

External Review of the Bachelor of Arts Degree, UBC-Okanagan

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Preface

The External Review Team [ERT] was assembled by the Office of the Provost and Vice-Principal Academic at UBC Okanagan [UBC-O] and commissioned with conducting an external review of the Bachelor of Arts Degree. Our site visit took place on October 12-14, 2016.

We were asked to assist with optimizing and improving “the integrity of the BA in terms of [the] focus on the student experience and the curriculum.” The terms of reference for the review, organized into three overarching questions, were as follows:

1. How can we ensure that our BA degree has a primary focus on students’ needs across their life cycle?
 - What are the challenges, from a student perspective, in the BA degree that is offered at UBC Okanagan? How should we address them?
 - How can we support student mobility across the two faculties and across campuses?
2. How do we ensure that our curriculum is suitable for the 21st century?
 - How can we create a BA that is uniquely attractive, a BA that encourages students to choose UBCO?
 - What are the factors (e.g., program innovation, national/international trends academic initiatives, demographics, student ‘desires’) that we need to consider at this juncture of time?
 - Is our current curriculum responsive and attuned to these factors?
3. What are the most effective mechanisms for administering a harmonized BA degree, and for coordinating program development, delivery and review?

Through its *Aspire* planning process, UBC-O aims to be a “model of innovative and interdisciplinary programming within the UBC system, and a place that has an impact on communities both local and global.” We read in this document that the campus’s constituencies hope for a “collaborative, boundary-free community of learning and research, with faculty and students working together across disciplines on projects to apply learning, conduct research, and impact communities in new and innovative ways.” We have taken these aspirational goals seriously in the development of this External Review Report.

While on campus, the ERT met with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Dr. Deborah Buszard; the Provost and Vice-Principal Academic, Dr. Cynthia Mathieson; Associate Vice-Provost (Enrollment and Academic Planning) Dr. Patricia Laserre; Dean Wisdom Tetty (Barber School) and Acting Dean Robert Eggleston (FCCS); unit heads, program coordinators, faculty, administrative staff, and undergraduate students in the two Faculties that offer the BA. We also met with a group of deans of other Faculties. We were provided with a number of documents in advance, and additional documents were provided during the campus visit. A non-exhaustive list of such documents follows:

- The *Aspire* blueprint
- The Academic Calendar for the BA
- Key indicator documents for the Barber School and the FCCS
- Faculty Council Guidelines for both Faculties
- Undergraduate Program Specializations (Excel chart)
- UBC-O FY17 Faculty Composite Report (Excel chart)
- UBC-O 2015 Annual Report on Student Retention
- UBC-O Progression Analysis 2013-1015 (Excel chart)
- A 2011 proposal for the renewal of the BA degree and its requirements
- In addition, we widely consulted UBC-O websites

We believe that we were provided with sufficient written documentation and personal testimony to draw conclusions about the history and future of the BA at UBC-O. Although attendance at Faculty Open Forums and in meetings with students was less than optimal, we did meet with a cross-section of faculty and students keenly interested in the future of the BA.

Introduction

In its decade-long history as a campus of the University of British Columbia, UBC-O has made great strides in both education and research. With over 8,000 students drawn from the region, the province as a whole, other parts of Canada, and many countries from around the world, the campus has established itself as a high-quality, mid-size university campus with growing accomplishments in research, quality undergraduate programs, and a still small but important suite of graduate programs. The campus is a jewel and undoubtedly a magnet for students looking to study at an institution with a strong sense of community.

UBC-O is continuing to evolve from its past as a regional university college towards a future as a co-equal campus in the UBC system that can compete with leading comprehensive universities. The arts and sciences are at the core of UBC-O, with growing programs in engineering, management, and the health sciences. These new programs will change the nature of the campus and the composition of the student body in the years ahead.

As indicated in the Terms of Reference, the focus of our review was the BA degree, jointly offered by the Irving K. Barber School of Arts and Sciences [Barber School] and the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies [FCCS]. According to data provided to us by the Office of the Provost and Vice-Principal Academic, the student headcount in BA programs was 2,058 for the 2015 Winter Session, a decline from 2,450 in 2011. The great majority of these students was in the Barber School, though we learned that students who have not declared a major are automatically registered in the Barber School. Psychology was far the most popular area of study, with almost 500 majors in 2015. There are quite a few small programs, with nine registering fewer than 25 majors. Data on the number of majors do not tell the whole story, of course.

Some units do significant amounts of what is often termed “service teaching”. This is critically important for the life of the university, and Arts programs normally do a great deal of this. The data on course enrolments we received show largely stable course registration numbers for the four units in the Barber School that offer arts courses, while enrolment declined by 16% in FCCS, with the largest decline in English. As for program student numbers, many majors and honors programs in the BA areas also saw declines. Despite decreased enrolment, the number of tenure-stream faculty in both the Barber School and the FCCS has remained nearly constant over the last five years at approximately 125 members.

Key Issues for the BA at UBC-O

Students canvassed through the *Aspire* planning process indicated that they wanted to see an undergraduate student experience incorporating experiential learning, high-levels of student-faculty interaction, alternative forms of delivery and undergraduate research. We have identified a number of issues that deserve the attention of members of the Barber School, of the FCCS and of the Administration as the university seeks to offer the highest quality Arts programming to the students.

Goals for the BA:

Before UBC-O can deal with requirements and other details of the BA program, it is clear to the ERT that a significant effort needs to be undertaken to determine the goals for the BA program. This has to grow out of the nature of the campus, the long-term strategic plan for the university and the particular identity of UBC-O. There are excellent ideas that emerge in the *Aspire* process, some of which we have quoted above, but these do not seem to be well represented in the current structure of the BA. We recommend that the campus leadership lead the development of the vision/mission of the BA and of its policies and requirements, and that it subsequently launch a bottom-up process to develop program outcomes / learning outcomes for each degree program specialization resonant with the new BA vision.

Governance:

There is a desperate need for a decision-making body to govern and reform the BA curriculum. The current model in which two Faculty Councils have veto power over any change is a recipe for stagnation. We suggest a unitary body composed of

representatives (including students) from both Faculties with governance over the BA up to the level of the Senate, power that would be delegated by both Faculty Councils. The design and creation of such a body will require strong leadership by both the Principal and Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the Vice-Principal and Provost or the process could fall victim to forces of defensiveness and distrust. If agreement cannot be reached on such a body, we propose that the campus leadership examine the University of Toronto model by which the Faculty of Arts and Science assumes governance responsibility for the BA and BSc and contracts with other Faculties to provide such specializations as the BA in Music or the BSc in Forestry.

BA Requirements:

The requirements for the BA should be overhauled as part of a new vision and process, but we are reticent to be too prescriptive with our recommendations. However, we can make some general statements and offer some impressions from our visit.

The UBC-O requirements are overly rigid in comparison with other top Canadian universities (see Appendix I). The high number of requirements could be dissuading high school students from choosing the UBC-O BA degree program for their post-secondary education; they now have other more attractive and less complex options locally, provincially, and nationally. Many Canadian universities are reducing their BA requirements to create flexibility and to emphasize learning outcomes, rather than content. The University of Calgary's BA core requirements are limited to *6 Science. The University of Alberta is currently considering a change to its rigid *36 BA requirements. The proposed requirements include *6 Language other than English, *3 Writing and *6 taken in another Faculty. The University of Saskatchewan is also revising its core requirements; proposed new requirements include *3 Literacy, *3 Numeracy, and *3 Indigenous Content.

The current UBC-O requirements seem to have been developed for an earlier vision of the university and would have been at home in some universities fifty years ago. This is quite discordant with the vision of UBC-O as a "model for innovative and interdisciplinary programming..." Any given requirement (language, science, breadth) can be justified, but the overall set of requirements strikes us as over-encumbered, lacking in a relationship to UBC-O's stated mission and strategic plan, not obviously student-centred or supportive of student progress, and missing any room for innovative new commitments to student learning. We viewed the results of a 2011 initiative that proposed to renew the requirements, and although we find this proposal, too, very cumbersome, there are certainly many useful ideas within it, and it could provide an initial platform for discussions. In addition, many who consulted with us on our site visit made the case for other requirements (quantitative analysis, global citizenship, Indigenous content, digital literacy) currently lacking in the UBC-O structure. Some specific comments follow:

- a. Given the explosion of knowledge and information in all fields, postsecondary education in the 21st century should be less content driven and focused on building not just knowledge, but skills and experiences that students can utilize throughout their careers and their lives. Intercultural competency, global perspectives, scientific literacy and an awareness of Canada's colonial relationship with Indigenous peoples are important 21st century attributes. Graduates require strong communication skills – oral, written and digital. The BA degree should equip students for lifelong learning, both within their fields and more generally. Graduates need to be able to critically assess complex and constantly changing situations in the workplace and the world. In order to interpret situations, arrive at judgments and solve problems in an informed and responsible manner, students require training in research methods. Research skills are crucial lifelong assets in the labour market. How are UBC-O students across the wide variety of disciplines being taught research methods? What is a research question? How would one go about answering such a question? And how do analyze and weigh results? Research skills should be built from first year on in all programs and for all students. As part of their program outcomes, units can determine how they would offer research training in their disciplines in first year and beyond.
- b. We heard some compelling arguments for having some form of language requirement, but the current set of requirements is too high by current standards (4 courses without Grade 11/12, although only 3 are required if the language is French, for a reason no one could explain). Most universities in Canada have no language requirements. Perhaps two language courses (6 credits) might be a reasonable requirement, with clearer guidelines and processes for qualifying out of the requirement based on high school transcripts, first languages, etc.

A few of our interlocutors suggested that the language requirement had to be maintained in order to prevent the loss of faculty positions in the language programs – we would stress that this is not a good rationale for curriculum design. The defensiveness around this requirement, and the sense among some that students will not take languages without being forced, probably hinders the development of creative ideas and pedagogies for offering language and literature/culture courses that would appeal to students and promote language instruction across the campus. Many universities have moved away from required language instruction, and yet their language programs have continued to thrive. If some portion of the language requirement survives, the calendar should provide a strong rationale for it (practical preparation for global studies, exposure to other ways of thinking and communicating, the humility of learning in a new cultural environment, access to broader literature and scholarly writing, etc.)

The removal of arbitrary barriers to exemptions for international students should be an immediate priority. While students graduating from high school in another language are exempted from the language requirement, international students who have completed their last two years in a Canadian university need to take a language proficiency test. Chinese-speaking students, for example, must, at their own expense, take a language proficiency test offered only in Vancouver. It seems ridiculous to compel students who have completed more than ten years of schooling in another language to take a proficiency test to gain exemption from two *3 language courses.

- c. The distribution requirements of *18 credits from each of two lists is excessive, and the lists themselves are problematic, with significant overlaps. When subjects can fulfill both Humanities and Social Sciences requirements, the rationale for a distribution model defined in this way is unclear. Moreover, the *Aspire* vision of UBC-O as a “model of innovative and interdisciplinary programming” is undermined by this reliance on a strict division between Social Science and Humanities. There are ways to enforce breadth beyond a distribution requirement, for example, by limiting the number of senior credits in the major to *48. If a divisional distribution model is maintained, would it be possible to advise students to choose their electives across a range of social sciences, humanities, and the arts and require only that one such course be demonstrably strong in the theories and methods of the Social Sciences and one similarly strong in the interpretive methods of the Humanities? Beyond two required distribution courses, students and their advisors could be trusted to choose an interesting mix of non-required courses, to combine majors or a major and minor.
- d. The rationale for Science credits is also not well articulated. We believe that all students would benefit from having a fundamental grounding in quantitative reasoning and the scientific method. Perhaps the BA should require that one course be taken that stresses quantitative reasoning/analysis and that another requirement could include Science courses designed for Arts students (not dumbed-down, but focused on the scientific method and broad areas of scientific knowledge, be it health science or sustainability science, useful for the training of informed citizens). Just as the BA courses can be better designed to serve other Faculties, other Faculties could design courses for BA students. We do not think that the Science requirement has to involve lab courses.
- e. The various requirements for English stand out as particularly incoherent in their application. Is the purpose of 112 to introduce students to literature or to develop an ability to express oneself in writing? How does English cope with the need to introduce students to modes of written expression tailored to the needs of different disciplines and fields? As an example of the difficulties placed in the way of students, we understand that a 70% in

Grade 12 English is not currently a requirement for admission to a BA, but that anything less than 70% will keep students from taking an English course, which is a requirement, until they do a continuing studies remedial English course (009). This can affect their ability to complete other courses on time, receive student financial support and engage in important experiential opportunities like “Go Global.” We must emphasize that the requirement of 70% in Grade 12 English for entry into 100-level English at UBC-O is extremely unusual and does not exist at our own institutions. The delivery of 009 also seems unusual. Why is 009 offered outside of the English department, when other requirements are managed by English, and why, when other Faculties require 112/114 rather than 150, 151, or 153 are there not always enough 112/114 sections to accommodate? The number of concerns we heard about the entirety of the various English and writing requirements suggest an entire rethink of the sequence and purpose of the courses. As an important part of this review, UBC-O should devote resources to the development of writing across the curriculum, perhaps through a university-level teaching innovation fund. Students need to understand the expectations and conventions of writing within their own disciplines, and instructors across the Barber School and FCCS need to devote more attention to writing instruction.

- f. We heard, especially from students, interest in new kinds of requirements: some means of ensuring a deep engagement with First Nations and Indigenous issues; clarity on courses that provide an experience of intercultural and global diversity and issues of social justice; or as mentioned above, research courses or community engagement. Any judicious development of new requirements can only take place if the dense set of existing requirements is unencumbered.

In summary, if the campus is to have BA requirements, their purpose should be clear and transparent, they should not be excessively onerous in number or in procedure, and they should be designed flexibly so as not to hinder student degree progress.

Experiential Learning:

Not all good ideas for student areas of study should be packaged as requirements. We were impressed by the new UBC-O undergraduate program webpages, which point the integration of experiential learning opportunities (e.g. Co-op, Go Global, Undergraduate Research) across programs in Arts, along with dedicated funding for student participation in international experiences and undergraduate research. This seems to be a distinct advantage of the UBC-O degree, and we would have liked to have more conversations about how experiential learning is incorporated into the diverse disciplines. We know that recruitment to BA programs can be inhibited by the widespread perception that graduates are inadequately prepared for the workforce. Experiential learning in its diverse forms encourages students to apply learning and to make connections

between their disciplines and the world. This promotion of UBC-O Arts as a destination campus for experiential learning in the humanities and social sciences could help to build a brand for a relevant 21st century BA that produces graduates who are well prepared as workers and citizens.

Certificates:

Certificates can be pulled together on issues like sustainability or digital literacy, with purpose-built introductory courses, a series of courses to pick from, and a capstone experience at the end. The Joint BA Governance Council could examine existing minors and majors, some of seem left over from the College days, to determine if any are no longer relevant or well organized. Minors should not be simply a collection of courses but should have some coherence. Advisors, if presented with thoughtful minors and majors (and possibly certificates), could help students devise selections that maximize their career and life preparation.

Minors Offered by other Faculties:

Arts students would benefit from minors in other degree programs, whether Science or in other Faculties (Education, Management); however, there is a BA restriction that no more than 12 credits can be taken in another Faculty. This seems like a revenue grab and should be repealed in the interest of facilitating student mobility.

Abolishing the 50% Rule within UBC-O:

We recommend that the 50% rule be repealed internally. Currently, students are only allowed to count 50% of the credits earned toward a major if they were formally registered in another degree program. Thus, if a student decides to transfer, and especially if they do so late, they will often have to make up many credits that they've already taken, incurring extra cost and delaying their completion. This rule certainly has no place being applied *within* a Faculty like Barber, for example when a student transfers from the BSc Psychology to the BA Psychology and or within the BA program.

Reducing Student Confusion between Barber and FCCS:

In the absence of a model where the two faculties become one, measures should be taken to reduce student confusion over the two faculties. Students should graduate by degree on the same day if not the same ceremonies, not by Faculty. It is nonsensical to treat all BA students in the common years as Barber School students; students should be asked on initial registration to select one of the two Faculties for the purpose of events ("Meet the Dean" for example), communications, and advising (and for counting registered students for budget purposes).

Reducing Impediments for Program Students:

Even though it is beyond the scope of this review to develop program-level recommendations, we know that a strong, attractive and relevant BA is built upon the success of its programs. We were impressed by the many committed faculty members in a range of disciplines who shared their insights with us. The

students with whom we spoke are strong ambassadors for the BA and for its programs. At the same time, there are declining numbers of program students in many areas. Art History and Visual Culture, English, French, Spanish, History, and Political Science have all experienced significant declines in Normal Program Load FTEs. Programs experiencing declines need to carefully examine curriculum and program requirements. It seemed strange to us that some programs with declining numbers have higher than normal entry and progression requirements. One example is English, whose FTEs have declined by 29% since 2011. In order to enter the English major, a student must have obtained 68% in *6 of 100-level English or 68% in *12* of English courses. In order to remain in the English program, students must maintain an average of 68% in English courses. There is no equivalent entry or progression requirement for English majors at UBC-V, the University of Calgary or the University of Alberta. Higher entry and progression requirements might be justified in a program that is seeking to reduce numbers, but that does not seem to be the case for the English major at UBC-O.

Impact of the Budget Model:

The budget model is still new, so it is not surprising that units and departments haven't yet fully realized ways in which they can grow their budgets and their impact. Departments need to be encouraged to come up with service offerings across the curriculum in the BA program and for other Faculties. This will be a strong source of revenue and can help the campus to grow better links between units and Faculties.

Redefining "Units" within the Barber School:

Everyone—not just the Review Team but everyone we talked to at UBC-O—is confused by the Unit #s used in Barber School. Could the Dean please investigate alternative means of signifying these clusters?

The Dual Faculty Structure for the BA:

We recognize that a debate took place last academic year on the subject of the Barber School and FCCS becoming one Faculty, and we also realize that this option is off the table at this point. However, we believe this conversation should proceed in the future after questions of the BA have been resolved. A unified Faculty would be a much better mechanism for delivering the BA and would ease the creation of interdisciplinary configurations, confuse students less, and provide better ammunition for recruiters and advisors. In fact, we did not hear and were unable to discern a single rationale for preserving two Faculties that was based in the needs of students and the quality of the student degree programs. Some faculty expressed entrenched positions that seemed to preclude finding common ground on the challenges facing a BA program. The new budget model will leave the smaller Faculty, which has undergone significant erosion in enrollments, exposed and precarious in their budget, weakening the status of the creative arts on campus. And to all the world, the current division of disciplines between the two Faculties seems arbitrary; for just one example, languages should certainly be

ensconced in the larger Faculty where they could be part of a more coherent strategy to encourage learning in languages and cultures.

Conclusion

The UBC-O BA has enormous strengths, among them, dedicated faculty members, talented students, an evident commitment to experiential learning, as well as to the goal of becoming a “model for innovative and interdisciplinary programming...” We believe that this is a worthy aspiration and fully within grasp. In order to be a destination of choice for students interested in the humanities and social sciences, we believe that the UBC-O degree must evolve, not to leave behind the interdisciplinary liberal arts, but instead to strengthen and retain these commitments. The dual Faculty structure has hindered the evolution of the BA degree. In order to facilitate the growth and evolution of the BA into a 21st degree, UBC-O must establish a governance structure that bridges the two Faculties. There is a need to engage faculty members and students beyond those who have been the key players in these debates to date. The entrenched positions that we heard repeatedly during our visit also need to be bridged. A committee with faculty and student representation from the two faculties must be established and given delegated authority over the BA degree.

As we have observed, the BA requirements are too heavy, and the individual requirements sometimes seemed to be operationalized in complex and arbitrary ways. A 21st century BA degree needs to refocus away from content, and towards the attributes and skills that graduates need as workers and as citizens. Just as the general degree requirements require change, we think that some of the program requirements could be deterring students from majoring. Normal program load FTEs are in decline in too many programs. A less rigid degree structure would allow room for the enhanced development of innovative pedagogies and student experiences, including experiential learning, undergraduate research, interdisciplinary certificates, cross-Faculty minors, and writing across the curriculum. We know that changes in the structure of the BA and its degree programs must be embraced by core constituents at the UBC-O campus. It will be necessary to approach the task of BA reform with a spirit of openness, compromise and with a commitment to student-centred change.

APPENDIX I: BA REQUIREMENTS AT TOP CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES

	Major	Minor	Core	Requirements
University of Alberta	*30-*48 at 200+	*12-*42 at 200+	*36	*6 Junior English *6 LOE *6 Science *6 Social Sciences *6 Humanities *6 Fine Arts
University of British Columbia - Vancouver	*42 with *30 at 300+	No minor necessary/ *30 with *18 at 300+	*30 or *24 with grade 12 language	*3 Writing *3 Research (from long approved list including in major) *3 Language (can be satisfied by grade 12) *6 Science (includes Arts courses) *6 Literature (long list includes courses from many fields)
University of Calgary	Meet requirements of major field.	May declare a minor/minor *30	*6 from Faculty of Science (maximum *48 at 100 or 200-level)	Major plus Other Requirements ¹ (may be specified for major) *6 from Faculty of Science
Dalhousie University	Major *36-*54	May declare minor *18-*27	*24	*6 Writing (double dipped with breadth requirements) *6 Social Sciences *6 Humanities *6 Life and Physical Sciences (includes Arts courses) *6 Language
University of Manitoba	minimum *48	Minimum *18	*24	*3 English *3 Math *6 Humanities *6 Social Sciences *6 Science

¹ No Other Requirement for BA major in Political Science, English or Sociology, for example.

McGill University	*36	*18	*24	*6 Humanities *6 Languages *6 Social Sciences *6 Mathematics and Sciences
University of Ottawa	*42	*30	*12	*3 to *12 in English (or French) or Philosophy
University of Saskatchewan	*54 senior credit units		*18	* Arts Distribution Requirement (18 credit units from the Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine Arts; at most 6 credit units in one subject; at minimum at least 6 credit units from two of Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine Arts; and a minimum of 3 credit units of Languages)
University of Toronto	Students must complete: One Specialist *54 - *84 or Two Majors *72 or One Major and Two Minors *72		*24 Breadth	(*6 from 4/5) 1. Creative and Cultural Representations 2. Thought, Belief, and Behaviour 3. Society and Its Institutions 4. Living Things and Their Environment 5. The Physical and Mathematical Universes
University of Waterloo	Program degree requirements set by program		*30	*3 Fine, Performing and Communicative Arts *6 Humanities *6 Languages and Cultures *12 Social Sciences *3 Transdisciplinary Studies

University of Western Ontario	Honors: Specialization *54 or Double Major *72 Bachelor: Specialization *54 or Major *36		*12	*12 Breadth: *6 from 2/3 1. Social Science, Interdisciplinary, and Various 2. Arts, Humanities and Languages 3. Engineering, Medical Sciences, Science, and Various *12 (double-dipping) two full courses must be designated essay courses
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