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Canadian Faculty Members' Hopes and Anxieties About the Near-Future of Higher Education
Les espoirs et les inquiétudes des membres du corps professoral canadiens concernant l'avenir proche de l'enseignement supérieur

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Article abstract

Higher education worldwide is facing several challenges spanning from economic, social, technological, demographic, environmental, to political tensions. Calls to rethink, reimagine, and reform higher education to respond to such challenges are ongoing, and need to be informed by a wide variety of stakeholders. To inform such efforts, we interviewed thirty-seven faculty members at Canadian colleges and universities to develop a greater understanding of their hopes and anxieties about the future of higher education as they considered what higher education may look like five years into the future. Results centred on four themes: (1) anxieties and hopes are shaped by supports and resources from various sources, (2) faculty members face anxiety over matters that negatively impact them but are beyond their control, (3) faculty members hope that "good" comes from the COVID-19 pandemic, and (4) faculty members hope for a well-rounded education that will enable students to succeed both within and beyond their careers. Implications for these findings suggest a need to direct research efforts and practices toward more hopeful futures for higher education, especially in the context of online and blended learning.

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Canadian Faculty Members' Hopes and Anxieties About the Near-Future of Higher Education

Les espoirs et les inquiétudes des membres du corps professoral canadiens concernant l'avenir proche de l'enseignement supérieur

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Abstract

Higher education worldwide is facing several challenges spanning from economic, social, technological, demographic, environmental, to political tensions. Calls to rethink, reimagine, and reform higher education to respond to such challenges are ongoing, and need to be informed by a wide variety of stakeholders. To inform such efforts, we interviewed thirty-seven faculty members at Canadian colleges and universities to develop a greater understanding of their hopes and anxieties about the future of higher education as they considered what higher education may look like five years into the future. Results centred on four themes: (1) anxieties and hopes are shaped by supports and resources from various sources, (2) faculty members face anxiety over matters that negatively impact them but are beyond their control, (3) faculty members hope that "good" comes from the COVID-19 pandemic, and (4) faculty members hope for a well-rounded education that will enable students to succeed both within and beyond their careers. Implications for these findings suggest a need to direct research efforts and practices toward more hopeful futures for higher education, especially in the context of online and blended learning.

Keywords: Anxieties; Faculty members; Learning futures; Qualitative research; Hopeful futures

Résumé

L'enseignement supérieur dans le monde entier est confronté à plusieurs défis allant des tensions économiques, sociales, technologiques, démographiques, environnementales et politiques. Les appels à repenser, réinventer et réformer l'enseignement supérieur pour répondre à ces défis sont en cours. Ces efforts doivent être éclairés par une grande variété d'intervenants, y compris les membres du

corps professoral. Pour éclairer ces efforts, des entrevues individuelles ont été menées auprès de trente-sept membres du corps professoral de collèges et d'universités canadiens afin de mieux comprendre leurs espoirs et leurs inquiétudes quant à l'avenir de l'enseignement supérieur lorsqu'ils réfléchissaient à quoi pourrait ressembler l'enseignement supérieur dans cinq ans. Les résultats sont centrés sur quatre thèmes : (1) les anxiétés et les espoirs sont façonnés par des soutiens et des ressources provenant de diverses sources, (2) les membres du corps professoral sont confrontés à de l'anxiété sur des questions qui les touchent négativement, mais qui sont hors de leur contrôle, (3) les membres du corps professoral espèrent que des effets positifs vient de la pandémie de la COVID-19, et (4) les membres du corps professoral espèrent une éducation bien équilibrée qui permettra aux étudiants de réussir à la fois dans et au-delà de leur carrière. Les implications pour ces résultats suggèrent le besoin d'orienter les efforts et les pratiques de recherche vers un avenir plus prometteur pour l'enseignement supérieur, en particulier dans le contexte de l'apprentissage en ligne et hybride.

Mots-clés: inquiétudes ; membres du corps professoral ; avenir de l’apprentissage ; recherche qualitative ; avenir prometteur

Introduction

At a time of rapid technological change and socio-political turmoil, compounded by nearly two years of teaching and learning in a pandemic context, many are speculating about what the future of higher education may hold. For instance, Zimmerman (2021) offers a hopeful outcome in his telling of a short fictional story of Professor Van Winkle, who awoke from a nap to find himself in the year 2041. Previously frustrated by political polarization, Van Winkle finds himself in a new era of pedagogy where students, still learning in an on-campus setting, are well-versed in the practice of viewpoint diversity and use technology to facilitate respectful dialogue that demands inclusivity of multiple viewpoints. Scholarship anticipating the future of education existed prior to the pandemic as well. Creighton-Offord (2017) for example, describes a dystopian future in which students and professors became disconnected and algorithmic, a future in which lonely students roamed digital spaces collectively wondering whether their professor was ever human.

While such speculative writing speaks to what likelihood futures may look like, it also offers insights about the present (Facer, 2011). Zimmerman’s story points to current concerns around political polarization. Crighton-Offord’s story suggests that technology diminishes important human aspects of the learning experience. Motivated by the recognition that what scholars imagine might unfold in the years and decades to come reflect issues faculty are observing and experiencing in the present, this study sought to identify the hopes and anxieties that Canadian faculty are facing in late 2021 as they consider what higher education may look like five years into the future (hereafter referred to as the near-future of higher education). Our objective was to generate an in-depth understanding of hopes and anxieties during a period of uncertainty and reflection, and identify challenges that higher education faculty perceive as impacting the future of the sector. To do so, we conducted one-to-one interviews with 37 faculty and analyzed the data collected using a constant comparative approach. We begin with

a review of literature relevant to the future of higher education, followed by an overview of the theoretical framework that was used to analyze the data. We then present and discuss our findings and their implications.

Review of the Relevant Literature

The study of benefits, drawbacks, potential roles, and impacts of technological advancements in higher education have long been topics of interest and debate amongst academics. To name a few, such topics have included everything from artificial intelligence to digitalization, future learning paradigms, globalization, marketization, microcredentials, and workforce skills development (Aoun, 2017; Cormier et al, 2019; Facer, 2011; Future Skills Council, 2020; Macdonald, 2019; Macgilchrist et al., 2020; Selwyn et al., 2020). Intertwined with scholarship examining the role of technology in the future of education are discussions about the ways in which social, political, cultural, and economic forces are shaping higher education (Barber et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2020; Siemens & Matheos, 2010; Tierney, 2020). The relationships between higher education and these forces are complex and Facer (2011, p. 14) urges researchers and practitioners "to rewrite the relationship between education, socio-technical change and the future if we are to ensure that socio-technical changes of the next two decades do not simply serve to produce futures of profound inequality and environmental degradation.".

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated and shaped conversations about the future of higher education. A number of researchers have explored the direct impacts of the rapid transition to emergency remote teaching, describing in detail the unprecedented and challenging circumstances faculty, staff, students, and administrators faced during the pandemic (Belikov et al., 2021; Claubaugh et al., 2021; Houlden & Veletsianos, 2022; Johnson et al., 2020; Littlejohn et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021). Administrators, instructors, and students, alike, had to quickly adjust to near-constant technology use while managing the anxiety, stress, isolation, and unpredictability of the pandemic. Other scholars have ruminated on the long-lasting impact of the pandemic (Grove et al., 2020). For example, Costello et al. (2020) used a speculative approach that places the reader in the year 2050, reflecting on the pandemic as a critical moment in history and provoking the reader to consider a dystopian future that could conceivably come to pass with the pandemic being the final catalyst leading to a post-truth, post-human era. Lockee (2021) is more optimistic, at least in the positive role that technology may have on education. She sees the pandemic as a pivotal moment and anticipates that it will permanently alter pedagogical practices and the delivery of education particularly in terms of increasing online and hybrid learning options.

The future of post-secondary education as impacted by ongoing challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic remains a heated topic of discussion. Peters et al. (2020) and Wyatt-Smith et al. (2021) for instance each compiled the perspectives of faculty, who expressed concerns and highlighted opportunities for change as the pandemic abates. Respondents emphasized concerns about neoliberalism, climate change, the political landscape, the economy, technology, and the intertwined nature of these concerns with the pandemic. They also noted the importance of refocusing on well-

rounded, interdisciplinary educational practices and moving away from a business-model style of post-secondary governance. In their essay on the implications of widespread technology adoption, Teräs et al. (2020) argued for the importance of reflective action with consideration to the long-term impacts of the choices made during the COVID-19 pandemic. They posited that technological solutions are not neutral and have the potential to reinforce and exacerbate existing problems if they are implemented without first scrutinizing, and perhaps rethinking, the objectives of higher education. In a report released by Georgetown University (2021), academics and administrators in the United States highlighted how the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has cast a spotlight on existing inequities and has created openings for meaningful systemic changes, which is a topic highlighted in a number of other studies (Harper, 2020; Jaggars et al., 2021).

An overwhelming amount of gray literature focusing on the future of higher education also exists. Much of this is opinion-based and overshadows the limited literature that is grounded on systematic analyses of student, staff, faculty, or administrator perspectives. Watermeyer et al. (2020) note that there is a need for research, rather than opinion, which explores the near future of higher education in order to identify the prospective impacts of the pandemic, particularly the subsequent (and likely inevitable) digital transformation of teaching and learning. In their survey of nearly 1,200 faculty in the United Kingdom, in which they asked respondents about the shorter-term impact of the shift to online instruction as a result of the pandemic, they find that respondents anticipate an increased workload over the next three years and are concerned about the impact of digitization and marketization, the scope of their role (such as having to support student mental health without adequate qualifications), and increasing precarity for adjunct and casual academic staff. Systematic studies of faculty perspectives are necessary and important because they highlight the experiences and expectations of individuals who are "on the ground" and who see the future of education through an insider perspective.

The purpose of this study therefore is to add to the aforementioned literature by identifying faculty hopes and anxieties about the near-future of higher education. Our previous work, conducted during the early months of the pandemic, showed that even though Canadian faculty faced significant challenges (Belikov et al., 2021; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021), faculty respondents were also almost evenly split as being either optimistic or pessimistic about the future of higher education (Veletsianos et al., 2020). These exploratory investigations provided the basis for the systematic effort that we provide here. In engaging in this research, we respond to the urgent need identified by Watermeyer et al. (2020, p. 624) to "map the terrain" of change and transformation in the higher education sector.

Theoretical Framework

We theorize *hope* using key dimensions of the concept identified in the Herth Hope Index, the Synder State Hope Scale, and the Multidimensional Hope in Counseling and Psychotherapy Scale (Arnau, 2018; Larsen et al., 2020; Schrank et al., 2008). To theorize *anxiety*, we use Barlow's (2000) concept of anxious apprehension. While much of the literature theorizing hope and anxiety is clinical

(e.g., counseling, psychiatry, psychology, psychotherapy), the operationalization of these two concepts in the literature is broad enough to inform this research.

Hope is a positive concept and "a primarily future-orientated expectation" (Schrank et al., 2008, p. 426). Models of hope consistently include five dimensions: cognitive, affective, behavioural, relational, and environmental. The cognitive dimension of hope focuses on an awareness of different possibilities within a situation, whether the desired outcome is probable or realistic, and one's ability to develop goals and strategies to achieve desired outcomes (Arnau, 2018; Larsen et al., 2020). The affective dimension relates to the presence of positive emotions such as trust and confidence (Schrank et al., 2008). The behavioural dimension consists of mobilization and taking action toward one's goals (Larsen et al., 2020). The relational dimension is comprised of supportive and spiritual relationships that provide a sense of interconnectedness with others (Arnau, 2018; Larsen et al., 2020); and the environmental dimension encompasses the availability of resources to the individual (Schrank et al., 2008). This understanding has a variety of implications for our study, for instance, that hope is impacted both by an individual's cognitive processes as well as their relationships and context.

In making sense of anxiety, Arnau (2018) distinguished between panic-related anxiety (fear) and *anxious apprehension (hopelessness)*. Panic-related anxiety, or fear, is oriented in the present and triggered by an immediate threat. For the purposes of this paper, we turned to anxious apprehension, which is oriented toward the future and is triggered by the perception that one is unable to prevent a negative or undesirable outcome (Barlow, 2000). Like hope, anxious apprehension therefore orients itself toward the future. The presence of anxious apprehension indicates a perceived lack of possible positive outcomes, positive emotion, control, support, or resources that negatively impact one's overall sense of hope.

Methods

We posed the following research question: What hopes and anxieties do faculty members in Canada have about the near future of higher education?

Participants

We recruited participants through social media and email outreach. A call for Canadian faculty willing to participate in a 45-minute interview was shared as (a) an advertisement emailed to faculty subscribed to updates from one of the largest research and institutional consulting firms in Canada, and (b) social media posts on the Twitter and Facebook profiles of authors, tagged with hashtags relevant to the higher education sector in Canada. These calls were subsequently shared by others via typical Internet affordances (e.g., retweeting, emails shared amongst colleagues, etc.). Potential participants clicked on a link that directed them to a consent form which included information about the study. Consenting individuals were asked for their contact email and were presented with a demographic questionnaire. Thereafter, researchers purposefully selected who to interview in an iterative manner in order to capture a diverse range of perspectives, seeking to include a wide range of ages, disciplines,

positions, institutional locations, and types of institutions. Interviews continued until researchers felt that saturation had been reached, which was the point at which the last set of three interviews conducted added little new insights to the data. At that point, the data collected was already extensive, rich, and well beyond common recommendations in the literature (Baker & Edwards, 2012). The thirty-seven individuals that were interviewed for the study are listed in Table 1. All were older than 35 years of age, distributed evenly across the age ranges of 55+ (13), 45-54 (12), and 35-44 (12). They held positions in universities (23) and colleges (14). Most held doctorates (21) and master's degrees (14) while two held bachelor's degrees. In terms of rank, interviewees consisted of full professors (15), associate professors (8), and assistant professors (7). Four were sessional (adjunct) instructors and four identified as holding permanent full-time positions (three full-time faculty, one full-time researcher). Their institutions were located in Ontario (23), Alberta (5), British Columbia (2), Manitoba (2), New Brunswick (2), Northwest Territories (2), and Prince Edward Island (1). Their disciplines were Social Sciences (11), Healthcare (8), Education (6), Arts (4), Business (3), Science (3), Culinary Arts (1), and Political Science (1).

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Name or Pseudonym*	Age	Degree	Discipline	Position	Province or Territory	Type of institution
Don	55+	Doctoral	Political Science	Full professor	PEI	University
Charanjit	55+	Master's	Education	Permanent full-time	Ontario	College
Laura*	55+	Master's	Healthcare	Permanent full-time	New Brunswick	College
Riley	35-44	Master's	Culinary Arts	Full professor	Ontario	College
Gary	55+	Bachelor's	Business	Sessional faculty	Ontario	University
Melanie	45-54	Master's	Business	Full professor	Ontario	College
Elizabeth*	35-44	Master's	Arts	Full professor	Ontario	College
Kaleb*	45-54	Master's	Social Sciences	Full professor	Ontario	College
Joy*	55+	Master's	Healthcare	Permanent full-time	Ontario	College
Julian	55+	Master's	Healthcare	Full professor	Ontario	College
Heather*	45-54	Master's	Social Sciences	Full professor	Ontario	College

Name or Pseudonym*	Age	Degree	Discipline	Position	Province or Territory	Type of institution
Jan	55+	Master's	Arts	Full professor	Ontario	College
Alice*	55+	Master's	Healthcare	Associate professor	Manitoba	University
Nicole	55+	Bachelor's	Education	Full professor	Ontario	College
Dawn*	55+	Doctoral	Education	Permanent full-time	Northwest Territories	College
Sharlene*	55+	Doctoral	Education	Associate professor	Alberta	University
Erin*	35-44	Master's	Business	Sessional faculty	Ontario	University
Alan*	45-54	Doctoral	Science	Full professor	Ontario	University
Denay*	35-44	Doctoral	Social Sciences	Associate professor	Ontario	University
Sarah*	35-44	Doctoral	Social Sciences	Assistant professor	Alberta	University
Kelly	45-54	Doctoral	Social Sciences	Sessional faculty	Ontario	University
Micah*	45-54	Master's	Arts	Full professor	Ontario	College
Jim	55+	Master's	Education	Sessional faculty	Northwest Territories	College
Theo*	45-54	Doctoral	Social Sciences	Full professor	Ontario	University
John*	45-54	Doctoral	Social Sciences	Full professor	Ontario	University
Rebecca*	45-54	Doctoral	Social Sciences	Associate professor	Ontario	University
Tanya	35-44	Doctoral	Education	Associate professor	Ontario	University
Taylor*	45-54	Doctoral	Healthcare	Assistant professor	Alberta	University
Mary*	55+	Doctoral	Healthcare	Full professor	Alberta	University
Jeremiah*	45-54	Doctoral	Social Sciences	Associate professor	Ontario	University
Dave*	35-44	Doctoral	Social Sciences	Assistant professor	Ontario	University
Lisa*	35-44	Doctoral	Arts	Assistant professor	Alberta	University

Name or Pseudonym*	Age	Degree	Discipline	Position	Province or Territory	Type of institution
Jay*	35-44	Doctoral	Science	Assistant professor	British Columbia	University
Grace*	35-44	Doctoral	Healthcare	Assistant professor	British Columbia	University
Caroline*	45-54	Doctoral	Science	Full professor	New Brunswick	University
Janine*	35-44	Doctoral	Healthcare	Associate professor	Ontario	University
Jocelyn*	35-44	Doctoral	Social Sciences	Associate professor	Manitoba	University

Note. An * indicates a pseudonym. The rest of the participants preferred to be identified by name.

Data Collection

Participants were interviewed using a video-conferencing application, and data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix 1). The interview consisted of broad open-ended questions focused on faculty hopes and anxieties about the future of higher education within their own institution and at the national level. Interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and were audio recorded. They were then transcribed verbatim using an automated speech-to-text transcription software. Each interview was then read and revised for accuracy prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

A constant comparative approach was used to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The two researchers read through all the transcripts to gain an overall understanding of the data. They each read each transcript independently and created a list of early codes identifying hopes and anxieties. The two researchers then discussed these codes, merged them into a single codebook, defined each code, and discussed potential themes. Next, one researcher coded the data in an iterative manner. Using the initial codebook, they read each transcript, and assigned codes to the text. The researcher read each sentence and paragraph in a transcript and compared it to the codebook. If the sentence and/or paragraph was defined by an existing code, it was coded as such. If the sentence and/or paragraph required a new code, the researcher created a new code, defined the code, added the code to the codebook, and tagged the relevant text with the code. Whenever a new code was added to the codebook, the researcher reviewed the previously coded transcripts to check whether any data should be assigned to the newly generated codes. Eventually, the process of constantly comparing the transcripts to the codes resulted in a list of codes describing all the data. Throughout the analysis, the two researchers met regularly to discuss and revise the existing and emerging codes, and to explore and identify any preliminary patterns. After several rounds of discussion, and after the researchers felt the

data had reached saturation, the codes were arranged into themes using the conceptual models of hope and anxieties described above.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Multiple steps were taken to minimize the incidence of bias in the analyses. First, we employed investigator triangulation by independently reviewing transcripts prior to discussion of initial codes to avoid influencing one another's understanding of the data. Second, we examined the demographic information of all potential participants, and purposefully selected who to interview incrementally so as to interview as wide and diverse a sample as possible. Third, we continued adding participants to our dataset until the data we had gathered were both rich and considerable. Fourth, we continued analyzing data until we felt that we reached thematic saturation. Fifth, we presented findings using thick descriptions to help readers establish whether the results apply to their own contexts (Merriam, 1995). Finally, we conducted member checks by emailing participants a summary of findings to verify that those accurately represented their experiences. Of the 37 participants interviewed, 15 responded to our emails, and they all affirmed that the findings captured their experiences.

Limitations and Delimitations

A key limitation to our study is the diversity of the individuals interviewed. Those who responded to the call for participation were primarily full-time faculty of Caucasian descent, most of whom reside and work in Ontario. While Ontario is the most populous region with the most public institutions in Canada, our sample of participants risks over-emphasizing the perceptions of Ontario-based faculty, especially due to the fact that higher education in Canada is a provincial/territorial vis-a-vis federal responsibility. As an internal check of our data, we compared responses between this group and the group of participants who were adjunct, or from provinces other than Ontario, and we found that the two groups reported similar hopes and anxieties, thus strengthening confidence in our results. We were unsuccessful in recruiting participants from all provinces/territories, most notably Quebec, and while some participants identified as Black, Indigenous or People of Color, we acknowledge that our sample lacks ethnolinguistic diversity which may impact the results.

Results

We identified four themes, and these are listed in Table 2 along with the number of participants who made comments that related to each theme.

Table 2

Themes and Number of Faculty Members Represented in Each Theme

Theme	Number of Faculty
Supports and resources from various sources shape hopes and anxieties	36
Anxiety over matters that negatively impact faculty but are beyond their control	34
Faculty hope that good comes from the pandemic	32
Faculty hope for a well-rounded education will enable students to succeed both within and beyond their careers	35

Supports and Resources From Various Sources Shape Hopes and Anxieties

Nearly all participants expressed their hope that they will be supported in achieving desired outcomes. Such support took the form of both resources and relationships, and faculty spoke about support from specific sources that they hoped would become available or increase in the future. They also shared their apprehension about the likelihood that supports would diminish, disappear, or not come to fruition. We identified three specific sources of support: government, institutional, and societal. In general, we found that faculty hope for greater societal recognition of the value of higher education to the extent that governments will be compelled to place a priority on funding Canadian post-secondary institutions. In turn, many faculty expressed hope that increased funding will make higher education more accessible and reduce pressure to cut programs. Concerns typically centered on the fear that these hopes will not come to fruition, and the negative consequences that will arise as a result.

Government Support (31 Participants)

While participants described their hopes that students and higher education, in general, would receive greater government funding in the future, they also were concerned that such funding would not materialize. Twelve faculty expressed hope for reductions in tuition costs for students to improve accessibility. For example, Denay said: “I hope that the costs of higher education would be lowered for students so that tuition is not a lifelong thing that they have to take on. That’s very problematic. And so I would hope to see lower tuition or tuition-free education. I think that would be fantastic.” Others made similar remarks. Heather expressed her hope for better financial support for students such that “marginalized populations can access higher education so that we have more diversity in certain sectors.” While optimistic, some faculty expressed caution. Nicole for instance, mentioned that she was hopeful for tuition-free funding to exist in Canada similar to what she has observed in European countries but noted: “I don't expect we'll ever get there, especially not in five years, but it would be

really nice. I would hope that we could reduce those [financial] barriers." Similarly, Caroline's "sincerest hope" and "fondest goal" was for "post-secondary, - whether it's a community college, polytechnic, university, whatever - to be made free…[which in turn] would alleviate some of the financial issues" that students and youth are facing.

Seven faculty reported being worried that the political climate in their province would lead to increased costs of post-secondary education in the near future, thus reducing the financial support that students receive. Jocelyn remarked that she hoped for higher education to be affordable for students, but was concerned over the negative impact that government decisions could potentially have on affordability. She said:

> Especially with some of the changes that our provincial government is looking to make, it is going to make [higher education] more unaffordable, make certain programs more unaffordable. Because part of what they're trying to do with the legislation is give themselves the power, instead of the universities, to set tuition rates, leading to tuition being lower for some programs, prioritized programs, the job-ready programs that the government considers valuable. So certainly, you know, I hope it's affordable for all students, and that it's accessible to students from traditionally underrepresented groups in academic programs.

Institutional Support (31 Participants)

At the institutional level, faculty concerns about support centred around workload, adjunctification, increasing class sizes, program cuts, and the policy and strategy decisions being made by institutional leaders. In the early stages of our interviews for this study, Laurentian University in Ontario declared insolvency along with major program cuts, making national news. Roughly half of participants alluded to the situation at Laurentian in discussing their anxieties. Many faculty reported that they received less support from their institutions over time and worried that such support would continue to diminish. Kaleb stated, "My fears are that we will continue to be underfunded, and administrators will be making cuts in areas that we as academics think are vital for the work we do." Theo noted that continual increases in workload are going to negatively impact the quality of the student experience.

Nineteen faculty reported concerns about adjunctification and a lack of institutional support for continuing full-time or tenure-track models of faculty employment. The worry that support for full-time staff would continue to decline was linked to the perception that the institution was acting more like a corporation with a focus on the financial bottom line instead of the well-being of students and faculty. Julian stated, "I keep coming back to money, which is really sad because that's not what I believe we're all about. But I believe that there's more and more demand for accountability, there's greater competitiveness for funding, and there's less funding going out to higher education. And so they're looking at ways of staying financially responsible and accountable."

Ten faculty members expressed nervousness that corporatization within their own institution would lead to program cuts that would limit the educational options available to students, especially

certain kinds of programs. Don remarked that the perception among administrators appeared to be that "the humanities courses are the frosting on the cake, the extras. Make things pretty, but they're not essential to the mission." He continued, "I'm afraid [administrators] are not going to see what steps need to be taken to ensure that [humanities are protected] because to me if they're not there, the whole point of the university is lost. That would be my concern." The source of anxiety in most instances appeared to be a lack of government support combined with a corporate mindset among administrators, leading faculty to wonder whether their own institution would some day in the future find itself in a financial crisis. Laurentian's declaration of insolvency seemed to aggravate these concerns. Janine wondered, "Will we have universities, small universities, community-based universities at all in 2026? I never thought I'd be saying this but with what happened with Laurentian, I do have questions about that . . . a year ago, this never would have crossed my mind, I never would have felt this uncomfortable, this scared, this anxious. But here we are."

Societal Support (16 Participants)

A sense of waning support for higher education from the general public was a further source of anxiety for faculty. Kelly described the current state of public support as "discouraging and disheartening" but added that she hadn't given up hope. She continued, "You need public support for establishing a robust university system. And I think actually, we're going to a weird intellectual place right now with, you know, the rise of right-wing populism . . . I've seen some disturbing talk online about how universities are just outdated and they're brainwashing institutions and all that… that kind of stuff I find very discouraging." Joy commented that she has observed "anti-teacher stereotypes out there at all different levels" and that "the public misunderstands what it is that we as faculty are trying to do." Janine expressed concern that the current culture of "anti-intellectualism" would lead to less money being put toward higher education "given that there's not as much of a perceived value of higher education within our society anymore."

Anxiety Over Matters That Negatively Impact Faculty, But Are Beyond Their Control

Faculty identified issues that were outside of their control as sources of anxious apprehension. When they described factors that contributed to their concerns, they tended to position both problems and solutions as being in the hands of others such as 'universities,' 'senior administration,' 'business leaders,' and 'the government.' These groups were described as having power and control over the working conditions of faculty, highlighting tensions between personal agency and institutional control. For example, John and Jocelyn expressed their fears around pressures for commodification, and Lisa said, "Our government is going to try and push us towards a more American-style of privatization or [creating] public-private partnerships for institutions like ours."

Participant remarks carried an underlying tone of hopelessness and several faculty shared their anxiety of negative repercussions that might arise if they attempt to oppose undesirable changes. Janine remarked, "It just is becoming increasingly problematic with increasing tensions between senior administration and faculty where faculty rights and collective bargaining processes are not necessarily respected, and this can create some hard feelings in the long- and short-term." She added that these

tensions were a result of "running universities like a business and seeing faculty as the problem rather than the solution." Jocelyn shared her concern that the situation with Laurentian University declaring insolvency would set a precedent, a "blueprint for governments who want to get around those exigency clauses in the collective agreements." As for the possible consequences to faculty, Sarah said, "I am afraid that universities are going to be run like corporate, neoliberal, standardized test systems where a lot of the important labour the faculty do is outsourced or automated."

Anxiety about lack of control over outcomes extended beyond the institution. Some faculty described what they felt as a decreasing influence of their role as educators on the broader culture, which is pushing for changes that are incompatible with quality education. The sense of cultural priorities overriding educational priorities mostly emerged in comments relating to increasing attitudes of neoliberalism and anti-intellectualism. For instance, John expressed concerns about "the McDonaldization approach to education," which he attributed to a growing sense of belief around education as a product for purchase. Tanya, Jim, Dave, and Sharlene also described negative changes being driven by neoliberalism and anti-intellectualism within Canadian culture. Tanya said that she worried about "anti-education sentiments and a neoliberal attitude of buying an education" increasing over time. Jim noted his concerns that government funding may be redirected to "producing entry-level workers for industry" due to "the increasing populist politics and neoliberal economics." In a moment of self-reflection, Sharlene asked: "Why is that? Where have we missed the boat [in the post-secondary sector] to be able to demonstrate our value to our citizens?"

The unfamiliar terrain that higher education is currently navigating, as well as faculty members' perceived inability and lack of control to influence institutional direction, aggravated the unease that faculty were feeling. For instance, Riley noted that while "changes are going to have to happen, we can't control when they do happen and that creates a little bit of anxiety." Janine described feeling like "everything is up in the air right now," adding, "which is probably where some of my anxiety comes from, as well as not actually knowing in five years from now, what this [higher education] is going to look like for us." Lisa echoed these sentiments, noting that she can no longer "foresee what the world will look like in 10 years… I think that has gone for me, at least it's gone down… and that is causing anxiety." Jeremiah described feeling very troubled because at his institution faculty "have absolutely no control over what is happening to us," and Denay described "feeling like we're kind of in the dark about why we're doing certain things in the first place." Theo painted a starker picture when he said: "Our institution lacks so much direction that nobody knows what our goals are or what we want to become."

Faculty Hope That Good Comes From the Pandemic

While participants often noted that the pandemic itself was challenging, and exacerbating their anxieties, many highlighted that they hope that something positive will come out of these circumstances. For example, eleven faculty stated that the pandemic provided varied opportunities for learning and change that gave them a sense of hope. John captured this by stating: "As much as the pandemic is a horrible, horrible, horrible thing to live through, it gives all sectors of society a unique opportunity to identify areas for change, and then to make that change happen. And education is

definitely one of those areas." In reflecting on the changes since the start of the pandemic, Erin stated, "It's remarkable how dramatically we've changed what we do. It's made me more hopeful for the future to think that we can change that quickly and that dramatically." Similarly, Kelly described feeling hopeful that "change can happen and happen quickly, and that we are adaptable" and Sharlene said that when she "think[s] ahead five years, [she] hope[s] that learnings are carried forward into that time."

The positive outcomes that faculty hoped would be sparked by the pandemic included fresh and innovative approaches to pedagogy, greater collaboration, the emergence of new learning options, and "changes in structures, focus, and priorities" (Mary). Several participants, for instance, noted how the rapid shift to remote courses compelled faculty to change their teaching practices. Jay was hopeful for positive "rippling consequences" resulting from the switch to online modes to teaching and learning. Rebecca noted that the pandemic "has raised important questions about pedagogy that maybe we weren't talking about before . . . I think it's been a really painful experience but, hopefully, it has prompted us to think about teaching in helpful ways." John described feeling hopeful that the pandemic would "push a vision of change in how we deliver educational opportunities for students in post-secondary institutions," and expressed his hope that several decades from now,

> people who are still alive can look back and go, 'yeah, that was a really bad time in world history, but look at all these amazing things that came out of it.' With respect to university education, look at all these changes that were made. Look at all these lasting differences that we see. And I'm hopeful that that's what happens.

The hope for the emergence of new learning options was shared by five participants. For example, Rebecca, Charanjit, Don, and Erin expressed hope that online learning options would remain and offer more flexibility for faculty and students going forward. Charanjit remarked that the pandemic accelerated technology adoption by encouraging faculty to learn how to use new technologies. Don hoped for a breakdown in disciplinary silos, and Erin hoped that "there could be more opportunities for people like me [adjunct faculty] in academia as a result of a move to more of these smaller credentialing type programs or courses." Mary spoke about a more hopeful future that addresses systemic inequities, Alan shared his wish that "everyone will be a bit more patient," and Melanie expressed her desire that "some of the compassion and flexibility that we have been required to quickly ramp up the past year" would be maintained.

Faculty Hope For a Well-Rounded Education That Will Enable Students to Succeed Both Within and Beyond Their Careers

Participants expressed their desire that in the future students would leave post-secondary education with both the skills necessary to enjoy a successful career, as well as the critical thinking skills necessary for a well-rounded knowledge base that would enable them to become thoughtful members of society. The primary reason that faculty expressed these hopes were due to concerns they had about students' futures: nine participants were concerned that post-secondary education seems increasingly unlikely to enable individuals to improve their economic prospects; seventeen expressed

concerns about the quality of higher education that students are receiving with respect to job preparation; and four noted concerns about sufficient job opportunities for graduate-level students. These concerns prompted participants to describe their hopes for the role of education in students' lives, and nearly all of them noted that they hoped higher education enables economic prosperity in addition to personal and societal growth. Sixteen participants described their hope that such an education includes critical thinking skills, soft skills, and interdisciplinary learning experiences.

To facilitate the development of critical thinking skills, Alice, Taylor, Jay, Jeremiah, and Elizabeth expressed the hope that higher education would become less focused on grades and more focused on creative problem-solving. Taylor expressed her wish that greater emphasis would be placed on the learning process, particularly on gaining and applying knowledge. Jay echoed Taylor's sentiments saying he hoped to see learning environments that helped students "understand that it's okay to be wrong and that how they respond to being wrong is the most important aspect." He added, "I think students are too afraid to be wrong because we focus too much on the right answer and not the process." Alice and Elizabeth noted that the critical thinking skills resulting from well-rounded educational experiences would lead to positive student outcomes that extended beyond work. Alice said, "My dream would be that personal development is as much of a priority as attaining whatever the degree is and whatever the job is . . . the value of a liberal arts education is just being a more interesting, broad thinking person and challenging the status quo and asking good questions and engaging in debate. I would love to see that element come back to post-secondary education." Elizabeth also described hoping to see a swing back toward valuing this kind of education, saying, "I want my students to be thinking beyond their job…I want them to be thinking about just their life and where they can be thinking deeply and engaging with the world, whatever they are doing."

Further to the impact of well-rounded education experiences beyond students' careers, Denay and Sharlene spoke to their hope that it would positively impact society. Denay noted, "My hopes for higher education are to maintain systems of education that provide a broad base of education for students and that we don't lose the breadth of topics that students can learn about. I hope [higher education] maintains the richness and variety of topics that I feel benefit students, benefit our society, and benefit Canadians." Sharlene remarked, "I think that post-secondary can also hold the key for some of the solutions to the problems that we're having to deal with. And I hope that we can play a strong key role in helping address some of the issues we see in society and continue to build a strong workforce and a scholarly workforce that's able to lead us well into the future."

Discussion and Implications

The existing literature highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic represents a critical juncture in higher education (Costello et al., 2020; Lockee, 2021), often framed in terms of a "new normal." The hopes and anxieties identified in this paper reiterate the expectation that the pandemic may have significant impacts on the future of higher education.

Similar to the perspectives compiled by Peters et al. (2020) and Wyatt-Smith et al. (2021), the systematic analysis presented here identifies anxieties focusing on neoliberalism, the political landscape, technology, and the intersection of these themes with pandemic-related concerns. Hope theory is helpful here in making sense of faculty aspirations about better futures. In the *cognitive* dimension, faculty appear to explore different possibilities to address the current circumstances they find themselves in and explore whether a desired outcome is realistic (Arnau, 2018; Larsen et al., 2020). The presence of positive emotions such as trust and confidence are central in the *affective* dimension of hope (Schrank, 2020). The belief that government or institutional leaders have the power and resources to implement new policies that would result in positive change (e.g., Nicole noted that she felt tuition-free higher education was realistic based on what she had observed in European nations) is a major driver of hope for faculty. However, the data also reveal a general absence of trust that government officials and institutional leaders would be able to develop policies to improve higher education, highlighting *relational* and *environmental* dimensions of hope. *Behavioural* dimensions of hope (i.e., one's ability to take action to achieve a goal or outcome (Larsen et al., 2020)), also figured prominently in the data. Some participants described decisions made at the government and institutional levels as being imposed upon them with little opportunity to voice their concerns or oppose such changes. When faculty described absence of feelings of personal agency, characterized by the sense that effecting change was outside their locus of control, they also described feelings of anxious apprehension.

A few participants noted that one of the major lasting impacts of the pandemic would be increased digital learning. Faculty hoped that increased digital learning would lead to more flexible learning options, improved pedagogical practices, and greater accessibility for students. However, some also feared that digital learning would be used to increase class sizes, automate aspects of the learning experience, and result in lower quality offerings. Faculty anxieties in this area were not necessarily rooted in the pedagogical potential of digital learning or the power of the technology, but rather on a lack of confidence that institutional and government policy-makers would prioritize sound pedagogy and quality learning experiences in their decision making. One of the key findings from our research is the perception of distrust among faculty toward institutional leaders and government policy-makers in navigating current circumstances and leading the sector into more hopeful futures. As digital learning opportunities continue to expand, and given the extensive literature that already exists around the efficacy of online learning (Castro & Tumibay, 2021), it would be worthwhile to expand the contours of research in this area. While research on pedagogical strategies and technology integration methods continues, it is also necessary to investigate the ways in which individuals in the higher education system (e.g., faculty, administrators, students, instructional designers, government officials, etc.) can engage in productive and collaborative efforts to develop learning and teaching futures that are grounded in hope and cooperation. Faculty in our study for instance hoped for more opportunities to communicate and collaborate with leaders at their institution. Future research could examine instances in which such collaborations were fruitful and offer strategies for engaging in such efforts, for both faculty and academic leaders.

At a cognitive and environmental level, faculty hoped for greater funding but they did not have confidence that the current governments would provide what they perceived to be adequate funding for the delivery of high quality and equitable learning experiences. The trend toward corporatization and students-as-customers within the post-secondary system repeatedly emerged as a concern. Faculty were concerned that institutions were failing to act in a responsible manner and were concerned that future-oriented decisions at a time of reduced funding would lead to less resources, curtailment of faculty positions, further precarity, and learning experiences of lower quality. While these concerns are neither new nor original, they have gained increasing importance during the pandemic for study participants. Future research could investigate the degree to which these concerns are prevalent in Canada and in other contexts.

Finally, multiple participants expressed their belief that the general public places significantly less value in higher education as a benefit to society than in the past. Faculty did not trust the government or institutional administrators to take initiatives to challenge or oppose what they perceive to be problematic societal values, nor did they perceive themselves as having the power to change the status quo. Of utmost concern was a prevailing sense of anti-intellectualism leading faculty to fear for greater long-term impacts on institutions and society. Future research in this area could take many directions, such as for instance probing the ways in which this belief impacts pedagogical practices and outcomes.

Conclusion

In this study, faculty hopes for the future appear to be grounded in what they believe to be possible within the realm of their control. Their anxieties seem to be rooted in a lack of confidence that others will take necessary action to bring these hopes to fruition. Further, participants appear to perceive themselves as lacking the agency and ability to influence change. While faculty do not appear to expect that they will encounter overly utopian or dystopian futures in the short-term, they seem to expect a progressive erosion of quality resulting from neoliberal practices anticipated to have long-lasting impacts on institutions of higher education. Nevertheless, faculty rarely described hopeful alternatives in specific or detailed ways. The research that we believe is imperative and urgent, and that we encourage the scholarly community to explore, invites us to ask: What are hopeful futures for higher education? What do those look like, what should they look like, and why? And how may faculty, in partnership with others - students, administrators, governments, communities - bring them to fruition?

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Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Q1: What are your hopes for higher education in the year 2026?

Q2: Do you have any fears or anxieties surrounding higher education in the year 2026?

Q3: What changes do you anticipate taking place at your own institution by the year 2026?

Q4: How has the pandemic impacted your outlook of higher education in Canada?

Q5: For my last question, I was hoping to ask you to take your crystal ball and imagine that you are teaching a course at your institution in 2026. Could you please describe to me a typical day at work? What happens? What do you think life is like?

Q6: Thank you very much. Is there anything else that you'd like me to know before we end this interview about the future of higher education and how you hope or fear it will turn out?

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