**Report on BA Attributes, September 4, 2013**

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Graduate student attributes have been a topic of discussion across higher education for decades. This process started in the 1990s in Australia, mandated nationally by their federal government. This has spread to others countries over the last few years, with Western Europe, the United States and now Canada as no exception. The same is true in private enterprise, with Pearson Education, the largest learning solutions and textbook publishing company in North America, restructuring its company around learning outcomes (they call this initiative the "efficacy project").

There is no sign that society's increasing focus on learning outcomes will relent. The Obama administration's recent announcement about an overhaul in university ratings - with outcomes such as university graduates' salaries - is just one out of many examples of outcomes-focused education. The intention behind these programs is to develop more well-rounded undergraduates and to level higher education. Of note is President Obama's plan to create an alternative set of university rankings, which could make for a league table that sees names other than Harvard or Princeton in the top rungs.

Within the University of Alberta, learning outcomes are already being implemented. This is true in the Faculty of Engineering, where national accreditation processes force the faculty to establish a list of a dozen or so "attributes" that are to be measured in exacting detail. The Faculty of Nursing does the same, as does Medicine and Campus Saint-Jean (though CSJ's process is not based on accreditation processes). Simply put, the attributes-creation process at the University of Alberta is fragmented, with little to no consistency between faculties.

Over the last four months, I've gathered a series of articles and papers focuses on skills, attributes and outcomes. These papers come both from mainstream media and peer-reviewed research. In this essay, I advocate for a movement away from a skills-based Faculty of Arts education, though I acknowledge that this way of thinking is rampant across higher education and thus must be considered in a restructured Bachelor of Arts.

I begin by dispelling the notion that a university's primary aim is the means to a job. Following this, I argue that the communication of *several* key learning outcomes/attributes is valuable, and that it is important that the Faculty of Arts engages in a conversation around these. Finally, I show (through reference to higher education literature) that there is little agreement on "best practices" for measurement of attributes.

UNIVERSITY AS A MEANS TO A JOB VS. BROAD-BASED LEARNING

There is much discussion in recent years about the means of a university education. Indeed, it seems that the *production* of adaptable employees is chief among these aims. In an article published in the *Globe and Mail*, Wilfrid Laurier University President Max Blouw remarks that in recent years, university graduates have come to expect that they will land high-paying technical jobs upon graduation. He also notes that employers have veered toward placing less emphasis on new employee training, with the expectation that universities will account for this gap. These trends contribute to the widespread discussions about a "skills gap," where universities are said to be largely unsuccessfully in developing well-rounded thinkers.

However, Blouw questions this manner of thinking, with the following statement:

"Last year was dominated by the discussion of the so-called skills gap, a phenomenon recently found not credible by economist Don Drummond. If indeed the statistics don’t bear out a serious mismatch between skills and jobs in Canada, the conversation should move away from turning universities into job training centres and toward the role employers can play in preparing graduates for jobs."

This is supported by Brad Ferguson, CEO and President of the Edmonton Economic Development Corporation, where he writes in *Post Secondary Education: The Economic Heart of Edmonton*, that "Many believe students are not being trained with skills demanded by industry, yet each year over 10,000 students graduate into the Edmonton market which incurs the second lowest unemployment rate and the highest wage rates in the country." In this quotation, Ferguson speaks primarily about the University of Alberta.

Still, this is not to say that there are gaps in university learning and the requirements of the workplace. In *University Affairs*, Canada's largest higher education magazine, Deputy Director of Education at the Canadian Forces College Adam Chapnick suggests that liberal arts graduates are for the most part, incapable of articulating the qualities developed via a university education:

"If we give our students the tools they need to recognize the practical usefulness of what they can learn in our classrooms, it is more likely that they will take care of ensuring that we receive sufficient government and private sector support in the future."

As Ronald Barnett, the University of London's esteemed Philosopher of Higher Education is fond of saying, universities now live in an age of "supercomplexity." Because of the rise of MOOCs, for profit online universities, community colleges, technical institutions and employment programs within large corporations, they are no longer the only means of developing knowledge in society. However, this should not detract from universities' core aims, which focus on the development of students that are articulate, broad in interests, flexible in thinking and adaptable to new circumstances.

THE VALUE OF CONVERSATION

It seems to me that the way in which a focus on a liberal arts conversation can take place is through conversation. This will be intense and likely challenging, considering the recent cuts made across the Faculty of Arts and institution as a whole. Overall, I wholeheartedly agree with our summer discussions: moving forward with the restructurization process takes place through conversation, and a return to "the basics." (The basics being a conversation about the *aims of Faculty of Arts* education: the development of analytical thinkers, emphasis on students with a certain kind of behaviour, universities that develop students capable of making social change, etc.).

AMBITIOUS and GENUINE ATTRIBUTES

In Australia, the graduating attributes process was initiated by government. The public research institutions used their attributes as a way to distinguish themselves from the technical institutions quickly gaining prominence across the country. However, this led to an attributes process that has been largely unsuccessful.

In *A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy*, for instance, Simon Barrie of the University of Sydney writes the following:

"Despite the lengthy history of the rhetoric of such policy claims, universities' endeavours to describe generic attributes of graduates continue to lack a clear theoretical or conceptual base and are characterized by a plurality of view-points. Furthermore, despite extensive funding in some quarters, overall, efforts to foster the development of generic attributes appear to have met with limited success. Recent research has shed some light on this apparent variability in policy and practice. It is apparent that Australian university teachers charged with responsibility for developing students' generic graduate attributes do not share a common understanding of either the nature of these outcomes, or the teaching and learning processes that might facilitate the development of these outcomes."

Based on Barrie's research (in addition to that of Canadian Research Chair Heather Kanuka) and the Australian example, graduate attributes share several key features:

1. They are *generic*, in that they are develop in all fields of study.

2. They are too be looked for in students *graduating* from a degree programme.

3. They are *attributes*, in that they are more than disciplinary skills developed in technical programs.

4. These attributes are indeed developed through *the process* of higher education.

With this in mind, the attributes developed in the Faculty of Arts are representative of students in all fields, whether it is Sociology, Economics, Political Science or Drama. Though these fields are all quite different, the attributes process is intended to develop commonalities between them. In this sense, the attributes process provides unity between disciplines, resulting from a discussion between these disciplines.

IMPLEMENTATION and MEASUREMENT OF ATTRIBUTES

The most impressive attributes approach that I have seen is that of the University of Edinburgh, one of the leading universities in the UK. Their framework is *aspirational* in nature, in that it communicates an impressive university-wide academic purpose.

It is this statement, however, that is the most critical in their attributes framework:

"The structure of the Graduate Attributes Framework allows interpretations of the statements to differ between academic domains, yet retaining an overall cohesion. This tailoring is designed to ensure the graduate attributes are relevant to all levels within the University."

Edinburgh's attributes process is developed through conversation between employers, students and academics. University-wide attributes are set by Edinburgh, after which every *faculty* interprets them on their own. The Edinburgh approach is also centered on three key attributes: Aspiration & Personal Development; Outlook & Engagement and Enquiry & Lifelong Learning.

These attributes are based on four clusters of skills and abilities: Research and Enquiry, Personal and Intellectual Autonomy, Communication and Personal Effectiveness.

REFERENCES

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