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SUMMARY

Plenary Session II: Seamless System or Pied Beauty: Articulation and Transfer in a National Context

Dr. Patrick Deane
President and Vice-Chancellor
McMaster University

Dr. Deane began his remarks by noting that change has been slow to come in the area of transfer in Ontario. However, he was pleased to report that the discourse on articulation and transfer is now much improved and indicated, “We now live in a world where student mobility is facilitated, not obstructed.”

This discourse has opened up the discussion of what should be considered credit bearing and where that credit bearing learning experience should occur. The opening up of discussion of ‘what is learning’ is becoming exciting, because there is less focus on the straight jacket of rules and more emphasis on and becoming part of a larger transformation. “The potential of doing something wonderful for our students is more acute,” he says.

Dr. Deane is a member of the AUCC/ACCC President’s working group on transferability, Co-Chaired by the Presidents of Lethbridge and the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT). The group is looking to advance relationships and has established joint principles for collaboration on credit transfer, rather than outlining a specific credit transfer protocol. The plan is for the AUCC/AUCCC to endorse these principles and then leave it to local institutions to determine how to align their own practices. A fall signing ceremony is planned. The principles will honour the differences across regions and institutions; emphasize the value of student-centred transfer arrangements that focus on learning outcomes, the learner, and learning ability; stress all levels of institutional support; build on successful partnerships and collaborations; promulgate the sharing of best practices; respect institutional governance structures; seek complementarity, not replication; and emphasize demonstrable effectiveness.

He noted that the collaborative discourse in the AUCC/ACCC working group has been extremely positive. The working group is comprised of ten university and college presidents drawn from across the country, and held its first meeting in Calgary in January 2014. The working group’s focus is on articulation and transfer; however, the group is looking at these two topics broadly. The group’s particular focus is on ‘What is good for our country?’ – and considers economic issues as well as how to improve the quality of life in Canada.

Dr. Deane shared his reflections on the history of transfer in Ontario. To do so, he employed Gerald Manley Hopkins' poem "Pied Beauty" to illustrate the tensions and opportunities inherent in the transfer discourse. The poem rejoices in the diversity of the world and the richness of multiple visual manifestations. He cautioned conference attendants to avoid the extreme of aspiring to a "seamless transfer system"; conversely, he cautioned against an approach that claims particular institutions or programs are absolutely unique. Instead, he suggested that the 'progress on articulation and transfer, to be realized, means to avoid the two fictions.' The risk of not avoiding these two extremes, according to Dr. Deane, is a diminution of variety and quality.

Questions from the audience included:

1. *How will institutions be differentiated and the "arms race" by which institutions become more similar be slowed down?*

- Dr. Deane indicated that all institutions suffer mission drift in the scramble for dollars, but that he is hopeful that the Strategic Mandate Agreement process will help resolve this issue. He suggested that emphasizing the range of possible collaborations is another way to attempt to resolve this "arms race." He further suggested we need to recognize that students can follow many different routes that are not better or worse than each other.

2. *What is your sense of the value of standardized versus unique customized arrangements?*

- It is Dr. Deane's view that if an overly centralized and standardized "algorithmic" model is employed, it will erode important cultural differences in programs. He suggested that preserving the student experience is not possible if you centralize and standardize fully.