



Summary of President Rhonda Lenton's Remarks to Senate

February 27, 2025

Good afternoon, Senators. Bonjour. Boozhoo.

Before I begin, I want to thank Cheryl Underhill, who has graciously stepped in as Interim University Secretary after Pascal Robichaud left.

As many of you know, Cheryl has been a member of the Secretariat since 1991 and became an Assistant Secretary in 1998. In her progressive roles, Cheryl has supported the work of both the University Senate and the Board of Governors and provided counsel across various committees, including but not limited to:

- the Senate Academic Policy, Planning and Research Committee;
- the Board Academic Resources and Investment Committees, and
- the Senate Academic Standards, Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee.

Cheryl, on behalf of York, I want to thank you for your exceptional service and dedication to York.

A formal search for a permanent University Secretary is underway and details regarding a full-time replacement will be forthcoming.

YorkU Forward Action Plan

I want to begin my remarks today by providing you with updates regarding the Forward Action Plan. As you know, the University continues to be in a significant deficit position. The good news is that we are tracking better than planned for this year – the anticipated deficit had risen to \$132 million but this has now improved to \$99 million.

I do not need to remind you that the current financial situation has been driven by declining public funding for universities, the current tuition freeze, and policy changes at the federal and provincial levels that have caused a significant decrease in international enrollment.

We also understand that it is not possible to cut our way to balance; we must continue to do everything we can to recapture and increase new revenue while also streamlining administrative costs, aligning expenditures with enrolment, and so on.

This cannot be achieved overnight; therefore, we have worked with the Board of Governors to develop a path to balance over the next three years with a \$115 million projected deficit in 2025-2026, a \$65 million deficit in 2026-27, and a small surplus in 2027-2028. I want to remind my colleagues that we are unfortunately dealing with a highly volatile higher education sector so there will be monthly fluctuations depending on enrolment and other factors.

Achieving this plan requires determined action by the University and an openness to reimagining what we do and how we do it. As most of you are aware, the YU Forward Action Plan identifies 17 projects that emerged in discussions with the University Executive Committee as having the potential to reduce costs and increase revenue.

We launched the Forward Action Plan in 2024 with the goals of maintaining our momentum in advancing the University Academic Plan and ensuring our financial sustainability, consistent with the

changing higher education landscape and the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (OAGO) Report.

Since its launch, we have made significant strides across the projects in all three streams: Program Enhancement and Sustainability, Enrolment Recovery, and Administrative Projects. Working groups have been established, some projects were delegated to Faculties. In other cases, like *Project 2: Faculties of the Future*, consultations are on-going and an interim report summarizing the key trends will be released shortly.

Mid-term updates of progress were recently submitted with expected outcomes and timelines. To offer a few examples, under *Project 13: Administrative Service Efficiencies* and *Project 14: E-License Optimization*, the groups estimate \$9 million in savings in the first 3 years through expense reductions, streamlining and reorganizing services, and so on. The York team also renegotiated 13 Tier one vendor contracts for savings of \$2.25 million for 2024-25; with forecasted savings of \$1.25 million for 2025-26 and 2026-27.

In the administrative stream, we implemented the voluntary exit program for members of YUSA and CUPE 1356 and CUPE 1356-1. All full-time employee members of these bargaining units could participate in the program. A selective voluntary exit program for CPM employees was also launched based on the requirement that the position would not be replaced. These programs are expected to realize an estimated \$15.6 million in savings in 2025-26 and, in combination with other HR initiatives, a total of \$27 million.

Temporary Suspensions of Admissions

As Senators will know, we recently announced the temporary suspension of new admissions in 18 programs with few applications. This action is a key aspect of *Project 4: Program Sustainability*

Review that was delegated to Faculties that is tied to the Auditor General of Ontario's (AGO) value-for-money audit of York.

Applications to these programs are small in number and have typically been steadily declining — in some cases falling to zero. Sufficient actions have simply not been taken to turn things around, or have been unsuccessful, as highlighted in the AGO Report.

While the programs in question offer many courses that deepen and enrich student learning, we nevertheless need to understand the declining interest on the part of students to enroll in the programs, and determine whether the curriculum needs to be revised in some way, or, alternatively, whether there are different ways to deliver the curriculum in more sustainable formats than we have had in the past. Temporarily pausing new admissions makes space for significant curricular discussion and re-envisioning while continuing to teach and conduct research in these areas.

It is important to note that this is not the same as program closure. Courses in these programs will continue for Fall 2025 as they are an important source of learning and enrichment for students across many disciplines.

Supports will be provided to these programs to consider options that could include collaboration with other programs; program renewal through major or minor modifications and relaunching as either a new major or as a minor; merging with other programs; cross-campus or cross-institutional collaboration; incorporation of work-integrated learning; and other innovations to streamline and enhance curricula. Current students in these programs will also be fully supported to ensure no disruption to their progress.

I know these suspensions are challenging for some members of the York community, be they students or faculty members.

I want to acknowledge issues with the implementation including specifically how relevant community members were engaged in the decision. It appears many were caught off guard and may not have clarity on the rationale for the suspension decision and why this is a crucially important action for the long-term sustainability of both these programs and the University as a whole as well as for the student learning experience.

The administration has learned from the rollout of *Project 4*, including the need to communicate more directly and frequently with faculty and instructors and staff at the program level. Discussions have of course taken place between deans, chairs and program leads in some cases for many years about the need to address enrolment declines and the implications for students, budget, etc. Suspension of admissions in such programs is not a new idea, but rather an action given new urgency by the Auditor General's report, the financial situation of the University, and the imperative to think deeply about student needs and interests.

It is regrettable that some valued colleagues first learned of the program suspensions from media coverage that was not always accurate. We know this experience was painful and difficult.

Another takeaway is that our community needs to better understand the financial and student experience implications of having very few or no students enrolling in degrees and the options and supports available to reconfigure small programs in different forms that are more accessible and appealing to students as well as more sustainable in terms of resourcing. Generally speaking, this information is shared at a Faculty-level given significant differences in how enrolment and budget plans are developed in each Faculty although the AGO Report makes a number of institutional observations.

Although certainly not easy, it is necessary for us to consider the direct and indirect costs of programs with few or declining majors and the implications for students. I am confident that we will

find creative ways to address these program challenges to ensure that we continue to offer innovative and relevant programs that prepare our students for success in a rapidly evolving world.

I would also like to recognize the Collegial Forum on Student Retention for producing a very robust report with a set of recommendations to retain more of our students and see them graduate with a credential. Response to the report will be forthcoming from the senior administration.

A [FAQ](#) addressing key questions about this decision, including the selection criteria, impact on students, and broader context of current challenges in higher education is available on the [Forward Action Plan website](#). I encourage you to take the time to review the information.

The OAGO Report

I would also like to provide an update on the Auditor General's report. As you are aware, the OAGO published the York University Operations and Capital Audit Report in December 2023, including 13 recommendations and 29 actions.

Our internal process to address these recommendations included establishing an internal working group comprised of representatives from the President's Office, Office of the Provost and Vice-President Academic, Office of the Vice-President Finance and Administration, University Secretariat, and Internal Audit, and our response was integrated into the Forward Action Plan, which is our blueprint for actioning the report's recommendations.

Out of the 29 actions, 10 have been fully implemented, three are substantially implemented, and 16 are in progress. We expect the in-progress items to be completed by the deadline.

I do want to highlight some more challenging items, including compliance with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities' Financial Health Indicator, managing risks associated with international student enrollment, reducing the deferred maintenance backlog, and improving underperformance in York's Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA) and financial metrics. Colleagues are working diligently to address these challenges and implement the recommendations.

Earlier this month, on February 10, we received a request from the OAGO to commence York's two-year follow-up process regarding the recommendations. Work is underway to ensure that we can provide a response by March 31, 2025.

SMA-4

Finally, I want to inform you that the fourth iteration of the SMA (SMA-4) is currently in development, with a final version due at the end of March. Amid local and global political challenges, the government has altered the metrics, allowing universities to add two metrics of their own from a list.

As the SMAs are binding contracts with the provincial government, universities like York have little leeway; however, to ensure transparency and dialogue, the Provost, David Peters, will give Senators a brief overview of the SMA-4, so that you may share your input, suggestions, or concerns.

Kudos Items

Before I close, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that February is Black History Month. Over the past few weeks, I have learnt more about many inspiring Black leaders, scholars, creatives, and advocates.

One of them is Professor Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang, a York alum who was recently sworn in as Ghana's first female vice-president. She was also previously the first female vice-chancellor of a Ghanaian public university and Ghana's first female minister of education.

Thank you. Merci. Miigwetch.