

Global Connections for the 21st Century BA

Report of Working Group to the Dean of Arts, University of Alberta

Overview of the Issue:

The Global Value of the 21st Century BA, in Cross-Cultural Perspective

The BA is under review in many institutions and many cultures. Traditional critics of the BA in Western societies grumble about its 'utility'. Such critiques about the 'usefulness' of the BA are grounded, directly and indirectly, on a construction of humanity in terms of *homo economicus*. It is clear today that the premise of *homo economicus* – that that human beings or groups can be understood in terms of narrow atomistic self-interest – is a misleading and costly fallacy.

Such critiques tend to come from sectors that stress the need to educate to further our economy. However, these very critiques show ignorance of a reality in which cultural vitality powerfully and positively impacts economic development and vice versa. A long-term strong economy cannot exist without a robust civil society able to maintain it. *Cultural resources are a necessary social condition for long-term economic development.*¹

It is not by chance that Asian societies, formerly wedded to a model of 'useful' education for their sons and daughters, now find value in the BA. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education**, business leaders and an increasing number of parents in Asia are embracing the liberal arts education. This is consistent with a better awareness of the need to provide an education that will allow students to reinvent their working selves time and again, to respond to changing social, cultural and economic circumstances. Moreover, we see the emphasis in Asian societies on developing linguistic, cultural and social competence so as to deal successfully with Westerners and Western cultures. The implicit assumption that non-Westerners should develop linguistic and cultural competences to deal with us, but that we do not have to 'reciprocate' is not only arrogant but also extremely short-sighted.

A substantial number of BA graduates, from diverse areas, is a necessary condition for our society's long-term well being. They will strengthen our community, Alberta and Canada in general. At the individual level, a BA provides students with a truly useful education of enduring relevance in today's globally and locally diverse and

¹ Our current City Government is thinking deeply about these questions. They are also creatively investing in cultural development programs, embedded in our geographic reality and cultural diversity. They understand these policies as a means to enhance democratic engagement with their citizens, among other things. We must be aware of these local movements and understand our role within these broad developments.

constantly changing world. A BA program provides the tools for students not only to better navigate but also to become leaders and engaged citizens in the 'real' world.

Utility will always be a factor in measuring the value of a BA. But the intrinsic worth of this education must also be gauged in any assessment. Mastering skills and making discoveries produce a level of satisfaction and engenders a quality of life that is invaluable – and it retains its value over time. Our students can testify to the joy and fulfillment achieved through the creative learning process, both students within the young adult cohort and older adults returning to university. This too is the lifeblood of our endeavour. It is the premise underlying our proposal.

* <http://chronicle.com/article/Bucking-Cultural-Norms-Asia/130667/>

Analysis & Strategic Priorities:

A) Patterns of work are dramatically altered. We now live and teach within a radically different environment than prevailed 25 or 30 years ago, with structural and technological changes whose affects will increase in the years to come. Those entering the work force can expect a variety of jobs over their working lives, engaging with different technological and social interfaces.

i) We prepare our students with adaptable knowledge and information management skills, central to a BA. These flexible skill sets enable graduates to navigate and innovate in a rapidly changing global context.

ii) The BA equips students to conduct effective research, solve problems, identify and assess information patterns and clusters, and apply acquired information competence in a variety of areas. The BA produces adaptable, innovative thinkers, with proficiencies in a range of analytical techniques, who can work creatively with information that is globally available and assess its value and credibility, rather than simply receive it.

iii) Effective communication skills are a critical hallmark of the BA graduate. These are more important than ever given the speed of communication processes and the range of communication technologies. Verbal and visual analytical strategies are essential parts of communication competencies. These critical capacities can be creatively applied in a range of employment or entrepreneurial settings.

iv) The skills and understanding obtained through the BA have life-long value, emphasizing creative and critical thinking.

B) We live in a multi-cultural world, locally, nationally and internationally. Students come to the University of Alberta's Faculty of Arts from a great variety of backgrounds. But whether they are Aboriginal, of myriad European heritages, or from Asian or African backgrounds, short-term residents or immigrants from other parts of the world, students engage with people of many cultures and orientations. This fact will also be true of their working lives after graduation. Our graduates must be prepared as globally aware citizens, with globally relevant capacities. Effective cross-cultural interactions depend on education and experience. A 21st-century BA must equip students with ethics of tolerance and respect for diversity, inter- and cross-cultural competencies, and the crucial skills of adaptability and flexibility when engaging with others. A BA builds essential capacities for a more globalized world.

i) Cross-cultural competencies are more vital than ever and essential preparation for our students. Building an international component into every BA program (with actual or virtual international or cross-cultural experiences) would make a major contribution to this end result.

ii) Language skills, as well as learning how to learn these skills, are critical elements of a BA education for the 21st century.

iii) Historical literacy is a necessary competency that ensures the development of a critical framework to understand the present, recognizing the complex historical issues that underlie current concerns.

iv) Local experience, such as with the CSL program or other course-based involvement, can be a dynamic, engaging route to cross-cultural education, while serving the local community.

v) Alberta will be shaped by our graduates' wider understanding of our community's global connections and its place in the world. Investment in developing global and cross-cultural competencies must be a central facet of the 21st-century BA.

C) Connecting with the local offers exceptional benefits. Edmonton has always been a place of connections, commerce and exchange. These processes took different shapes over the centuries. The 21st century provides exceptional opportunities to reposition UAlberta within the local and global context, celebrating our northern locale, connecting with local peoples, Aboriginal history and current issues. This will facilitate further regional, national and global connections in the years ahead.

i) The core thinking underpinning the humanities, fine arts and social sciences no longer assumes the superiority of the metropolitan centres and the inferiority of peripheries. Post-colonial analyses, as well as global perspectives on world change and contemporary development

are transforming scholarship. This thinking offers immense functional opportunities for the UAlberta BA to distinguish itself, attracting students with a strong globally aware curriculum, which also celebrates its geographic locale and history as site of connections, commerce and exchange.

ii) Cross-cultural competencies can also be acquired by engaging with the past and present aboriginal context of this city and region. This should be an aspect of our BA's global competencies.

iii) Our extensive research on northern issues, locally and in the circumpolar world, offers unique potential for research and developing cultural competencies for our present and future students.

iv) Curiosity driven academic experiences should be available and encouraged among undergraduate students as part of their local/global competencies. Undergraduate research energizes the BA experience, fostering a feeling of ownership.

v) New technologies (such as Skype) enable links to be made between our students and those at a distance. We should explore these options and expand opportunities for local / global connections.

D) How do we teach the skills aimed at achieving a globally knowledgeable and intellectually sophisticated BA graduate? There are many existing courses and programs, majors and minors, that provide students with a rich sense of global / local engagements and that develop historical/chronological competencies in students. We suggest a clearer representation of the strengths achieved and achievable through the BA. Our rich variety of disciplines should be framed in this context, with a clearly expressed understanding of the outcomes and benefits to students that accrue. At the same time, we suggest pedagogic imperatives and commonalities in such courses.

i)) Global connections, local context and historical competency should be central to the 21st -century BA. Skills and knowledge in these three areas can be learned and should be the organizing precepts for 21st - century BA students, regardless of disciplinary specialization. Virtually all disciplines lend themselves to these precepts.

ii) The study of the global is founded on understanding processes that connect people to world systems: social, cultural, economic, environmental, and political, that change over time. Critical thinking is developed within the contexts of current and newly proposed courses. Numerous courses are already on the books encompassing these goals; they need to be more clearly bracketed and their value explained, recognizing expressions of critical thinking through various media.

iii) Increased language competency is critical to fully engage with other societies / peoples. This can be achieved here and cultural connections can be experienced locally within the diverse communities resident in Edmonton, experienced virtually or (for a minority) through internationally based courses, internships. Innovative delivery systems can be devised to provide stimulating cross-cultural experiences.

iv) Writing competency is crucial for all BA graduates, allowing the expression of critical thinking, with interpretations and analyses of global/local/chronological connections. Higher standards of writing competence and increased requirements for research papers should be explicitly part of undergraduate training. Examples already exist of this preparation. We believe it should be more generally applied. The application of these skills may involve various media platforms before or after graduate. But effective critical thinking/writing is at the heart of all these endeavours.

Operational Implications:

Delivery of enhanced programming emphasizing global, local and historical competency will require attention to innovations already underway and the success of many existing programs. Skype connections, institutional linkages and experimental technology can allow our instructors and students to forge connections in a variety of real or virtual spaces.

Information should be more readily available within the Faculty and flow more freely among departments and students, to allow students to find the courses they want and need to build their programs.

Inter-cultural competency must be acquired and at a minimum acknowledged as a vital element in the 21st -century BA. Perhaps there might be 100 or 200 level introductory courses with this focus.