

Curriculum Renewal at Ryerson University: Green Paper

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1. Introduction

This document presents an interim report from the Curriculum Renewal Committee (CRC) on implementation of the new curriculum framework approved by Ryerson University Senate in June 2011. The report presents proposals for a curriculum policy revised to align with the approved curriculum framework as well as suggested approaches for implementation. The purpose of the report is to inform the broad Ryerson community about the directions being proposed by the CRC, to stimulate focused discussion about those proposals, and to solicit advice from the community with respect to these proposals.

a. Rationale for Curriculum Renewal

For decades, the Ryerson community has discussed how its curriculum can better serve students while retaining its traditional strengths. While Ryerson's current curriculum model has built the foundation for highly regarded professional and professionally related programs, society's needs and students' aspirations are rapidly changing in the twenty-first century.

Student demand for choice is clearly articulated in recent student surveys. For example, 2011 NSSE data indicate that about 22% of first-year Ryerson students rate increased course choice within their major as one of their top two priorities. This increases to 37% for fourth-year students. A parallel pattern is evident when students rated the importance of increased course choice outside their major (18% of first-year students and 22% of fourth-year students). This trend has remained over an extended period of time, with very similar results reported in surveys from 2008.¹ It is interesting to note that student satisfaction with choice deteriorates as students progress through their programs. The highly prescriptive nature of Ryerson programs seems to be initially reassuring to students but, as they become more certain of their own educational and career aspirations, this initial comfort changes to an awareness of limitation. These thoughts are echoed in the results of a recent poll of Canadian post-secondary institutions which found that Canadian university students wish to be creative in shaping their own curriculum. They wish to have the opportunity to explore their own interests and have access to co-curricular activities. At the same time they want their curriculum to have career relevance.²

A second motivation for the curriculum renewal effort is meeting program demand for greater flexibility in curriculum design. Ideas for new curriculum, particularly interdisciplinary ideas, have been under development in many areas of the university. These ideas have come about in part as a result of priorities outlined in *Shaping our Future*, Ryerson's current academic plan. But they also reflect changes within academic disciplines and fields of practice as those areas respond to developments in the twenty-first century society. For some, the current curriculum model is perceived to be an impediment rather than a facilitator of change.

¹ NSSE and CUSC survey results from 2008.

² Educational Advisory Board Company, University Club, Toronto, December 2011.

b. Background to the Curriculum Renewal Project

i. How we got to where we are. Ryerson’s tripartite curriculum model implicitly evolved as practice before it was ratified as policy in 1977. The model divides courses into three distinct categories: professional, liberal and professionally related. The first category includes courses which provide professional training; the second, courses which provide a “social and cultural” context for all professions as well as writing skills and critical thinking development; and the third complementary knowledge for the profession. This tripartite curriculum has served Ryerson well. Over the years it has adapted to a changing institution and continued to provide a framework for career-relevant education.

However, as Ryerson and its programs evolved, defining a profession along traditional lines for students became limiting, and there has been increased student demand for more curriculum choice. By 2005, the demand for change led to the *Curriculum Review Report (the Currie Report)*, authored by external consultants. After extensive discussion, the provost at the time believed that Ryerson was not ready for the changes that the report proposed. He recommended that the next provost “monitor the evolution of the tripartite curriculum model, taking into consideration the Academic Standards Committee annual reports..., and that, in consultation with the Academic Planning Group, consider whether more fundamental change is desirable.”

When consultations were undertaken in 2007 to inform Ryerson’s current academic plan, there came renewed awareness of the desire among students for more opportunity to define their own educational paths leading to the increasingly diverse careers that they envision. As stated in the previous section, this is supported by various student survey results, and by faculty who also expressed the desire to see the curriculum afford broader opportunity.

During the fall of 2010, active discussions on curriculum change were reactivated within the provost’s Academic Planning Group (APG) as well as at two plenary sessions involving all chairs, deans and directors at Ryerson. These discussions led to a provisional revised curriculum framework.

Consultations on this provisional framework were conducted over a six month period in the winter and spring of 2011. Faculty teaching chairs, in partnership with student senators, hosted information sessions for students, faculty and staff in their respective faculties. Consultations with student senators and the RFA Executive, librarians, the chairs, directors and deans (CDD) group, APG, associate deans, the Senate Priorities Committee (SPC), and The Chang School of Continuing Education were also held. The feedback on the proposed model was generally positive. Most of the discussion was not about the model itself, but rather with its implementation and the details which would need consideration. Implementation details common to many faculties included course access and availability, resources for the teaching of additional elective courses, and the provision of appropriate student advising.

In June 2011, a motion was brought to Senate to adopt a revised version of the tripartite curriculum. This new curriculum framework was approved by Senate, as was the creation of a committee, now known as the Curriculum Renewal Committee (CRC), to develop an implementation plan.

ii. Guiding principles. There are several guiding principles – most of which are articulated in the current academic plan – which accompany the approved curriculum framework:

- Students should have more flexibility to define their personal educational and career goals, and therefore should be given more curricular choice.

- Ryerson is known for its mission to provide career-relevant education and programs must maintain sufficient rigour and depth to ensure that this mission is served.³
- Graduates must be well rounded, with a breadth as well as a depth of knowledge.
- The undergraduate degree level expectations (UDLEs), which are now part of Ryerson’s Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), establish a framework for defining the attributes of a Ryerson graduate both generally and on an individual program basis. The curriculum model should provide the appropriate structure to ensure that students meet these educational objectives; including critical thinking and communication (particularly writing) skills.

These principles have been adopted by the CRC in informing its deliberations.

iii. Framework from Senate. The framework adopted by Senate outlines the approximate ranges for core, professionally related electives and liberal studies in the proposed program. A new category of “core” courses, which includes what are now termed “professional” (required and elective) and “professionally related” required courses (e.g., math and physics courses which are required for engineering degree programs), was approved. The new model includes the following ranges:

- Core courses - 60% to 75%;
- Professionally related elective courses - 10% to 30%;
- Liberal studies courses - 8% to 20%, representing the required 6 courses.

In practice this would mean ranges of 25 to 30 for core courses, 4 to 9 for professionally related electives, and 6 for liberal studies (with no intention of altering the current four-course requirement for engineering students).

It should be noted that the terminology used in the Senate-approved framework was provisional. Part of the work of the CRC has been to consider the appropriateness of terminology. In particular, the term “professionally related elective” was a topic of discussion during the consultations, with most commentators expressing the view that to be clear about the new meaning of this category, the name should be changed. Others felt that there was value in retaining the current name, while others were agnostic. The same is true for the use of the term “liberal studies.” Proposals for these are made later in this paper.

c. The CRC’s Mandate, Scope and Structure

The CRC was created to develop an effective plan to implement the new curriculum framework approved by Senate in June 2011. The committee was tasked with addressing three broad areas identified during the spring 2011 consultation process: policy/governance; access/advising issues; and registrarial issues (i.e. technical aspects). The CRC recognizes that curriculum ultimately exists to meet the needs of students and that the new framework should have clear and identifiable advantages for students when compared to the current system.

³ The framework accommodates those programs that have external professional accreditation requirements. Accredited programs are an integral part of our academic reputation and their accreditation requirements will be fully maintained.

The CRC includes 31 members in total (see Appendix 1): five students, four staff/administrators, and 22 faculty members. Of these members, 29 are on the main steering committee, while the two others are on a reflection committee along with the vice-provost academic and two members of the steering committee. The role of the reflection committee is to constructively critique the steering committee's proposals and to offer advice (i.e. provide sober second thought). All members of the steering committee are on one of three working groups which address the broad implementation areas: the Policy Working Group; the Access Working Group; and the Registrarial Working Group.

The remainder of this document outlines the CRC's interim proposals in the areas of policy, access and advising, and registrarial issues, and summarizes several areas where further discussion and consultation are necessary.

2. Policy Proposals

This section presents an overview of the policy ideas that have been discussed by the CRC.

Proposal 1. An omnibus curriculum policy. Currently Ryerson's curriculum is defined by numerous but separate Senate policies which were developed and approved independently over an extended period. For example, six policies alone govern liberal studies. The CRC proposes a single policy which will include all elements of curriculum, including the policy elements relating to minors which were approved by Senate last year.

Proposal 2. Nomenclature review. Curriculum nomenclature at Ryerson has developed in an *ad hoc* fashion and a wide range of terms (major, specialization, module, stream, etc.) are used. The CRC reviewed the practice at Ryerson and at other institutions, and will suggest standard terminology for Ryerson curriculum in the near future. Terms under consideration include: "major" for the core discipline (a major would be composed of core courses, see below); "combined major" or "interdisciplinary major", for a combination of more than one discipline, composed of core courses from the disciplines; and "concentration" which would be a specified group of courses (between 6 and 12 courses) within a program. In the case of combined majors/interdisciplinary majors, the curriculum would be designed by partnering programs and approved by Academic Standards.

Proposal 3. Course categories - Renaming professional and professionally related courses and liberal studies. Currently Ryerson's curriculum is composed of three course categories: professional (required and elective); professionally related (required and elective); and liberal studies. The CRC proposes new names for each category. Courses within these categories would also be known by these new names.

The category of core courses will include what are currently called professional (required and elective) and professionally related (required) courses. An example of the latter would be math and physics courses which are requirements in engineering degree programs. As is currently the case, students will have some choice within the set of core courses.

The CRC proposes that the professionally related elective course category be referred to as the open elective category. The CRC interprets the approved curriculum framework to imply that this category is the "choice

category” for students. The name open elective conveys that ability to choose more effectively than does professionally related elective.

The CRC discussion of a possible new name for the liberal studies category indicated that a desirable long-term objective for this category is to enforce breadth in the curriculum. However, the CRC recognizes that currently and largely for historic reasons, this category cannot provide optimum breadth (i.e., there are currently few courses outside the humanities and social sciences). The CRC therefore proposes two possible names for this category: breadth electives or liberal electives; and seeks guidance from the Ryerson community on the best way to proceed. Note that students would be required to complete a total of six breadth/liberal electives in order to graduate with a Ryerson degree. The current engineering exception of four breadth/liberal electives will be retained.

The CRC also discussed the possibility that students should be permitted to use breadth/liberal elective courses to satisfy open elective course requirements once they have met the requirement of six breadth/liberal electives (four for engineering programs).

Proposal 4. Writing-intensive or Writing-Designated courses (W-courses). The CRC proposes the separation of the breadth aspect and the writing aspect of what are currently called Liberal Studies courses. It is recognized that students’ writing skills can be honed in courses in any of the three categories of the tripartite curriculum. These courses will be designated as Writing Intensive or, perhaps, Writing Designated. Provisionally, CRC is suggesting six W-courses as the standard for a Ryerson degree.

Proposal 5. Renewal of the liberal studies governance system. The CRC proposes a revised governance system for what we now call liberal studies. A sub-committee of Academic Standards would review proposals and make recommendations to Senate to assign courses to this category. It will also review proposals and make recommendations to Senate to designate W-courses. The details the sub-committee’s membership remain to be confirmed, but several principles for establishing membership resonate with the CRC: there must be representation from all six faculties⁴; there must be student representation; some members of the sub-committee must also be members of Academic Standards; the chair of the sub-committee should be in a position deemed to be neutral with respect to all faculties (e.g., the vice-provost academic).

3. Access and Advising Proposals

Proposal 6: Retain, but improve, the course intentions system. The CRC recognizes that a key element to facilitate student choice is having reliable knowledge about student demand. The CRC therefore proposes that a concerted effort be taken, through the appointment of a special task force, to look at practical ways to improve the course intentions system as it currently operates. The current approach, although it has limitations, is demand-driven and designed to optimize student access to courses within the limits of teaching and space resources. The CRC did discuss the possibility of moving to a mandatory pre-registration system. However, this would require Ryerson to schedule courses before students enrol in the courses – that is, in the absence of knowledge of student demand. This is difficult to achieve at Ryerson because, while some of the university’s programs are highly prescriptive, many others are not, and, if anything, the

⁴ Arts, Communication and Design, Community Services, Engineering and Architectural Science, Science, and TRSM.

proportion of prescriptive programming at Ryerson is gradually falling. The CRC felt that a mandatory pre-registration would have the effect of restricting, rather than facilitating, student access to courses.

Proposal 7: Presentation of electives. The CRC believes that the revised curriculum structure should be simpler for students to understand compared to the one currently in use. To this end, the CRC proposes that new categories (*understood to be for guidance purposes rather than a prescriptive tool*) should be used to structure the range of elective selections into a more manageable format for students. This is intended to facilitate student choice. For example, in the breadth/liberal elective category the initial categorization might be into the divisions of social science, humanities, and all other subjects. This simply reflects the types of courses in the current liberal studies category. Over time, as new courses from other academic areas come on-stream, these groups might evolve to include other subject areas such as science, entrepreneurship, etc. In terms of open electives, presentation of the list of courses is of great importance both for student self-service and for the online calendar. Once the courses in the open elective category have been established, the list must be managed and maintained to ensure additions, deletions and restrictions are monitored by all program departments.

Proposal 8: Endorsement of the academic advising report of the University Committee on Student Success. The CRC is proposing that Ryerson adopt five key recommendations from the academic advising report:

1. Establish a central coordinating function related to academic advising at Ryerson.
2. Develop early warning systems for students who may be in academic difficulty.
3. Develop a list of outcomes for advising at Ryerson.
4. Develop a common interpretation, implementation and communication of policies and procedures
5. Make RAMSS more user-friendly and build additional tools to assist students.

The CRC notes that presentation of elective choice is only one facet of providing the resources that students need to make effective curriculum selection decisions. Timely access to academic advice is also paramount.

4. Registrarial Proposals

Proposal 9: Bands. The CRC proposes that breadth/liberal elective bands should be retained, but no separate bands be introduced for open electives.

Up to now, the liberal studies category has been distinguished by the fact that students have a choice from a relatively wide list of subject areas, albeit primarily from Arts-based disciplines. Thanks to the scheduling of liberal studies in a separate set of bands, and the exclusion of prerequisites from outside the liberal studies stream, the classroom environment in these courses effectively mixes students from a broad range of programs. The intention is to encourage interplay of program-based perspectives, so as to contribute to the overarching roles of contextualization and non-instrumental learning that liberal studies are meant to play in Ryerson's curriculum. The continuation of breadth/liberal elective bands would ensure continued student access to these courses and the inter-faculty mingling of students. This same logic does not apply to open electives, however. It will not be possible to mount a viable banding structure if the large number of open electives envisioned for the average student is made available.

Proposal 10: New curriculum framework rollout. Within a specified time frame, all Ryerson programs will be required to align with the new framework. Requests for exceptions to alignment with the framework would have to be reviewed by Academic Standards and approved by Senate. The rollout of the new framework for all Ryerson programs will be a highly complex activity and place great demands on the resources of the Registrar's Office. The CRC is therefore proposing a phased-in implementation, with some programs adopting the model before others, and the new framework then being sequentially introduced year by year in existing programs' curricula. Early adopter programs would be those which have curricula already aligned with the framework. Even in the transition period to full implementation, there are steps which can be taken to rapidly increase student choice, such as judicious use of course substitutions. While the overall timelines for implementation are still under discussion, the CRC anticipates a multi-year rollout requiring at least two years to initiate from the date of approval of the implementation plan.

The CRC anticipates that the implementation of the new framework will also require changes to the scheduling of registrarial processes. For example, it is quite likely that the deadline for calendar submissions from program departments will have to move from the current date in early October to mid-September.

The CRC is also proposing a partial moratorium on minor curriculum changes during the phase-in of the framework. The guiding principle would be to limit curriculum revisions to those which support program conversion to the new framework. The moratorium would not apply to new program development as new programs would be designed to align with the curriculum framework. Nor would it be expected to apply to curriculum changes of sufficient complexity to require Academic Standards review as these would also likely be framework alignments. Rather, the moratorium would apply to the plethora of minor curriculum changes which must be approved by Senate. The moratorium would apply to:

- Category 2 minor modifications (e.g., course repositioning, additions, deletions; significant changes in course hours; mode of delivery and course weight variations; and/or minor changes to existing minors).

Category 3 minor modifications (e.g., change in admission requirements or variation in policy on grading, promotion, graduation, or academic standing; new minors and substantial changes to existing minors; and/or changes to program name and/or degree designation with applicable implementation date with provisions for retroactivity) would be permitted provided they help a program's curriculum align with the new curriculum framework.

5. Conclusion

While the CRC's deliberations to date have addressed many of the aspects of our mandate, as evidenced by this green paper's proposals, there are several major outstanding issues where discussion and fact-finding is ongoing. In addition, it is vital to that the Ryerson community of students, faculty and staff continue to contribute to the process. The CRC asks the community to consider the proposals made here and to provide their views to the CRC for consideration. Comments can be emailed to curriculum@ryerson.ca or presented in person at upcoming town halls.

Respectfully submitted by Chris Evans, Chair of the Curriculum Renewal Committee and Mark Lovewell,
Vice Chair of the Curriculum Renewal Committee

January 27, 2012

Appendix 1 Curriculum Renewal Committee Membership

Office	Name	Working Group Membership
Vice Provost Academic (Chair)	Chris Evans	Policy/Registrarial/Access
Vice Chair	Mark Lovewell (Arts)	Policy/Registrarial/Access
Senate	Diane Schulman ^{a)}	Policy
Vice Provost Students	Heather Lane-Vetere ^{b)}	Access
Registrar's Office	Keith Alnwick ^{c)}	Registrarial
Special Advisor on Curriculum Change (ex officio)	Barbara Soutar	Registrarial
Director of Curriculum Renewal/Quality Assurance	Katherine Penny (TRSM)	Access
Interim VP Diversity	Rona Abramovitch	Policy
Arts (faculty representatives)	Dennis Denisoff/Jim Dianda	Policy/Registrarial
Chang School	Des Glynn/Gervan Fearon	Registrarial/Access
FCAD (faculty representatives)	Alex Bal/Catherine Schryer	Access/Policy
FCS (faculty representatives)	Lynn Lavallee/Rachel Langford/Janice Waddell/Nancy Walton	Access/Access/Registrarial/Policy
FEAS (faculty representatives)	Jacob Friedman/Jurij Leshchyshyn/Stephen Wylie	Access/Registrarial/Policy
TRSM (faculty representatives)	Asher Alkoby/Liz Evans/Jane Saber	Access/Registrarial/Policy
Student	Ugo Asagwara (CESAR and Senate)	Access
Student	Andrew McAllister (FCAD, Senate)	Registrarial
Student	Melissa Palermo (FCAD, VP RSU, Senate)	Policy
Student	Annie Hyder (Arts)	Access
Student	Angelo Piroz (TRSM)	Access
Student	Liana Salvador (FCS, Senate)	Policy
Student	Shermiyah Baguisa (FEAS)	Registrarial

Reflection Committee: Marcia Moshe (Arts), Gillian Mothersill (FCAD), Barbara Soutar (ex officio), Chris Evans, Mark Lovewell.

a) Chair, Policy Working Group.

b) Chair, Access and Advising Working Group.

c) Chair, Registrarial Working Group.