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Briefing Note No.18 | March 2021

French-language postsecondary education in Ontario: crisis or opportunity?

How the Laurentian and UOF issues could open the door to Franco-Ontarians' dream institution

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We recognize and appreciate the historic connection that Indigenous people have to these territories. We recognize the contributions that they have made in shaping and strengthening these communities, the province and the country as a whole.

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About the Author

Dr. Stéphanie Chouinard



Professor Chouinard grew up in Labrador. She has been teaching at Royal Military College since 2017 and has been cross-appointed at Queen's in 2018. She received her PhD in Political Studies from the University of Ottawa (2016) and was a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow at the Faculty of Law, Université de Montréal, as well as at the Chair of Celtic Languages, Literature, History and Antiquities, University of Edinburgh. She teaches in the fields of Canadian Politics, Comparative Politics, and Political Geography.

Her research interests focus on the relationship between courts and minorities in democratic systems. Her current research focuses on the Supreme Court of Canada's impact on the evolution of official-language rights and Aboriginal self-determination rights. She is also interested in territorial and non-territorial autonomy arrangements for national and linguistic minorities in the world.

Professor Chouinard has published in *Ethnopolitics*, the *Language Rights Review*, *Linguistic Minorities and Society*, and the *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, among others.

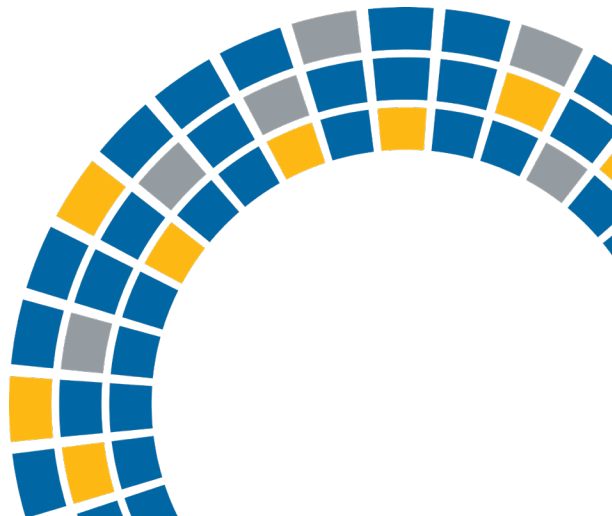
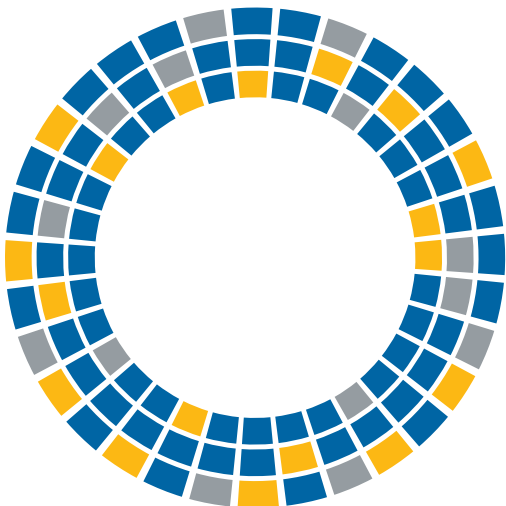
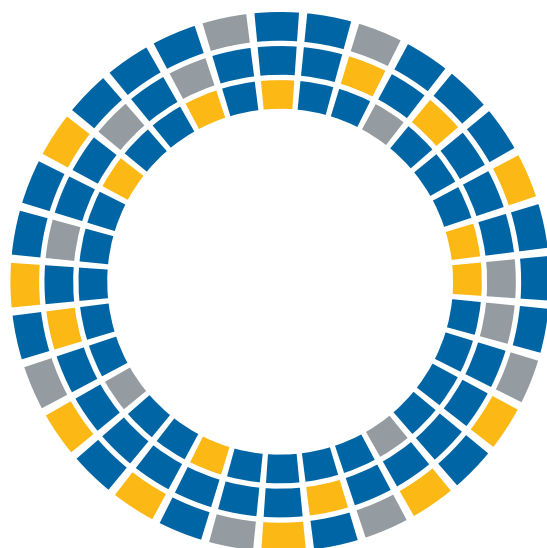
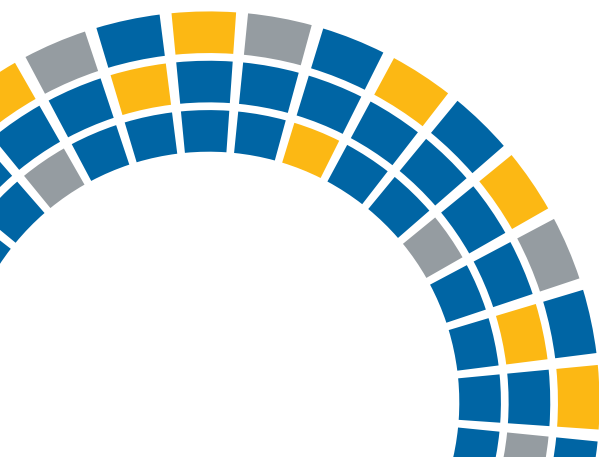


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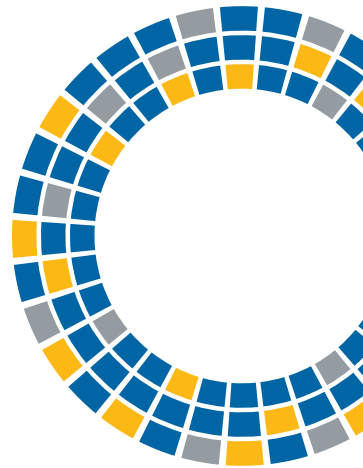
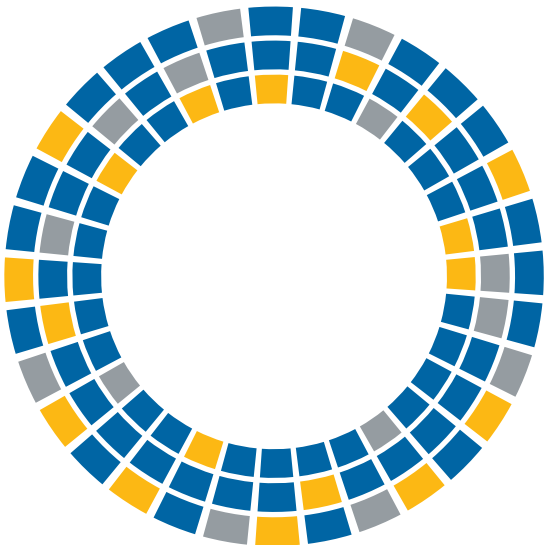


Executive Summary

"You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." President Obama's Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel gave new life to this phrase when he uttered it during Obama's first term. What is routinely left out though, is the second sentence in the quote, "...what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before."

Is the current financial crisis at Laurentian University, and the simultaneous enrolment crisis at Université de l'Ontario français, such an opportunity? An opportunity to do something that we "could not do before"? This is the question Northern Policy Institute asked three leading thinkers to answer.

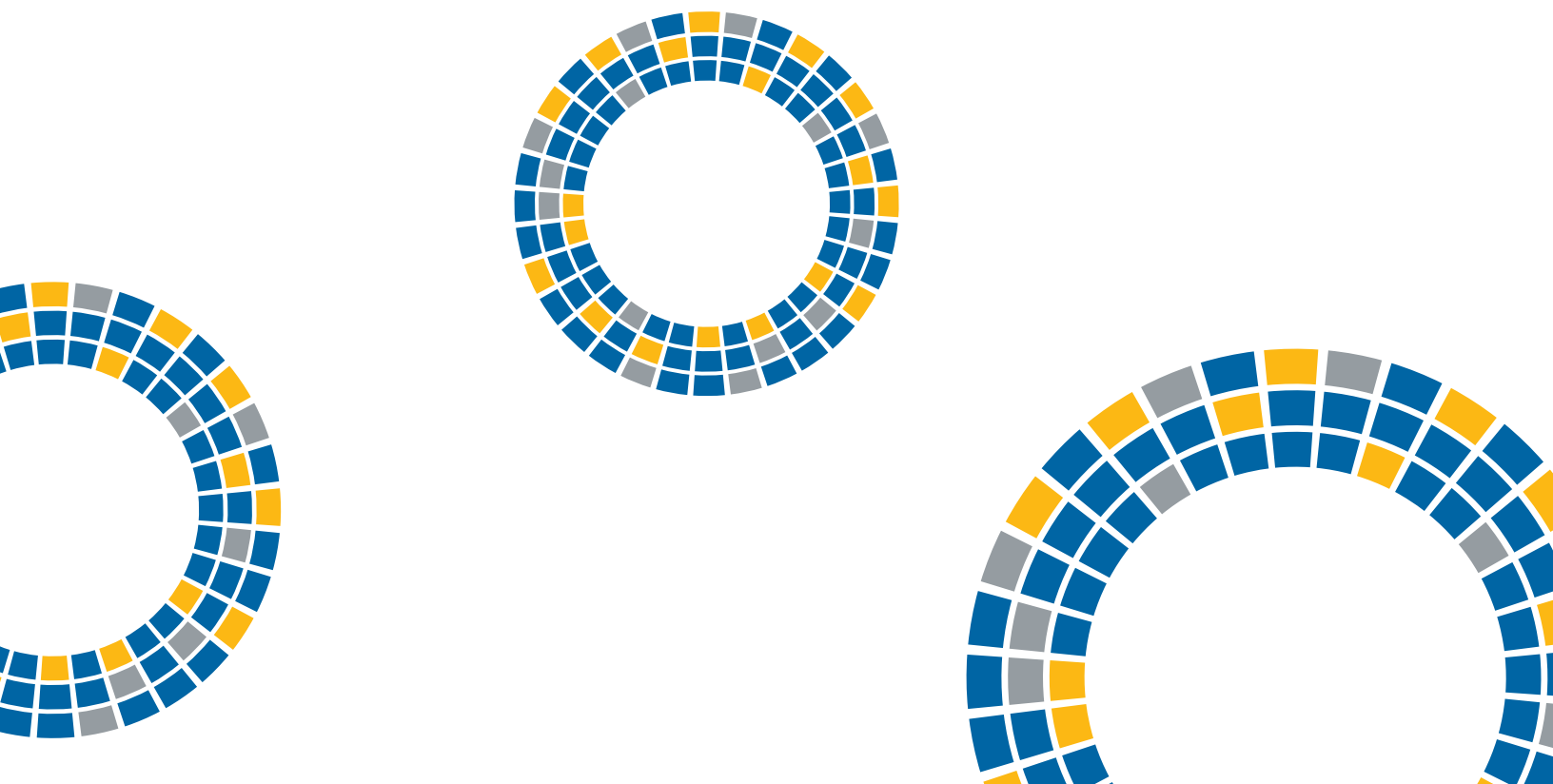
This piece answers the question by outlining the historic demands around a pan-provincial French post-secondary education network, the development that led up to the creation of the Université de l'Ontario français and asks whether today's issue could be a steppingstone towards achieving those historical demands. The paper concludes that yes, such a network could be possible. However, this rests on a number of assumptions, the primary one being whether or not institutions will be willing to play ball, and second, whether the provincial government will give this arrangement its blessing. Another factor to consider, as well is how the University of Ottawa positions itself in relation to such a network.



Introduction

The last weeks of January 2021 were troubling for French-language postsecondary education in Ontario. News first came of the Université de l'Ontario français (UOF)'s failure to attract more than a handful of potential students¹ for its opening in September. This was worrying for a hard-fought institution that almost didn't see the light of day². Then came Laurentian University (LU)'s filing for creditor protection and disappearance of its professors' research funds³. Francophone professors at this bilingual institution, who regularly face smaller class sizes, worried for the future of their programs in what would likely be a bitter restructuring process.

Taking stock of the situation, some members of the Franco-Ontarian community with a long memory saw in this crisis the perfect pretext to rethink both of these institutions (and beyond), and to revisit Franco-Ontarians' historic demands for a community-driven, pan-provincial French-language postsecondary network⁴. What were these demands, and how could today's crisis be a stepping-stone towards their achievement? These questions will be the drivers of this brief.



¹ Katherine Brulotte, « L'Université de l'Ontario français n'a reçu que 19 demandes d'admission d'élèves ontariens », Radio-Canada, January 20, 2021 : <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1764606/universite-ontario-francais-admission-rentree-2021>

² Benjamin Vachet, « Le 'Jeudi noir' de l'Ontario français », ONfr, TFO, November 15, 2018 : <https://onfr.tfo.org/le-jeudi-noir-de-lontario-francais/>

³ Alice Zanetta and Zacharie Routhier, « L'Université Laurentienne a dépensé des fonds de recherche pour payer ses factures », Radio-Canada, February 6, 2021 : <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1768695/insolvabilite-lauren-tienne-deficit-finance-recherche>

⁴ Heidi Ulrichsen, « LU restructuring may be an opportunity for postsecondary French education, alumni say », Sudbury.com, March 8, 2021: <https://www.sudbury.com/local-news/lu-restructuring-may-be-an-opportunity-for-post-secondary-french-education-former-grads-say-3525367>

A Franco-Ontarian university: More than just a school

But before we delve into the history of this debate, it is crucial to understand why the Franco-Ontarian community wishes for its own university. It is easy to consider a university as simply a place where tomorrow's workforce learns technical skills and is being molded to fulfil the needs of the job market. I suggest that a university's usefulness is far more important than granting diplomas; that, in the words of Michel Freitag, its mandate is not only technical, but also civilizational⁵. A university is a place where a community creates a space for critical thought and reflection on its own destiny, and therefore participates in its perpetuation through time. For a minority community like "l'Ontario français", that can't be achieved in a bilingual institution, as has become clear since the 1960s.

Not only do bilingual institutions' evolution mirror Ontario's demo- and sociocultural forces, Francophones are becoming increasingly marginalized as the anglophone population's growth outpaces theirs, but their operatives are generally poorly equipped, if not oblivious, to respond to the francophone community's needs. In this context, French becomes a language of accommodation, not a language in which we allow a community to dream, to think, and to project itself into the world, to borrow Serge Miville's words⁶.



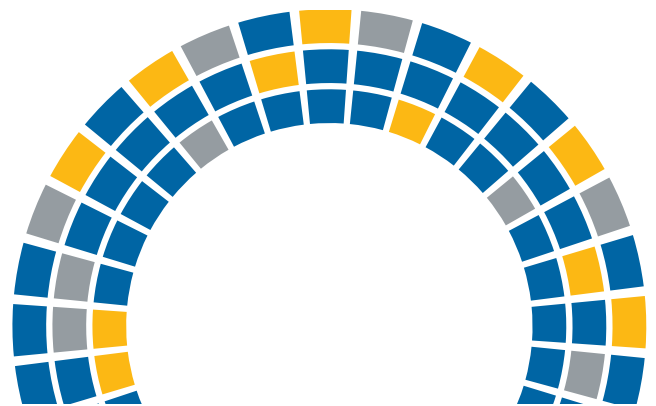
⁵ Michel Freitag, *Le naufrage de l'université et autres essais épistémologiques*, Québec : Nuit blanche, 1995.

⁶ Serge Miville, « Sur le radeau du bilinguisme », conférence *Les défis de l'enseignement universitaire en français dans le Nord de l'Ontario*, March 2, 2021.

The development of French-language postsecondary education in Ontario through bilingual institutions

Incidentally, the bilingual postsecondary institutional model that emerged in Ontario since the 1960s is an anomaly in Canada⁷. While bilingual public universities like the University of Sudbury (US) and the University of Ottawa (UO) were created from the classical colleges of Ontario, other provinces were charting a different course, granting their Francophone communities their own institutions. Université de Moncton in New Brunswick was created from the fusion of three Catholic colleges in 1963; Campus St-Jean in Edmonton, Alberta, formerly Oblates-owned, was granted public status by the province in 1977.

While it is outside the scope of this brief to explain why the clergy chose bilingualism in Ontario⁸, the historiography shows the Franco-Ontarian community took stock early of the limits of institutional bilingualism in education. The 1960s and 1970s were marked with parents' fights with local school boards for the creation of French schools, in Penetanguishene, Sturgeon Falls, and others⁹. In 1969, the Saint-Denis Committee on Franco-Ontarian culture criticized bilingual universities for failing to protect its francophone students from becoming marginalized and to offer them an equal variety of programs¹⁰. It fell short, however, of demanding a homogeneous French university.



⁷ Serge Dupuis, Alyssa Jutras-Stewart and Renée Stutt, « L'Ontario français et les universités bilingues », *Revue du Nouvel-Ontario*, no. 40, 2015, 13-104.

⁸ For a more detailed account of this episode, see Lucien Pelletier, "Les Jésuites de Sudbury vers 1960: une mutation difficile", *Revue du Nouvel-Ontario*, no. 37, 2012, 13-81.

⁹ Association d'éducation franco-ontarienne, « Historique : le crises scolaires » : <https://historiqueaefo.ca/education/les-crisis-scolaires>

¹⁰ Michel Bock and François-Olivier Dorais, « Quelle université pour quelle société? Le débat intellectuel sur la question universitaire en Ontario français depuis les années 1960 », *Revue du Nouvel-Ontario*, no. 41, 2016, 121-195.

A collective awakening: Initial claims for a French university

This claim was made for the first time at the 1969 Congress of the Association Canadienne-française de l'Ontario (ACFO), where a request was formulated for UO to become French. In Sudbury, the Franco-Parole conference in 1973 was key in raising awareness of francophones' status within LU, an institution where, according to Fernand Dorais, they "don't feel at home"¹¹. By 1979, youth organization Direction-Jeunesse will demand the creation of a francophone multi-campus community college and a French university. Despite social turmoil, few institutional changes will be made.

The 1980s are marked by unrest in bilingual institutions, with lack of French-language programs gradually recognized as a problem. A special edition of the *Revue du Nouvel-Ontario* in 1985 is entirely dedicated to the French-language university issue. According to the editor, the bilingual institution model had arrived at an "impasse"¹². This publication marks a turning point in the Franco-Ontarian collective reflection on the matter. Moreover, the provincial French-language K-12 education system had become autonomous since then, "having paved the way" for further autonomy. Anglo-Quebeckers' three English-language universities were also cited as evidence that a French-language university in Ontario was not a pipe dream.

In 1989, the ACFO approached the Jesuits and asked that they give up US's charter in order to create a French-language university, in vain. In 1991, the ACFO organized Franco-Parole II to discuss postsecondary institutional autonomy and claimed it as "a remedial strategy to the higher illiteracy and dropout rates among francophones and to participate fully in cultural, social, political and economic life"¹³ of the province. As a first step towards attaining a full-fledged French-language university, the creation of a French university college at LU was proposed. The proposal fell on deaf ears.



¹¹ Fernand Dorais, cited in Bock and Dorais, op. cit., p. 150.

¹² Jean-Pierre Pichette, "L'université française en Ontario : une question de temps », *Revue du Nouvel-Ontario*, no. 7, 1985, p. 7.

¹³ Franco-Parole II, cited in Dupuis et al., op. cit., p. 57.

Growing concerns, growing debates: The creation of the RÉFO and the push for UOF at Queen's Park

In the late 2000s, witnessing the widening gap between francophone and anglophone students and the generalized disappearance of social life in French on bilingual campuses, a number of francophone students decided to join forces and founded the Regroupement étudiant franco-ontarien (RÉFO) in 2009. Its mandate was to ensure that Franco-Ontarians could “study in French in the program and region of their choice, in a context where they manage the levers of their education”¹⁴.

The RÉFO will see a golden opportunity when, in 2012, the French-language Commissioner's Office of Ontario publishes a report on postsecondary education¹⁵. It demonstrated that while the Centre-South-West of the province had the fastest-growing francophone population, it lacked access to the vast majority of university programs. Moreover, francophones from that region were far more likely to enroll in English-language programs close to home than to attend a French school far from home, citing costs as an issue. The RÉFO will organize a province-wide consultation, les États généraux du postsecondaire en Ontario français in 2013, and a Summit in 2014. They will result in a report co-published with l'Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario (AFO) and the Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne (FESFO) in February 2015 calling on the government to create a French-language university with campuses in the francophone regions of the province, starting with Toronto where demand was most pressing¹⁶. Nickel Belt NDP MPP France Gélinas will use this report as a starting point for the private member's bill *An Act to Establish the Université de l'Ontario français*, which she will table at Queen's Park in May of the same year. While this bill died on the order paper, it contributed in putting pressure on the government from the partisan arena.

In the Fall of 2016, the Ontario government mandated former Official languages commissioner Dyane Adam to investigate on the need and potential demand for such an institution. Almost a year later, the Adam report recommended the creation of a French-language institution managed “by and for” the Franco-Ontarian community. A “hub” for this institution would be created in Toronto in collaboration with other community organizations, but the creation of a “French-language university network with affiliations with [this new university] would radiate through “the other regions of the province”¹⁷ were considered future steps. Hearst, St-Paul, and US were seen as prime partners in this network. The government gave its green light to the project in December 2017, cancelled it in November of the following year, and finally put it back on the rails in August of 2019.

It is difficult to know exactly why the UOF has had such poor success in its first recruitment season. COVID-19 has created a wildly uncertain situation. The government was slow to approve the UOF's four programs, making it impossible for the institution to begin recruitment until mid-October¹⁸. And then there's the issue of said programs: Digital Culture Studies, Economics and Social Innovation Studies, Urban Environment Studies and Human Plurality Studies. The UOF was mandated by the government not to duplicate existing programs in other institutions, so it had to get creative. But the prospect of enrolling in programs with unrecognizable names for future employers, in a brand-new institution with no reputation, and in the midst of a pandemic no less, may have been too risky for most.

¹⁴ RÉFO, cited in Dupuis et al., op. cit., p. 87.

¹⁵ Commissariat aux services en français de l'Ontario, L'état de l'éducation postsecondaire en langue française dans le Centre-Sud-Ouest de l'Ontario : pas d'avenir sans accès, Toronto, 2012.

¹⁶ RÉFO, Rapport du Sommet provincial sur les États généraux sur le postsecondaire en Ontario, 2015, p. 47.

¹⁷ Jean-François Morissette, « Rapport Adam : Une université 'par et pour' les Franco-Ontariens », ONfr, TFO, August 28, 2017 : <https://onfr.tfo.org/rapport-adam-une-universite-par-et-pour-les-franco-ontariens/>

¹⁸ Étienne Fortin-Gauthier, « UOF : Les programmes finalement autorisés par le gouvernement », ONfr, TFO, October 7, 2020 : <https://onfr.tfo.org/uof-les-programmes-finalement-autorises-par-le-gouvernement/>

UOF's troubles, Laurentian's woes, and Sudbury's surprise: Charting a new course

This brings us to today's situation. As these lines are written, US has just surprised the entire community by announcing its intention to become a fully French institution managed "by, for, and with" the francophone community, and to "welcome" the French programs currently offered at LU into its fold. Fruitful negotiations between these two institutions could open the door to a pan-ontarian network of French-language institutions that could offer a vast array of programs, with the use of existing affinities and new technologies, allowing for students to use existing facilities in each region while enrolling in classes on all campuses. US could offer a significant portion of the "standard" programs, including some highly coveted diplomas in management, education, and health in the South of the province, and benefit from higher enrollment from a new, fast-growing population base. I would like to propose that Hearst University should participate in this network as well. While its student population is small, Hearst has a long-standing expertise in distance education, which could benefit to this entire network.

This proposed outcome rests on a number of assumptions: first, that these institutions will be willing to play ball, and second, that the provincial government will give this arrangement its blessing. In the case of UOF, funding is provided by the federal government until 2023, so Queen's Park may be open to more risk, but the resolution of LU's restructuring is another story from the government's perspective. It will need to be convinced that the transfer of these programs to US is a viable option.

This potential solution is also missing a significant region from the equation: Eastern Ontario. As history has shown, Ottawa has been by far the most recalcitrant towards the creation of a new French-language institution. How the giant that is UO positions itself on this fast-evolving chess board will be crucial to the rest of the story; it may hinder, rather than support, the creation of this new network. Whether it decides to become an ally or an opponent remains, for now, anyone's guess.



About Northern Policy Institute

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent think tank. We perform research, collect and disseminate evidence, and identify policy opportunities to support the growth of sustainable Northern Communities. Our operations are located in Thunder Bay and Sudbury. We seek to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts Northern Ontario, Ontario, and Canada as a whole.

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