



Policy Paper

The Differentiation Debate: Respecting Autonomy While Encouraging Innovation

March 2010

Prepared by:

Adam Zabrodski, Vice-President University Affairs
Alma Mater Society of Queen's University

Robert Woodrich, Vice-President University Affairs
University of Windsor Students' Alliance

Background

Differentiation, at its most general, is a process whereby universities pursue different mandates and different strengths so that each can better respond to the needs of the local community, the Province and the country. The application of differentiation as it pertains to post-secondary education is subject to broad interpretations. The five largest universities in Canada have called on the country to create a differentiated system that would result in two tiers of institutions. Under this model, these universities would receive the vast majority of funding designated for research and innovation, would teach only a limited number of undergrads, and would take on more graduate students to help support their research agenda. The remaining universities would focus on undergraduate teaching rather than research. The premise of this proposal centers on the hypothesis that Canada will not be able to compete globally if it does not concentrate its research funding.

A second proposal contrasts the first in that it calls on the government to continue to allocate research grants on the basis of the quality of the applications, rather than selecting which universities will be research intensive and which will not. This plan would encourage “organic” differentiation so that schools would be rewarded for strong research programs and would invest in those areas where they excel. By allocating funding based on excellence, institutions would only be able to fund their finest research programs and would be encouraged to abandon those areas where they do not excel. Over time, universities would become specialized in very specific areas, but still preserve the traditional approach of blended teaching and research universities.

The issue of differentiation is significant to undergraduate students because it could alter the current approach to baccalaureate education. Institutions that strictly teach would not be able to offer undergraduates exposure to research opportunities, which may hinder their ability to continue on to graduate studies. The quality of undergraduate education may also be affected. Despite a traditional divide between teaching and research, many institutions are attempting to bring more research into classrooms to enhance the undergraduate experience. This would be more difficult to implement without strong research programs. Furthermore, removing top researchers deprives students of professors that excel in the application of their field. It is possible that the university system could become antiquated, with an emerging disconnect between curriculum and the latest research.

Undergraduate students need to be involved in discussions surrounding differentiation of any nature because of the impact it will have on their education. So far the discussion has been too focused on the sustainability of the system and reducing the costs to government, with little or no regard for the impact of differentiation on the quality of undergraduate education.

Principles

Principle One: All undergraduate students should have access to high quality teaching and research opportunities if desired

Research suggests that although there is no correlation between excellence in research and teaching quality, there are many positive effects of exposing undergraduate students to research. Undergraduate student research involvement correlated positively with the students’ attainment of a bachelor’s degree.¹ Having research opportunities available to students encourages them to develop a deeper understanding of the material. Having no access to research opportunities can stifle potential graduate student applicants and may lead to student disengagement.

¹ Astin, A.W., *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1994.

Principle Two: Research should be used to enhance the quality of undergraduate education.

A great deal of research has concluded that teaching and research are stronger when integrated. The most constructive environment for both students and teachers seems to be a forum that allows both groups to learn from each other through a constructive dialogue and sharing of research results. Education policy researcher Jane Harrison sums up this process of mutual discovery saying, “the student learns within and is inspired by an environment of enquiry and creativity; while faculty are re-energized and revitalized by the act of teaching through which they gain new perspectives on old ideas.”² The Boyer Commission briefly explores the potential opportunities at universities if research and discovery are integrated for the benefit of all parties, “scholar-teachers would treat the sites of their research as seminar rooms in which not only graduates but undergraduates observe and participate in the process of both discovery and communication of knowledge.”³

Principle Three: Funding for research should be allocated on the basis of the quality of the proposal rather than the status of the host university.

The size of an institution does not necessarily dictate quality in research. Moreover, limiting research to only a select few institutions will encourage complacency because they would not have to compete. The current system for allocating research grants forces all researchers to compete for funding on an equal playing field, thereby assuring that the best proposals are rewarded.

Principle Four: Each university’s research activities play a critical role in supporting the unique needs of their local community.

Universities naturally form partnerships with their local community, helping to provide research and innovation for important local sectors. The University of Windsor, for example, works closely with the auto sector to provide necessary training, research and innovation. Were the University of Windsor to be altered to a liberal arts institution, it is unclear who would fill this vital role. Across the Province, our universities play a critical role in supporting local economic strengths and we should not jeopardize this by artificially imposing differentiation.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: All stakeholders should recognize the immense impact of differentiation on undergraduate students and include the student perspective in all future discussions of differentiation.

Above all, undergraduate students need to be involved in discussions surrounding differentiation of any nature because of the impact it will have on their education, both in terms of quality and advancement to the graduate level. So far the discussion has been too focused on the sustainability of the system and reducing the costs to government, with little or no regard for the impact of differentiation on the quality of undergraduate education.

Recommendation Two: The government should respect institutional autonomy and provide support for the priorities of each university.

OUSA supports an organic and responsive system, free of central planning, that is based on incentives for quality rather than rules. This would allow institutions increased freedom to pursue excellence. Through the multi-year accountability agreements and the broader accountability framework, the government should ask universities to identify areas of strength and weakness, building on the former and trimming the latter. Innovation and teaching

² Jane E. Harrison, “The Quality of University Teaching: Faculty Performance and Accountability. A Literature Review”, *Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education Professional File 21* (2002): 4; accessed online at <http://robertwright.ca/Harrison.pdf>.

³ Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduate in the Research University, “Reinventing Undergraduate Education” (New York: Boyer Commission, 1998): 18; accessed online at <http://naples.cc.sunysb.edu/Pres/boyer.nsf/>.

excellence can and should be supported through the mandate of the institution and the needs of the community in which it is located. Differentiation of this kind will result in increased efficiency and numerous centres of excellence where the climate for innovation can be nurtured in different ways.

Differentiation Policy Statement

WHEREAS all undergraduate students should have access to high quality teaching and research opportunities if desired.

WHEREAS research should be used to enhance the quality of undergraduate education.

WHEREAS funding for research should be allocated on the basis of the quality of the proposal rather than the status of the host university.

WHEREAS each university's research activities play a critical role in supporting the unique needs of their local community.

BIRT all stakeholders should recognize the immense impact of differentiation on undergraduate students and include the student perspective in all future discussions of differentiation.

BIFRT the government should respect institutional autonomy and provide support for the priorities of each university.