

## **Improving undergraduate education in Canada – the good and not so good news**

Many Canadians are becoming concerned about the quality of teaching and learning in our universities. Similar worries are being voiced in the United States, where studies like those described in the recent book, [Academically Adrift](#), have suggested that, for many students, four years of university produces little or no measurable improvement in writing skills, critical thinking or complex reasoning.

As part of the research for our book, [Academic Reform](#), we reviewed experiences in 13 jurisdictions as well as best practices within Canada, to identify measures that universities and provincial governments could take to improve the quality and cost effectiveness of undergraduate education. They include performance funding, accountability agreements, teaching practice, teaching assessment, quality assurance, outcome assessment, performance measurement, public reporting, and faculty engagement.

On performance funding and accountability agreements, the good news is that some provinces such as Ontario have put in place written accountability agreements with each university, and universities are increasingly comfortable with the process. We have proposed options for maintaining this momentum, drawing on the [Australian example](#) of integrating the negotiation of the agreement, the production of performance measures, and the award of performance funding. We propose that government could allocate part of its operating grant to a Teaching Enhancement Fund which would be awarded to institutions in accordance with progress on measures negotiated in the accountability agreement process.

With regard to teaching practice, the good news is that it is possible to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of undergraduate teaching and learning with techniques that are completely within the capacity of the professoriate. Each year, more is becoming known about how to do this, and additional learning instruments and techniques are being developed. The not so good news is that, as in other jurisdictions, too few faculty members in Canadian universities are adopting these practices or taking advantage of the research findings.

We fare slightly better in the area of curriculum review, with some universities conducting regular renewal processes. But all universities struggle with the constraints imposed by disciplinary traditions, and few academic units have risen to the challenge outlined by President Zundel at the University of Sudbury and President Patrick Deane at McMaster University ([University Affairs, December 6](#)) of exploring more effective ways to achieve curricular goals. We have also found that information on teaching inputs is much less available in Canada than in some other jurisdictions. We propose ways to remedy this.

On student course evaluations and faculty performance reviews, the good news is that some Canadian universities have adopted leading-edge practices. (See for example the University of Toronto's new [Course Evaluation Framework](#).) The not so good news is that these practices are not present in all universities. We propose that, for institutions where these practices are not well developed, governments include a discussion of how to improve them in their annual accountability agreement negotiations.

With regard to academic standards and quality assurance, the good news is that some provinces, most recently [Ontario](#), have rejuvenated their systems of quality assurance in ways that follow principles of quality assurance systems in comparable jurisdictions and that these processes could be deepened and

broadened if necessary. The main question for Canadian universities is the role to be played by the measurement of learning outcomes, which currently has little or no part in program quality assessment. The [Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework](#) endorsed by provincial and territorial ministers responsible for advanced education in 2007 is no longer an international leading practice in light of recent initiatives in the US (such as the [Degree Qualifications Profile](#)) and elsewhere to develop more detailed and useful descriptions of learning outcomes.

In the realm of outcomes assessment, the good news is that established techniques such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment ([CLA](#)) now exist for assessing employment success and measuring student learning in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing. The not so good news is that the employment success surveys used in Canadian provinces university graduates are primitive by international standards, and no Canadian universities are using the recently developed learning outcomes measures. We suggest that each institution's progress in measuring learning outcomes be part of the annual accountability negotiations.

On performance measurement and public reporting, there have been some impressive Canadian initiatives such as [CUDO in Ontario](#), but even these have fallen behind undertakings such as the [Voluntary System of Accountability](#) in the US. Canada could learn a great deal from the practices in the UK and the plans to enhance public reporting in Australia through the [My University](#) website. We suggest that our universities should follow the lead of these jurisdictions.

The essential insight from our review of other jurisdictions is that substantial reforms in instruments and processes for improving undergraduate education do not happen on their own. There are many faculty and administrators who are committed to improving undergraduate education in Canada, but the barriers to reform are high. Provincial governments have a responsibility to put in place incentives that will help the reformers get on with their work.

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