



The Conference Board
of Canada

CASE STUDY 13

*A core product of the
Employability Skills
Forum, National
Business and
Education Centre*

Program
University

Date Established
1995

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Name of Program
*The University of
Guelph's University-
Wide Skills-Focused
Learning Objectives*

Skills Developed

- *Academic*
- *Personal
Management*
- *Teamwork*
- *Science Literacy*

Assessing and developing university students' employability skills

THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

Empowering Graduates Through Skills Development

BY KURTIS KITAGAWA

August 1998

The University of Guelph is empowering its graduates to be responsible citizens who can manage productive careers by overhauling its teaching and learning systems to better develop students' employability skills.

Overview

The University of Guelph is promoting the development of employability skills through its learner-centred strategy. The University has set learner-centredness as one of its two primary strategic directions. (The other primary strategic direction is research-intensiveness.) By learner-centredness the University of Guelph means an educational strategy that emphasizes self-reliant learning, the research-teaching link, skill development and experiential learning. In these four interrelated ways, Guelph believes that it can help students to be better prepared for responsible citizenship, lifelong learning and productive careers.

Self-reliance means taking responsibility for one's own learning; it is closely associated with the idea of active learning, and signals a rejection of the model of the learner as merely a passive recipient of knowledge, a vessel to be filled with "content" by professors. The self-reliant learner at Guelph works not only

in traditional classroom settings but also independently (with the aid of self-paced learning modules, for example, or on research projects) and in student groups. The self-reliant learner is one who develops through exercise the intellectual muscle, determination and skills that will be required for lifelong learning.

Both self-reliance and an ability to work with others are fostered by the research-teaching link, which is the second critical pillar of Guelph's learner-centred approach. As students engage in well-conceived and well-managed independent and group projects, they learn to frame questions and to develop strategies for answering them. The critical thinking and problem solving skills developed by active participation in research are regarded as crucial to success in the world of work, as well as to responsible citizenship.

The third of the interrelated pillars of learner-centredness is skill development. The essential skills identified by the University are critical thinking, problem solving, written and oral communication skills, numerical and computing skills, leadership skills and group skills. The convergence of this skill set and the University of Guelph's learning objectives (published in the 1998-99 university calendar) with the Conference Board's employability and science literacy skills profiles is most striking.

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NBEC Mission

We help business and education leaders work collaboratively to promote the development of a learning society that will prepare Canada's young people for a changing world.

Experiential learning, the fourth pillar of learner-centredness, means hands-on learning or learning by doing to gain the practical experience that fosters self-reliance and co-operation with others. It may, for example, entail laboratory experiments, working with interactive software, making sculpture, or writing essays, reports, business plans and short stories. Experiential learning also means opportunities for international study and research. Most obviously, perhaps, it means co-op work terms, internship programs, volunteer work, practica and field work. Experiential learning in all of these senses is regarded as critical to the transition from university to the workplace.

To measure its success in achieving the strategic direction of learner centredness, the University of Guelph dedicates itself to rigorous and ongoing self-assessment.

Objectives

- Put learners at the centre of everything the University does.
- Prepare students to meet the challenges of life and work in a rapidly changing world.
- Assess the University's performance in skill development and learner-centredness generally.

Groups Served

- Students, educators, employers and society at large.

Activities

Assessing Learning Skills Development

- Asking new students to assess their learning skills against those of peers in the University of Guelph's Incoming Student Survey.
- Asking new students to indicate how important the need to develop various learning skills was in their decision to go to university in the Incoming Student Survey.
- Having alumni two years after graduation assess how much the University in

general and their program in particular contributed to their development of various learning skills in the University's Post Graduation Survey.

- Establishing a Performance Indicators Working Group with a mandate to recommend to the University president input, process and output indicators to assess the University's success in achieving its strategic direction of learner-centredness, and developing a questionnaire to assess learner-centredness across the whole of the student's experience at Guelph, as a separate exercise from student evaluations in individual courses.

Fostering Experiential Learning Opportunities

- Reorganizing the University's Co-op Program Services unit in order to enhance job development and placement for targeted increases in the co-op student population.
- Continuing to build on the University's very successful "Peer Helper" Program, in which a modest honorarium is offered to students for work on campus that develops leadership and group skills.
- Granting academic credit for new experiential learning ventures.
- Working with community colleges, through 16 or more articulation agreements and unique blended programs, to make it easier, cheaper and less time-consuming for students to combine the advantages of a university education with those of vocational training at college.
- Having seven semester-abroad programs (including London, India and Krakow), over 40 exchange programs, and a wide range of field courses for students wishing to study abroad.

Supporting Innovative Teaching and Learning Experiences

- Offering over 70 distance education courses to regular students and open learners. The use of interactive learning

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The Employability Skills Forum Mission

We are committed to improving the productivity and quality of life for individuals, organizations and society by enhancing the employability skills of the current and future workforce of Canada.

This study was made possible through funding by members of the Employability Skills Forum.

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technologies and other best practices for distance education defines the University's distance courses and explains why it was a University of Guelph course that won a recent U.S. competition for the best Web-based course in North America.

- Expanding the number of publicly accessed computer terminals.
- Providing the services of staff from Teaching Support Services and the Office of Open Learning to help faculty develop computer-assisted learning materials.
- Creating a new credit system, based on student workload, that facilitates a modular approach and greatly increases flexibility in curricular design.
- Restructuring of curricula and of academic departments and colleges. To take just one signal example, the former Colleges of Social Science and Family and Consumer Studies have become the new College of Social and Applied Human Sciences—thus bringing theoretical and applied education and research in these areas closer together.

Enhancing the Research–Teaching Link

- Offering annually over 120 paid research opportunities to undergraduate students to participate in faculty/staff research projects.
- Introducing a credit system that allows departments to offer research project courses with higher than usual credit weights.

Developing Career Skills

- Applying a learner-centred focus to the development of the employability skills of students in its Agricultural College through the production of a series of skills identification, assessment and development handbooks. In one handbook, specific emphasis is placed on the development of discernment skills needed by students to understand the culture and value systems of the organizations for which they will be working

and to find a best fit for themselves in light of their own ethical orientation and comfort levels. Another handbook helps students develop their change management skills to anticipate challenges and meet them in appropriate ways. A third handbook helps students to develop the leadership and teamwork skills they will need to succeed in the workplace and in the wider world. This prototype program in a modular format can be adapted for students in other degree programs.

Resources Required

To the extent that its resources allow, the University of Guelph's university-wide skills-focused learning objectives are being implemented across the university. Fundraising and revenue generating activities, as well as internal restructuring, have financed some new investments. However, efforts by a reduced complement of faculty and staff to enhance the learning/skills development experiences of an increasing student population represent a substantial and strategically important use of institutional resources.

Achievements/Outcomes

The 1995 University of Guelph's Post Graduation Survey shows that graduates believe strongly that their university experience helped them develop employability skills:

- 87 per cent enhanced their effective communications skills,
- 94 per cent improved their ability to work independently,
- 88 per cent developed their co-operative group interaction skills,
- 95 per cent enhanced their self-learning and project execution skills,
- 96 per cent improved their problem resolution skills,
- 88 per cent developed their time management skills,
- 79 per cent enhanced their leadership skills, and
- 93 per cent improved their interpersonal skills.

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Our grateful thanks to our interviewees and to others who provided comment, including:

*Constance Rooke
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Of those surveyed, about 66 per cent were employed, 29 per cent were involved in further education and only 3 per cent were unemployed and looking for work.

Benefits

Students

- Become more active, self-reliant learners.
- Set learning goals for themselves and monitor their own progress toward those goals.
- Reflect on and integrate what they have learned.
- Have an increased sense that their university experience fosters skills development for lifelong learning and productive careers.

Educators

- Where appropriate, implement strategies that permit more faculty to reallocate their activities from conveying information in a conventional classroom setting to a mentoring relationship with students that encourages self-reliant learning and fosters writing, research and creative activities.
- Become sensitive to the needs of students and aware of advances in technology; faculty implement new learning technologies and course formats and involve more students in research as a component of course curricula.

Employers

- Profit from students who have transformed their readiness to learn into a readiness to work.

Innovation

The institution is not afraid to measure its performance or to change in light of these assessments. The University's innovation lies in its specific elaboration of strategic directions; its commitment to garner support from all university members for a teaching and learning system that produces the skills development results it seeks; and its willingness to use the assessments of students and faculty to measure its progress in achieving learning objectives.

Keys to Success

- Having a bottom-up strategic planning process that enables the University to build consensus on its objectives and strategies for pursuing those objectives.
- Finding sufficient resources to implement its strategic directions (see below).
- With appropriate consultation, achieving a commitment to assessment as a vehicle for institutional improvement.

Greatest Challenge

As it delivers on its learner-centred commitments to its students, the University's greatest challenge is financial. With decreased base budgets and fewer faculty and staff to invest in learning technologies and new initiatives and small group work, it is impossible to make all the changes called for in the University's 1995 Strategic Plan. Becoming more learner-centred and developing students' skills is difficult when financial resources are scarce, yet, increasingly, these are the things Canadian society and the Canadian workforce demand from their universities.

NBEC Publications Relating to Employability Skills Development and Assessment

Employability Skills Profile

Science Literacy for the World of Work

Best Practices in Assessing and Developing Employability Skills—20 Case Studies (Sept. 98)

The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy in the Workplace, 206-97 Report.

Enhancing Employability Skills: Innovative Partnerships, Projects and Programs, 118-94 Report.

Linking Teachers, Science, Technology and Research: Business and Education Collaborations That Work, 144-95 Report.

1998 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook

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ISSN 1205-1675

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