

State of Unreadiness

By Sandy Farran

In September 2005, 25 students from Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., and 25 students from Zhejiang University in China began the first year of a new joint computer science degree program between the two universities. In news releases, Simon Fraser president Michael Stevenson hailed it as “an important step” in the university’s international efforts. “This program will create graduates who combine a strong command of their discipline with a deep cross-cultural understanding and a well-developed command of a foreign language.” It would be a unique opportunity for exceptional Simon Fraser students.

But once the program started, it quickly became apparent that the Canadians in it were struggling. The First World students were simply not as educationally advanced as their developing world colleagues. The Chinese students were much more comfortable in English than the Simon Fraser students were in Chinese—perhaps not a surprise given that English is the global language. But the real shocker was in math and science. The Canadians were way behind. “They arrive there, are joined with Chinese students, and their experience has been, I think for 90 per cent, their math-science background is significantly behind their Chinese peers,” according to Stevenson. “It’s very challenging to them, let’s put it that way.”

The original program required students to take an intense first year of language instruction—Mandarin for SFU students, English for Zhejiang students—at their home university. In second and third year, both cohorts would study a variety of courses including math, science, and second language at Zhejiang in China. This would be followed by a fourth and fifth year at SFU.

“It’s kind of a challenge to a joint program when the students start at different levels,” says Stevenson. “Canadian students start behind.” Chinese faculty helpfully offered Stevenson that they would be “happy to give extra office hours” and extra help to their less-educated Canadian charges.

As a result of these disparities, the Simon Fraser program has been changed. Canadian students will still do a language year in Mandarin at SFU, as well as courses in math and science to upgrade their skills. For the Canadians, this is a five-year degree. But for the Chinese students, the first year of the program has been dropped. For them, it’s now a four-year degree.

Canada has never had more young people enrolled in higher education; in fact, as a proportion of its youth population, Canada has more

people in college and university than any other country. The trouble is that many university-bound students—sometimes even allegedly good students—have no idea how unprepared they are for university. Universities quietly acknowledge that they are welcoming a large number of kids who aren't entirely ready for university, but who arrive on campus, after a high-school experience marked by high grades and insufficient learning, blissfully unaware of the disparity between their skills and a degree's demands.

Some high school teachers think that their institutions are a big part of the problem. Last June, five seasoned teachers from Owen Sound, Ont., did a very uncharacteristic thing: they sent a letter to the editor of the local newspaper criticizing their employer—the Bluewater District School Board—for stifling teachers' concerns about students advancing and graduating without basic skills. "We feel students are ill-prepared to meet the expectations at the next level and that no meaningful input is garnered or accepted from students, parents, trustees or teachers, beyond that which already matches the Board's position," the teachers wrote. "We hope by raising awareness we can all participate in making our educational system better both in our district and at the provincial level."

In an interview with *Maclean's*, Norah Phillips, one of the five teachers who signed the letter, blames an educational system that is "more fixated on meeting graduation rates and raising the marks on provincial test scores" than with real achievement and learning. Phillips, a teacher for more than 20 years, describes a high-school system where teachers are not permitted to deduct marks for late work or missed classes; are required to give students multiple opportunities to make up for incomplete work; cannot impose consequences for high numbers of absences; and are under pressure from parents and administrators to raise failing marks. Phillips says that her colleagues are reporting that more and more students are "disengaged and unwilling to work towards their education."

Yet nearly 30 per cent of those who graduate from Ontario high schools head off to university, with comparable numbers in the rest of the country. As a result, universities from coast to coast are having to ramp up their academic support services and expand their remedial programs in an effort to help students before they fall so far behind that they drop or are failed out.

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