

1-2-1

A Model for Undergraduate Education

**A Discussion Paper Prepared by John Black
for the Planning and Priorities Committee Task Force on Academic Plan Action Item #2**

Preamble

As part of its deliberations, the Task Force is seeking feedback on a number of possible ways of structuring undergraduate education in order to improve student learning, engagement, retention and success. Some of the ideas which have come under discussion would involve small, some large, changes to our current ways of proceeding. While there is no specific agenda for change, the Task Force believes it will be helpful to consider some wide-ranging proposals for reorganisation, since, even if it is not plausible to implement any of them *per se*, they may still provide interesting and useful perspectives on current practices, and ways of improving them.

One such wide-ranging option is the division of the four-year degree into three nominal periods, of successively one year, two years, and one year. Since many students are part-time, and take more than four years to complete a degree, this structure should not be interpreted in strictly chronological terms. Instead, consider it as applying roughly to the sets of 30 credits which students *would* take annually if they pursued fulltime study with a four-year completion time.

For ease of explanation, the model will be developed below as it might apply to the BA degree, for which it may in some sense be more plausible than for others. Its applicability to other degrees raises interesting and important questions, but they will not be discussed in this report.

The 1-2-1 Concept

The central thought behind the proposed structure is that students need different kinds of focus and activity at different stages of their undergraduate education. In the first year, they have to acquire the basic learning skills that will allow them to continue. That many do not continue beyond first year cannot be put down simply to their not having acquired these skills, but it is possibly part of the reason in some cases, and one which it is within our power to address. In second and third year both existing wisdom and this proposal suggest that there is a need for consolidation, whether in a disciplinary or coherent interdisciplinary direction, undertaken as a result of the individual student's emerging vision of a desirable future. In fourth year students require different sorts of preparation for life after graduation: the proposal assumes that only some students ought to prepare themselves for graduate programmes, and offers alternatives.

First Year Foundation

The suggestion here is that the main objective of the first year (or first 30 credits) is for students to acquire the basic skills that will enable them to continue through to the higher study involved in degree completion. There are various alternative ideas about how they might do this, ranging from (a) an arrangement whereby students are free to choose structurally unrelated courses from a diverse array to (b) a core foundation year in which all students in the same degree programme have the same educational experience, in terms of curriculum and activities. Mark Blackell has provided a useful discussion paper on some of these alternatives lying towards the (b) end of this spectrum. Given that existing degree structures seem to assume that under (a) students may not acquire the skills to proceed to advanced study until they have completed two years, the model places the high demand on any first-year foundation to achieve the same objective in one year. The key question is, then, where on the (a)-(b) spectrum one ought to position a foundation year in order to increase the chances of achieving this.

Second and Third Year Concentration

The model suggests that both second and third year encourage students to focus on the core elements of a particular (disciplinary or interdisciplinary) major, minor, or combination thereof. This is the period in which students will build significant strength in the relevant methodologies, and an understanding of the basic theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of the discipline or interdisciplinary approach. It should be possible for students to complete at least one minor during this period, and indeed to get very close to a major. Different departments would of course make different choices about whether and how to redistribute curriculum between the four years of the degree, and specifically between second and third year, but a guiding principle might be that material and activities which would elsewhere be reserved for honours students would take place in fourth year.

Fourth Year Capstone Experiences

The model proposes that a range of options, answering the differing needs and employment expectations of students, be made available in the form of capstone experiences in the final year. Here are three possibilities:

- (a) A set of courses, akin to an honours curriculum and including a research project, preparing students for academic graduate study in the field of the bachelor's degree.
- (b) A set of courses, preferably including an internship, preparing students for graduate studies in a professional field related to the bachelor's degree.
- (c) An option whereby students can complete, as part of their degree, a course of practical study preparing them for entry-level skilled employment in a related field.

The rest is for discussion!