

Making Sense of Kwantlen's New University Status

Forum Speaker Separates Myth from Reality

Our name has changed, but what does it all mean? Getting an answer to that question was one of the reasons why the Kwantlen Faculty Association and the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators (FPSE) organized an afternoon panel discussion at Surrey Campus on October 23, to talk about some of the challenges that Kwantlen faculty face in the transition to our new university status.

The featured speaker was Jim Turk, the Executive Director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). Dr. Turk's distinguished academic career as well as his working experience as an advocate for both post-secondary education and the faculty who work in that sector provided valuable insights into how Kwantlen's transition to university status will affect post-secondary educators.

Dr. Turk began by noting some of the characteristics of a university that should be the starting point for any meaningful change in Kwantlen's status. He stressed that the change to university status has to include, at a minimum, strong contractual language on academic freedom, tenure, academic governance and protection of faculty members' intellectual property. He emphasized that securing these basic protections was not something that could be covered off by institutional policy statements. Real protection, he argued, comes from having contract language that allows faculty members to access a grievance procedure if they believe administrators have contravened provisions in the collective agreement.

The transition to university status isn't just about securing new protections. It's also about maintaining many of the provisions that the KFA has won over the years. In his comments to the audience of faculty at Kwantlen, Dr. Turk detailed current measures that need to be maintained and strengthened as Kwantlen moves to its new university status. The diversity of programs and our commitment to teaching were two high priorities in Turk's view. He noted that the universities are evolving and that evolution has led to greater inclusion of new

programs and new disciplines. That trend needs to continue at Kwantlen.

Dr. Turk cautioned against changes in salary structure, noting that the typical university salary structure is highly skewed with multiple steps that put the majority of faculty far below top-of-scale. (By contrast, close to 74% of post-secondary educators on the existing salary scale are at top-of-scale.) Dr. Turk cited that achievement as another example of something that needs to be protected in any transition to university status.

Turk also pointed to provisions for non-regular faculty as important protections that need to be part of any transition to university status. He described how so much of the work done in most universities today is done by contingent academic faculty who have few protections when it comes to regular employment.

In his closing remarks, Dr. Turk also talked about the changing nature of governance and its impact on faculty. In Kwantlen's case the concern is the change from Education Council to Senate. Dr. Turk observed that while Senates have traditionally been viewed as an important mechanism for faculty input into academic matters, he believed that the greatest voice and protection of faculty is found in strong collective agreements rather than new models of governance. Although he was not dismissing the importance of faculty input into the Senate governance model, he believes that Senates have too often been dominated by administrators, to the detriment of faculty.

The road ahead for Kwantlen? Turk believes that the transition to university status means new challenges for faculty members and for the KFA. The good news is that with the combination of a strong collective agreement and an active and engaged faculty membership, KFA and its entire membership are well-positioned to take on the challenges and ensure positive outcomes as the change in status is implemented.

