STUDENT LEARNING WORKING GROUP
Operational Priorities

Recommendation – Queen's University Should Lead in Offering Transformative, Inquiry-based Learning Experiences

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I. MOTIVATING OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENT LEARNING AT QUEEN'S

Our recommendation for Queen's is grounded by the following over-arching objectives to any new student learning endeavour:

1. To provide a university experience that **promotes the personal development of the learners** who come to Queen's. In that respect, we see a need to provide a more diverse, non-traditional, collaborative and experiential (less "siloed") learning environment that promotes personal encounters with people, as well as new challenges and areas of intellectual pursuit they might never have otherwise encountered.

2. **To provide an enhanced, collaborative learning experience.** We see a need to move outside the traditional course-based and classroom-based paradigm. We also want to allow students to take full advantage of everything the university has to offer. We recognize the value of learning by doing and the value of bringing people together through common effort/struggle. The opportunity here is to engage learning in an active, collaborative fashion. The idea is that the learner will learn as much from the process as well as the content, and will take lasting pride in what they achieve. It should change their concept of "leadership".

3. **To bring about positive social impact.** The process should result in outcomes that will bring value to the community/region. We feel that the effort itself will have significance and bring value.

II. PROPOSAL: INSTITUTE A TRANSFORMATIVE, INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING OPPORTUNITY AS THE SIGNATURE QUEEN'S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

We propose that Queen's University should make as its signature student learning experience a transformative, inquiry-based learning opportunity that brings students from diverse disciplines together in interdisciplinary teams to focus as a team on solving a "wicked idea" in the community.

By a "wicked idea," we mean an idea that is of important social, economic, political or cultural influence that has impact on others' lives in the community. It may include something like "homelessness in Kingston," a particular climate issue for a community in Eastern Ontario, or an issue facing correctional facilities in the area. The issue does not have to be profound, and could be entirely local in scope. It may be an 'experimental' structure, a conception, or a 'what if.' The aim is not necessarily to solve the idea entirely (or indeed at all), but to engage students in the practice of identifying and taking ownership of the idea, rehearsing best practices for collaboration, identifying opportunities for meaningful community engagement, and implementing imaginative approaches to problem-solving. This fits well with recent research in best practices in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Fernando and Marikar 2017; Hanstedt, 2018; Major and Palmer 2001; Murray 2007; Olusegun 2015).

We believe that this type of learning can – and should – occur in all years and in all programs at Queen's: undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs (both in Kingston and at the Bader International Study Centre). It can be a truly pan-institutional initiative: the signature stamp of a unique Queen's education. Naturally, the implementation of such a program would need to begin somewhere more modestly, so we are recommending starting with a first-year program and building from that.

Such a learning initiative would feature the following key elements:

1. **"learning to learn"**– the aim is to equip learners to problem-solve and develop learning, leadership, and collaboration skills <u>early</u> on in their learning journeys, in the first year of their respective programs (i.e. how to frame a problem, how to research, how to work together, how to communicate a problem or solution, how to engage with diverse ideas and perspectives);

2. **inquiry-based learning** – learners will be highly engaged and "learning by doing" – by working on an actual, impactful idea that they can see and experience and that matters to others in the community, and by doing so in a team-based environment, learners will connect and reflect on their learning with a broader purpose of inquiry and impact;

3. **empowering learners** to make their own learning choices in an inclusive, pedagogically sound fashion – learners can define the topics that are important to them, and the learning process will not have a set structure imposed but instead a range of possibilities for collaboration and pursuit;

4. **"undisciplined" learning** – learners would come from a variety of disciplines and are teamed up to learn from each other and about each other's disciplines and ways of approaching problems. This may also mean unlearning, and includes decolonization and embracing Indigenous ways of knowing.

5. **collaboration and learning leadership** – we would propose that learners work in multi-disciplinary teams of smaller groups (perhaps 6-12 learners) for an impactful team-building and leadership experience;

6. **community impact** – providing opportunities for Queen's to engage with the Eastern Ontario community and make a difference by bringing the university into the community, including community partners and alumni;

7. **breaking down learning silos** – exposing learners to other disciplines beyond their initial programs at an early yet crucial time in learning, to build community and open opportunities for learning beyond their respective programs;

8. **honing skills to engage** with real intellectual change, differing world views and with diversity through team-based community projects; and,

9. **providing space and voice to marginalized learners** by allowing opportunities to chart learners' own learning journeys without topics and structure being "imposed" and in an environment where their voices and experiences will matter to the outcome of the project.

10. **allowing nimbleness** in projects/initiatives , to be immediately responsive to societal needs, thus positioning Queen's as a successful post-pandemic university.

11. **learning from and through Diversity** – trusting and ultimately empowering learners with the responsibility to engage with ideas, people, and places that reflect the diversity of our communities.

The goal of such a Queen's Inquiry-based Wicked Idea Experience would be to instil a critical inquiry-based mindshift in student learning that can then be brought to other classes and learning experiences at Queen's as the learner progresses in their respective program.

III. ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK (2021)

Our proposal aligns with new Strategic Framework (2021) in the following ways:

A. Vision

The Queen's Inquiry-based Wicked Idea Experience equips learners to "solve the world's most significant and urgent challenges" – learners choose to work on an impactful, real-world "wicked idea." The Experience also fosters "intellectual curiosity" because it is an inquiry-based, interdisciplinary learning experience that aims to be transformative because the learning results have the potential for real-world impact. It also, by design, imbues "passion in the learner to achieve" by supporting the learner to choose an impactful, real-world community issue relevant to the learner. The Experience also hones learners' collaborative skills because the Experience is a team-based, interdisciplinary learning opportunity.

B. Mission

By adopting a transformative, inquiry-based learning experience, like the Queen's Inquiry-based Wicked Idea Experience, Queen's can position itself as the university of the future. Few institutions are as uniquely situated as Queen's to be able to provide such an opportunity to its learners. Having this as its flagship learning experience would "attract and cultivate excellence and leadership" because learners are drawn to opportunities that not only challenge and expand horizons but that are met with real value in the working world. Any employer or graduate or

professional school would absolutely value a student who experienced such a learning opportunity because the leadership, collaborative, and problem-solving skills gained through

such an opportunity are self-evident. Finally, by focusing the experience on real-world community issues with impact, Queen's can be of real service to "an inclusive, diverse and sustainable society" while involving learners from a wide variety of backgrounds and life experiences.

IV. WHY THE INQUIRY-BASED WICKED IDEA EXPERIENCE AT QUEEN'S?

Queen's University has some remarkable, unique strengths that make it an ideal institution to offer a transformative, inquiry-based learning opportunity:

- a highly talented, motivated and committed student body;
- a pool of learners that continues to learn – the undergraduate student population pursues further education upon graduation at a rate of more than two times students at other universities in Canada;
- a remarkable faculty breadth, depth and impact for the size of the institution;
- a faculty and staff that is highly engaged in their respective communities;
- given its size, a more nimble institutional structure, allowing it to pivot to impactful student learning experiences;
- a physical campus which is navigable and compact, making the people and resources required for such an experience accessible; and,
- a campus situated in a medium-sized city in the eastern Ontario region, within a reasonable distance to smaller centres and Indigenous communities.

The Inquiry-based Wicked Idea Experience at Queen's would draw on all of these strengths by involving students as well as faculty and staff in impactful and transformative experiences with the community.

V. THE QUEEN'S INQUIRY-BASED WICKED IDEA EXPERIENCE PILOT

We recognize that a pan-institutional conceptual shift in Queen's approach to student learning may take some time and consultation. Although we urge that this transformational learning experience should also be imagined in graduate and post-graduate contexts, in traditional classroom settings, and beyond, we propose that our recommendation at least be offered to start as a non-mandatory pilot program in the first year undergraduate programs at Queen's. Our recommendation remains that the ethos of our proposal ideally should infuse the teaching and learning environment at Queen's more broadly. Knowing this, an exploratory group can put together the first model as a pilot and try it out with that target group.

We stress that any pilot efforts would require a real commitment to institutional educational research to assess whether and how the program is working. This research needs to be grounded in sound pedagogical research methods in order to provide a valid assessment of the pilot, so that Queen's can make effective adjustments responsive to learner needs.

We would not recommend making the pilot mandatory for all students. Rather, we recommend creating the opportunity and allowing enrolment to be driven by desire, as the impactful, transformative learning experience we expect it to be. We expect it would soon garner enough of a following to become a "de facto" learning opportunity for all learners in all programs at Queen's – eventually.

We would stress an unstructured educational experience that provides guidance only about some possible forms of learner engagement with the wicked idea, yet allows the learners to chart their own learning course with a minimum of imposed structure.

We are open to issues of learner assessment for the experience. We are mindful that much can be learned through Indigenous pedagogies and ways of knowing, particularly with a transformative and collaborative learning experience such as this, and would urge appropriate consultation for further exploration.

We wish to emphasize that transformative inquiry-based student learning opportunities can and should appear in all programs and in all years and all contexts at Queen's: undergraduate, BISC, graduate, and professional programs. While the constructs for such learning may shift somewhat depending on the educational context, this is something that can – and we believe should – be a signature piece of what it is to experience a uniquely "Queen's" education.

VI. WHAT THE QUEEN'S INQUIRY-BASED WICKED IDEA EXPERIENCE PILOT MIGHT LOOK LIKE

The Queen's Inquiry-based Wicked Idea Experience may take a variety of forms (such as a course, workshop, or certificate program – but we stress that it should not have a time or process structure imposed like a traditional on-campus "course"). We envision the first-year undergraduate pilot having the following features:

a) small groups of learners (6-12) are drawn from a variety of disciplines (i.e. one team may include students from economics, chemical engineering, art history, music, math, and religious studies) to work in an inquiry-based fashion on a wicked idea in the community;

b) groups will be guided by a faculty liaison (from any discipline) who acts as an overall resource for the university, a guide in the project's process, as well as provocateur, as the need arises;

c) learners choose their own "wicked idea" to work on, based on something that is important to them and that would have a real, palpable impact in the community (from Kingston or Eastern Ontario);

d) the groups, with the aid of some faculty guidance, set the structure and progress of the experience, including meeting times, work to be done, and scope, as well as appropriate training and education on working supportively, equitably and inclusively in groups with diverse members;

e) the groups choose their own collaborative working models, from a range of collaboration models presented to them (which would be pre-set to give guidance to the groups, but along a range of options, which would allow them to choose "how" to work together based on a model that best fits that group and its task);

f) the experience may be one semester long, or an academic year, or the summer (we are open to any);

g) the "end point" of the experience is also designed by the group – it may a thorough exploration of the wicked idea, it may be the communication of the idea in a certain outlet to a certain group, it may be the launch of a pilot project, or it may be the actual "doing" of the "wicked idea" itself;

h) the "product" or "output" for the group is up to the group to design: it may be a presentation to a community group, a document like a prescriptive recommendation paper, or something more: a delegation presentation to a governmental group, a media release, or the actual "doing" of the "wicked idea" itself (if it is such an idea capable of "doing"); and,

i) assessment of a learner's participation in the experience would proceed holistically and be assessed by the faculty lead for the group, based on current pedagogical approaches to assessing inquiry-based, participatory learning experiences (i.e. assessment would be based on the learner's participation in the process, not on the end product the group produces).

VII. OBSTACLES SHOULD NOT BE THE OBSTACLES

Student learning, in our view, should not be driven by artificial mechanisms of university administration: staffing, operational costs (i.e. budgeting), cross-crediting issues, assessment, unit-level programmatic concerns, administrative support, and timetabling. All of these have the potential to pull the institution away from pursuing excellence in transformative student learning experiences. We note that any initial administrative obstacle foreseen to realizing this initiative may well actually be a reason for doing this initiative. In fact, embarking on creating a

transformative inquiry-based learning experience pilot such as this can be the catalyst for this institution to have some long-overdue (in our view) conversations about such university administrative issues, with an eye to making things better.

Graduate work typically, by its nature, embraces the wicked problem concept. But the emphasis on building community (broadly-defined) inroads, and in knowledge mobilization that moves beyond the academic community, could be considered a natural extension of this proposal for graduate students.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Shifting Queen's to a model of transformative, inquiry-based learning opportunity as the signature Queen's educational experience would showcase Queen's as among the leading educational institutions around the globe. Armed with such an experience, Queen's graduates would become sought-after prospective employees and contributors to world knowledge.

Queen's graduates would be confident and collaborative leaders who know how to learn, how to collaborate, and can harness the powerful impact that learning can have by bringing that learning engagement directly into the community.

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