



# **A Vision for Undergraduate Experience at the University of Toronto**

Expert Panel on the Undergraduate  
Student Educational Experience

August 2019

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*Our University*

Our University welcomes undergraduate students from across the globe to become part of its vibrant intellectual community. These students value enquiry and curiosity, and aspire to develop the skills, attitudes, and collaborative capacity necessary to thrive at the forefront of knowledge. They embrace their role as members of our research-intensive community by seeking out opportunities for learning and exploration while flourishing on intellectual complexity. They join faculty who have embraced a lifetime as learners to energize the continuum of teaching and research at the core of our University's mission.

Our University's diversity is one of its greatest strengths. We welcome students from diverse backgrounds to play their role in translating its deep and distinguished history into an even greater future. Their ideas, voices, passion and actions help drive our community's unending quest to re-imagine itself as even more. Their undergraduate experience prepares them to someday find their place among our distinguished alumni, alumni with a history of discovery, innovation, championing change, shaping Canadian society, and contributing within communities around the globe. We entrust these students to become the next generation of guardians and ambassadors for our global reputation of excellence.

Our University fosters in all students a sense of belonging to a caring and supportive learning community that encourages them while also challenging them in and beyond the classroom. We offer our students support and guidance in navigating the multitude of opportunities for learning and growth. We help our students to build the self-awareness and self-determination needed to take ownership of their education and to develop learning paths that are fulfilling, engaging and aligned with their career goals and life aspirations. We promote student health and well-being as part of enabling their potential and growth, while recognizing that undue pressure can make it harder for students to flourish, constrain their academic progress, or for some even impact their mental health.

Our community supports student exploration through its innovative and dynamic course experiences, world-class laboratories, libraries, and computer facilities. Excellent instructors draw masterfully on a wide range of pedagogies to teach and share their passion for knowledge in ways that promote and inspire learning. Our community allows students to take risks and fail, and then move on to achieve more than they thought they could. Students thereby develop the self-confidence needed to take on the world's greatest challenges.

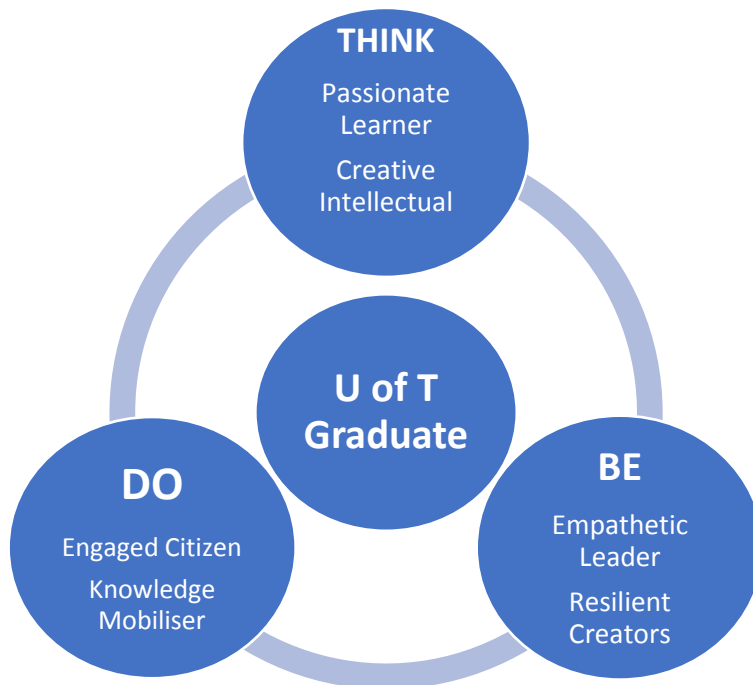
Our University helps students engage with ideas, situations, spaces, people and themselves in ways that open many doors to learning and personal growth. Personally meaningful interactions with instructors, staff, mentors, classmates and friends play a central role and foster the connections that build community. These interactions across classrooms, clubs, residences, online communities and café-conversations promote a sense of connection, joint purpose, respectful recognition of differences, and shared vision. Interactions across the rich cultural mosaic of our campuses and the Toronto Region foster learning, growth and belonging. These interactions bring moments of enlightenment and shared joy; they help students through challenging times and let them build lifelong connections and friendships as part of the University's incredible human network.

## Our graduates

The many interactions within the richness of our University allow each student to choose their own path within a supportive community, while at the same time encouraging shared outcomes that create a deeper unity and sense of belonging. These shared outcomes promote distinctive attributes in graduates from our University. Collectively, our students are known as:

- **Passionate learners**, who embrace knowledge exploration while reflecting on and growing from their experiences, with awareness of what and how they have learned, and why it matters;
- **Creative intellectuals**, who thrive on the creation of new knowledge, value integrity and expertise, can navigate intellectual complexity, integrate multiple literacies and diverse perspectives, and apply knowledge to make and defend evidence-informed statements, recommendations and decisions;
- **Empathetic leaders**, who are able to guide and bring out the best in themselves and others;
- **Resilient creators**, who can self-regulate in order to see opportunity when faced with adversity, and have the self-confidence and well-being needed to overcome barriers in order to strive for personal fulfilment and realise their dreams;
- **Knowledge mobilisers**, who harness and leverage the potential of new knowledge to maximum advantage by synthesising and expressing complex ideas in compelling ways in order to build wide support;
- **Engaged citizens**, who embrace responsibility and proactively seek opportunities to create positive change and promote sustainable local and global societies.

The undergraduate experience at our University will place our students on trajectories towards developing the attributes illustrated through these aspirational personas, recognising that individual students will shape their own distinct identities.



### Our experiences

To help foster this learning and growth in and beyond our classrooms, our University offers students experiences that:

- Stimulate **exploration and discovery** to promote a spirit of enquiry and help them learn to navigate intellectually at the frontiers of new knowledge;
- Encourage **knowledge integration** across the multiplicity of learning experiences made possible by our size and scale so they can build rich and broad mental models that help them look beyond the horizon and see more widely and deeply;
- Help them appreciate **disciplinary differences** and the value of reasoning within and across multiple disciplinary foci;
- Challenge them personally and encourage them to expand their affective boundaries, to embolden intentional exploration towards **self-awareness, self-determination and well-being**;
- Promote a sense of **belonging, connection and joint purpose** within our University's many communities;
- Foster **provocative yet constructive dialogue** that helps them learn from those who have different life-experiences and appreciate the personal relevance of diversity, equity and inclusion and understand its broader societal significance;
- Further their understanding and respect of **Indigenous peoples'** histories and perspectives, appreciate their own roles as treaty people, and seek their own path within reconciliation;
- Connect their knowledge with their **identity and values**, and how they fit in the wider world around them;
- Instill **transferable skills**, let them explore **career clarity**, and grow into their emerging intellectual and professional identity;
- Promote a **lifelong and life-wide desire for learning** within and beyond the University.

These principles will help our many university communities design and evaluate the plethora of curricular, co-curricular and experiential learning opportunities they offer to our undergraduate students. Certainly, individual campuses, faculties, colleges, departments, programs, residences, clubs, teams, or other entities are best positioned to design and deliver experiences suited to their distinct memberships. There are many ways to offer experiences that align with the characteristics encompassed within these principles.

Finally, while our University can offer opportunities, these are "experienced" by the participant. It is the culmination of many experiences inside and outside of the classroom that enable an individual student's growth and learning, and thereby shifts their resulting trajectory while at our University and beyond. A new student-centric **partnership based on ownership and support** needs to be struck wherein students, over the course of their studies, take ownership of their learning, increase their engagement, find their own path, unify their experiences, and embrace their identity.

**Guidance on Implementation and Next Steps**  
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As per its Terms of Reference, the Expert Panel on Undergraduate Student Educational Experience (USEE) was tasked with enunciating and enlivening the University's vision for the undergraduate student educational experience and making recommendations towards continuous improvement that would lead to that vision's implementation across the University. Needing to contain the scope of its inquiry, the Expert Panel agreed that this mandate does not include a request to develop a full implementation plan of the proposed vision, and that this task instead belongs to University administration. However, comments and questions surrounding implementation surfaced and re-surfaced at various stages of the Panel's work, be it in consultation or in discussion, such that they became difficult to ignore. This document acts as a companion to the vision document and presents some preliminary thoughts that may be helpful to the administration as it looks towards implementation.

*Using the vision*

The University of Toronto is a community with a wealth of good ideas. The Panel was adamant that one of the purposes of the vision should be to help faculty, student and staff leaders make difficult choices among good ideas by allowing them to compare them against the standards and objectives outlined in the vision. In this way, the vision should not only be a theoretical document, but a practical one as well. To this end, one of the final steps in the Panel's work was to test the vision's ability to facilitate these choices. The feedback we received was that the vision is useful in helping to frame ideas differently and can thus contribute a new perspective to decision-making. To make the most of its purpose, the University should consider integrating the language and objectives outlined in the vision into the planning and proposal processes for new initiatives, thus providing the vision as a framework for thinking through and assessing new ideas prior to their implementation.

*Communicating the vision*

To be successful, the vision needs to be communicated effectively to members of the University community. The current vision document is only one medium through which this communication might take place, and the Panel encourages the University to consider different formats and media, such as web, video and infographics, that might be more effective in reaching specific audiences within the University. When communicating the vision, the University might also consider:

- Formulating a **clear call to action** that outlines what students, staff and faculty are supposed to do in response to the vision. A set of clear next steps would be helpful here.
- A strategy to **socialize the vision** to students, staff and faculty and build buy-in. The greatest change at the University tends to happen from the grassroots, so creating awareness about the vision, its contents and its objectives will be critical. To do so, the University and academic units may wish to identify individuals who can champion the vision and act as its voice across our campuses.
- Creating **opportunities to support implementation**, such as seed funding for pilot initiatives or recognition programs for those who advance the vision on campus.
- Outlining an **assessment strategy** to measure progress in implementing the vision, including relevant metrics.

### Starting points for implementation

While not intended to be a comprehensive or authoritative list, the Panel proposes the following priority areas or starting points when considering implementation:

- Not all change can occur overnight. While some of the elements of the vision can be achieved quickly, others will require a more concerted and sustained effort over time. As a result, the University should **balance easy wins with more aspirational, longer-term goals** when formulating a plan for implementation.
- It is also desirable to create a balance of initiatives that **directly improve** student experience and initiatives that **promote motivation** or create the **opportunity** or fertile ground needed for change.
- Several divisions and administrative offices already have visions for undergraduate education in place. Yet the Panel has drafted a vision that is intended to be University-wide and to apply to all students regardless of college, division or campus. As such, **consideration should be given to how existing visions link into the University's vision.**

While some of the priorities identified in the vision might best be driven from the University's administrative centre, many can or would best be seized on by colleges, divisions or campuses. Relevant initiatives that flow from the vision for both levels of governance might include:

- Further consideration of innovative assessments of learning outcomes and their implications to balance academic rigour and challenge against undue competition among students
- Examining and enhancing student spaces and places to make them valuable, inclusive and engaging to different student populations
- Supporting student wayfinding on campus, such that students might better sift through the wealth of opportunities the University offers to find those that align with their interests and goals
- Students using their on-line profiles to communicate their interests, so that the University can more proactively offer curricular and co-curricular opportunities that align with these interests
- Enhanced pedagogical training for faculty members and engagement in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, such that students might maximize the benefits of their interactions with faculty members
- Community-building initiatives, such as but not limited to alumni mentorship and buddy programs for incoming, international and commuter students
- Enhanced incentives for students, staff and faculty members to value and consider undergraduate student experience when creating new initiatives
- Data-analytics capabilities to support integrated assessment of growth and learning across the many rich combinations curricular, co-curricular and other undergraduate educational experiences

Some of these directions could be approached by creating relevant working groups, whereas others might be pursued through calls for proposals across multiple levels of the University. Where applicable, funding could be made available to engage interest, encourage innovation and support implementation of such initiatives.