General Education Skills Criteria (humanities and social sciences): Essential and Foundational

– Executive Summary –

1. General overview

This document describes the standards for general education courses in the humanities and social sciences at York and lays out the criteria used to evaluate new course proposals or course revisions. It can be used by instructors as a guide for the development of new courses. General education courses aim primarily for the cultivation in students of essential and foundational skills. Broadly speaking, students who possess these skills know how to read, think, speak, listen, and write well, as well as navigate university life, communicate, and collaborate. They expose students to a diverse range of ideas and prepare them for the exploration and evaluation of various kinds of positions, interpretations, and discourses. The following outcomes represent the criteria used to assess new course proposals or course revisions. New course proposals or course revisions are expected to meet a significant number of these criteria, though not all of them.

2. Essential Outcomes of General Education

2.1 Reading
2.2 Writing
2.3 Speaking
2.4 Listening
2.5 Critical Thinking
2.5.1 Critical Analysis
2.5.2: Critical Evaluation
2.6 Technological and Data Literacy

3. Further Outcomes of General Education

3.1 Academic Literacy
3.2 Assignment Analysis
3.3 Citation
3.4 Note Taking
3.5 Research Skills
3.6 Study Habits
3.7 Time Management/Professionalism
3.8 Interconnectedness of Knowledge
3.9 Institutional Knowledge + Resources
3.10 Group Work Etiquette including collaborative writing and project design
3.11 Academic Honesty
3.12 Classroom behaviour
3.13 Social Skills
3.14 Resilience

General Education Skills Criteria for Humanities and Social Sciences:
Essential and Foundational

1. General overview

General education courses aim primarily for the cultivation of essential and foundational skills. Essential skills are those skills that are necessary (though not sufficient) for competence in a wide range of endeavors, such as navigating university studies, acquiring a university degree, and meeting basic workplace demands. These skills are truly general: broadly speaking, students who possess them know how to read, think, speak, listen, and write well. Foundational skills involve a wide range of abilities, including: the ability to appreciate any idea or problem in its context, to acquire the relevant information, to conceptualize, analyze, evaluate, synthetize, transfer, apply information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication and use this information together with the standards of good reasoning and civil dialogue in order to develop workable responses that are sensitive to the complexities involved, coherent, eloquent, precise, free from biases and cognitive distortions, balanced, well-argued, and persuasive. These skills are foundational in the sense that they are a prerequisite for the development of other, more specialized skills.

Foundational and essential skills involve critical thinking skills, but they are not limited to them. While critical thinking skills operate predominantly in the rational domain, foundational and essential skills are more broad; they include communication skills, the ability to plan and manage coursework and level-appropriate intellectual projects, exercise personal responsibility and autonomy, collaboration and inter-dependence, as well as the ability to be receptive to and engage with intellectual discourses of all kinds, including social, political, scientific, religious, moral, and artistic.

General education courses promote efficiency in the acquisition, management, creation, and use of knowledge, as well as effective decision making, communication and collaboration. They expose students to a diverse range of ideas, theories and points of view, and inoculate against unilateral or excessively narrow points of view, interpretations, methodologies, and discourses, as well as against intellectual conformity. They foster the appreciation of diversity of all kinds, especially diversity of ideas, and they prepare students for the exploration and evaluation of various kinds of positions, interpretations, and discourses, be they either widely held or heterodox. At the same time, general education courses promote the student's ability to bring together seemingly opposite thinkers or disparate sets of ideas to create novel solutions to problems of all kinds. Besides their utilitarian value, general education skills also hold intrinsic value: they catalyze an inner transformation toward a greater appreciation of the human condition and its possibilities, of human values and aspirations, of the inherent complexity of life, and of the value of meaningful engagement with others.

Foundational and essential skills are assessed through students' demonstration of the following general education learning outcomes, which are adapted from the Canadian Language Benchmarks 2012 and align with the University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations. The learning outcomes are organized into two levels using curricular scaffolding—essential and higher order—to distinguish between the knowledge and competencies that are required to succeed in general education and those that build on the essential outcomes to prepare students to be successful in their university education beyond the general education curriculum. The outcomes are expressed this way to recognize the conditions that underscore the purpose and need for general education and essential skills instruction: while students are expected to begin university having met the admission criteria for their programs and achieved the outcomes articulated in Ontario's secondary education curriculum (or equivalent), the

student body contains a vast range of skill levels and qualifications at this stage. Further, the material, social, and psychological demands of students' transition to postsecondary learning present developmental obstacles that necessitate opportunities to review and practice the essential skills and knowledge that they are expected to know already. Therefore, general education courses cover both the essential and higher order outcomes articulated below. In preparing a course proposal, proponents are reminded that individual courses need to demonstrate coverage only of **some** outcomes from each level and that no individual course is expected to align to every skill and competency represented here.

The following outcomes represent the criteria used to assess new course proposals or course revisions. New course proposals or course revisions are expected to meet a significant number of these criteria, though not all of them.

2. Essential Outcomes of General Education (Modelled on CLB 2012, Levels 9-10)

2.1 Reading
- (LO) Understand an expanding range of complex texts not necessarily related to the student's major. While reading, the student is able to:
    - Consider any discourse or scientific, literary, or artistic work within the historical and cultural context in which it was created and be aware of the complexities of that context,
    - Actively read to identify purpose, main ideas, supporting details, and the author's own values and assumptions from stated and implied information,
    - Read any text with the intention to understand and be able to contribute to the conversation in an intellectually honest manner,
    - Demonstrate an awareness of one's own bias and limitations of experience,
    - Read any text in good faith and not from a position of contingent historical or cultural superiority,
    - Be aware of the dangers of applying anachronistic evaluation standards,
    - Use knowledge of genres, styles, and registers to assist in comprehension,
    - Use the standards of good reasoning to identify and/or reconstruct the arguments in the text by identifying their premises and the conclusion,
    - Use inference to integrate several pieces of stated and implied information throughout the text,
    - Separate relevant from irrelevant details,
    - Apply knowledge of complex grammar and syntax to interpret nuances in texts,
    - Apply the principle of charity (i.e., interpret a speaker's statements in the most rational way possible).

2.2 Writing
- (LO) Write literate, multi-paragraph compositions in a variety of academic and non-academic styles, congruent with the demands of discipline, genre, style, register, and context. These texts are:
    - On concrete, abstract and unfamiliar topics that require research,
    - Intended for a defined audience (e.g., academic, or business, or casual reader, etc.),
    - Clear and eloquent,
    - Flexible & complex, demonstrating independence from structures like the "5-paragraph essay,"
    - Lengthy, as dictated by the requirements of the task, typically up to a range **of about 2,000 words,**
    - Produced in demanding contexts.

- As a composer, the student is able to demonstrate the ability to:
  - Compose complex multi-paragraph texts in a variety of contexts, styles, genres, registers, and for diverse purposes, to suit a range of instructional/assignment requirements,
  - Convey main ideas clearly, with adequate supporting details,
  - Formulate cogent arguments with a clear logical structure and clearly delineated premises and conclusions,
  - Be reflexive about their own writing processes and use of effective strategies to address concerns,
  - Paraphrase and summarize key points,
  - Use and integrate secondary sources effectively,
  - Use grammar, syntax, and punctuation appropriate to an assignment's genre and conventions, and when proofreading and revising their own work and/or the work of others in peer editing contexts,
  - Convey an understanding of discipline-specific terms and conventions related to course concepts.

2.3 Speaking

- (LO) Communicate with some confidence by presenting information about complex, abstract, concrete, and/or general topics on the course in formal and informal situations. The student is able to:
  - Speak in coherent, connected discourse,
  - Communicate information clearly to peers as course tasks require,
  - Organize and convey information in short (< 2 min) answers to questions, and medium length (2-10 min) presentations,
  - Be able to engage fellow students and the instructor eloquently and constructively,
  - Be able to engage in classroom debates, which may be structured or unstructured, either as part of a group or individually, while maintaining composure, civility, and intellectual integrity.

2.4 Listening

- (LO) Understand complex formal and informal communication within a lecture/seminar context and on some specialized topics relevant to the course discipline. NB: Listening skills cannot be directly tested for but are critical nonetheless! Students show they can:
  - Actively listen in order to paraphrase or summarize key points and important details of short/medium length instructions and/or class content.
  - Understand a range of concrete, abstract, and discursive language appropriate for the content and purpose,
  - Use knowledge of complex grammar and syntax to interpret meaning,
  - Be exposed and listen intently to a diverse range of ideas, including heterodox ideas, theories, perspectives, and discourses,
  - Be exposed and listen intently to the ideas, questions, and concerns of others, including of those who do not align with the student's worldview.

2.5 Critical Thinking

General education courses help develop students' critical thinking. Critical thinking is not a body of knowledge or a topic that can be taught side-by-side with other topics but a set of skills that is weaved into the study of any other topic, thereby improving the quality of the discourse, regardless of the

nature of the discourse and where the discourse takes place. Critical thinking skills are *par excellence* transferable (to new contexts) and foundational skills.

Critical thinking is the process of conceptualizing, analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, and applying information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication as a guide to belief and action. Critical thinking rests on values such as clarity, precision, consistency, relevance, good standards of evidence, as well as on respect for rational argument, viewpoint diversity, and dialogue.

The development of critical thinking requires exposure to a diverse range of ideas as well as to opposing points of view. Different perspectives are worthy of consideration, not because of their intrinsic merit or because they are all equally well-supported or valuable, but because engaging with them is crucial for the development and exercise of critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is a set of skills that is perpetually cultivated and weaved through the curriculum. Critical thinking works best when it becomes an intellectual habit. Critical thinking skills involve the ability to gather and weigh evidence, judge the truth or likelihood of a claim, judge the validity, logical strength, and soundness of an argument. It involves the ability to justify one's stance on a given matter with rational and logical means. Critical thinking skills rest on values such as respect for argument, viewpoint diversity, and dialogue. A crucial component of critical evaluation is the ability to see the strengths and weaknesses of any intellectual product, theory, or system of ideas. For this reason, general education courses expose students to a range of ideas and points of view.

2.5.1 Critical Analysis: In a general sense, critical analysis involves a deep and sustained investigation of a subject, where a comprehensive range of perspectives is considered. A critical analysis consciously includes having developed an understanding of the basis – the values – in light of which one learns how to understand a range of different voices, theories, and critiques, such that a more complete and complex history and evolution of thought on that subject is apparent. General education courses foster critical analysis skills by encouraging diverse student voices in order to prevent intellectual conformity and promote intellectual diversity. In a more specific sense, critical analysis involves the ability to identify the premises of arguments and discourses pertaining to all areas of life (including social, political, scientific, religious, artistic, personal life, etc.), to decompose complex arguments into their constituents and identify the latter, to identify and reveal hidden or unstated assumptions, as well as patterns of thought and reasoning.

2.5.2: Critical Evaluation: In a general sense, critical evaluation involves the ability to gather and weigh evidence as well as judge the truth or likelihood of a claim, and rests on values such as respect for argument, viewpoint diversity, and dialogue. In a more specific sense, critical evaluation involves assessing both the validity of an argument as well as the truth of its components, to determine whether the argument is sound, valid or invalid, or inductively weak or strong. A crucial component of critical evaluation is the ability to identify the strengths and weaknesses of any intellectual product or system of ideas, regardless of where this occurs, and of any point of view, regardless of whether it is shared widely or not. Critical evaluation involves the ability to detect fallacious arguments, assess sources based on a wide variety of factors, including genre, historical context, authorship, purpose, etc. General education courses help cultivate students' critical analysis and evaluation skills, as well as their intellectual abilities and independent thinking by exposing them to a diverse range of types of critical analysis and evaluation.

2.6 Technological and Data Literacy

Technological and data literacy is essential for university students to succeed in their academic pursuits and in their future careers. General education courses can foster technological and data literacy by promoting a wide range of skills, including: basic computer skills, such as using word processor software, spreadsheets, and presentation software; using eLearning platforms; online research, using search engines, databases, and other digital resources to locate, evaluate, and apply information; data analysis, including collecting, organizing, analyzing, and communicating data using statistical and visualization tools, including spreadsheets; digital communication, including effective communication using email, chat, video conferencing, and social media; cybersecurity literacy, being aware of the risks and threats associated with using technology and protecting digital identity, data, and devices from cyberattacks, as well as the political complexities involved. These skills are valuable in their own right, and they also contribute to the student's development of other skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and collaboration.

3. Further Outcomes of General Education (skills that depend on students' achievement of the essential outcomes)

3.1 Academic Literacy: what do key words like analyze, compose, design, argue, research, etc., mean?

3.2 Assignment Analysis: identifying the purpose of the assignment or project (e.g., to persuade) as well as characteristics of the final product. What do you want this piece of writing to achieve?

3.3 Citation: awareness of the basic principles behind citation and at least one major citation style. Knows where to find specific examples and can compose a properly formatted Works Cited in the appropriate style.

3.4 Note Taking: application of listening skills, modelling and organizing notes, summarizing, and paraphrasing.

3.5 Research Skills: knowledge of, and practice with, search engines, libraries, locating academic sources, differentiating between primary and secondary sources, ability to summarize and paraphrase key points.

3.6 Study Habits: some instruction on exam writing skills, do/don'ts, anecdotal best practices.

3.7 Time Management/Professionalism: work is completed on time, to instructor specifications. Some consideration of procrastination, modelling good habits.

3.8 Interconnectedness of Knowledge demonstrates interdisciplinarity (AB) not multidisciplinarity (A+ B). Courses/students also demonstrate a recognition of *complexity*: the perspective and contributions of multiple fields and contributors to form an integrated and comprehensive viewpoint.

3.9 Institutional Knowledge + Capital: the different university roles (like TA/Staff/Prof/Dean) and how the university works. Standard university rules and structures (like drop dates, financial penalties, course prerequisites) and how to negotiate the university system. Writing Centre, Learning Skills, Library Orientations. It also includes strategies for effective and judicious communication with university staff and faculty.

3.10 Group Work Etiquette, including collaborative writing and project design: ability to work in diverse environments, overcoming problems, team building, team roles, process, and editing the final product.

3.11 Academic Honesty: understand the basic principles of academic honesty, what the term means, and problems with "grey zone" techniques like patchwriting.

3.12 Classroom behaviour: awareness of university protocols and standards, professional student behaviour, lecture etiquette, zoom etiquette, respect for diverse viewpoints and perspectives.

3.13 Social Skills: study partners, peer review, short-term group work.

3.14 Resilience: Resilience is not a quality that can (or should) be directly tested. Instead, teaching resilience involves the inculcation of a set of values and commensurate responses to the challenges of everyday life. To be "resilient" is to acknowledge that making mistakes is an inevitable part of the learning process and represents opportunities for growth, rather than evidence of lack of worth. Resilient students possess a quality of persistence that allows them to accept temporary setbacks and new challenges, and they have a "try, try again" mentality. At the same time, they recognize the mental stresses caused by perfectionism and focus on their progress, not on failure. A resilient student knows that unreasonable work demands are not sustainable in the long-term and practices a beneficial work regimen that results in (as far as possible) a balanced approach to life. The Resilient student is able to:

- successfully transition from high school (especially for first year students),
- approach new material/assignments with a positive mindset,
- work autonomously and independently,
- manage deadlines,
- accept criticism and take responsibility for quality of work,
- ask for help when experiencing an unreasonable amount of stress.