

Thompson Rivers University Open Learning Association

Mission: To regulate relations between employees and employers, including, but not limited to, the right to bargain collectively on behalf of the employees within the jurisdiction of the Association; and to bring about improvements in the wages and working conditions of the membership without discrimination on the basis of appointment, assignment or job security.

Vision: To promote the provision of the highest possible standard of open and flexible distance learning

13 December 2016

Dear Members

Another academic year is coming to a close and this is an appropriate time to summarize the efforts and work of your Executive over the course of the last 7 months.

One of our first house-keeping activities was to simplify our executive meeting process. In the past we relied heavily on the TRU phones and Skype to manage our meetings and this was generally burdensome and in many cases failed to meet our needs. We addressed this deficiency by subscribing to a teleconferencing service which was both economical and easy to use and consequently our meetings have been more productive with more time being allocated to association matters than trying to resolve communication issues.

Earlier in the year several Executive Members met with the President and Provost to discuss a broad range of topics, primarily, mechanisms for achieving greater recognition for OL faculty. As highlighted at our last workshop TRU has been rebranding as One TRU and we have felt that this rebranding did not address fully and adequately our role and presence in the university. While the President and Provost assured us that our interests were considered it was very evident that our association had not been consulted. In our meeting we stressed:

‘We see the ‘One TRU’ campaign and initiative as an important step toward providing our students with the highest quality academic and educational experience, however, to realize this, it is critical that Open Learning Faculty be included in all discussions and department/discipline initiatives, and that our views, concerns and interests are listened to and heard, and that we are recognized as equal contributors to the collegial community when it comes to delivering the best education for our students.’

Since this meeting we have been pressing for greater involvement in the affairs and governance of the university, and specifically, we are attempting to gain acceptance and recognition in the faculty councils. The President and Provost assured us that they would bring the matter to the attention of the council chairs but as of this communication we are still waiting for some response on the matter.

We have been working closely with our sister association, TRUFA, to broaden our involvement in university governance as TRUFA’s concerns run parallel to our own. Like us they feel stymied by the administration and in late summer the TRUFA Executive presented to the Board of Governors their position:

‘Strengthening the academic governance model at TRU, a model that is the bedrock of all academic institutions;
Re-asserting the primacy of governance bodies in all academic decision making at TRU;

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Acknowledging the importance of faculty expertise and perspectives through respectful engagement and meaningful consultation in all University academic matters; and
Promoting accountability and transparency as guiding principles for professional interactions.'

We are on a similar path and it is our intent to continue press for greater engagement between OL Faculty and the university. While we have raised this at the highest level we have also addressed similar issues in our Labour Management Committee Meetings, and specifically raised the subject of full consultation between OLFM, Deans and Campus Directors on course development. As many of you are aware the current process is top-down with the administration via Curriculum Development deciding on future courses, updates, etc. rather than seeking input from faculty in the disciplines specifically affected.

Presently, both of our associations are presenting arguments to TRU to include, by default, on all university selection committees for the position of Director and higher administrative officers a representative from our respective Executives. Sister faculty associations include specific language calling for such and CAUT's policy on this reads:

'In keeping with the principle and practice of collegial governance, search committees for senior academic administrators shall be constituted so that a majority of committee members are academic staff members elected by the academic staff association.'

As many of you might be aware, under the terms of the current Collective Agreement, TRU reserved the right to appoint faculty living outside of British Columbia. Prior to that Agreement, it was generally accepted that OL faculty must reside in British Columbia and that was the norm for many years. We never understood TRU's insistence on hiring outside of the province and recently the administration decided that it would not take any initiative to hire faculty permanently resident in other province. We suspect that this change in position came after consideration of the variance in labour laws across Canada and the potential for labour grievances resulting from the application of these laws and regulations. One of the consequences of this reversal is that OL faculty who decide to move to another province will cease to be members of TRU.

Earlier in the year we discovered that there was a flaw in the administration's payment system which resulted in members not being paid for graded assignments, projects and exams. The flaw presented itself when a new set of assignments, projects or exams was updated. Since the payment system was not configured correctly to adjust for such updates payment was not confirmed even though the results of the assignments, exams, etc. were recorded the mytru portal. Upon further examination it was discovered that the problem had persisted for several years, in one case dating back to 2014, and OL undertook a full review of records to identify and compensate at current rates outstanding claims. It is our understanding, based on reports from OL, that all outstanding payments have been made.

As has been communicated in other email notices, we have been working with OL to establish a systematic and regular programme for updating assignment and exam forms. While we are still in discussion with OL on the appropriate mechanism for achieving this we, nevertheless, encourage members to take the initiative to request an update, if the assignment files and exam forms are older than two years, by sending an update request to fixmycourse@tru.ca. It is our hope that future discussions with OL will lead to at least an annual update of assignment files and exam forms. We think this important for a number of reasons, least of which is academic integrity.

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We have also raised the issue of an enhancement in the technology fee and we require input from members as to the degree to which the cost of internet services has risen across the province in order to make our case. On this matter we encourage members to review their past internet costs and to identify the difference between past and current costs. Please send a summary of such to the association at the earliest.

On a broader front we have been working with the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators (FPSE), and with the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) to increase public awareness of the state of post-secondary education in British Columbia and in Canada in general. We support FPSE's 'Open the Doors' campaign to put pressure on the Government of British Columbia to increase funding for post-secondary education across the board. In the lead up to the next provincial election in May 2017 expect to see a range of public announcements, television commercials and social-media postings on this subject. For additional details about the campaign and how to become involved consult: <http://www.openthedoors.ca/>.

At the CAUT conference in November we initially sought to affect a change in the bylaws of CAUT to create the position of a Member at Large for Open Learning and Delivery. As this would require further study we received instead the Council's support for the following resolution:

'That the CAUT Executive considers the establishment of a working group on open, distant and online delivery of post-secondary education. This group would provide advice to the Executive and Council on these issues. Here is the rationale for this recommendation: Open, distant and online learning and delivery is a growing segment of both Canadian and international post-secondary institutions, and faculty delivering open, distant and online post-secondary education face a variety of constraints on academic freedom, tenure, rights to engage in research, sabbatical leaves and other restrictions that do not affect faculty delivering face-to-face instruction.'

It is our expectation that once the working group does its due diligence that CAUT's bylaws will be amended to create the Member at Large position for Open Learning and Delivery and that working with CAUT and other post-secondary associations we will address issues affecting Open Learning faculty at TRU and other institutions across Canada.

In a recent email communication we notified members to be cognizant of the language in our collective agreement pertaining to the right to course development. We encourage members to apply for both the Developer content expert and Consultant/Reviewer content expert position. While we understand that members might prefer one role over the other be aware that there is wording in our collective agreement that has been interpreted to rule-out/reject candidates for the Consultant/Reviewer position if the OLFM had not expressed interest in the Developer content expert position. To assure your rights under the collective agreement we urge members to express their interest in both positions when responding to postings. Obviously, if you wanted to be the developer rather than the consultant but were overlooked by the selection committee and offered the consultant position you are under no obligation to accept the reviewer position.

As members contemplate their achievements over the course of the last year and the favourable and comfortable position and status of an university professor in Canada we should give some thought to colleagues and fellow professors and instructors in other parts of the world who lack the rights and privileges that we enjoy. In this regard we draw your attention to the plight of a Literature Professor in Turkey who was dismissed with thousands of other academics following the failed coup in Turkey. We urge members to express their solidarity by writing to our university and government leaders to condemn actions that run

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counter to academic freedom inside and outside of the classroom. For some insight into this issue click on the following link:

<http://www.dw.com/en/turkey-one-womans-struggle/av-36717889>

If you feel strongly about academic freedom and the plight of fellow colleagues please let your views be known; send correspondence directly to:

President of Turkey:

Cumhurbaşkanlığı Külliyesi 06560 Beştepe-Ankara

Tel : [\(+90 312\) 525 55 55](tel:+903125255555)

Fax : [\(+90 312\) 525 58 31](tel:+903125255831)

E-mail: contact@tccb.gov.tr

Prime Minister of Canada

Office of the Prime Minister

80 Wellington Street

Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Fax: 613-941-6900

Embassy of Turkey

197 Wurtemberg Street

Ottawa, Ontario K1N 8L9

Canada

E-mail: embassy.ottawa@mfa.gov.tr

On this final note I should like to thank all members for their contribution to Open Learning and to wish each and everyone an joyful and peaceful New Year!

TRUOFA Executive