



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des associations des professeurs des universités de l'Ontario

OCUFA BRIEFING NOTE

Nous Group

Board Meeting
February 10-11, 2024

What is Nous Group?

- A large Australian-founded international management consultancy firm with over 750 staff across offices in Australia, the UK, and – most recently – Canada.
- They work with clients to solve their “most complex strategic challenges” and “partner with them through transformational change.”
- Nous claims to engage only on projects that provide “positive influence.” It works most prominently in higher education, healthcare, and Australian national defence.
- Nous has close links to McKinsey and Company, the notoriously secret management consulting firm which has ties to authoritarian governments, sought to ‘supercharge’ opioid sales when consulting for Purdue Pharma, and was implicated in the Loblaws bread price-fixing scandal. Nous founder Tim Orton was a consultant with McKinsey and Company, and several Nous leaders were previously with McKinsey.
- In April 2021, Nous acquired Cubane Consulting and rebranded it as NousCubane in 2023. NousCubane is “a world leading provider of benchmarking services, specialising in higher education.” Its subscription based UniForum product provides staffing levels by university function, allowing universities to evaluate their staffing levels against comparators.

What does Nous Group do in the university sector?

- It expanded into the Canadian market in early 2020 when it signed its first major client in Canadian higher ed: York University, with whom it launched the “Service Excellence Program” to reduce costs and transfer all transactional services into a central hub. Nous’s contract with York was a three-year agreement worth \$7.8 million. During this time, Nous secured additional fee-paying work at York beyond this contract.
- In addition to York, Nous has worked with Laurentian University, the University of Ottawa, Queen’s University and the University of Alberta.
- Nous was contracted to provide the plan for the massive academic and administrative restructuring the University of Alberta undertook in response to

provincial funding cuts. The University of Alberta's restructuring was modelled after the University of Sydney's similar efforts, which Nous also led. The union representing U Sydney's academic staff says their restructuring has significantly and negatively impacted academic freedom, collegiality, and academic quality.

- Nous was hired by Laurentian University in October 2021 to perform the governance and operations review, after a failed request for proposals (RFP). Laurentian deemed three bidding firms ineligible due to alleged potential conflicts of interest or lack of qualification.
- Laurentian's chief redevelopment officer (CRO), a former consultant for EY, said that the failed RFP allowed the university the opportunity to "reach out directly to a number of very qualified organizations, firms that could conduct the review. And we did that and we narrowed it to two organizations, and then concluded that the appropriate firm to do the work would be Nous."
- Nous's governance review recommended circumscribing the power of Laurentian's Senate, allowing it to only make recommendations on individual programs but not make recommendations about the academic direction of the institution. It also further recommended subjecting the Senate to performance reviews. Its recommendations are mainly reflective of the governance situations of Australian universities.
- An emerging focus for them is on helping Canadian universities find the right "price" for international tuition (Oct 2021). Nous conducts this work alongside 5Rs Partnership, a global consulting firm that monitors higher education fees data and trends.
- Nous promotes "cost-saving strategies for universities" through cuts that are "achievable and sustainable." They publicize five cost-saving measures: resetting external spending; streamlining professional services; rationalizing courses and program architecture; incentivizing research productivity; and better utilizing existing space.

What is the problem with Nous?

- OCUFA's 2022-26 strategic priorities plan sets as a priority developing "research and strategies to assist member organizations in challenging pro-corporate consultants and agencies, like the Nous Group."
- The post-secondary sector in Ontario is chronically underfunded. This has led to several trends on college campuses including privatization and corporatization, as well the undermining of collegial governance. Nous does nothing to counteract these trends; rather, its profits depend on them.
- In the absence of adequate and stable public funding for Ontario's universities, Nous Group and other consulting firms are capitalising on the crises facing Ontario's universities. They have found a market in promising "creative" solutions to the problems faced by post-secondary institutions.
- The work of Nous Group and similar consulting firms ignores the core issues of concern in the post-secondary sector including underfunding, high tuition rates, over-reliance on privatization and international tuition fees, the rise in precarious

work on campus including contract faculty, and the lack of adequate faculty renewal.

- In its work at the University of Alberta and York University, Nous Group has developed a reputation for promoting major structural change at significant expense.
- Nous Group does not include campus stakeholders in their assessment and development of solutions, and they bypass campus representatives of faculty students and staff. Its Laurentian governance review demonstrates that Nous Group holds little regard for collegial governance; former staff report that an anti-labour animus permeates the organization.
- Once Nous Group is on your campus, it does its best to establish a long-term relationship with your university administration. Its consultants are encouraged to find ‘opportunities’ that are out-of-scope on their current projects, in order to drive future contracts.
- Nous Group’s solutions tend toward a “one-size fits all.” Its benchmarking approach for staffing – the UniForum product – does not differentiate between university types or account for different institutional priorities. If an institution has more workers on a specific function than the per-student average elsewhere, this alone suggests the need for staffing reductions.
- We have learnt from a formal internal source at Nous Group that it is “remarkably incurious” about higher education and that it encourages its consultants to avoid extensive research. Instead, consultants review past Nous Group work – much of which was conducted for Australian higher education institutions – and apply the findings and recommendations to new clients.
- Nous Group has developed a growing niche in postsecondary consulting and has identified Canadian higher education as a main growth area.

How do we Challenge Nous Group?

- Nous Group is secretive about its relationships with university administrations and with the contracts they have in the post-secondary sector, which poses a challenge to monitoring their presence on campus.
- OCUFA is monitoring their involvement in the post-secondary sector and will keep members informed of developments in this area.
- OCUFA also encourages member associations to be vigilant about their university administrations’ work with consulting groups and to reach out to OCUFA for support if Nous Group – or any other large consulting firm – is working on their campus or planning work with their university administration.
- OCUFA’s Governance Committee will provide governance-specific recommendations on how to address the presence of educational consultants at universities.