

Society for
Teaching and Learning
in Higher Education



La société pour
l'avancement de la pédagogie
dans l'enseignement supérieur

A Response to the Rae Post-Secondary Review

November 2004

Background

The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE/SAPES) is a national association of academics interested in and committed to the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education. Its members include more than 500 faculty, teaching resource professionals, and administrators from universities across Canada and beyond. The organization has been formally in existence since 1981. It grew out of the collaborative efforts of its founding members, all of whom were involved in educational development at universities in Southern Ontario (Guelph, McMaster, Waterloo, and Western Ontario).

The Society exists to support post-secondary education in Canada. Its goals include increasing the emphasis on teaching and learning, encouraging and facilitating the improvement of teaching and learning and the scholarship of teaching, recognizing and rewarding outstanding contributions to teaching excellence and educational leadership, and disseminating scholarship in teaching and learning in higher education. In fact, until recently STLHE/SAPES was the *only* organization in Canada that focused almost exclusively on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in Canadian universities.

The Society sponsors a national conference, awards for both individual educators (3M Teaching Fellowship) and creative curriculum design (Alan Blizzard Award), as well as publications (including a regular newsletter and journal). More importantly, it provides a forum for like-minded people from around the country to gather and to work together in support of national initiatives (the Council of 3M Teaching Fellows and the Educational Developers Caucus). These activities of the Society are overseen by a Steering Committee, with representatives of the various regions of Canada, the Educational Developers Caucus, the Council of 3M Teaching Fellows, and several ex-officio members. The Committee is responsible for ensuring the continuity and success of the Society's core activities, particularly the annual conference, the awards program, publications, and the electronic forum. For more information, visit the STLHE/SAPES website at: www.stlthe.ca

Why Consider What We Propose?

The Society includes nearly 200 3M Teaching Fellows, each of whom has been nominated by their own institution and selected by STLHE/SAPES as an outstanding Canadian educator. They are among the very best of university teachers in the country. The Society also includes the educational developers of Canada; the only set of individuals in Canada whose principal responsibility is the improvement of teaching in Canadian universities. Most Ontario universities have a centre for educational development, in which many of these professional are employed.

Several of the founding members of the Society have been actively supporting the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education (and in particular in Ontario) for over 25 years. Most members have access to, and are familiar with, the vast literature on the topic of improving teaching and learning. In short, the Society is the single best collection of committed educators available to the Review. This, we believe, makes the following suggestions particularly worthy of your consideration.

We do not address many of the specifics of the Draft Report because we fear it fails to address some of the most important issues affecting the future of higher education. In our view, the Review runs the risk of worrying too much about how to pay for higher education in Ontario, and not worrying enough about just what is being paid for. Price is relative to quality and we believe the question of quality should be front and centre.

We wish to focus attention on *how* students learn and not simply *what* (i.e. the disciplinary content) they learn. The academic disciplines have the latter well in hand, but apart from vague platitudes and pledges to make education “student-centered”, the Draft Report pays little attention to how students learn. We are not talking here about more teachers (though more teachers are certainly needed) and we are not talking about more of the same classrooms and more of the same courses. We are concerned with the learning and retention of disciplinary knowledge and the development of skills and attitudes that support the effective application of that knowledge. In short, we are concerned about how students and faculty experience undergraduate education in Ontario and make suggestions that might enhance that experience.

We know that this Review is making suggestions to the Government of Ontario and we also know that in the end, the universities, and not the Government, have to effect quality. Still, there are supportive actions that only a government can take. We here take up the challenge posed on page 10 of the Discussion Paper to offer “practical and implementable things” to explore.

Where Can the Government of Ontario Act?

With regards to higher education, it seems to us that the Government of Ontario can exercise power in two primary areas: certification and funding. This brief contains detailed suggestions for action in both areas.

A. Certification

Preparation to Teach as a Required Element in PhD Programs

Ontario graduate programs require Government approval. For several years, educational developers have encouraged and supported the preparation of doctoral students for teaching as an important part of their graduate work, through the offering of credit courses and/or teaching certificates. At the moment we are largely responding to a perceived need on the part of the doctoral candidates and the students they teach. The Province of Ontario should help insure that its PhD graduates have a minimum of preparation to teach by insisting that every doctoral program has at least one course in teaching and learning open to every student. Many of these courses already exist in Ontario universities and STLHE/SAPES would be pleased to provide the Review with detailed information on their content and structure.

It is within the Government’s purview to require that all doctoral programs include some formal preparation for teaching that would be mandatory for those students planning to enter teaching careers. In

making it mandatory for just these students, we communicate the high value Ontario places on preparedness to teach. Doing so might even result in more doctoral students considering academe as a career. Again, if all that is required to teach at a university is a PhD, it is simply absurd that there is not a single element concerning teaching in doctoral programs. This seems so obvious that we are embarrassed to have to raise it.

The Discussion Paper expresses a concern with recruiting enough faculty members to cope with retirements and the expansion of student numbers. Recruiting new faculty without adequate preparation to teach will not provide the quality learning experience the Commission wishes to see, and will exacerbate the problems of student attrition referred to in the Discussion Paper. The Government of Ontario should exercise its authority over graduate programs to see that this does not happen.

Certification of New Undergraduate Programs

The Government approves and funds new undergraduate programs. To some degree such approval is driven by market forces in that new programs reflect demands within the Ontario economy. Setting aside the debate about whether the market is the best place to dictate educational needs (and this is hard for many of us to do), still, too little attention is paid in program planning and approval to the basic issues of teaching and learning.

We know a lot more about how students learn best than we did 25 years ago. The Discussion Paper makes mention of some important insights on page 34 where it says clearly that “For students, quality can mean things like: the level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, a supportive campus environment . . .” If Ontario is to lead the way, the design and delivery of new degree programs needs to build on this knowledge. To do otherwise will result in our following the market - new computer science degrees, followed by new health science degrees, followed by new public school teacher degrees - without ever considering whether any one of these degrees could be offered in a better way.

Again, this emphasis on the *process* of learning as contrasted with the content of learning, is not something universities do especially well, partly because of the highly discipline-specific nature of most university education. Ironically, most existing program reviews focus almost exclusively on course content (and qualifications of faculty teaching such courses) rather than how students learn.

We suggest the Ontario Government require any newly proposed degree program to include evidence of clear thinking about teaching and learning issues and a clear plan indicating *how* students will learn. Universities produce a great deal of teaching activity, however, activity is not enough. There is adequate evidence to show that students learn best through tackling meaningful and challenging learning tasks, not only by listening to experts. In a system that has considerable resource problems, we need to ensure that the teaching and learning taking place is as effective as possible.

B. Funding

How can a Government encourage quality undergraduate programs through funding decisions? This can happen in at least two ways - through the general funding formula and through earmarked funding.

A Small Change in Formula Funding

The current funding formula encourages a particular way of educating students. Students need to be registered in programs and to do that they need to be taking courses. Educating undergraduate students in any unusual way is penalized since the formula is unable to properly identify and support unusual learning. The Government can encourage educational change and enhancement by providing a portion of formula funding for non-traditional forms of educational experience.

Imagine a program that encourages service learning, a form of learning that is based in experience and systematic reflection upon that experience. As much as 50% of the students' educational experience might take place off campus and in non-traditional environments.

Or again, consider an award winning new curriculum in accounting that has third year students come to campus for the month of August. While in residence, students "work" full-time in a simulated accounting firm. Faculty pose as clients and confront students with the full range of challenges they will face once they have graduated, from keeping up with changes in tax law to ethical dilemmas posed by dubious clients. Much of the following year is enlivened by this shared educational experience.

It may be that the current funding formula can, with effort, accommodate these educational activities, but it does not encourage institutions in this direction and indeed encourages a type of mass education in which large numbers of students can be enrolled in lock-step didactic courses. In this sort of context, counting student numbers will almost always trump educational innovation and quality learning. We suggest that to encourage the enhancement of undergraduate education, the government needs to uncouple a small part of formula funding from its current constraints.

Suppose each year as much as 3% of the normal operating fund were reserved for undergraduate education initiatives that are not best measured by enrollment. The point here is that we need to routinely free up ongoing funds to support change in undergraduate education and we need to do this on an ongoing basis if we are to make progress towards improving the quality of Ontario undergraduate education. To do otherwise is to concentrate on routinely paying the bill without any hope of improving what happens to students and faculty alike. We know change alters and shifts costs and so we need to routinely plan for this through an enhanced funding formula that allows for and encourages change.

It is important that this be a regular incentive in formula funding and not simply a "one-time" funding initiative. The examples above are not one-time initiatives but rather ongoing success stories, and as such, need ongoing support.

A New Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education

The most powerful way that the Government of Ontario can act to improve the quality of higher education is by providing incentives to change teaching practices in ways that improve learning. We would urge you to consider a restricted fund for institutional projects to improve undergraduate education. This is well within the reach of the Government and can be shown to have clear and beneficial results.

To begin, there is a precedent within higher education in Ontario for just such a fund. In fact, the Educational Development movement in Ontario (and in large part the national organization encompassed by STLHE/SAPES) owes its existence to earmarked funding under the Ontario University Program for

Instructional Development (OUPID) in the early 1970's. The instructional development centres at universities in Southern Ontario owe a significant debt to that funding and to the encouragement and support offered under the program. OUPID funds also provided for a small central office that helped coordinate provincial efforts in this area.

Nationally, The McConnell Family Foundation offers targeted grants to Canadian universities for projects that are designed to transform the undergraduate educational experience. Several Ontario universities have taken up this challenge and designed projects to improve the education of undergraduates at their institutions. There is no doubt that the initiatives they supported have had an important impact on Canadian universities.

The United States offers a similar federal fund that might serve as a model. The Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) program has long been the envy of those of us in STLHE working for the enhancement of higher education in Ontario. Grants through the program have led to substantive innovations with widespread impact and uptake in the US.

A new fund, supported by the Ontario Government, would set aside money for institutional projects to improve undergraduate education. Such a fund, perhaps named the ***Ontario Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund for Higher Education***, would direct money to support the transformation of undergraduate and graduate programs. This program could be developed in collaboration with the Federal Government, who we suggest be requested to extend the existing Canada Research Chairs program to include ***Research Chairs in Teaching and Learning***. These Chairs would help develop the projects, assess the impact of the innovations, and participate in the dissemination of results.

Lessons learned - how such a fund might work

For projects to make a significant difference to the process of higher education, they require transformation funding for at least 3 years, and in amounts ranging from \$200,000 to \$3,000,000 over that period. The overall grant fund needs to be large enough to support at least one ongoing major initiative at each Ontario college and university - an annual total budget of approximately \$25,000,000 would be sufficient.

Nature of projects

Projects need to be large and aimed at a transformation of how students learn. The standard here should be a significant change in student experience, such that graduates of the reformed program would learn more effectively, and often differently. Students should be different, in important ways, because of *how* they learned.

Projects should be the work of a team, one that is capable of sustaining the enhancement once the initial changes have taken place. This means there needs to be evidence of building a consensus on the project, and authentic commitment from the institution to sustain the work of the team (letters of support and signatures on the application are hopelessly insufficient). Instead, we suggest that a requirement of participation be the submission of an ***institutional strategic plan for teaching and learning*** (including prioritized goals), along with the annual reporting of accomplishments. These requirements would directly support the Provincial Government's interest in increased accountability, while allowing individual variability amongst institutions, and help position teaching and learning as issues of strategic importance. The potential components of a strategic plan for teaching and learning are provided in Appendix A.

Participating institutions should be required to provide an explanation for how the identified innovation would support the institution's overall teaching and learning strategy and prioritized goals, and is consistent with what we already know about good practice. In addition, they should be expected to present a systematic plan for monitoring results and demonstrating real learning outcomes. At least ten percent of the project budget needs to be set aside for dissemination of information about the project and its results. Apart from the above criteria, the fund should refrain from dictating what might be useful. Individual institutions have unique areas of expertise and need, and the grant program should encourage institutions to build upon this expertise and respond to areas of priority.

Administration of fund

Project proposals need to be peer reviewed. A small provincial body (perhaps the proposed Centre of Higher Education Teaching Excellence) could take responsibility for promoting the program and reviewing the applications according to the above criteria. It would be very important that the projects represent authentic initiatives for change and not simply a means of repackaging conventional teaching programs in order to secure new sources of funds. The reviewers should therefore err on the side of caution, awarding funds only when convinced of the credibility of the application. STLHE/SAPES, and its members, could be consultants for this process, given their relevant experience.

There is also a key need for assessment expertise. This expertise could be provided through the Canada Research in Teaching and Learning Chairs program or through a central assessment specialist. These experts would be available to consult with successful applicants (even at the proposal stage) on how to best assess the outcomes of their projects. They could also be responsible for disseminating findings through publications, conference presentations (at STLHE/SAPES), meetings sponsored by the Provincial Government, and/or a designated website, so that lessons learned can be readily shared with others. They might also produce how-to publications and guiding documents that are freely available and thus help all institutions do a better job of assessing educational initiatives regardless of whether they have a grant or not.

Conclusion

In this brief our focus has been on the quality of higher education in Ontario – specifically on the quality of teaching and learning and the competencies of the graduates of our colleges and universities. While the Commission will receive many submissions that argue for injection of more money into post-secondary education, it is the contention of STLHE/SAPES that money alone will not produce the necessary changes and improvements without attention to underlying pedagogical issues.

Supported by increasing research evidence about factors that support quality learning, we argue that simply doing more of the same is inadequate to prepare students for the increasingly complex challenges they will face after graduation, and we suggest a number of mechanisms for encouraging innovation and change. These include making preparation for teaching a requirement for all doctoral programs, ensuring attention to teaching and learning issues in certification of new undergraduate programs, using a small part of the formula funding to support non-traditional educational approaches, establishing a province-wide fund to encourage innovative teaching and curriculum initiatives (perhaps in conjunction with the Federal Government's Canada Research Chairs program), and require the development and annual reporting of institutional strategic plans on teaching and learning.

Higher education institutions play many roles in society and struggle to meet the ever higher expectations of their students, parents, employers, and politicians. But at the heart of the enterprise is student learning, and we neglect such learning at our peril. We believe profoundly that the ultimate test of a higher education system is the value we can add to the learning capabilities of our students -- capabilities that will serve them not just on graduation, but throughout the rest of their lives. The Commission has a golden opportunity to make recommendations that will enhance such learning. We hope that this brief will help in that important task.

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Appendix A

Recommended Components of an Institutional Strategic Plan for Teaching and Learning

- A statement of teaching philosophy for the institution as a whole
- Identification of areas of pedagogical focus/differentiation (e.g., learner-centredness, service learning, problem-based learning, inquiry based learning, co-op education, first-year seminars, writing across the curriculum)
- Key measures with identified areas in need of improvement (e.g., retention, employability, course with high failure rates, student perceptions of teaching quality and satisfaction, student learning behaviours, student course ratings, faculty perceptions of extent to which teaching is valued and supported)
- University wide learning outcomes and a plan for assessing such outcomes
- A statement of institutional priorities for curricular and pedagogical reform and a plan for assessing the effectiveness and impact of such reforms
- A professional development plan for instructors in pedagogical theory and practice
- A plan for encouraging graduate students to participate in professional development opportunities on pedagogical theory and practice (e.g., the requirement of at least one course on pedagogical theory and practice within graduate programs)
- A plan for the effective adoption, maintenance, and replacement of learning technologies (including a budget)
- A plan for the design and refurbishment of effective learning spaces (including a budget)
- A plan for providing learning supports for students (e.g., learning commons)
- Plans and policies pertaining to the effective assessment of student learning, including plans for ensuring integrity in student work and its assessment
- Plans and policies pertaining to the effective assessment of teaching for hiring and promotion and tenure decisions (e.g., teaching dossiers)
- Issues of accessibility (e.g., a plan for supporting the teaching and learning of people with disabilities)
- A plan for celebrating and rewarding teaching excellence
- The designation of a senior administrative position with the responsibility for providing the leadership for the development and monitoring of a strategic plan for teaching and learning
- Delineation of the priorities, roles and responsibilities of the university's teaching and learning centre staff, with respect to the strategic plan