Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

Postsecondary Education Project
Learner Pathways and Transitions
October, 1998

FINANCING LEARNER PROGRESS THROUGH PROGRAMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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September, 1998

Introduction

With every passing generation, the demand for higher education grows. Every year, the need for post-secondary education in the job market becomes greater and greater. Because of these social factors, and government programs aimed at increasing access to higher education, there is now a greater diversity of learners in the system, and a greater diversity of demands upon the system.

The purpose of this paper will be to examine these expectations upon the system, and to place them in a context of the challenges, limitations and potential which define each expectation. Finally, for each contextualized expectation, a set of tangible interventions will be offered, along with the stakeholder group or groups best positioned to implement the recommended change.

Expectations

In the early days of the academe, stakeholder expectations were easy to manage. The student was sent, by generally wealthy families, to a private institution to expand his horizons, to become an educated person. Today, there is an immediacy to many of the demands upon our institutions. The market necessity of a degree sends many students to school with job readiness as a major expectation. The increasing indebtedness of these students upon graduation adds a certain urgency to these expectations. Moreover, the taxpayers who provide the funds to our universities have come to equate the graduate's success in the job market with value for their money, whether they use the system themselves or not. These demands are unlikely to diminish and cannot be ignored.

Even so, it should also be noted that personal development is still a major reason why individuals pursue higher education. Universities are also expected to provide critical thinking and problem solving skills, and to act as a window through which we can introduce the learner to the intellectual growth required of an educated person. These goals are not, necessarily, at odds with more job-oriented goals, but may differ in priorities and timelines.

In short, most post-secondary programs will seek to balance the acquisition of skills; which may be defined as teaching the learner to perform certain tasks, with the enhancement of abilities, which may be defined as enabling the learner to acquire and process additional knowledge in the future. This balance may be said to produce the following expectations upon the system.

Enhancement of Abilities

- ***To expose the learner to a broad and diverse range of new ideas and thoughts.***
- ***To empower the learner to process new ideas and thoughts by providing them with critical thinking and problem solving skills.***
- ***To condition and exercise the learner's mind to embrace new ideas and challenges.***

Acquisition of Skills

- ***To provide the learner with opportunities to put their abilities to work in real-life environments.***
- ***To equip the learner with basic skills which will allow them to use their abilities in the context of likely fields of employment.***

In addition to this, governments and administrators have grown increasingly concerned in recent years with the goal of degree completion. This encompasses both concerns about attrition rates, or if a degree is completed at all, and the need for the timely completion of programs. Therefore we must consider these new demands upon the system, and the expectations they provide.

- ***To make efficient use of the learner's investment of time and money, by ensuring that programs are:***
  - ! *Completed once commenced*
  - ! *Completed in a timely fashion*
  - ! *Completed in a time frame consistent with the benefit to the learner*

Barriers to Achieving Expectations

In dealing with each of the three areas of expectations, there are barriers to success. These barriers are sometimes created by trends of recent vintage, more often, they arise in areas traditionally neglected as a priority.

(A) Enhancement of Abilities

The demand for "job-ready" skills is often seen as a barrier to the development of broader critical thinking skills. It is submitted that this dichotomy is not necessary. The true barrier is how governments and society define a "job-ready" skill.

Today's learner is more likely to be entrepreneurial than past generations. She or he will have a greater need to switch occupations, to continuously upgrade skills and training, and to be skilled in more than one occupation. The ability to do these things, so critical for the job market, is an ability beyond a particular skill. It is an ability which must be developed in the individual.

The professional athlete will jump rope and climb stairs, even though no organized sport requires skipping or stair climbing. However, the conditioning of the body which results from these activities is relevant to any sport. So, too, is the conditioning of the mind to think, to solve, to be curious, relevant to every job and to the likelihood of job market success.

The detachment of job training from intellectual development in the minds of the public and politicians, as well as traditionalists within institutions, is a barrier to achieving either.

A second barrier is the diminishing of critical thinking skills as a result of or predictor of academic success. There is no standard measurement device at the majority of institutions which would allow one to see how participation in a program has transformed the ability to solve novel problems. Academic success is frequently the result of diligent adherence to repetition of material as presented, which can often be done more completely by the learner than embryonic attempts at challenging or providing it. Even worse, at some institutions there is no standard grading structure or other device, making grades a function of judicious course selection. Several student groups have recently expressed concern with the lack of support for professors in developing testing methods which allow a student to show what the results of reflection upon, rather than absorption of, course material.

This emphasis upon absorption over reflection manifests itself in a third barrier, which is the lack of opportunity for the learner to apply theory to a new problem or challenge. At the undergraduate level, there remains minimal avenues for students to put a theory into play for themselves, or to test it against others. Even the clash of theories among thinkers is often measured in the ability to summarize, rather than apply, both. This is attributable in part to large class sizes and time constraints, but also in part to the slow pace of innovation at many institutions.

Fourth and finally, while the rigour of the classroom is well maintained by most institutions, the nature and quality of student life remains an untapped resource. Too often the social and cultural atmosphere of a campus is left to student groups, who in

turn emphasize the “party”aspect of socialization. This is inevitable, even welcome, but the lack of attention to diversity of campus life is striking. Some concern must be expressed about financial strain and the need for part-time work on the part of the learner, but even allowing for this, more could be done in this area.

(B) Acquisition of Skills

Because of the underestimated nature of problem solving as a marketable skill as well as an intellectual ability, some of the same barriers exist in this area. In particular, the lack of opportunity to apply classroom learning to situations existing within the life of the learner is a barrier not only to the acquisition of problem solving skills, but to the ability of the learner to appreciate, prior to graduation, what skills are needed to complement their education.

It must also be frankly stated that at some institutions there is resistance to even considering any demand attributable to the job market. In part, this is of concern because, with the degree of financial investment now required to attend an institution, turning a blind eye to the learner’s life after graduation may be an insidious barrier to universal access. This is also a barrier to the development of skills because it fails to recognize that certain skills, such as computer operation, public speaking, entrepreneurship and even social skills may be a barrier to the future manifestation of, and growth of, the knowledge the learner has obtained.

The past dichotomy between skills and education has also produced faculty which are professional teachers and researchers, and may actually have limited experience in the jobs for which they are training people. This does not have to be a fatal flaw, since it makes the reticence of some faculty to embrace this type of training a boon which allows for extra-curricular personnel and opportunities to provide this service.

Finally, it is very easy to overstate the institution’s responsibility to build skills training into every program. The lack of career counseling and simple information on graduate study and career paths mean that the most efficient way of ensuring skill development is missed. This way is by allowing thoughtful learners to decide for themselves the skills they must acquire, and to simply make these avenues available to them.

(C) Program Completion

With all the changes in the needs of learners and the flexibility required by life and the marketplace, one must begin to ask if a traditional, four-year degree is becoming too blunt an instrument by which we measure learning. It is a common complaint among learners that undergraduate degrees leave them feeling as if they are “spinning their wheels” by the end, repeating the same cognitive tasks in slightly-varied fields, with too little opportunity to use these functions in a manner more meaningful to them.

This format may also discourage returning students from viewing the university as an appropriate place to upgrade skills, because so much time must be taken on survey courses. While some improvements have been made in this area, there remains a dearth of courses which allow for expertise applied to a particular concentration of learning, recognizing the particular area where a graduate may be exceptionally experienced.

A third barrier to the timely completion of degrees is the patchwork of policies which comprise institutional recognition of credits. Many a fifth year is spent replacing credits at one institution which were already completed in virtually the same form at another institution. As well, the failure of institutions to develop means of recognizing life experience in an academic setting adds many fruitless years to many learners' return to academic life.

The lack of qualified career advice made available to learners is also a barrier, in that students are rarely even aware of the many options for graduate studies or career-directed courses towards which they can gear their studies, resulting in lost time. This lack of career advice and guidance can also be applied to high attrition rates, since many a first year has been lost by those who are either in the wrong program or there at the wrong point in their lives.

Social integration into campus life is also linked to attrition rates, due either to poor integration, or excessive integration which interferes with studies. This refers back to the need for increased diversity of social opportunities and campus life. More pointedly, this is one area where financial barriers, whether they force the learner to choose part-time studies, require learners to drop out to earn money, or deny some students the financial wherewithal to integrate socially into campus life, cannot be ignored as the most vital issue to address.

Suggested Interventions

Despite having addressed the barriers in three separate categories, certain trends develop in the barriers to meeting the body of expectations which await higher education providers. In general, these barriers are:

- ***!*** *The failure to recognize problem solving and critical thinking as skills which cross barriers between the academic and the practical.*
- ***!*** *The lack of attention paid to how interventions in the nature of campus life can affect learner attitudes, behaviour, and achievement.*
- ***!*** *The lack of resources outside the classroom, such as career and academic counseling and integrated skills training.*
- ***!*** *The increase in financial strain brought about by higher tuition fees and debt loads.*

- ***!*** *The failure to provide opportunities for and recognition of the application of theoretical knowledge to practical, real-life problems.*
- ***!*** *The lack of co-ordinated efforts on an institutional and provincial level.*

The following, then, is a series of suggested interventions aimed at addressing these barriers.

(A) Enhancement of Abilities

1. Institutions, co-operating provincially where feasible, should design a standardized test to be given to students upon entering and departing a post-secondary program which measures critical thinking and problem solving skills. Individual scores should be given and institutional scores should be made public.

2. Faculty associations and administrations should co-operate to enhance resources available to faculty to develop and innovate teaching methods which enhance the provision and rewarding of critical thinking skills.

3. Institutions should develop academic programs which allow for the integration of theoretical teachings from the first years of a program to be applied by the learner, under supervision, to a volunteer experience, work experience, or practical experience setting of his or her choosing.

4. Institutions, faculty, and student organizations should work together to develop creative social activities on campus which enhance the campus environment in its encouragement of intellectual curiosity, discussion, and integration with the broader community.

5. Governments should implement a system of additional funding to be given to institutions with a proven track record of improving the critical thinking skills of learners to allow for new pilot projects and innovations in the delivery of post-secondary programs.

6. Governments should ensure that student aid programs recognize the real financial cost of education, including the cost of reasonable and necessary social integration into campus life.

(B) Acquisition of Skills

1. Institutions, with adequate funding from government, should provide offices for career and academic development to students.

2. Institutions, with adequate funding from government, should provide increased extra-curricular programs which develop the skills that allow knowledge to manifest itself.

3. Institutions and faculty should develop ways to measure, report and reward learners for development of problem solving and critical thinking skills.

4. Institutions should increase the number of offerings which integrate academic programs with practical programs, or which build in certificate options for applied specializations within an academic program.

(C) Completion of Degrees

1. Institutions and student organizations should co-operate to increase the number of peer counseling and mentoring programs, particularly within campus segments with high attrition rates.

2. Institutions and provincial governments should develop standards for transfers of credits and recognition of life experience as credits toward degree completion.

3. Institutions should co-operate, in conjunction with their faculty associations, on a review of degree structure and length.

4. Institutions and faculty should develop more flexible degree arrangements, offering a foundation year focused upon critical thinking skills in the context of the program, followed by a series of segments which focus on applications of these skills. These later segments should be available as certificate programs for returning learners.

5. Governments should take action to remove financial barriers which lead to part-time or interrupted studies, including tuition fee caps and debt load caps.

6. Governments and institutions should begin to study what changes in funding, scheduling and student aid would facilitate the implementation of year-round schooling.

Measuring Results

One of the structural strengths of the post-secondary system is that it is more resistant than the grade school system to being centrally micromanaged. While goals may be centrally agreed upon, those closest to learners should always be left to achieve those goals.

This is why accountability should never be demanded when transparency will do. And transparency can sometimes be thwarted by the diversity and freedom of our post-secondary structure. What a “B+” in a course at University ‘A’, may have a very different meaning, in terms of content, difficulty, and information, than a similar course at University ‘B’, or another section of the same course at the same institution. Even within institutions, there are internecine disputes about grading standards between departments, let alone faculties.

If diversity is truly the strength that administrators and faculty members claim, then there is little need to fear measurement of what courses, degrees and institutions provide their students. Even if they provide different things, the institution should be comfortable knowing that they only need deliver upon what they promise in order to attract students.

While it is subjective to grade the teaching effectiveness of a professor or the supportiveness of an institution, results can be measured in many instances. Most important to achieving transparency from these efforts is the need to gain data on the transformational effect of the institution. Too often, we fall into the same trap as Maclean's Magazine – measuring an institution by the students it takes in. While a cogent argument can be made that better students mean a better learning environment, if this is true, it will reflect in the answer to the proper question – what abilities and skills does the learner gain during their time at the institution?

While there is a benefit to offering successful programs the resources to innovate through new projects, governments should be wary of tying finances too heavily to results. Each institution makes its mission statement and goals available. By simply making information available, students, parents and the public may judge not only how well an institution fulfils an expectation, but also the importance of achieving that expectation.

(D) Recommendations for Measurement

1. Institutions, aided by government, should co-operate to develop adequate testing methods for critical thinking and problem solving skills. These tests should be administered to students upon entering and upon graduating from a program. The results should be made public sorted by institution and program, and studied to see if these skills bear a correlation to marks received.

2. Academic departments at each institution should develop a standard test to be given to graduates of their program, with results to be used internally for comparing course difficulty and instructor effectiveness.

3. Institutions should publish five year reports on attrition rates, noting in particular sub-groups of learners at risk and develop action plans to reduce that risk.

4. Governments should conduct surveys every five years of post-secondary graduates, to view at various career stages the employment rates, program satisfaction and program relevance among graduates. These results should be made public.