

# **GREEN PAPER ON YORK'S OVERALL REPUTATION**

## **Introduction/Background**

The Green Paper Working Group on York's Overall Reputation (Working Group) has been constituted in order to: examine York University's reputation; identify relevant issues for discussion; and suggest strategies to strengthen its reputation over time. These strategies may influence the other green papers that are concurrently exploring important issues that will have direct and indirect impacts on the University's reputation.

The importance of reputation has been recognized at the University in the past. Indeed, the current University Academic Plan (UAP)<sup>1</sup> identified the two inter-related concepts of academic quality and academic reputation as key, overarching themes of the Plan. The Plan noted that attaining the highest academic quality across the full range of academic activities is a fundamental goal of the university. While "quality" has a variety of meanings, the term has been seen as including improving "...institutional reputation, (through) selectivity in admissions, success in competitions for research funding or pedagogic innovation or by reference to similar "objective" or external indicators". Building on this the UAP called for the York community to engage in "rigorous self-criticism and to search constantly for new and higher levels of achievement".

The second overarching theme of the UAP also linked to reputation. The Plan indicated that we need to make better efforts at both "knowing ourselves" as well as "seeing how we are seen". While identifying this as an overarching theme, the UAP goes on to state that we do not know enough about ourselves and, thus, may not be in a position to properly assess whether we are achieving our objectives. In particular, the UAP states that we do not know enough about:

- the hopes, expectations and preparation of our students, and their experience of university life;
- the intensity and impact of our research, relative to our own standards and measured against competitors at other universities;
- the pedagogies we employ that have an enduring worth;
- the pedagogies that are opening to us through new technologies and practices;
- the success of our graduates in academic and career placements.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [\*University Academic Plan – Academic Priorities 2005-2010\*](#), as approved by Senate, June 23, 2005

<sup>2</sup> *Supra*, at p.4

While the UAP indicated that greater effort needed to be devoted to the task of knowing ourselves, and understanding how we are seen by others, it does not appear that this has been a major focus of discussion at the University over the past five years. Thus this Green Paper, which is intended to explore these questions, is important and timely. Discussions among the members of the Working Group echoed the concerns raised in the UAP and identified similar areas that need to be explored in order to develop a better understanding of York's reputation and how it might be improved.

### **Reputation Depends Upon Academic Quality**

We believe that an academic institution's reputation is built primarily through the quality of the institution's faculty, staff, students and academic programs. While measuring the quality of these various attributes of the University remains a somewhat elusive exercise, there has been a proliferation of different measures of quality developed over the past decade. None of these measures of quality provides a complete or completely accurate reflection of the quality of a university. Nevertheless, given the range of these measures, their increasing importance in building an institution's reputation, and the increasing reliance by governments and funding agencies on such measures, it is important to review York's standing on such measures relative to other comparable institutions.

Measures of academic quality have tended to fall into one of three categories: (i) reputational assessments; (ii) measures of faculty quality, primarily focused on research productivity and influence; and (iii) measures of student educational experiences and outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Since there is a separate green paper focusing on measures of faculty research, the discussion in this paper will review reputational measures as well as measures of student educational experiences and outcomes.

#### **a. Reputational measures**

York has a number of traditional strengths. For example, our Arts and Humanities programs, as well as our Social Science programs, have long been considered as amongst the very best in Canada and comparable to the best programs worldwide. Moreover, our professional schools as well as a number of individual Faculties, departments and programs have developed strong national and international reputations. Most recently, the Schulich School of Business was ranked 12<sup>th</sup> overall in the *Economist* magazine's 2009 ranking of the world's top MBA programs. Osgoode Hall Law School has been ranked as the number one law school by *Canadian Lawyer* magazine and, this year, was ranked 1<sup>st</sup> for faculty quality in *Macleans* magazine's annual ranking of Canadian Law Schools. In addition, York has an historic reputation for pioneering programs in such areas as adult and part-time learning, critical disabilities studies, e-learning initiatives and interdisciplinary fine arts, just to name a few. At the same time, our lack of breadth and comprehensiveness has tended to negatively impact our overall relative standing, both nationally and internationally.

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<sup>3</sup> See generally Rachelle L. Brooks, "Measuring University Quality", *The Review of Higher Education* 29(1) (2005) p.1-21.

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings, which is one of the most widely cited international rankings of universities, is based to a significant extent on a reputational survey of academics (40% of total score) and employers (10% of total score). The table below demonstrates our relatively high standing in Arts and Humanities. However, over the past three years York has lost ground in both the overall ranking as well as the rankings in specific knowledge areas, including our traditional areas of strength.

**Table 1 – Times Higher Education – Top Universities Ranking – York University**

<b>Year</b>	<b>All Disciplines</b>	<b>Arts and Humanities</b>	<b>Engineering &amp; IT</b>	<b>Life Sciences &amp; Biomedicine</b>	<b>Natural Sciences</b>	<b>Social Sciences</b>
2007	248	78	276	365	262	41
2008	252	70	281	n/a	263	53
2009	273	108	n/a	n/a	281	89

[Source: THE]

The vast majority of all of the universities in the top 200 institutions ranked by THE are either “comprehensive” (active and recognized in all five knowledge areas) or “fully comprehensive” (active in all five of the discipline areas, including a medical school).<sup>4</sup>

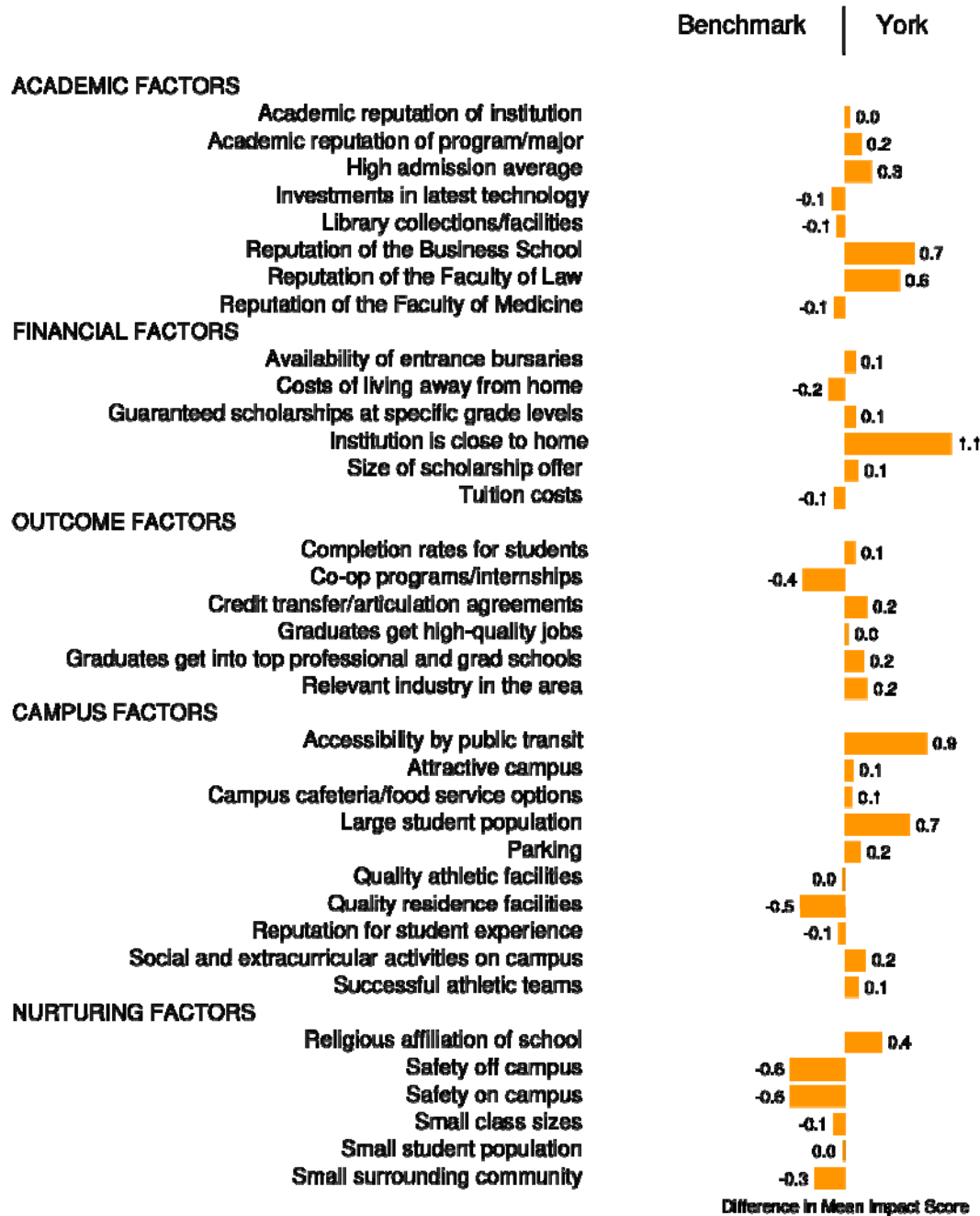
The shortcomings of such reputational surveys are widely recognized in the academic literature.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the influence of such measures within the university and broader community, including government, would also appear to be growing. It is also relevant to consider the university’s relative standing over time as an indicator of trends and directions.

Over the past number of years, the Academica Group has conducted the *University & College Applicant Study*, which surveys prospective university and college students to gain insight into the post-secondary decision process. Results from the 2008 Study are illustrative of some of the factors students took into account when applying to York and other Ontario universities. The survey has a section specifically focusing on institutional reputation. These included a variety of both academic and non-academic factors, as shown in Figure 1 below.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Ince, “The Times Higher Education – QS World University Ranking Classification System at [www.topuniversities.com](http://www.topuniversities.com)

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Brooks, note 3 above, at pp. 3-8.

Figure 1 – Difference in Mean Impact Factors – First Choice York Applicants



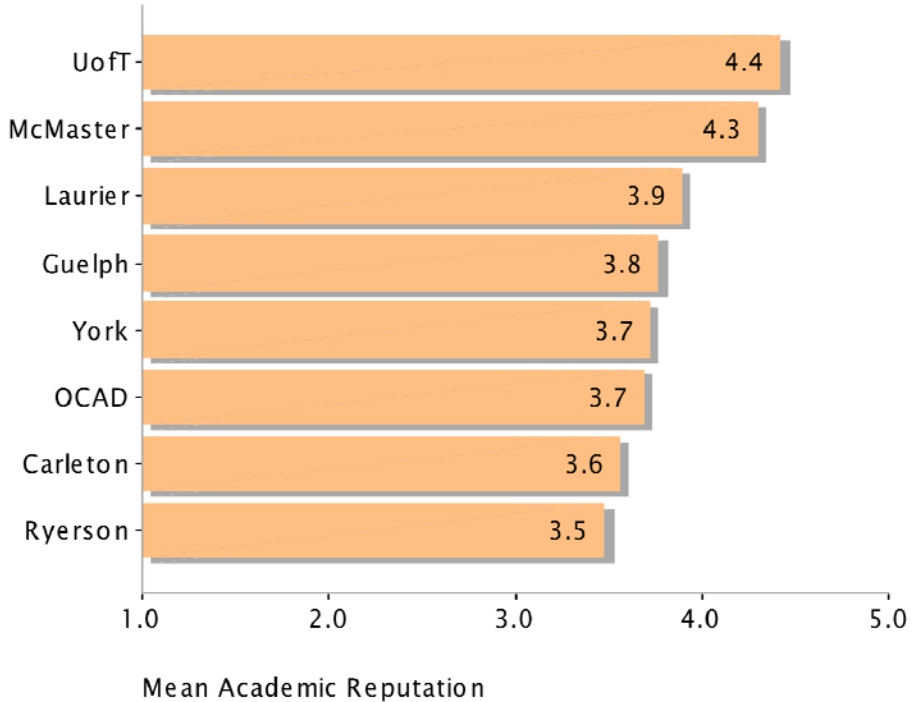
[Source: 2008 UCAS Survey, Academica]

Figure 1 demonstrates that our first choice applicants are choosing York for a variety of reasons: it is close to home; it is accessible by public transit; there is a large student population; and the reputation of our law and business schools. It also shows that applicants are less inclined to make York their first choice university for reasons relating

to perceptions of safety on and off campus; the quality of residence facilities and the perceived lack of internship and co-op programs.

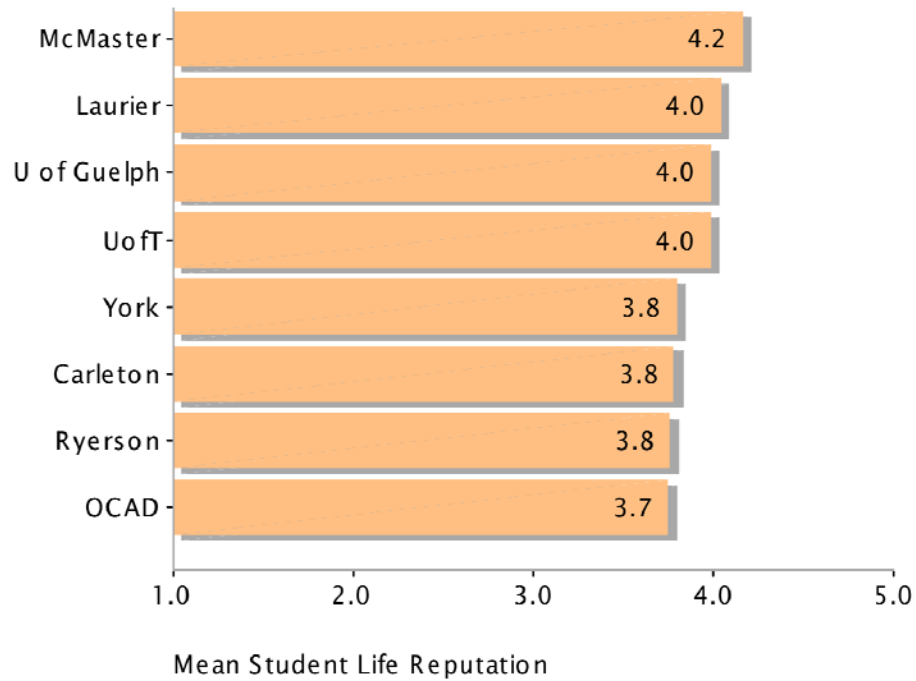
In terms of reputation for academic quality as well as student life experience, York was ranked at or near the mean for other comparable universities.

**Figure 2 – Reputation for Academic Quality – All UCAS Respondents**



[Source: 2008 UCAS Survey, Academica]

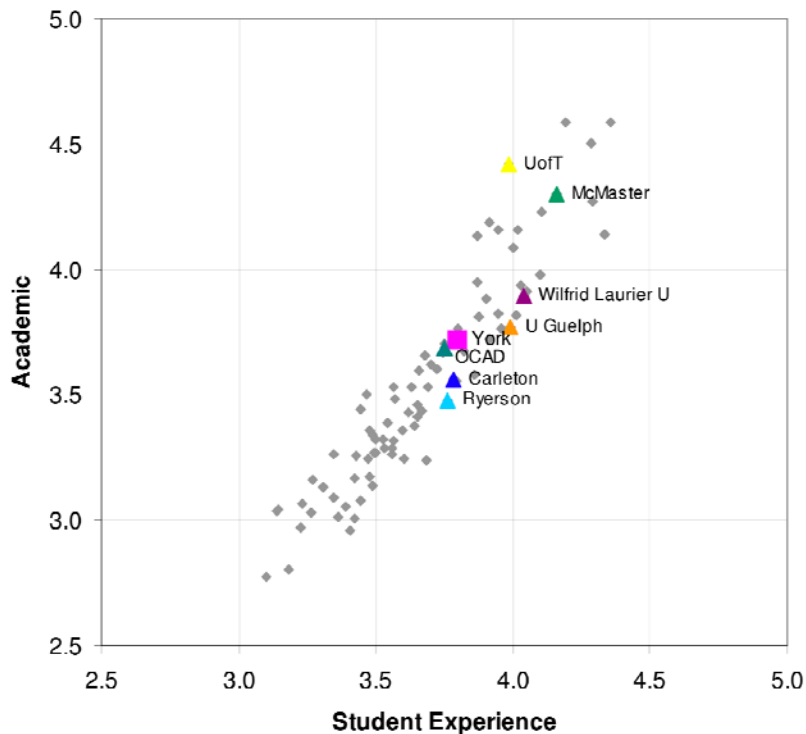
**Figure 3 – Reputation for Student Life Experience – All UCAS Respondents**



[Source: 2008 UCAS Survey, Academica]

These variables were combined to generate a map of relative ranking by academic reputation and student experience reputation.

**Figure 4 – Academic Reputation by Student Life Reputation – All UCAS Respondents**

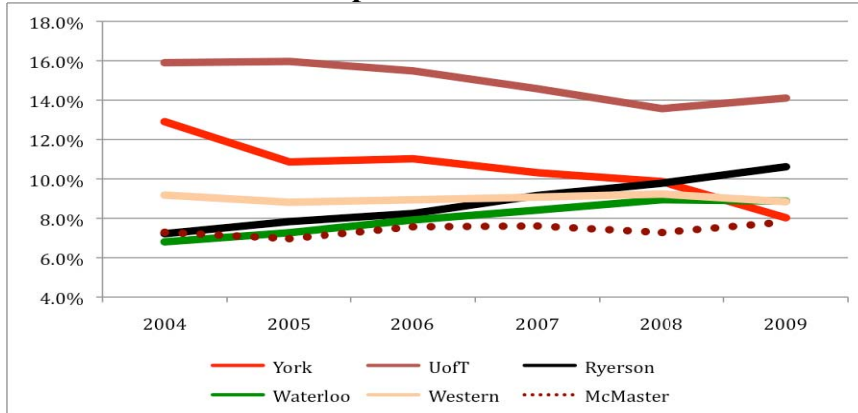


[Source: 2008 UCAS Survey, Academica]

It is arguable that another indicator of reputation is reflected in the degree to which we are able to attract outstanding students. To the extent that students see York as an institution of high quality, they will be more inclined to seek admission. It is, therefore, relevant to consider the degree to which we have been able to attract students, over time, relative to other comparable institutions.

As is demonstrated in Figure 5 below, over the past five years York's share of "first choice" 101 applicants in Ontario has declined significantly. In 2009, York fell from its traditional 2<sup>nd</sup> position in Ontario and ranked 5<sup>th</sup> behind the University of Toronto, Ryerson University, the University of Western Ontario and the University of Waterloo, just ahead of McMaster.

**Figure 5 – 101<sup>6</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> Choice Applicant) Market Share 2004-2009  
York versus selected competitors**

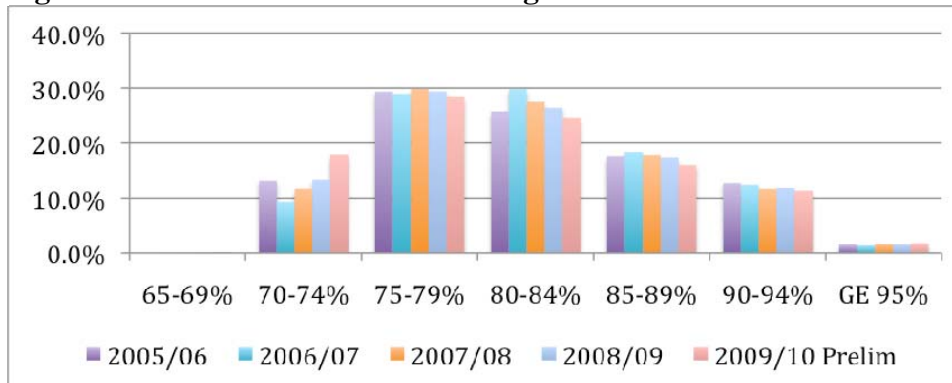


[Source: Ontario University Application Centre]

While the results for 2009 were likely influenced significantly by the labour disruption that was occurring at the time of the application deadline, it should be noted that there has been a downward trend in York's share of first choice applicants over the past five years.

This decline in share of applicants has likely had some impact on the quality of the entering undergraduate class. Figure 6 below charts the distribution of "101 student" entry grades from 2005/06 to 2009/10. Since 2006, the number of students admitted in the 80-89% range has dropped significantly in a number of Faculties, while the number of student admitted in the 70-74% range has risen.

**Figure 6 – Distribution of 101 Entering Grades 2005-06 to 2009-10**



[Source: OIRA]

The quality of the student body will, over time, impact our external reputation negatively. It can also be expected to have an impact on other quality indicators such as student retention, graduation rates and employment rates of our graduates.

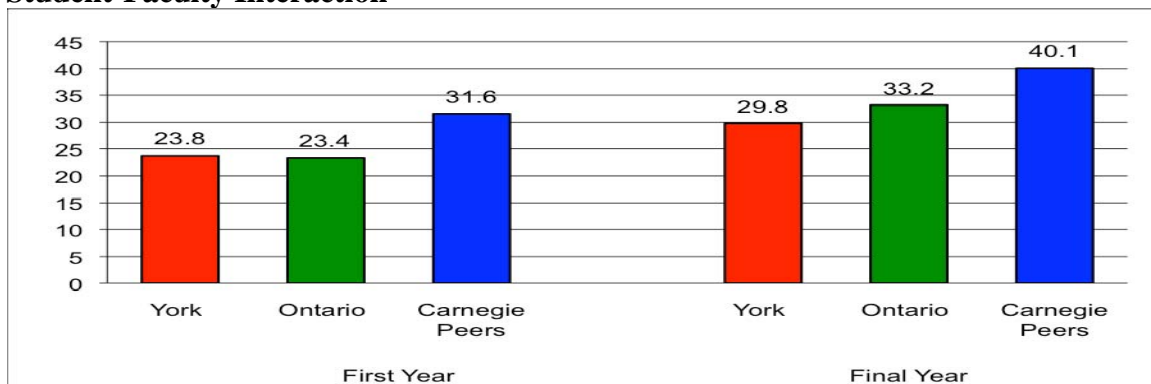
<sup>6</sup> "101 students" are those students applying to university directly from secondary school



b. Student educational experiences and outcomes

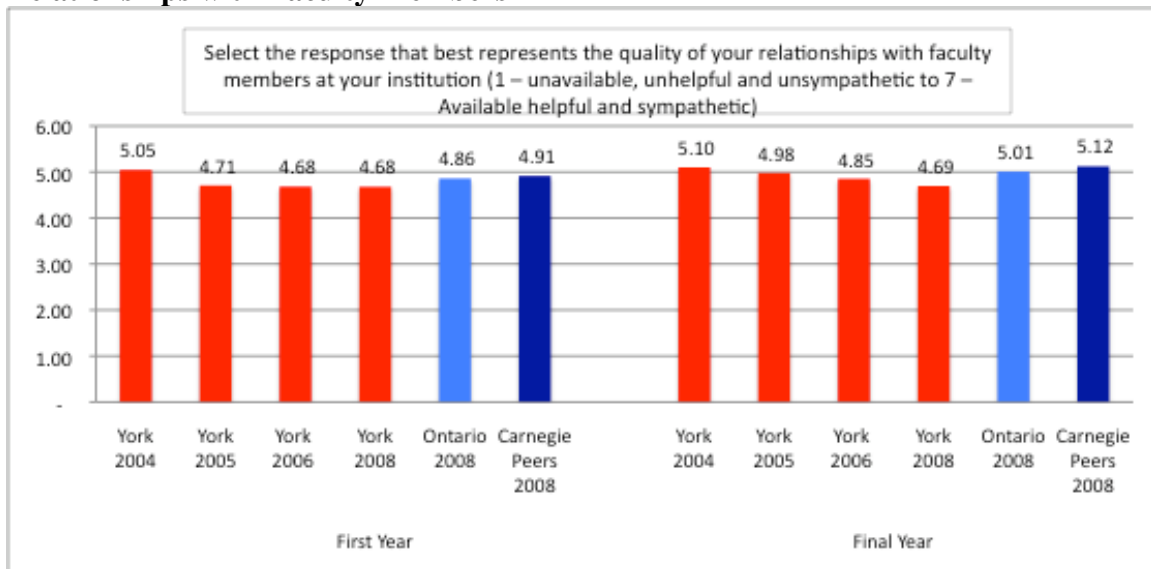
There have been a wide variety of indicators of student educational experiences and student outcomes developed in North America over the past decade. Of particular significance is the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE). Participation in NSSE is now mandatory for Ontario universities and York has participated every year since 2004/05 (save and except for 2007/08). The following tables are representative of the types of data we are gathering from our current and graduating students.

**Figure 7 – Student Satisfaction with Faculty Instruction (1): NSSE Benchmark Student-Faculty Interaction<sup>7</sup>**



[Source: 2008 NSSE]

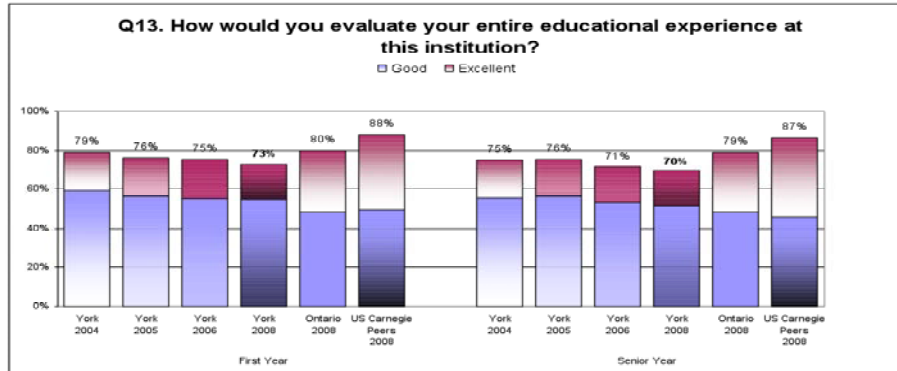
**Figure 8 – Student Satisfaction with Faculty Instruction (1): NSSE Quality of Relationships with Faculty Members**



[Source: 2008 NSSE]

<sup>7</sup> Index includes the following questions: discussed grades or assignments with an instructor; talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor; discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class; worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student-life activities, etc.); received prompt feedback from faculty on your academic performance (written or oral); worked with a faculty member on a research project outside of course or program requirements

**Figure 9 – Percentage of Students who Attain their Academic Goals**



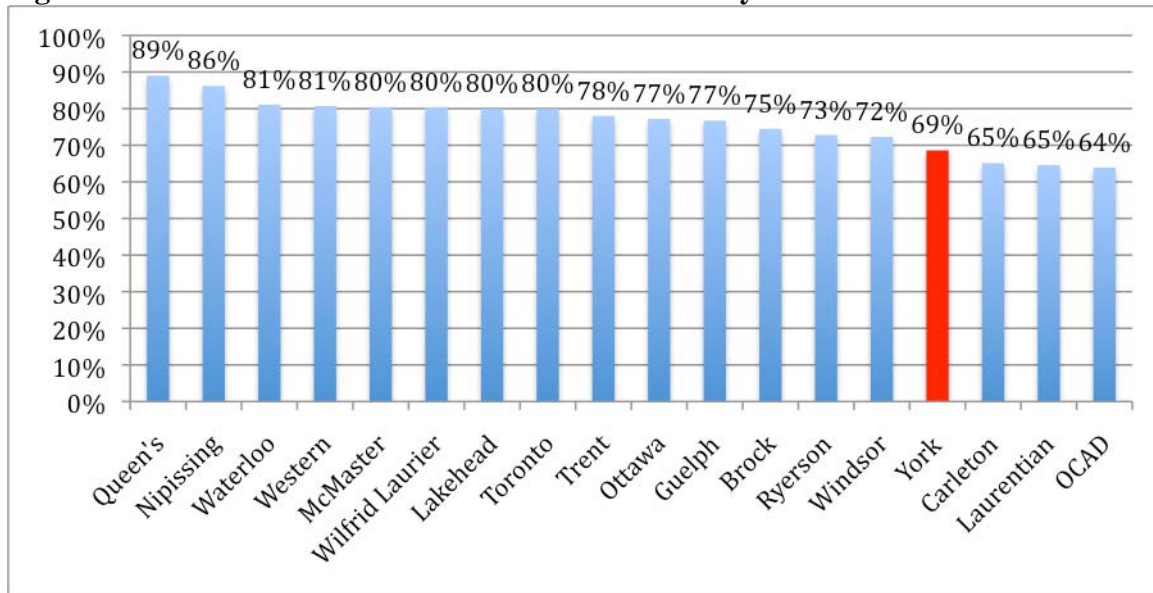
[Source: 2008 NSSE]

There are, of course, multiple factors that contribute to a student's entire educational experience. Yet, the data from the NSSE surveys show some concerning trends. In particular, we note that York falls well below the Ontario average for universities whose students evaluate their entire post-secondary educational experience as good or excellent – and that York has been on a declining trend in this measure since 2004/05.

Over the past decade, MTCU has developed a number of key performance indicators for Ontario universities, based on student outcomes. The indicators include the percentage of full-time undergraduate students who graduate within seven years of commencing studies at the institution; the percentage of graduates who are employed within 6 months of graduation; and the percentage of students who are employed within two years of graduation. Significant funding is allocated to universities based on their performance on each of these indicators (approximately \$8 million for each indicator). MTCU policy requires that a university must fall within 10% of the system-wide mean in order to receive a proportionate share of the funding allocated annually for any one particular measure.

Figure 10 shows that 69% of York full-time undergraduate students graduate within seven years of entry into their first year of study. At 69%, York is 15<sup>th</sup> of the 18 universities measured; further, because we are more than 10% below the system-wide mean, we are not eligible for the York share of the \$8 million government quality funding associated with this measure.

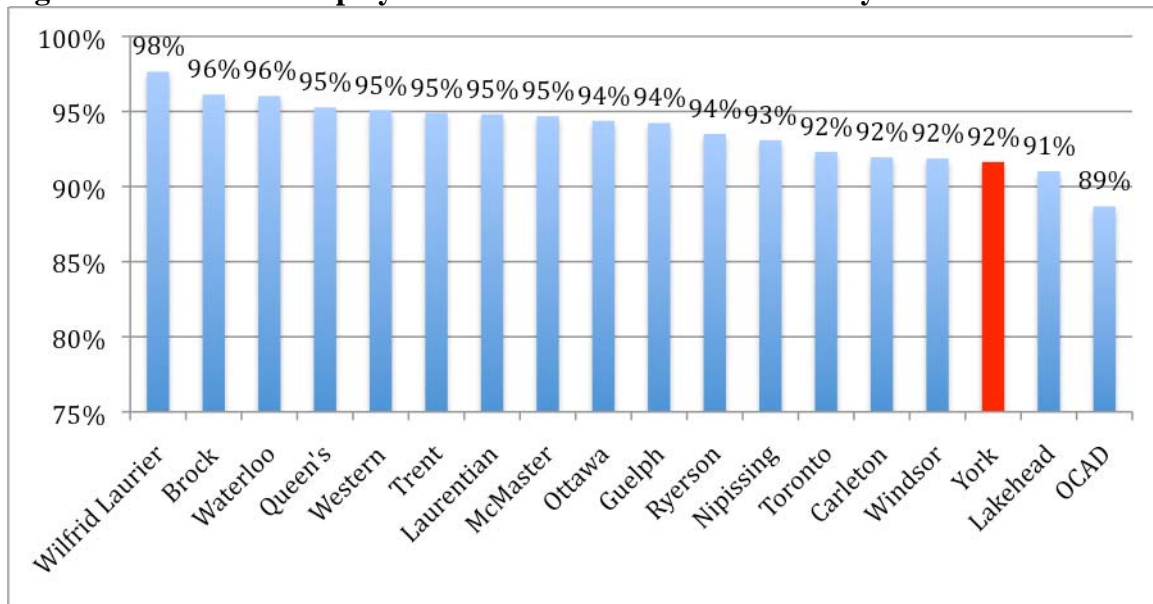
**Figure 10 - Seven-Year Graduation Rates – Ontario System**



[Source: MTCU]

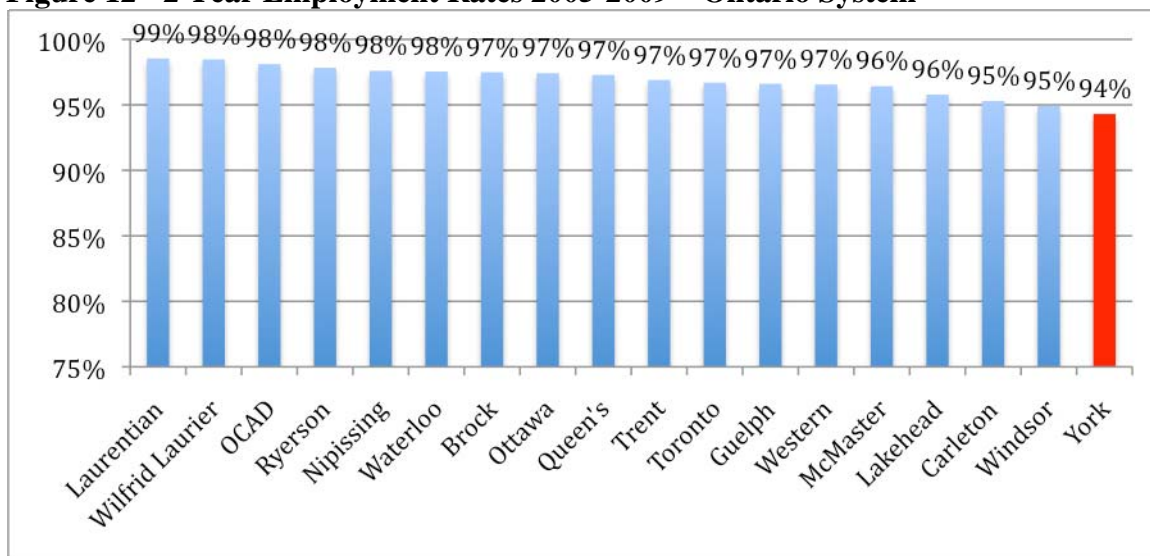
The MTCU data on employment rates of York graduates shows the vast majority of our graduates are employed shortly after graduating. However, on a relative basis we lag behind most other Ontario universities on these indicators.

**Figure 11 - 6 Month Employment Rates 2005-2009 – Ontario System**



[Source: MTCU]

**Figure 12 - 2 Year Employment Rates 2005-2009 – Ontario System**



[Source: MTCU]

Measures such as these, which are required by MTCU to be published on our website, may well have an impact on York's reputation at least among certain key stakeholders such as government, industry and other sectors of the broader community.

### **Concluding Thoughts/Items for Further Discussion**

Given the mixed nature of much of this data, it is important to remind ourselves that so much of what we do at York is of the highest quality. Certain of our Faculties and programs are recognized worldwide. Many of our faculty colleagues are considered the best scholars and academics in their fields. Our brightest students go on to become leaders in industry, culture, community and government. Moreover, our location in the Greater Toronto Area, where much of the growth in enrolment over the next decade is anticipated to occur, gives us the opportunity to significantly improve the quality and attractiveness of our programs. Projections show that there will be a demand for 20,000 to 45,000 additional spaces at post-secondary institutions in the immediate area of York University (ie. York and Peel Regions) in the next decade.

At the same time, it is important to openly debate the implications of the data presented above. Recognizing that no individual measure can accurately capture a university's reputation, or the quality of its faculty, staff, students or programs, the overall picture that emerges from this evidence is troubling. Of particular concern is the direction in which we appear to be moving in a number of these measures.

In terms of next steps, we believe, first, that we need to undertake further research into the questions identified by the UAP. In particular, we need to come to a better

understanding of how we are seen, both within the York community, as well as amongst the broader, external community.

We also believe that the trends in terms of York's declining share of first choice applicants, and the declining GPA of the entering class, are matters of particular concern and require further investigation. We propose to undertake research into current and prospective students, to ascertain their views of the university, their reasons for applying (or not applying, as the case may be), and how we can improve the quality of the student body over time.

Finally, the Working Group has identified the following to be key strategies that might be considered in order to improve upon York's overall reputation:

- build upon strengths, with a view to considering how to differentiate ourselves;
- do better at trumpeting our strengths, including a review of our media and marketing strategies;
- improve the quality of students coming to our programs, including examining how new and existing programs can be made relevant to student and societal needs;
- attract and retain the best scholars, artists, scientists, etc., including consideration of our hiring and tenure and promotion processes;
- continue efforts at strengthening the breadth and depth of our scholarship and programs across a wide range of disciplines, including the comprehensiveness of our program offerings; and
- take advantage of, and establish closer links with, the communities around us.

The Working Group also acknowledges the impact that labour relations have on York's reputation. However, we are of the view that this issue is beyond the purview of this paper and needs to be considered through the appropriate channels and processes.

Many of these strategies are being considered in the context of other green papers. Nevertheless we believe that it is important that the university develop an overall strategy to better measure and improve its reputation. Despite the numerous challenges we face, the Working Group is convinced that an open recognition of these challenges – and the need to work together at addressing them – is key to York's future. We must approach this task in an evidence-based and holistic manner. It will be through open and collegial dialogue on these strategies – and how they might be implemented - that we can be confident that we will build on York's strengths and enhance the university's reputation in the years to come.

**Submitted on October 26, 2009**

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