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Résumé de l'article

L'éducation expérientielle, soit le concept d'offrir aux étudiants des possibilités d'apprentissage appliqué à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des salles de cours, vient avec une grande complexité organisationnelle. Cet article examine les ententes de mandat stratégiques de l'Ontario à l'aide d'une analyse qualitative du contenu afin d'observer comment les conceptions et les communications de l'apprentissage expérientiel ont évolué au fil du temps, et comment les universités ont répondu aux pressions du gouvernement pour favoriser l'apprentissage expérientiel. En s'appuyant sur l'analyse des cadres, les résultats révèlent que les universités ont mis en place un nombre considérable d'infrastructures et d'initiatives institutionnelles pour soutenir l'expansion de l'apprentissage par l'expérience, et que ces efforts sont encadrés par le discours actuel sur les aptitudes à acquérir des diplômés. Toutefois, ces signaux extérieurs ne sont pas nécessairement alignés avec les processus organisationnels internes (c.-à-d. l'expansion de l'apprentissage en parallèle). Ces ententes de mandat représentent les comptes-rendus officiels des priorités institutionnelles, laissant la porte ouverte à de futures recherches visant à examiner les microfondements de l'apprentissage par l'expérience selon les perspectives du corps professoral et du personnel des établissements concernés.

MESO-FOUNDATIONS OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION IN ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE PROVINCE'S STRATEGIC MANDATE AGREEMENTS

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Abstract

Experiential education, the process of providing students with applied learning opportunities within and outside the classroom, is rife with organizational complexity. This article examines Ontario's Strategic Mandate Agreements using qualitative content analysis to see how conceptions and communications of experiential learning have changed over time, and how universities have responded to government pressure to foster experiential learning. Drawing on frame analysis, findings reveal that universities have developed a considerable amount of institutional infrastructure and initiatives to support the expansion of experiential learning, and these efforts have been framed in relation to current discourse about graduate skill readiness. However, these outward signalling responses are not necessarily aligned with internal organizational processes (i.e., expansion of co-curricular learning). These mandate agreements represent official accounts of institutional priorities, which leave the door open for future research to examine micro-foundations of experiential learning through the perspectives of the faculty and staff inhabiting these institutions.

Keywords: experiential education, organizations, higher education, frame theory, strategic mandate agreements

Résumé

L'éducation expérientielle, soit le concept d'offrir aux étudiants des possibilités d'apprentissage appliqué à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des salles de cours, vient avec une grande complexité organisationnelle. Cet article examine les ententes de mandat stratégiques de l'Ontario à l'aide d'une analyse qualitative du contenu afin d'observer comment les conceptions et les communications de l'apprentissage expérientiel ont évolué au fil du temps, et comment les universités ont répondu aux pressions du gouvernement pour favoriser l'apprentissage expérientiel. En s'appuyant sur l'analyse des cadres, les résultats révèlent que les universités ont mis en place un nombre considérable d'infrastructures et d'initiatives institutionnelles pour soutenir l'expansion de l'apprentissage par l'expérience, et que ces efforts sont encadrés par le discours actuel sur les aptitudes à acquérir des diplômés. Toutefois, ces signaux extérieurs ne sont pas nécessairement alignés avec les processus organisationnels internes (c.-à-d. l'expansion de l'apprentissage en parallèle). Ces ententes de mandat représentent les comptes-rendus officiels des priorités institutionnelles, laissant la porte ouverte à de futures recherches visant à examiner les microfondements de l'apprentissage par l'expérience selon les perspectives du corps professoral et du personnel des établissements concernés.

Mots-clés : apprentissage expérientiel, organisations, enseignement supérieur, théorie des cadres, ententes de mandat stratégiques

Introduction

Experiential education is a concept that has become diffuse in academic institutional language. In contemporary applications, the experience component of experiential education has been increasingly applied to particular forms of learning, and efforts have been made to distinguish between curricular and work-integrated learning (Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada, 2021; Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Develop-

ment, 2016). The need for experiential learning in university education is often made in reference to the skill-readiness of undergraduate students (see Munro et al., 2014), grounded in a concern that the Canadian labour market is experiencing a skills shortage or gap resulting (at least in part) from universities not adequately preparing their students for the world of work (Busteed, 2019; Gabler & Gormley, 2022; Gismondi, 2021; Mantione, 2018). Experiential education is touted as enhancing curricular learning outcomes, and helping ease the transition of undergraduate students into economically productive workers and socially responsible individuals (Agnew, 2022; Hoover et al., 2010; Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, 2016). Though, experiential education is not only discussed as something that is inherently good to do. Provincial governments have attempted to blend work-readiness into performance-based accountability frameworks with their universities (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2020). Manitoba and Alberta, for example, are in the midst of provincial talks about the development of such frameworks (Government of Alberta, 2021; Government of Manitoba, 2022). Ontario's most recent cohort of Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA) places experiential learning requirements within the Skills and Job Outcomes metric category for institutions to report on (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2021). Ontario universities are required to provide all students with at least one experiential learning opportunity by the time they graduate (Government of Ontario, 2021). This shift has placed new organizational demands on universities to foster experiential learning as a mechanism to transmit skills.

The pre-occupation with experiential learning presents an opportunity to study how universities have responded to the organizational pressure within their environment, and how they frame their institutional responses to this pressure. Despite the new funding metrics in Ontario, and the broader national shift toward accountability mandates, the organizational implications of experiential learning remain an understudied area of Canadian higher education (for an exception, see LaCroix, 2021). Though some have considered the presence of experiential learning in the SMAs (see Buzzelli & Allison, 2017), no study has yet investigated the extent to which experiential learning has become institutionalized across all Ontario universities, nor how broad implementation of experiential education is rationalized by these institutions.

The analysis presented in this article forwards experiential learning as an organizational process. It addresses the question: How have Ontario universities responded to the institutionalization of experiential education in the field of post-secondary education? Findings are drawn from qualitative textual content analysis of the province's Strategic Mandate Agreements and analyzed through frame theory. What the data show is that Ontario universities have undergone a concerted effort to foster experiential education, a process which has been framed by an expanded institutional infrastructure and resourcing of experiential learning initiatives. Through their Strategic Mandate Agreements, universities have signalled the development of core infrastructure to support experiential learning and have outlined various expansion efforts. Interestingly, while there is a broad development of different forms of experiential learning, universities often frame their expansion around work-integrated learning, and the above-noted skills-tension in current discourse.

Situating Ontario's Strategic Mandate Process

The foundation of the SMA process is rooted in provincial concerns about differentiating the higher education landscape in Ontario (Weingarten & Deller, 2010; for a broader review on differentiation, see Pizarro Milian, 2018). In the back-and-forth of policy discussions across the province the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) provided a four-step "roadmap to differentiation" (Weingarten & Deller, 2010, p. 17). Included in these steps were multi-year accountability agreements signed between universities and the province (step 3), and an incremental funding design that tied funding to desired outcomes (step 4). The Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities' (MTCU) later provided the *Differentiation Policy Framework* (2013), which identified differentiation as a primary policy driver for post-secondary education transformation and would require universities to align their mandates with government priorities. It is in this report that the strategic mandate process is outlined as the mechanism through which government priorities will be communicated and responded to by the universities, all with the goal to ensure the quality of public higher education in Ontario "in the face of increasing enrollments and diminishing resources," (Weingarten & Deller, 2010, p. 7) as well as meet the needs of Ontario's post-secondary students. There have since been three SMA cohorts, each with a "shelf life" of five years and renewed toward the expiry date of each cohort (hereafter, SMA1, SMA2, SMA3). Gradually, each cohort has changed

in terms of the structure of the document, becoming less open-ended over time. In the most recent cohort the government introduced a "made in Ontario" performance-based funding model that is focused more on student and economic outcomes (Government of Ontario, 2021).

Mirroring the development of the province's differentiation and accountability framework has been a wide-ranging interest in experiential education. Beginning in 2012, the Ministry highlighted experiential learning as a valuable avenue for strengthening the university system, and this was favourably endorsed by the Council of Ontario Universities (2014). Experiential learning was rationalized for having a positive and strong impact on the job readiness of students after graduation by providing both job experience and access to professional networks. Even within the original MTCU (2013) policy statement there is mention of further developing experiential education in the university sector. In the most recent iteration of the SMA process experiential learning then became a formalized performance metric (Government of Ontario, 2021). As the province's steward of post-secondary education, the government has increasingly emphasized experiential education as an educational priority. The question, though, is how universities have responded to this process. While the province dictates funding priorities, universities respond in kind, and in ways that are advantageous to their existing operations.

Theoretical Foundations: Institutionalization and Frame Theory

The diffusion of experiential learning across the university sector, and the ways in which institutions foster it is a matter of institutionalization and framing. Institutionalization is the process by which organizational patterns become entrenched, both within an organization's structure and across an organizational field (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). Tolbert and Zucker (1996) outline the process of institutionalization, which moves from *habitualization* (i.e., where policies become formalized) to *objectification* (i.e., the development of structures to support an initiative, and which become accepted by individuals), to *sedimentation* (i.e., where these structures persist over time). If there is direct, or coercive (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) pressure from the government telling universities that they must (a) be implementing experiential education, and (b) be able to articulate where and how it is happening, these coercive mechanisms may make it more difficult to sidestep mandate requirements in typical

strategic responses such as responding ceremonially, or relying on loosely-coupled organizational arrangements to buffer core operations from these external pressures (see Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976).

Complementary to this process is the way in which experiential education is being framed within the province, both through the SMA directions given by the provincial government and through the SMAs produced by the province's universities. Frame theory is a popular theory within social movements literature (e.g., Benford, 1997; Snow & Benford, 1992), providing analytic tools to understand how collective action is likely to occur (Snow & Benford, 1992). Social movements scholars have worked to expand framing from an internal individual process to the level of collective action. In essence, frame theory considers the process of framing the "active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and connection and the level of reality construction" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). This constructive process creates interpretive frames that are meant to influence collective action, referred to as "collective action frames" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 615). When there is a greater degree of consistency between the frame and the beliefs and values of social actors, and when there is a greater degree of empirical credibility (i.e., alignment between the frame and the real world), it is more likely that the frame will achieve the necessary social buy-in needed to mobilize action.

As a power-laden process (Carragee & Roefs, 2004), frame analysis can not only address how meanings become constructed, but also consider the roles of different social actors in that process. For example, Davies (2002) discusses the idea of "narrative fidelity" (p. 271) when puzzling the diffusion of progressive education in Ontario. He found that progressivism endured as popular language in education because it resonated with the values of modern schooling, or the "narrative fidelity" of schools' organizational realities. More recently, Björnehed and Erikson (2018) have attempted to merge frame theory with institutional perspectives, forwarding the idea of "frame institutionalization" (p. 113) as a process in which a frame gains both influence and regulative function over time. When frames become institutionalized, it means that they become expressed in formal institutions and exert influence on social actors.

Using frame theory to analyze a meso-organizational process like the diffusion of experiential learning in the Strategic Mandate Agreements contributes to an understanding of how organizations frame their actions in relation to pressures from and within their external environment, and how these actions are rationalized.

Research Methods: Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze how Ontario universities have responded to mandate requirements to foster experiential learning. Qualitative content analysis is a systematic and process-driven method of inquiry, involving "the systematic reduction of content, analyzed with special attention on the context in which the data were created, to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 230). Beyond merely counting words, a qualitative approach to content considers the critical connection between content and social context and produces data-driven findings that can be interpreted to enhance empirical knowledge.

Data Analysis

The Government of Ontario has signed SMA agreements with 21 universities across the province (MTCU, 2021). The sample for this study includes all institutions except for the Université de Hearst, given its specialized and highly focused institutional scope (i.e., francophone only). This approach also follows existing approaches to analyzing Ontario's SMAs (see Buzzelli & Songsore, 2022). With this exclusion, the sample comprised three SMAs for each of Ontario's remaining 20 institutions, or 60 mandate agreements with a combined page length of 852 pages. Institutional SMAs were analyzed in reference to (a) the institution, (b) the SMA cohort, and (c) the level of comprehensiveness based on the MacLean's university rankings (Maclean's, 2018). The SMAs are templates that have undergone some changes to formatting over the cohorts. The agreements begin with government and institutional preamble, and then become structured around specific metrics or categories that government is collecting information on. In the case of SMA3 for example, the SMA is framed by the strategic funding metrics. Relevant to this research is that the SMAs have sections devoted to experiential learning, but discussions on experiential learning are also spread across the different sections (e.g., Graduation Rates, Community and Local Impact).

The content analysis was performed in two coding cycles through NVivo software, broadly following a process of descriptive and analytic coding. Analysis began through the process of familiarization, where the researcher immerses themselves in the body of materials they have gathered and sets any hunches they may have about the data "firmly in context by taking stock and gaining a feel for the material as a whole" (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002, p. 310). This process involved reading these agreements in their entirety, not just the sections which covered experiential learning. For clarity, the analysis is categorized into "first" and "second" cycles. However, the data analysis did not proceed in a purely linear fashion. The breadth of the topics covered in these documents made it necessary to continually move back and forth between documents and re-read sections to create reliable codes and ensure that each was sufficiently saturated with data (Morse, 2015).

First Cycle Coding

Coding began by reviewing a small subset of SMA1 agreements, making jottings of inductive codes to use as a classification scheme. This process is what Creswell (2013) refers to as *winnowing* the data. These preliminary codes were all top-level codes, with no child or grandchild codes, and were more descriptive in nature. Examples of the codes were "Challenges associated with EL," "Forms of EL," "Future of EL," and "Rationalization of EL." Each code had an accompanying definition to ensure they were being applied consistently and objectively to the SMAs. Altogether, round one consisted of nine top-level codes that were applied to all the SMAs. By the time all of the SMA1 agreements were reviewed, no new codes were added to the codebook, and the codebook was then used to code SMA2 and SMA3.

Given that the coding process was going to take place across the three cohorts, it was best to cast a wide net that could later be analytically refined during subsequent rounds of coding. In this way, round one coding utilized a lumping approach (Bernard, 2011) relying on "summative codes that capture the essence of a segment of text" (Aurini et al., 2022, p. 258). For example, the code "Forms of EL" was used as a catch-all code to record examples or forms of experiential learning that were mentioned (e.g., classroom simulations, co-op, internships). This lumping process was not without a level of systematic-ness, as the definitions of each code also served to establish exclusion criteria. Adopting a lumped approach to round one meant that the later analytic refinement could be done from within the winnowed data itself, as opposed to having to start anew for each SMA cohort. During this process, it was observed that experiential learning became more formalized in the structure of SMA2 and SMA3.

Second Cycle Coding

Within the second cycle, the codebook and the data were continuously revisited and refined over several waves of analysis, characterized by splitting (Bernard, 2011). Working toward analytic refinement, splitting broke down the large bunches of text data to "differentiate each idea expressed in the text" (Aurini et al., 2022, p. 259). During this process the names and definitions of codes were refined, and child and grandchild codes were created to adequately capture the complexity with which experiential learning was discussed across the SMAs. For example, the code "Forms of EL" was expanded to thematically group co-curricular, curricular, and work-integrated forms of experiential learning, and was further saturated by child codes such as applied research projects for curricular forms, co-op for work-integrated forms, and international exchanges for co-curricular forms. Significant in this phase of analysis was to appreciate that what might be coded as a Future Goal of EL in SMA1 might then become Expansion of EL in SMA2 or SMA3 if it had been fully implemented since it was proposed earlier on. Where institutions repeated themselves, all references were still coded, as they demonstrate how the institutions communicated tried and true examples of experiential learning. This process resulted in a codebook with 11 top level codes, 47 child codes, 31 grandchild codes, and two great-grandchild codes.

Findings

Analysis revealed three main findings with respect to experiential learning in Ontario universities. First, experiential learning has greatly expanded across the province's universities since the inception of the SMA process, especially within Ontario's comprehensive universities. Second, universities have framed their expansion efforts through the development of institutional resources and infrastructure to support the expansion. Third, there were several analytic frames for how universities were framing their approaches to experiential education. Institutions have rationalized this expansion primarily in relation to the discourse around graduate work-readiness, and therefore have framed experiential learning as a viable option for addressing and remedying concerns about skills-shortages and graduate competencies. Though, as will be discussed later, these frames are not necessarily aligned with expansion efforts related to co-curricular learning, suggesting that these frames are more outward signalling in response to the organizational environment than internal organizational processes.

Expansion of Experiential Learning in Ontario Universities

It is evident that universities have been talking about experiential learning more over time. Brock University, for example, had no mention of expanding experiential learning in SMA1, but in SMA2 states that "Brock is expanding its experiential education opportunities" (Brock SMA2, p. 4), and that they were implementing some new tracking systems to keep track of where experiential learning opportunities existed on campus.

In Brock's SMA3, the number of references grew in relation to the earlier two agreements, with many references to how experiential learning has expanded at the university. For example, the university now has a list of experiential learning opportunities across campus:

> Brock has also expanded the range of experiential learning opportunities that are available to students as they complete their studies. This list now includes 20 curricular and 7 co-curricular activities, recognized by Brock's Senate as fulfilling an experiential learning component of a degree program. Today, Brock has experiential education opportunities in 100% of its programs. (Brock SMA3, p. 5)

With respect to the coverage across the SMA cohorts, there is much more discussion of expanding experiential learning in SMA2 and SMA3 than there was in SMA1, due in part to experiential learning being formally integrated into the reporting structure. When the institutions are grouped by level of comprehensiveness, there is a clearer pattern about what kind of institutions are expanding experiential learning the most.

When the universities are grouped based on level of comprehensiveness, Table 1 illustrates the coding references to expansion efforts related to experiential learning. The coding spread captures instances where universities discussed expanding experiential learning, such as the above excerpt from Brock University. As shown, expansion efforts have been most prevalent at the province's comprehensive universities. This is not to say that primarily undergraduate and medical/doctoral universities have not seen their fair share of expansion efforts. Comprehensive universities have expanded experiential learning opportunities by more than double their other institutional counterparts. These expansion references can also suggest that there is something about comprehensive universities that

Table 1

Expansion of Experiential Learning by Institution Type

Institution Type	SMA1	SMA2	SMA3	Total References
Primarily undergraduate	1	17	17	35
Comprehensive	7	36	36	79
Medical/Doctoral	0	16	16	32

has made the experiential learning frame resonate more than their undergraduate and doctoral counterparts. One possibility is the market positioning of comprehensive institutions. These institutions are more numerous across the province, and occupy an organizational middle-ground between the advantages of primarily undergraduate institutions (e.g., small classroom sizes, closeness with community) and their medical/doctoral counterparts (e.g., sheer research capacity and prestige). Experiential learning may give these comprehensive universities a competitive edge between one another, and in contrast to their undergraduate and doctoral counterparts.

Expansion of the Particular Forms of Experiential Learning

The expansion of experiential learning forms has not been equally patterned across the SMA cohorts. As Table 2 shows, the core forms of experiential learning have expanded at different rates across the province.

Co-curricular forms of experiential learning have expanded the most over the three cohorts of SMAs and were defined as forms of experiential learning that take place adjacent to curricular forms, but which are not for eligible academic credit. These included international exchanges and experiences, mentorship, attending conferences and curat-

ing exhibits, volunteering, and work opportunities on and/or off campus. Work-integrated learning has expanded to the second-highest degree across the SMAs, though expanded the most in SMA3. Work-integrated learning includes co-op, internships, or other work placements.

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) can take many forms (see Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada, 2021). Co-op and internships were discussed the most in the SMAs, but some mentioned "work placements" generally in regard to experiential learning. For example, Nipissing mentions that "Arts and Science programs, as well as professional programs such as Education, Nursing, and Social Work, all have significant work placements as part of the curriculum" (Nipissing SMA2, p. 4).

Other times, some universities simply stated "placements" with respect to work-integrated learning. At Wilfrid Laurier, they state "Laurier's Workplace Partnerships offer students a flexible and effective form of work-integrated learning that includes job shadowing, case study projects and placements with employers" (Laurier SMA3, p. 6).

References to work placements may suggest that the particular forms of experiential learning associated with work-integrated learning are referenced more casually given their expansion. At the same time, this third form of work-integrated learning can inflict some analytic difficulty, given that pre-existing forms of work-integrated learning

Table 2

Expansion of Experiential Learning by Form and SMA

Forms of EL	SMA1	SMA2	SMA3	Total References
Co-Curricular EL	3	25	13	41
Curricular EL	2	16	13	31
WIL	1	16	20	37

have specific criteria that distinguish one from another. The term "work placements" seems to be used here as a catch-all for work-integrated learning.

Institutions acknowledge the distinctions between the different forms of experiential learning, but when communicating the expansion of experiential learning they often lumped these forms together. For example, OCAD University discussed experiential learning and work-integrated learning simultaneously:

> Experiential and work-integrated learning takes a broad and multi-pronged approach to experiential learning that recognizes the myriad of student goals (e.g., employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship, social innovation) and the ways in which students can engage (e.g., work study, course-based placements, exhibitions, internships, research assistantships). (OCAD SMA2, p. 5)

This is all to say that when speaking about the expansion of experiential education at their institutions, universities attempted to show the various ways in which expansion was taking place. This expansion was communicated in broad strokes through the terms "experiential learning" and "work-integrated learning," as well as through specific examples of these forms as exemplified in the OCAD statement.

While experiential learning has become more integrated into the structure of the SMA document, the widespread expansion may suggest that expanding experiential learning has gradually become an institutional priority. With an understanding that experiential learning is expanding in scope, it is also useful to consider the extent to which experiential learning is being embedded in these institutions. Essentially, the concern would be whether the expansion that is communicated through the SMAs is merely lip service, without any meaningful supports or resources being developed at the same time. In an organizational sense,

this would be evidence of ceremonial compliance, as the expansion would not be accompanied by administrative or technical level changes and would also suggest that experiential learning has not moved past a stage of habitualization (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). On the contrary, the expansion of experiential learning has been accompanied by the development of infrastructure and resources, though this should be a cautious interpretation as outlined below.

Developing Institutional Initiatives and Infrastructure Related to Experiential Learning

The development of new initiatives and infrastructure related to experiential learning is inherently about the internal structural approaches to fostering experiential learning. Like the expansion of experiential learning, the development of institutional infrastructure and initiatives was more prevalent in the second and third rounds of SMAs in contrast to the first. The development of institutional initiatives and infrastructure also happened most at the province's comprehensive universities, as shown in Table 3.

From a frame perspective, these institutional developments represent the kind of collective action that is necessary to instill and reify the values underlying collective action frames. It is clear that institutions have acted to support the diffusion of experiential learning on their campuses. These supports are necessary for the long-term commitment to experiential learning, as they provide the functional capacity to deliver on institutional promises. Table 4 shows that digital resources or records have been the most common infrastructure change to institutions with respect to experiential learning, closely followed by the development of centres and hubs for experiential learning.

Digital resourcing was the most prevalent way that institutions were supporting the expansion of experiential learn-

Table 3

Initiatives and Infrastructure by Institution Type

Institution Type	SMA1	SMA2	SMA3	Total References
Primarily undergraduate	7	25	23	55
Comprehensive	8	50	40	98
Medical/Doctoral	4	17	28	49

Table 4

Development of Particular Institutional Initiatives and Infrastructure by SMA

Particular Initiative & Infrastructure	SMA1	SMA2	SMA3	Total References
Centres/Hubs for EL	7	14	12	33
Digital Resources or Records	5	17	16	38
EL Tracking Systems	1	3	7	11
Faculty Supports	0	1	1	2
Institutional Funding for EL	0	2	2	4
Professional Groups Related to EL	3	5	2	10
Professional Positions Related to EL	0	4	8	12

ing. The most common initiative was the creation of experiential learning records, often taking the form of co-curricular records, "allowing students to document learning experiences outside of the classroom" (Toronto SMA1, p. 3). Wilfrid Laurier University held itself out as the first institution in Canada to introduce a co-curricular record (Laurier SMA2), establishing the "Laurier Experience Record." This record is a "validated record of curricular and co-curricular activities," which could then be used to "present employers with a complete record of the core competencies they have acquired through each of their experiences" (Laurier SMA3, p. 4).

Of the 20 institutions, roughly half have some form of co-curricular record that students may use to demonstrate their learning and skills. Some institutions, such as the University of Ottawa and York University, subsumed these records into a broader framework or digital portal, which would allow students to keep track of their experiences and records. Often these portals or frameworks were given clever names and branding, which should be interpreted as making the learning relevant to the institution (e.g., Laurier's "ExpLaur"), or to the students as individuals (e.g., York's "YUExperience" [you experience]). The intent of these portals and documents was most often articulated as being relevant for school to work transitions, suggesting institutions are thinking about experiential learning in terms of its employment benefits for students, and how they articulate the logic behind their organizational actions.

Centres and hubs for experiential learning were another commonly discussed infrastructure development across the SMAs. The logic behind these hubs varied across the province's universities. In some respects, experiential

learning hubs were mergers of pre-existing offices on campus. For example, Trent University restructured its approach to experiential education by bringing multiple offices together under one banner. The institution restructured its career services,

> creating a new department called, Co-op, Careers & Experiential Learning (CCEL) and branded Careerspace. The restructure has expanded our existing career services in a way that integrates community and workplace partnerships and centralizes all experiential learning (EL) processes and policies. (Trent SMA3, p. 3)

Pairing experiential learning and work-related offices was a common institutional approach. Brock University brought together co-op, careers, and experiential education under the office of "Co-op, Career and Experiential Education (CCEE)" (SMA3), Wilfrid Laurier University has an Experiential Learning and Career Development Centre (SMA3), and the University of Windsor has Co-op, Career and Employment Services (SMA2). While these efforts do represent change in the sense that a new office was created, readers should be cautious about the extent to which these changes may veil ceremonial institutional change. Such efforts may instead reflect ceremonial recoupling by combining existing efforts under a new banner, and where little technical change occurs to the way experiential learning is done.

Institutions' Rationalization of Experiential Learning

Rationalizations of experiential learning were drawn from a multi-factor list created by the code "Rationalization of Experiential Learning." The code had 310 references and was aggregated by 13 child codes, six grandchild codes, and one great-grandchild code. The coding spread indicates several analytic frames that rationalize organizational behaviour, ranging from experiential learning as an admissions pull factor, personal development, or improving graduation rates, to student network building and improving town-gown relations. By far, the child code "Student Preparedness for the Job Market" was the most referenced, suggesting that school-to-work transitions and employability are front-of-mind for universities when discussing experiential learning, and that experiential learning is being framed within the narrative fidelity of skill-readiness and graduate competencies. Experiential education, as discussed by the University of Waterloo (SMA2), "allows students to link their academic goals with their career goals. This is accomplished through hands-on learning experiences that link theoretical knowledge and practical experiences, enabling students to acquire and demonstrate personal transferrable skills" (p. 4).

Skill readiness was a pervasive theme in the SMAs when institutions would talk about the why factor behind experiential education. The term "skill" was discussed with reference to professional skills (Nipissing SMA3), or "professional competencies in their chosen field" (Queen's SMA3, p. 3). Skills, therefore, were not conceptualized in abstract. Rather, the point these institutions continually made was that the skills being fostered through experiential learning were connected, or could be articulated, in relation to the workforce: "Co-op, work-integrated internships, practicums and placements give students practical work competencies, skills and meaningful experiences to prepare them to enter the job market" (Algoma SMA2, p. 6).

Perhaps unsurprising, the benefits of experiential learning were often discussed in conjunction with the various forms of work-integrated learning (e.g., co-op and internships). Less discussed in the SMAs were other outcomes, such as Personal Development (15 references) or Improved Learning Outcomes (17 references). Even in these fewer instances, there was still a heavy skew in these references to the real world and applying knowledge outside the classroom: "EL offers students an opportunity to apply their classroom learning and skills development in real-world settings, thus enabling them to demonstrate and refine their skills and knowledge" (Guelph SMA3, p. 5).

While experiential learning is nonetheless rationalized in part by the personal and scholarly growth it helps to facilitate, the takeaway here is that it is most rationalized by the employment prospects and the connections that are made outside of the classroom. These claims are not inconsequential. The University of Waterloo boasts some strong statements about how experiential learning puts students on top, and the kind of professional returns they can expect to see compared to peers from other institutions. Notably, "Waterloo co-op graduates are more likely than other university graduates to be employed six months and two years after graduation," and "They earn more than their university-educated peers and are much more likely to be hired in positions related to their field of study" (University of Waterloo, SMA2, p. 4).

Although there are personal and scholarly rationalizations for why experiential learning is being fostered, employment prospects and return on investment are more strongly represented in the Strategic Mandate Agreements. This is significant when compared to the particular forms of experiential learning that have expanded the most. Even though co-curricular forms of experiential learning have expanded the most over the SMA cohorts, experiential learning rationalizations are framed within the current discourse about skill shortages and the preparedness of graduates to enter the workforce.

Discussion

Ontario universities have greatly expanded their efforts to foster experiential education. In doing so, experiential learning follows the process of institutionalization outlined by Tolbert and Zucker (1996), as it has become objectified within these institutions. Through the Strategic Mandate Agreements, the expansion of experiential learning and associated institutional resources has not been without concerted rationalization. These institutions have demonstrated thoughtful consideration about why they are institutionalizing experiential learning, beyond merely responding to new institutional funding metrics adopted by the province. Institutions have rationalized the expansion and support for experiential learning within the current frame of skills shortages in the province's workforce. The benefits of experiential learning are framed as remedying the skills shortages by producing graduates that are more equipped for success in the labour market. To a lesser extent, experiential learning

has been rationalized by its humanistic ability to develop the whole person (i.e., personal and civic development).

Framing Institutional Rationalizations of Experiential Learning: Responding to The Skills Shortage

The rationalizations for expanding experiential learning that were most present in the SMAs were about the potential of experiential learning to prepare students for the world of work, framed within the capacity for skill development. Institutions have framed their responses to the SMA process within the popular worry about student skill development, or what Mantione (2018) refers to as a "skills shortage" (p. 1). Through their collective rationalizations, Ontario universities seem to acknowledge, though not overtly, that there is a concern over the job readiness of graduates. This recognition is not overt because the institutions discuss how they are contributing to skilling their students, as opposed to acknowledging the presence of a skills shortage in the provincial or national economy. Thus, they frame their institutional initiatives within the popular concern over work readiness, and what might even be considered an existential threat to the economic security of the province (for a discussion on the economic impact of skill vacancies, see Gabler & Gormley, 2022).

The rationalization of experiential learning along work-integrated lines follows a trend in policy discussions about experiential learning in the province. Even though co-curricular forms of experiential learning seem to outpace work-integrated learning, institutions have framed their policy responses along work-integrated learning. The continued emphasis on work-integrated learning is an example of what Davies (2002) referred to as an "era-specific zeitgeist," or popular mentalities that "capture the collective imagination" (p. 272). The ongoing focus on skill readiness seems to have captured the collective imagination of various institutional constituents, as represented in the rationalizations of experiential learning. Institutions frequently identified their own role in skill development, industry partners as interested parties, as well as the demand of students to have such opportunities before they enter the working world. By framing their institutional responses within the frame of skills shortages, this helps universities to ensure that their initiatives are perceived as beneficial and legitimate by the province.

Supporting Institutional Frames: The Rise of Infrastructure and Resourcing

Institutionalization requires mechanisms that sediment a particular schema or process. In an organizational sense, the expansion of experiential learning has followed Tolbert & Zucker's (1996) model of institutionalization. As the first component, habitualization, organizational structures and resources have been developed in response to an organizational problem. During the second round of SMAs there was enhanced discussion about creating new hubs for experiential learning and expanding digital resources. Since then, the expansion of infrastructure across the sector suggests that there is an element of durability, or mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) with respect to these organizational structures. Many institutions now have offices of experiential learning, specialized professionals working within these offices, and have developed digital resources for experiential learning. The diffusion of these elements across the field suggests a level of organizational consensus that experiential learning requires institutional supports if it is going to be a permanent fixture of universities. The increasing penetration into the technical-level organizational operations, evidenced by the diffusion of these structures, means that experiential learning is being taken seriously by these institutions: it is achieving a degree of permanence which, over time, could indicate sedimentation, the last step in the institutionalization process. This process moves experiential learning beyond a discursive frame (Björnehed & Erikson, 2018) to one that is embedded within the organizational structure of universities. Experiential learning isn't just being talked about within these institutions (i.e., discursive frame), but has been gradually supported by tangible structures and credentials on campus. At the same time, this is a cautious interpretation, given that the creation of hubs and centres often took the form of merging pre-existing structures on campus. To the degree that these are simply recoupling efforts that were already present, experiential learning is being implemented with a whiff of myth and ceremony (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Limitations and Future Research

Organizations are experts at strategically working within institutional environments. While this article presents findings driven by what universities say they are doing, organizational theorizing reminds us that organizations do their best to ceremonially respond to pressures rather than

continually overhauling their technical operations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991). Content analysis is limited in its interpretive potential, as the analysis and findings are derived from data produced by resource-hungry universities. While a qualitative approach is useful for situating content in the broader social context, the findings here are limited to what organizations say, and may not be truly reflected in their internal dynamics. Quite simply, content analysis on its own cannot uncover the internal processes of universities with respect to experiential education and the ways in which these outward facing documents may be enacted or refuted by technical-level actors. The SMAs frame the institution's discourse, but institutions are inhabited (Hallett, 2010), and the findings garnered by this study may be more or less relevant to different organizational actors and their distinct professional locations. Institutionalization is not an amorphous process, nor is it merely a discursive one. It is driven by influential agentic actors who "champion" particular structures within and across the organizational field, and requires the development of particular mechanisms within organizations to support the process (Björnehed & Erikson, 2018; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). This research, and the findings it presents, may act as a catalyst to further interrogate the micro-foundations of experiential learning within these institutions.

Conclusion

This article has explored the meso-foundations of experiential education in Ontario by unpacking how universities have responded to the institutional mandates to foster experiential learning. Not only have universities expanded their capacity for experiential learning, but this expansion has been resourced through institutional infrastructure and other initiatives. To be sure, the expansion of experiential education and the rise of performance-based funding are not isolated to Ontario. Other provinces are well on their way to establishing accountability funding metrics with universities (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2020), as well as expanding experiential learning opportunities for university students. Here, it was demonstrated that institutions framed and rationalized the expansion of experiential learning within the popular concern about the skill-readiness of graduates. This adds to the understanding of frame institutionalization (Björnehed & Erikson, 2018), whereby particular institutional mechanisms are needed to support

the institutionalization process. Even though co-curricular forms of experiential learning have expanded the most, the expansion of experiential learning was rationalized with respect to work-integrated learning. While this does suggest some internal disagreements in the documents, it shows that universities were strategic about their rationalization, as framing their expansion within the skills gap has helped to legitimize their efforts. This may be attributed to where experiential learning is situated in the third SMA cohort. As it was in the skills and job outcomes section, this may signal the kind of experiential learning the province was looking to hear about. The findings of this research underscore that experiential learning is more than a pedagogical approach; it is an organizational process.

Acknowledgements

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