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Skills and Student Affairs: A Discourse Analysis

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Graduate Program in Education
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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Abstract

Media, industry, and other public actors have claimed that a ‘skills gap’ exists in students exiting post-secondary education (PSE) and entering the workforce. The Ontario provincial government has developed policy, the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy*, to provide directives to universities in the province to provide skills development to students to aid in closing the gap and providing a workplace relevant education. In this study, I explore the experiences of student affairs and services (SAS) staff responsible for enacting provincial policy related to skills development at the university level by investigating the discourses that shape policy and practices of these staff in their daily work. Data collected from documents related to the issue of skills, and from interviews with SAS staff, provided insight into how the problem of skills is represented in policy and in practice. Discourses shaping the practice of SAS staff related to skills development at times conflicted the discourses shaping the issue of skills in policy, but a neoliberal economic rationality is embedded within the broader representation of the issue of skills, with discursive implications for SAS staff and for students.

Keywords: student affairs, skills, policy, discourse, post-secondary education, career development

Acknowledgements

I am sincerely grateful for my supervisor, Dr. Melody Viczko, whose endless patience and kindness was invaluable to me throughout the process of completing this degree. Her passion for her work motivated me early on, and, through Melody, I discovered the complex and messy world of policy that has brought a new dimension to my interest in student success in university. I feel exceptionally fortunate to have accompanied Melody to conferences and workshops in Edmonton and in Amsterdam. My graduate school experience has been entirely enriched by such a supportive supervisor relationship. Thank you.

I am also grateful for the support of my committee member Dr. Rita Gardiner, whose encouragement and feedback always challenged me to ensure my work remained authentic to my interests. In addition, I want to thank other faculty in the Critical Policy, Equity, and Leadership Studies ARC for their support, and in particular, Dr. Allison Segeren, Dr. Paul Tarc, and Dr. Brenton Faubert who provided me with references and assistance completing successful applications for awards and the continuation of my graduate studies.

I want to thank those who have helped to make London feel like home over the past two years. I stumbled into a community of kind and loving people who have helped me cultivate a healthy and full life. A special thank you to my friends and teammates at lululemon, Body by Lagree, and Rev3K Spin, and to every Starbucks along Fanshawe Park Rd. that has at one point served as my office for the day.

My research interests in student success and the field of student affairs and services was a seed planted over four years ago at the University of Toronto. I am especially thankful that I was introduced to this field by an exceptional group of people whose fierce dedication to, and belief in students continues to influence me today. Thank you to Jill Charnaw-Burger, Dirk Rodricks, Meaghan Skinner, and the rest of the team at the New College Office of Residence and Student Life.

Finally, I believe that this simply would not have been possible without the love and guidance I receive from my family and close friends. Thank you for listening to me talk about this work and always asking interesting, thoughtful questions, and for reminding me that I am capable when I wasn't so sure. I am very lucky.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Employability of students has risen as a key indicator of success of institutions alongside an increased focus in policy on skills development in Canada in an effort to increase national competitiveness in a global knowledge economy. In Ontario, a significant hub for Canada's economy, the issue of the 'skills gap' has emerged as an important, but contested discourse in public post-secondary-education (PSE), with some actors claiming that students exiting Ontario's universities lack the 'soft' or socioemotional skills like teamwork, communication, and problem solving (McKinsey & Co, 2015) required to successfully enter the workforce. Other actors identify the skills gap as a major contributor to youth unemployment in Ontario, which at 14.3%, is double the overall general unemployment rate (Statistics Canada, 2016), and as a factor in the types of often precarious and unstable work recent graduates accept when they are unable to find work in their field (Purdon & Palleja, 2017). The Conference Board of Canada (Munro, MacLaine, & Stuckey, 2014) reports that Canadian businesses may not be experiencing skills shortages so much to refer to this as a gap in skills, but that there may be other factors contributing to the issue that result in the feeling of a 'gap' (Munro et al, 2014; Province of Ontario, 2016). The issue of skills and securing employment following the completion of their degree is of importance to students as well. Recent Canadian research confirms that, in 2016, students entering PSE are doing so to increase their likelihood of getting a 'fulfilling job' and to prepare for their career (CUSC, 2016).

In response to pressure from the public, the media, and industry, universities have made significant efforts to highlight their ability to develop the 'whole' student. My research explores these co-curricular programs and services that are university-provided, but not

wholly academic in nature. Known as student affairs and services (SAS), programs related to leadership development, mentorship, career exploration and preparation, and community-engaged, experiential, or work-integrated learning are key pedagogical strategies in universities for addressing skills development for students. In tandem with university academic curriculum, these programs and services have been identified as priority areas in provincial policy, like the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy* (Province of Ontario, 2016), and represent significant areas of funding and expenditure at the university level (@AlexUsherHESA, 2018a, 2018b). The problem is that there is little known about this group of staff and their programs and services that are connected to the desired outcomes for university students in Ontario skills development policy. I assert that these staff and their programs and services are an important site for research to better understand how provincial policy is enacted at the university level by engaging with the practical knowledge and expertise of these staff.

By exploring the role of SAS staff in the university context in developing and implementing these programs, in this research, I aim to better understand how provincial policy is enacted at the level of the post-secondary institution. Specifically, I am interested in exploring which discourses about students and skills are prioritized in this process by studying policy documents produced by various actors and by studying the experiences of SAS staff responsible for enacting this policy in the post-secondary setting. Ultimately, this research is concerned with better understanding the role of SAS staff as key actors in enacting policies aimed at student skills development in the university.

In this chapter, I introduce the problem of the ‘skills gap’ in Ontario PSE, explicate the purpose of the research conducted and identify my positionality as a researcher in this

field. In my research, I will use quotations when referring to the ‘skills gap’ to reflect the issue’s contested nature within PSE. As I will evidence through my research, actors often represent the issue of skills in disparate ways that contribute to how the issue is shaped.

Purpose of the Study

There is limited research on the role of SAS staff in Canada, with most literature drawing on the context in the United States and the robust professional and academic field of student affairs and higher education administration (Seifert, Arnold, Burrow, & Brown, 2011; Seifert & Burrow, 2013; Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010; Carney & Hardy Cox, 2016). I position myself as an emerging SAS professional in Canadian higher education, having accumulated professional experience in the field with aspirations to pursue a career in SAS in Canada. My experiences as a professional have identified this field as an important site in higher education institutions where skills development is intentionally built into the program and service design and curriculum. However, there is little indication in Canadian higher education research that this group of staff have been engaged in policymaking beyond the university campus, despite their clear involvement in the intended outcomes of the provincial-level policies themselves, particularly those related to skill development.

The purpose of this research is to explore how SAS staff in the university context are interacting with and enacting policy in their everyday work – how do they engage policy in their daily work lives? What meanings do SAS staff attribute to ‘skills’ in their work with students? By focusing on the staff whose work in post-secondary institutions is largely addressing the issue of skills development, I hope to discover how relevant policies are actually enacted, and how policy discourse can shape perceptions and practices of student success in this area.

In this research, I investigated how skills development policies in Ontario, such as the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy*, are enacted in an Ontario university by SAS staff in a centralized student success program and service hub. Further, I investigated how particular discourses about skills and student success emerge as powerful and others are excluded or silenced through engagement with skills development policies within a SAS department at an Ontario research university.

Positionality

I occupy a privileged space in society. As a white woman, already having received a university education, who is able to access the university system even further into graduate studies, I acknowledge that my experience as a student in university was without significant difficulty. I also acknowledge that it is likely due to my privilege in the university that I was able to access the programs and services in the field of student affairs, the focus of this study, during my undergraduate degree. Barriers to accessing the types of supports and services offered by student affairs units or departments remains an issue (Carney & Hardy Cox, 2016), and is a priority area for professionals in the field (CACUSS, 2013). In my experience professionally, there was a sincere dedication to seeking equity in the development and delivery of SAS programs, and broadening the scope and accessibility of programs and services to serve the diverse student body at Ontario universities. I continue to believe that the work of staff in this field is truly beneficial to the success of all students.

My understanding of the issue of skills development in students and career development in PSE is framed by my experience in the field of SAS as a student-user, student-staff, and emerging professional. In my experience, this field of staff are sincerely committed to the success and development of all students in PSE, not only as students, but

also as citizens in their local communities. Pursuing this research assists me in learning, contributing to, and advocating for the development of this professional field with which I identify.

In addition to my connection with the professional field associated with this study, I also feel deeply connected to the issue of skills in post-secondary students in Ontario. The topic of skills is difficult to avoid as a student, or someone generally interested in education issues in Ontario. The focus on skills in the media, in policy, in institutions, and also in families and peer groups, is, at times, overwhelming. In my experience, there is a great deal of pressure from many sources to pursue education that has a direct workforce outcome, regardless of your interest in that field. When I was unable to articulate my intended career path early in my degree in anthropology, I was often met with a certain disdain followed by suggestions to add a second major in a more ‘realistic’ discipline. In addition, students, like myself, often believe it is required to have a significant number of ‘resume-boosting’ experiences to even begin to be a competitive applicant for jobs. The belief is that without these experiences, we have not developed the skills we need to be successful beyond the campus. Having to balance the stress of a post-secondary academic workload, many extra-curricular and co-curricular experiences, the early stages of career planning, with mounting pressure and media telling me my most likely career outcome as a social science/arts and humanities graduate was as a café barista (Brosnahan, 2013) was less than motivating. Pursuing this topic of research assists me in ‘scratching the itch’ of the skills issue – learning the story of skills in Ontario policy and Ontario’s post-secondary institutions to better understand how myself and my peers are affected.

Statement of the Problem

For many students in Canada, the most important reason for pursuing an undergraduate degree is to prepare for the workforce with the expectation that, at the completion of their degree, students will find employment in a fulfilling job in their field (Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2016; Hirsh, 2013; Millar, 2014). There are diverse discourses about the extent to which this expectation is being realized. Employers seeking to hire new or recent university graduates report that there are particular skills needed for success in the workplace that students coming out of the PSE system in Canada are lacking in particular skills, especially focused on the ‘soft skills’ including teamwork, communication, initiative, problem solving, and work ethic, among others (McKinsey & Co, 2015).

In Ontario, estimates from the provincial government and large provincial industry associations report that the ‘skills gap’ costs the province upwards of \$24 billion in lost provincial GDP and almost \$4 billion in lost provincial tax revenue (Stuckey & Munro, 2013; Conference Board of Canada, 2015, Munro, MacLaine, & Stuckey, 2014). Others, usually in the PSE sector, argue that students graduating from Ontario’s universities are well-equipped with skills that will carry them through an ever-changing and innovating workforce, and that the ‘skills gap’ is more an issue of experience to be solved through incorporating new pedagogical strategies into university curriculum (Davidson, 2014; Council of Ontario Universities, 2015).

In response to the ‘skills gap’ issue, the Province of Ontario and the Ontario Premier’s Expert Panel on the Highly Skilled Workforce have developed the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy*, which calls on institutions of higher education to address the ‘skills gap’

and ensure Ontario remains competitive in the global economy by providing meaningful experiential and work-integrated learning opportunities in partnership with industry (workforce) employers and community partners (Province of Ontario, 2016; Wynne, 2016; Ministry of Finance, 2017). While the existence of a ‘skills gap’ between post-secondary students and the workforce is contested, the discourse of the skills agenda has become a policy priority in Canada, and specifically in Ontario. The preoccupation with skills in provincial policy circles has particular implications within the field of higher education as it relates to the local operations of post-secondary institutions and in how we understand the purpose of knowledge and experience gained through a post-secondary education.

Within institutions, a focus on student employability and skills development has increasingly become synonymous with notions of student ‘success’. The work related to student success and employability in the university has largely been tasked by university leadership to staff working in the field of SAS, a growing field of non-academic/co-curricular, student-focused staff (Seifert & Burrow, 2013; Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010; Canadian Association of College and University Student Services, 2011). These staff are administrators, facilitators, and student advisors in campus career centres, leadership development programs, community engagement and volunteer programs, health and wellness services, residence halls, and more. There is little known in the Canadian context about how this group of staff operate, particularly as it relates to their interaction with larger policy discourses surrounding realms of public life and public investment their work has direct impact upon, such as the development of skills in university students and employability of recent graduates. The goals of the skills agenda are often manifested in the university through programs and services offered by staff in this field, especially those in campus career centres,

placing immense responsibility on those in SAS roles to bring this provincial policy to life at the university level.

Research Questions

My research study focuses on how a particular group of staff in a university setting understand the issue of skills generally, and as it relates to the directives or intended outcomes of provincial level labour market policy. Further, my study seeks to understand how these staff incorporate that understanding into their work, such as in strategic planning, program development, and in their experiences working directly with students. Drawing on Carol Bacchi's (2009) approach to policy analysis, my research is designed with the understanding that problems, such as the 'skills' gap, are constructed by the policies developed to solve them. As such, my research questions intend to interrogate what assumptions underpin the problem of the 'skills gap' as it is represented in policy and in practice. The research was conducted at a research-intensive university in Ontario in a centrally operated SAS unit. Through semi-structured interviews with these staff, and document analysis of provincial and institutional policy, the intent of this research was to understand broadly: How do the discourses of skills and skills development policies shape the work of SAS in enacting these policies at the university level? Specifically, the intent of this research was to understand:

1. What initiatives do SAS staff engage with in their work as sites to enact skills policies?
2. What discourses and actors emerge as powerful in the enactment of skills policies and what is the effect of these powerful discourses on the practices of SAS staff?

3. What discourses and actors are excluded/marginalized and what is the effect of this exclusion on the practices of SAS staff?

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to the growing field of literature on the role of SAS staff in the PSE landscape in Canada. While much of the literature in Canada in this field to date has focused on the structural organization or professional identity of staff in this field, this study will illuminate the practices of SAS staff related to provincial policy priorities, as well as their understanding of their role in this broad issue-scape of skills, university students, and labour market outcomes. The significance of this study is the possibility to better understand how policy actors, like SAS staff, understand policy and participate in the process of enactment to improve the relevance and effectiveness of policy impacting Ontario's post-secondary students, with the purpose of increasing opportunities for student success. My hope is that the findings of this study will be considered by both policymakers in Ontario and by SAS staff, encouraging collaboration across the higher education sector and prioritizing opportunities in policy and practice for student success and development at the post-secondary level.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

In this work, I draw on a particular understanding of policy and the policy development and implementation process from the field of policy sociology and critical policy studies. Using a framework of *policy enactment* (Ball et al., 2011), I apply a critical lens to the issue of skills development in post-secondary students. In addition, this study is theoretically framed by the work of student development theorists, particularly as they have influenced the professional practice and standards of the field of SAS in Canada.

Critical policy analysis. A critical approach to policy analysis acknowledges the social contexts, actors, assumptions, and limitations involved in policy creation and policy enactment. For many critical policy scholars (Bacchi, 2009; Ball et al., 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), education policy must be considered as part of a larger global network of policy, and this network “represent[s] a particular configuration of values whose authority is allocated at the intersection of global, national, and local processes” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 3). These authors assert that policies, as text, discourses, or practices that communicate a policy message, are constructed in specific ways so as to represent perceived problems and the requisite solutions. The discursive work of policies is done through language, mediatization, and the normative privileging of certain values. Education policy in particular has undergone an ‘economistic reframing’ which has “led to an emphasis on policies of education as the production of human capital to ensure the competitiveness of the national economy in the global context” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 16). The conception of policy that I align with takes a critical lens, recognizing the intersections of power and oppression in policy studies with aims to re-think how education policy analysis is conducted in a neoliberal context. This is in contrast to traditional policy analysis approaches that are concerned more with a cyclical policy process of planning, adoption, implementation, evaluation, and reform that views policy processes as deliberate, rational, and manageable (Diem et al, 2014). The traditional approach to policymaking and policy implementation is influenced by positivism and is typically accepted as an unbiased or value-free type of analysis (Diem et al, 2014). Critical policy analysis aims to problematize the limitations of traditional policy analysis and draws on an interdisciplinary field of knowledge to interrogate

the underlying assumptions, power relations, and exclusionary nature of policy and policymaking.

Student development theory and experiential learning. The guiding tenet of student development theory is that post-secondary education is a transformational experience for all who participate. Student development theory is an interdisciplinary field adopted by SAS staff as a tool to ensure the student experience is purposefully guided so as to facilitate development of the individual to their fullest potential as a student, person, and citizen (Sanford, 1966, as cited by Koring & Reid, 2009; Patton et al, 2016). Foundational theorists like Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Perry (1968), amongst others, provide theories of identity development and epistemological development in students that have had great influence on the practice of career development or career advising within the field of SAS.

Experiential learning has also risen in popularity as it relates to career development and skills development. In PSE, experiential learning refers to a broad field of opportunities including work-integrated learning opportunities like co-op, practicum or placements, community-engaged learning, service-learning or volunteering, amongst others. In my research, I identified experiential learning as a key pedagogical strategy offered as a solution to the problem of the ‘skills gap’ by policy and is also an area of practice seeing a great deal of growth within the field of SAS.

Study Methodology

The focus of my analysis is on policy as discourse, and I engage the work of Stephen Ball and colleagues (Ball, 1993, 2015; Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011; Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011) and Carol Bacchi (2000, 2009, Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) to accomplish this. These scholars bring a Foucauldian lens to discourse analysis to

interrogate the assumptions and power relations embedded in policy. These scholars understand policy as a discursive practice that has effects on those it intends to govern that impact how we understand public issues and believe in possibilities for change.

Bacchi's (2009) approach to policy analysis challenges the presumption that policy serves to solve social problems and she explores how policies themselves imply a particular conception of the problem needing to be solved. She asserts that "policies give *shape* to 'problems'; they do not *address* them" (Bacchi, 2009, p. x, emphasis in original). Bacchi's emphasis on problems, or problematizations, is important because it "directs attention to the ways in which particular representations of 'problems' play a central role in how we are governed" (Bacchi, 2009, p. xi). Ball and colleagues (Ball, 1993, 2015; Braun et al, 2011; Ball et al, 2011) draw attention to the complexities of policy enactment with a particular attention to context, and the roles of various actors involved, acknowledging the processes of interpretation, negotiation, and choice of the many actors involved, rather than viewing policy implementation as a top-down process (Ball et al, 2011; Braun et al, 2011).

To answer my research questions, I collected and analyzed policy documents related to skills and PSE following Bacchi's (2009) critical approach to policy analysis, known as the 'what's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach, to identify significant discourses that shape the representation of skills as a problem in PSE. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded with staff at different levels of authority within a SAS department including staff who deliver the programs and services to students directly, staff involved in the planning and development of programs and services, and directors of SAS departments with more direct links to senior institutional leadership. Interview analysis first followed Merriam & Tisdell's (2016) inductive and comparative

coding method, where I coded the interview data thematically to identify important discourses that SAS staff were engaging with. Then, I engaged Bacchi’s WPR approach across the discourses identified in the interview data. Together, the findings and analysis of policy documents and interviews with SAS staff, my research brings attention to the discourses that are shaping policy and practice related to skills development and PSE.

Definitions of Key Terms and Acronyms

In Table 1, I provide a list of definitions of key terms and acronyms used throughout my study to provide a guide for how I operationalize these terms.

Table 1

Definitions of Key Terms and Acronyms

Term/acronym	Definition
Policy	Broadly, a program or course of action intended to make change or ‘fix’ a public problem. In this analysis, policy is understood to be a multilayered and multi-scalar process of problem or crisis construction by an assemblage of actors and the resulting enactment (Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011; Viczko & Tascón, 2016)
Discourse	“ <i>Socially produced forms of knowledge</i> that set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about a ‘given social object or practice’ (McHoul and Grace, 1993: 32).” (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).
‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ (WPR)	An approach to policy analysis developed by Carol Bacchi (2009). Drawing on Foucauldian concepts, the WPR approach is a series of questions that guides researchers to interrogate how policy ‘problems’ are represented and what effects these representations have.
Problematization	“The process of putting something forward as a ‘problem,’ to give shape to something as a ‘problem’” (Bacchi, 2009,

	p. 38). Problematizations are particular conceptualizations of ‘problems’. In policy, problematizations are used to interrogate how issues become constituted as problems within and by policies.
Key concepts	Used by Bacchi (2009) to interrogate assumptions in policy (Question 2). Key concepts “are abstract labels that are relatively open-ended.” (p. 8). These concepts are so embedded in society and in knowledge that their constructed meanings are difficult to unpack, however, these terms can also be widely contested.
Binary	Used by Bacchi (2009) to interrogate assumptions in policy (Question 2). Binaries create a hierarchical separation between one concept and another in an “A/not-A relationship” (p. 7), wherein ‘A’ is typically privileged. Binaries essentialize more complex and nuanced relationships and operate to shape understandings of the problematization.
Category	A way of organizing people, objects, and things. Used by Bacchi (2009) to interrogate assumptions in policy (Question 2). Categorization of people in policy has effects on the ways in which people think about themselves and others, and on the ways in which we are governed.
Experiential Learning	Learning opportunities that prioritize practical experience, often outside of the classroom. In post-secondary education, often offered in complement to a lecture-based course. These opportunities can also include work-integrated learning, service learning, community engaged learning, co-ops, and internships (Kolb, 2015).
Career Education or Career Development	An area of practice in student affairs and services focused on providing students with education about career

	decisions, career search, and strategies for success in the workplace (Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010).
Skills	Learned competencies that are often linked to a student’s employability and ability to “make a meaningful contribution to the economy and society” (Stuckey, MacLaine & Munro, 2014). Skills are a rather ambiguous concept and are represented in different ways by different actors depending on their positionality.
Student Affairs and Services (SAS)	A broad term describing the field of professionals in post-secondary education responsible for the student experience (Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010).
Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy (HSWS)	A report produced by the Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel outlining the recommendations that form the Ontario <i>Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy</i> .
Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA)	An agreement created between the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development and City University to indicate the institution’s specific and unique priorities for the period of 2017-2020.
Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS)	The professional association of SAS staff in Canada. CACUSS provides a space for SAS staff to engage in networking, practitioner research, and professional learning (CACUSS, 2013).
Post-Secondary Education (PSE)	Refers to education that occurs after high school (secondary education). In my study, specifically refers to the university setting.

Summary

Skills has emerged as a significant policy priority in Ontario, resulting in calls for action for the higher education sector to direct resources and attention toward the workforce

readiness of graduates. The purpose of this research is to investigate how skills development policies, such as the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy*, are enacted in an Ontario university by SAS staff. In this introductory chapter, I have explained the context within which this policy was developed and where the enactment of the policy will be studied, as well as the frameworks and research methodologies intended to be used to analyze findings. In the following chapters, I will present a theoretical framework and literature review to contextualize my study. I will also explain the methods by which I conducted the study and share the results of my findings. Finally, I will discuss the implications of those findings. In particular, I provide a discussion of the discourses that shape the problem of skills in policy documents and in the daily work of SAS staff, drawing attention to where these representations may conflict. These discourses include student mental health, community engagement, and a connection to industry. I also bring attention to discourses that have been marginalized in the dominant representations of the problem of skills, like a commitment to equity in providing programs for skills development. The results of this research will contribute to the success of post-secondary institutions in producing skilled graduates who are prepared to be successful in the workforce and will contribute to the success of provincial level policymakers in understanding how current policy is working in institutions and how future policy may be improved with the viewpoints of SAS staff actively included.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that guides my research, as well as the literature that contextualizes my research and situates it within the larger body of work on higher education and student affairs in Ontario. The theoretical framework provides an overview of the theoretical and conceptual lenses I bring to this study, including neoliberal influences in the university and critical policy analysis. Through the literature review I explore the context of skills development in Ontario policy, public universities, and in the work of student affairs and in identify how my research addresses a gap and contributes to the field. In this chapter, I also describe how the findings from this research uniquely contributes to the growing literature on SAS staff in Canadian higher education.

Theoretical Framework

The following section describes the theoretical framework that guides this study, in particular, the sociopolitical context of neoliberalism, drawing largely on the work of Shore and Wright (2015) and Wendy Brown (2015), and critical policy analysis drawing on Carol Bacchi and Stephen Ball.

Neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is an economic principle that has had pervasive effects across much of social and political life, including a major impact on the structure and operations of public institutions like post-secondary education (Brown, 2015; Clark, Moran, Skolnik, & Trick, 2009). Neoliberalism as policy, ideology, and technology of governance is based on the assertion that the market, with less government interference, can efficiently allocate resources across the population. Essentially, neoliberalism (re)configures all of social and political life into economic terms (Brown, 2015). The marketization shift from public sector to private sector as policy has had further ideological implications, particularly

the production of self-governing individuals (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 85). Individuals are deemed responsible for their eventualities in the neoliberal social imaginary, activated by their perceptions of freedom and choice, wherein ‘truths’ have been predefined through neoliberal discourse to encourage citizens to act in particular ways (Raddon & Harrison, 2015). However, the role of the state is not diminished, as Larner (2000, as cited in Raddon & Harrison, 2015) says, “While neo-liberalism may mean less government, it does not follow that there is less governance” (p. 12).

In institutions, the neoliberal turn has seen the student-institution relationship become consumerized, a further indication of the marketization shift, with an emphasis on student choice of institution, course of study, and student evaluation of the experiences provided by the institution, all guided by an economic rationality (Brown, 2015). In addition, institutions have seen a proliferation of administrative functionalities to support the increased expectations of the institution to provide education, resources, social experiences, and skills development, accompanied by systems of accountability or assessment that subject their existence to evaluation and justification (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). The very concept of preparing students for the workforce is informed by the neoliberal context within which institutions exist today and is a method of accountability or audit that the public and the market require of post-secondary institutions (Brown, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2015).

In a neoliberal context, universities claim autonomy in their operations, having control over programs of study, research development, and budgetary decisions. However, the discourse of autonomy, as used by higher education institutions, is significantly influenced by neoliberal market principles wherein governments require the institution to be autonomous so as to influence action through ‘state steering’ (Viczko, 2013; Wright & Rabo,

2010; Wright & Orberg, 2008). In this state steering process, higher education institutions, as seemingly autonomous organizations, are enrolled as service providers in the state's action towards global economic competitiveness, cultivating a highly educated and highly skilled citizenry. The responsibility of service delivery (education), and for fulfilling policy aims (skilled graduates), is outsourced to higher education institutions who are autonomous to some degree, yet accountable 'to the top' through political technologies of market competition, funding structures, and strategic agreements operating at a distance (Wright & Orberg, 2008: p. 39). The types of programs developed at universities that achieve these policy aims are typically run by SAS staff, and are closely linked to the social, economic, and political processes that prioritize the production of self-interested, skilled, and productive workers, and to broader neoliberal discourses of competition that institutions are subjected to, often through rankings of student experience and student/graduate employability. The context of neoliberalism is critically important to this research because it contextualizes the pressures that institutions are facing to produce market-ready workers, as well as provides the ideological foundations upon which the types of programs and services provided by SAS staff have been built. I intend to use this grounding to explicate the importance of SAS staff in the institution, who position themselves as supports for students in this particular social, political, and economic climate.

Critical policy analysis. This research employs a critical approach to policy analysis, and in particular, draws on the work of Stephen Ball and colleagues (Ball et al, 2011; Braun et al, 2011), and Carol Bacchi (2009). As I briefly explored in the introductory chapter to this thesis, a critical policy analysis takes a specific conception of policy, one that acknowledges the social contexts, actors, assumptions, and limitations involved in policy creation and

policy enactment (Bacchi, 2009; Ball et al., 2011; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). It also challenges traditional, rational approaches to policy analysis that frequently rely on the cyclical policy process of planning, adoption, implementation, and reform (Diem et al., 2014). The positivist tradition in policy studies assumes a value-free process, focusing on developing evidence-based policy and policy reform. In contrast, in a critical approach, the researcher asks questions about the assumptions underlying the evidence informing policy, who is involved in creating policy (or more importantly, who is left out), and understands policy as innately social, historical, and political, having implications beyond the intended solution (Bacchi, 2009).

The purpose of a critical policy analysis is to reveal the assumptions and power relations embedded within policy making and implementation and thus trouble more traditional approaches to policy analysis. In my research, a critical approach to policy analysis allows for a more nuanced exploration of the assumptions that underpin the preoccupation with skills in higher education policy in Ontario, and the complexities that exist for staff tasked with implementing these policies. In particular, my research is concerned with policy as discourse, and draws on the work of Stephen Ball and colleagues (1993; 1994; Ball et al, 2011; Braun et al, 2011), and Carol Bacchi (2009). In the following section, I will describe these two approaches and explicate how they work together to conduct a critical policy analysis.

Policy enactment. Stephen Ball (1993;1994) describes two ways to conceptualize policy that are useful in a critical policy analysis. First, policy as *text* emphasizes the ways in which policy is subject to compromise, negotiation, interpretation, and re-interpretation by policymakers and readers of policy. These ‘interpretations of interpretations’ are dependent

upon the particular social, institutional, and historical contexts that impact the policy's development and enactment. Policy as *discourse*, in Ball's (1993; 1994) conceptualization, engages the work of policy further than that of understanding it as text. Policy as discourse gives agency to the policy to do things – “we need to appreciate the way in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercise power through a production of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’, as discourse” (Ball, 1993, p. 14). Ball (1994) elucidates how policy discursively guides action,

We do not speak a discourse, it speaks us. We are the subjectivities, the voices, the knowledge, the power relations that a discourse constructs and allows... we are spoken by policies, we take up the positions constructed for us within policies.
(p. 22)

Policies do not simply define a problem that the policy is attempting to solve, the policy defines the problem in the way that the policy itself is constructed, creating conditions for certain possibilities for interpretation and solutions while limiting others. Ball extends the idea of policy as discourse in his work on enactment (Ball et al, 2011; Braun et al, 2011).

Ball et al (2011), and Braun et al (2011) explore two facets of policy enactment analysis: contexts and actors. The importance of context, as described by Braun et al (2011), arises from the understanding of policy as being enacted within particular discursive and material conditions with particular available resources in response to a problem. The context of policy enactment is subject to ‘interpretational dynamics’ wherein policy at the institutional level may look different than policy as originally constructed. Braun et al. (2011) describe four contextual dimensions that interact and create conditions (or not) for policy enactment:

Situated contexts (such as local, school histories, intakes and settings), *Professional* contexts (such as values, teacher commitment and experiences, and ‘policy management’ in schools), *Material* contexts (e.g. staffing, budget, buildings, technology and infrastructure), *External* contexts (e.g. degree and quality of local authority support, pressures and expectations from broader policy context) (Braun et al, 2011, p. 588).

These contextual dimensions inform how different policy actors may interpret and negotiate policy and policy enactment. For example, the situated context of the institution is, as described above, largely influenced by external contexts of neoliberalism and globalization. Some actors may accept and endorse this context, whereas others may challenge and critique intentions of policy given this particular context.

SAS staff are some of many actors involved in the enactment of policy related to skills development and career-readiness of post-secondary students. Ball et al.’s (2011) work posits that actors involved in policy enactment do not engage in a simple agent-receiver relationship, rather, there are multiple positions within policy enactment that actors can assume. Ball et al describe these positions as *narrators*, *entrepreneurs*, *outsiders*, *transactors*, *enthusiasts*, *translators*, *critics*, and *receivers*. The many positions policy actors may take up make for a potentially messy and incoherent process as conflicting values and opinions destabilize the conditions necessary for policy enactment. In this research, it will be useful and revealing to identify how SAS staff are constituted as policy actors, bringing light to how policy has discursive effects beyond the scope of the government, entering into the everyday lives of practitioners in higher education institutions.

Policy & problem representations. Carol Bacchi's (2009) approach to policy analysis, known as the 'what's the problem represented to be?' approach, or WPR approach, is centered around a particular conception of policy and of the problems that policy claim to solve. Bacchi (2009; 2012) draws on Foucauldian concepts to theorize how problems come to be through a turn to practices, investigating how and why problems come to be understood as truths. Bringing attention to policy studies, Bacchi asks how problems are shaped by the solutions that are prescribed to them. She writes, "it is important to make the 'problems' implicit in public policies *explicit*, and to scrutinize them closely" (p. x), and that we should "direct our attention away from assumed 'problems' to the shape and character of problematizations" (p. xi). Similarly to Ball (1994), Bacchi understands policy as discourse, creating particular conditions in which problems are represented, understood, and solved. Bacchi (2009) describes this discursive process as 'problematizations'. Problematizations, the "ways in which particular issues are conceived as 'problems'" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 30), are a form of rule by which social life is governed.

Policy as discourse, as utilized by Bacchi (2009) recognizes that policy and policy statements have material form. This conceptualization intends to "establish discourse in its 'ponderous, awesome materiality', bridging a symbolic-material division" (Foucault, 1972, p. 216, as cited in Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 36). Policies as discourse contribute to the construction of the real ways we perceive and understand issues, rather than just symbolically representing an issue that already exists. In this study, I use problematizations to begin to disrupt the dominant ways in which the issue of skills is discursively represented in policy and in the daily practice of SAS staff at the university level to better understand how this issue is shaping the practice of SAS staff.

In Bacchi's (2012) work, the discursive work of policy is in its contributions to the construction of 'truth' through representations, and creation, of problems. Studying policy in this way "gives access to the spaces within which 'objects' emerge as 'real and 'true,' making it possible to study the strategic relations, the politics, involved in their appearance" (p. 7). Problematizations are a site wherein governance occurs, shaping identities and behaviours under particular rationalities. Bacchi (2009; 2012) employs certain tools to conduct this analysis, including the WPR approach and investigating the use of key concepts, binaries, and categories as techniques of governance.

In Bacchi's (2009) WPR analysis, key concepts, binaries, and categories are understood as techniques of governance that are utilized in policy problem representations as a way to shape identities and behaviours. Key concepts are often things so common in the cultural vernacular that they difficult to detach from the meanings assigned to them, but Bacchi encourages researchers to probe these concepts, and in particular, their uses in constructing problems in a certain way. Binaries are utilized in policy to a relationship wherein one thing is the opposite of the other, but typically these are arranged hierarchically, privileging one at the expense of the other. Categories work to organize things. In people, categories are often linked to identity and are 'central to governing processes' (Bacchi, 2009). In my analysis, I follow Bacchi's (2009) guide to interrogate the key concepts, binaries, and categories as they appear in policy to "reveal the operation of conceptual logics that may act to constrain or limit our understanding of an issue" (p. 7).

Ball and colleagues (1993; 1994; Ball et al, 2011; Braun et al, 2011) and Bacchi's (2009; 2012) conceptualizations of policy as discourse work together to effectively critique policy and bring light to its discursive effects on subjectivities, practice, and those governed.

My analysis will focus on policy as discourse and in particular, will rely on Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach, supported by Ball's (1993; 1994) foundational conceptualizations of policy as discourse.

Literature Review

The following section reviews the literature that contextualizes, informs, and situates this research. This section will review current skills development policy and discourse in Ontario, the professional field of SAS in Canada, experiential learning as a pedagogical approach in higher education, student development theory, and an overview of the infrastructure of career development programs and services at Ontario research universities.

The skills agenda in Ontario. The 'skills gap' has been widely covered in the media (Millar, 2014; Hirsch, 2013; Brown, 2016; Council of Ontario Universities, 2015), prompting a sense of urgency around this issue in employers, policymakers, education institutions, students, and their families. In a literature review conducted by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, claims about the 'skills gap' can be grouped into four separate and, at times, conflicting categories:

Claim 1: Canada will not have enough postsecondary graduates to meet future demand for high-skilled workers;

Claim 2: Canadian postsecondary students are graduating with the wrong credentials to meet current and future labour market demands;

Claim 3: Canadian students have the right credentials but lack the essential skills employers require;

Claim 4: Students have the right skills but lack work experience (Borwein, 2014).

The distinct claims about the ‘skills gap’ are made by the wide range of actors and stakeholders in this issue. Each claim maintains a particular representation of the issue, with its own definition of skills and of postsecondary graduates. These representations, and the ways they manifest in policy recommendations related to the issue, limit understandings of the issue itself, and of the possibilities or options to address the perceived issue (Bacchi, 2009). Within these claims and across media coverage, certain qualities of student employability are frequently discussed and debated. There is debate about the kinds of skills students need to be highly-skilled in, the type of credentials students are choosing to graduate with, and the level of work experience students are able to acquire throughout their university education. This research will focus on the issue of skills as it is taken up in skills development policy and policy discourses in Ontario. In particular, the release of the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy* in 2016 by the Ontario provincial government provide concrete examples of government policy with directives for higher education (Ministry of Finance, 2017; Province of Ontario, 2016; Wynne, 2016). I engage in a document analysis of this text later in this text. Beyond government policy, other key local, national, and global actors are actively influencing the skills agenda at the provincial level in Ontario.

At the core of the skills gap issue are the skills themselves. Questions remain, however, regarding which type of skills students graduating from Ontario universities are lacking – technical, job-specific skills, or the ‘soft’ skills. Emergent within this discourse is the identified importance of the so-called ‘soft’ skills such as communication, team-work, critical thinking and problem solving (McKinsey & Co, 2015). The Organization for Economic Cooperation (OECD), a global policy actor, is contributing to this discourse, referring to these skills as ‘emotional and social skills’ that are beneficial to success in

education, and more broadly in life (OECD, 2015). The OECD's approach to emotional and social skill assessment is currently in development, and adds to their existing skills assessment for adults, the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which assesses skills in literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technological environments (Survey for Adult Skills, 2017). In Ontario, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) is taking up the OECD skills assessment tools, in a pilot study of 11 colleges and 5 universities in Ontario assessing skills proficiency in incoming first-year students and graduating students. HEQCO claims that this pilot study, the Essential Adults Skills Initiative (EASI), will provide institutions with important data regarding their success in skills development from students' entry to graduation, and will "capture the value-added of higher education" (HEQCO, 2016).

Directives from the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy* (Province of Ontario, 2016) call on higher education institutions to ensure all students participate in one "meaningful experiential learning opportunity" (p. 4) during their time as a student in an Ontario university. Experiential learning and work-integrated learning are continually identified by actors in this issue landscape as critical to the success of student skill development. The recent release of Canada's 2017 federal budget solidifies this by specifically increasing investment in work-integrated learning and industry research collaborations for PSE via Mitacs, a non-profit research organization that connects students, higher education institutions, and industry through research internships (Department of Finance Canada, 2017). In addition to skills development, the work-integrated learning solve also addresses the experience gap some claim is the more pressing issue.

Student affairs and services. This study specifically acknowledges that, within the university, the work of developing, implementing, and facilitating programming related to skill development, such as experiential learning and career education, is done by staff in the field of SAS. SAS is a robust and established field in the United States in part due to the tradition of American collegiate life, wherein “students developed an interest in extracurricular activities to educate the whole student: intellect, spirit, and body. Literary societies, fraternal organizations, campus publications, sports teams, and debate and student clubs emerged as informal but integral aspects of college and university life” (Long, 2012: 3). Graduate level preparation programs at American universities for students interested in pursuing a career in SAS are numerous, and several major professional associations exist that also produce peer-reviewed journals, facilitating a culture of research on practice in the field (Publications ACPA, 2018; Publications NASPA, 2018). In Canada, only a small body of research exists in higher education literature about these staff, mostly focused on establishing an understanding of the organizational structure of the field in institutions, and the practitioner’s connection to the professional organization, the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) (Seifert & Burrow, 2013). CACUSS has also contributed to the literature in the field, producing strategic plans and reports as part of the organization’s Identity Project (2013), and collaborating frequently with the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HECQO) on research reports (HECQO, 2016; Seifert, Arnold, Burrow, & Brown, 2011; Stirling, Kerr, Banwell, MacPherson, & Heron, 2016).

The field of student affairs in Canada often goes by many different names, varying from institution to institution, and even within a single institution. These names include Student Life, Student Affairs, Student Experience, Student Services, Student Success,

Student Development, among others. In this study I have chosen to refer to the field as student affairs and services (SAS), keeping in line with the naming practices used in current Canadian research (Seifert & Burrow, 2011), and I maintain a particular focus on SAS in university settings, rather than in the Ontario college system. In Ontario universities, SAS encompasses an incredibly diverse range of services. Often included under this organizational umbrella are staff in student housing and residence, leadership development and mentorship development, career development services, health and wellness, study abroad and other experiential learning programs, first year orientation and transition initiatives, student government and campus organizations, civic engagement and volunteerism, athletics and recreation, and accessibility. Ultimately, the entire field endeavours to support and facilitate student success at the university (Seifert et al, 2011; CACUSS, 2013).

As an undergraduate student, I was introduced to the field of SAS through my involvement in a leadership development program offered through the institution. I later continued to engage with the field in a variety of hired roles, as a work-study student in leadership development programs, as a live-in residence advisor, and closer to the completion of my degree in a contract staff role managing leadership development and mentorship programs. In these roles, I was exposed to a group of people genuinely concerned for, and dedicated to, the well-being and success of students in PSE. When I decided to pursue graduate education, it was clear that I needed to explore the work of these staff further to better understand the work I was beginning to feel quite connected to, and to contribute to the field of knowledge on student affairs in Canadian higher education.

Early approaches to SAS have been referred to as *'in loco parentis'*, wherein campus staff, mainly professors and other academic figures, provided support and authority on

campus in place of parents (Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010; Long, 2012). Evidence of acknowledgement of the importance of services for students emerged in Canadian universities as early as 1925, where university presidents began to reflect upon the benefits of a residential system for students to improve connection and integration of the student into the campus, and on the connection between health and academic success (Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010, p. 8-9). Additionally, specific staff positions had been added to the campus in response to student demographic changes, in particular, the inclusion of women on campus. Queen's University was the first in Canada to appoint a Dean of Women in 1939 (Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010, p. 9). Canadian universities would experience another major demographic change (and enrollment surge) following World War II (Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010, p. 10), prompting review of the services provided on campus and calling for additional support and services for this specialized population, and eventually, the campus in its entirety.

In 1939, President Hatcher of the Memorial University of Newfoundland struck a faculty committee to “[take] steps to improve certain conditions under which our undergraduates do their work” (Hatcher, 1939, as cited in Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010, p.9), demonstrating a clear acknowledgement of the role the institution plays in supporting student success. Memorial would continue to be an influential campus for the development of the field of SAS, through the formation of the first regional professional association for personnel in this field, and later as the first university in Canada to offer a graduate degree with a specific focus on SAS, to be followed later by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, Simon Fraser University, Seneca

College, and most recently, the University of Guelph (Tamburri, 2011; “Laurier’s Faculty of Education adds field of study in student affairs to master’s degree”, 2017).

Today, the field of SAS has continued to diversify to align with changing and growing student populations and with the expectations that accompany the idea of completing a university degree. Of those, securing meaningful employment upon graduation continues to be a priority for students, and thus for SAS staff as well (CUSC, 2016; CACUSS, 2013; Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010). SAS departments have developed comprehensive suites of programming and services for students to engage in alongside their academic courses to explore potential careers, develop career-related skills, practice those skills, and ideally, secure employment. These include full-service career ‘centres’ where staff act as educators and counsellors for students at all levels of study who are exploring career pathways, learning strategies for job search and interview success, or developing workplace relevant skills. These programs are often career-development specific, but they can also include programs related to leadership development or mentorship opportunities within the institution. All programs are generally designed to assist students in their holistic development, seeing to that academic learning and professional learning are pursued synergistically (CACUSS, 2013; CU, 2017; Hardy Cox & Carney Strange, 2010).

In summary, SAS staff have a lengthy history in Canadian higher education, however, as a named professional group in the university setting, they are a relatively new and emerging field. They also encompass a remarkably wide range of services, departments, and programs at the university; essentially, any facet of the university experience that a student may directly interact with, SAS staff are generally involved. In my research, I draw on my experience in the field and take a particular focus on SAS staff who deal with student skills

development and career development, an area that has become a specific focus for provincial policy in a significant trend towards experiential learning.

Experiential learning. Experiential learning is certainly not a new pedagogical tool, but it has seen a considerable resurgence in the last decade (Kolb, 2015). Kolb describes this type of learning as placing “subjective, conscious, and intentional experiencing at the center of the learning process” (Kolb, 2015, p. xvii). Experiential learning incorporates a deep attention to the process of experience as a site for learning, including ongoing reflection and integration of learned concepts into practice. In post-secondary settings, experiential learning is often the term used for learning opportunities that happen outside of the classroom, or in complement to a lecture-based course. This binary of experience and theory has been embedded in the pedagogy from its early development (Kolb, 2015).

Critiques of experiential learning have relied on the ambiguities of experience. Given the considerable influence of context, individual and personal histories, and past experiences on one’s experience today, it becomes difficult to impart learning that is objective (Kolb, 2015). The binary that prioritizes academic learning emerges from this critique; “experiential learning is haphazard, unreliable, and misleading, and it must be corrected by academic knowledge” (Kolb, 2015, p. xx). As scholars in experiential learning adopted a more post-structural and phenomenological approach to understand ‘experience’, there was less reliance on ‘scientific centeredness’ in the theory of experiential learning and these scholars emphasized the need to embed the complexities of the human experience into learning and knowledge (Kolb, 2015).

In post-secondary institutions, there has been a rise in opportunities for experiential learning alongside increases in enrolment in universities, a demand to connect academic

ideas and theories to the lived realities of students and communities, and a “marked trend towards vocationalism” (Kolb, 2015). Actors in PSE in Ontario, including the Ministry of Advanced Education and the Council of Ontario Universities specifically address the nature of experiential learning in Ontario universities as an opportunity to provide students with real-life, relevant work experience that together with their academic education will assist them in achieving career success. Experiential learning in Ontario universities encompass an incredibly broad range of activities, including work-integrated learning such as co-op placements or practicums, community-engaged learning or service learning, volunteering, field schools or courses with a study abroad component, student research opportunities, student leadership opportunities, work-study, and more. Concern exists around the consistent quality of these experiences and the appropriate assessment to apply to them (Kolb, 2015; Elias, 2014) so as to ensure that students are truly benefitting from experiential learning.

Ontario universities have also begun to adopt a tracking and credential system for experiential learning, known as the Co-Curricular Record (CCR). This tool manages a database of co-curricular (not-for-credit) opportunities on campus that are considered experiential and provides students with a place to track and manage their experiential learning opportunities during their degree. In addition, the CCR produces a transcript document that indicates the activity the student participated and the skills and competencies the student identified that they developed in the activity through a post-activity reflection (Elias, 2014). To be included in the database, and therefore eligible to be tracked by students and included on the record, the co-curricular activity must require a certain investment of time and have a reflection component included. This tool exists to incentivize co-curricular

and experiential learning on campus so that students participate in the learning and skill development that happens in these activities.

As I explored, there is some trepidation around the place for experiential learning in the academic environment of a university. A focus on learning outside of the classroom is contrary to much of the lecture and classroom-based theoretical learning that has been traditional to higher education. Arthur Chickering's 1977 reflection on experiential learning in the academy summarizes this hesitation:

There is no question that issues raised by experiential learning go to the heart of the academic enterprise. Experiential learning leads us to question the assumptions and conventions underlying many of our practices. It turns us away from credit hours and calendar time toward competence, working knowledge, and information pertinent to jobs, family relationships, community responsibilities, and broad social concerns. It reminds us that higher education can do more than develop verbal skills and deposit information in those storage banks between the ears. It can contribute to more complex kinds of intellectual development and to more pervasive dimensions of human development required for effective citizenship (Chickering, 1977, p. 86-87 as cited in Kolb, 2015, p. 7-8).

Decades later, Chickering's reflection remains relevant. Experiential learning, for many in the field, represent an innovation to the traditional structure in PSE, bringing relevance and groundedness to theory, connecting what students are learning with broader societal issues and giving students the tools to seek economic success.

Student development theory. The guiding tenet of student development theory is that PSE is a transformational experience for all who participate. Student development theory

is an interdisciplinary field adopted by SAS staff as a tool to ensure the student experience is purposefully guided so as to facilitate development of the individual to their fullest potential as a student, person, and citizen (Koring & Reid, 2009; Patton et al, 2016). As such, student development is frequently defined in student affairs and in this theoretical body as a process of positive growth that students experience as a result of their participation in PSE. This field began to take shape in the 1960s and 1970s as a site of inquiry into the behaviours and experiences of post-secondary students and draws largely on psychological research (Patton et al, 2016). In this section, I explain two foundational theories related to student affairs practice in career development, and I will explore critiques of this body of work.

In SAS work, student development theory is frequently cited as the ‘guiding principles’ for practice and is relied on in program development to ensure that SAS programs and services are ‘grounded’ in theory as evidence of their applicability to student populations. Professional associations for SAS staff encourage knowledge of student development theory as a critical competency for staff success (Fernandez, Fitzgerald, Hambler, & Mason-Innes, 2016), and student development theory is a mainstay in curriculum for graduate programs related to student affairs in higher education (Patton et al, 2016). This body of work importantly gives an academic foundation to a field of practitioners that work within academia. The following two theories have specific connections to career development in student affairs.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) developed seven vectors through which a student experiences development in PSE. They chose ‘vectors’ to describe how these developmental areas can possess a particular direction and magnitude, avoiding assumptions of a linear progression of development (Patton et al, 2016). Chickering and Reisser’s six developmental

vectors are:

1. *Developing competence* includes intellectual and interpersonal aptitudes in addition to physical and manual skills.
2. *Managing emotions* describes the ability to recognize, accept, express, and control emotions.
3. *Moving through autonomy toward interdependence* involves self-direction, the ability to solve problems, and the acceptance of social interdependence.
4. *Developing mature interpersonal relationships* describes the process of respecting and appreciating diversity, as well as developing the capacity for healthy relationships.
5. *Establishing identity* includes a sense of comfort with one's appearance, heritage, role, and lifestyle, resulting in self-acceptance and self-esteem.
6. *Developing purpose* requires personal and interpersonal commitments as well as commitment to vocational choices.
7. *Developing integrity* involves commitment to a value system that balances the needs of self and others as well as affirming one's own core values while respecting others' values and beliefs (p. 43-52).

While each vector in some way contributes to the holistic development of students that will serve them in the workplace, the sixth vector, *developing purpose*, pays particular attention to the role that vocational choice plays in the development of one's sense of purpose throughout PSE. Career choice, and preparation for that choice is seen as a central part of student development and the student experience of PSE, and as such, becomes an area of development for SAS staff to plan for (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010).

Perry's (1968) theory of intellectual and ethical development concerns processes of meaning-making amongst post-secondary students, positing that undergraduates undergo a developmental process that includes four epistemological positions: *dualism*, *multiplicity*, *relativism*, and *commitment*. As students progress through their undergraduate education, they may experience crises, or disequilibrating events that challenge their ontological views and propel them through developmental stages (Koring & Reid, 2009). SAS staff concerned with student career development use Perry's development theory to guide their interactions with students according to the stages students' may find themselves in. For example, SAS staff can provide students with career exploration tools early in their undergraduate education when they are most likely to be in the dualistic phase, rather than encouraging early career choice (Koring & Reid, 2009, p. 99). SAS staff acknowledge that career choice is dynamic and closely linked to a students' developmental journey throughout PSE. They also recognize that, like with Chickering & Reisser's (1993) vectors, this path is not direct, and students face many obstacles and pressures throughout their intellectual and career choice development, and may struggle to identify a career-choice at all during their education (Koring & Reid, 2009).

As evidenced by the abovementioned theories, SAS staff understand student development to be non-linear in nature, influenced heavily by a students' context and previous experiences, but particularly influenced by the many new, challenging, and impactful experiences a student has in PSE, academically and socially (Patton et al, 2016). These theories are important to this analysis because they demonstrate the position held by SAS staff that inform their program development decisions.

However, it is also important to note the limitations of these theories. In particular,

these foundational theories are quite dated. It is important to consider the changing context of PSE over time and bring attention to the contexts within which this foundational research was conducted. In the text *Student Development in College*, Patton et al (2016) acknowledge that much of the existing theories included in this field are “based on the values of White, middle-class, and educated people, predominantly men” (p. 399). In addition, the roots of this field in psychological research places a focus on “internal developmental processes” (p. 400), rather than on a more holistic approach that includes understanding how the campus environment and systemic oppression impact student development. There has been little formal critique of student development theory in the field. As Patton et al (2016) write, “student development is almost always seen as a good thing” (p. 399). Some scholars have written about ‘racelessness’ in student development theory (Patton, McEwen, Rendon, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007), and about the failure of student development theory to effectively include all students and address issues facing SAS staff today (Gillett-Karam, 2016). In using these theories and engaging with this body of work, SAS staff should also intentionally engage in a critical examination of the assumptions in these theories and how they might differently impact students participating in their programs.

Student mental health. PSE is a significant investment of time, finances, and energy, and requires a great deal of responsibility to manage the expectations of academic study. It can also be a time when students first live on their own, develop relationships, discover their interests, experiment with alcohol and drugs, and begin to take on adult responsibilities (Lunau, 2012; Council of Ontario Universities, 2017). For many students who attend university, the transition to life as a university student, while their personal life as a family member, employee, volunteer, etc. continues, can be stark. Mental health on campus has

emerged as a crisis in the last decade. The American College Health Association's (2016) National College Health Assessment survey found that 65 percent of students reported experiencing overwhelming anxiety in the previous school year, and 46 percent reported feeling so depressed it was difficult to function (ACHA, 2016; COU, 2017). Both of these findings increased by at least 40 percent from the previous survey conducted in 2013. Research has found that improved mental health on campus is critical for student retention and persistence to completion, and can be improved by cultivating positive relationships between students and faculty, encouraging and welcoming diversity and inclusion, and ensuring that the campus is providing ample and well-resourced services to support students (O'Keeffe, 2013; Cleary, Walter, & Jackson, 2011; Rushowy, 2017; Pfeffer, 2016; COU, 2017)

Some research has connected student mental health with the pressures of career development and job search (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2011; Pace & Quinn, 2000). Pace & Quinn (2000) report that students pursue career counselling and mental health counselling with significant overlap, and discuss their fears about the future, fear of failure, and feelings of depression and anxiety in relation to career decisions. They write that the connection between mental health and career is clear and to disconnect these in service-delivery may be of harm in best supporting students (Pace & Quinn, 2000). This is reflected in some career education models at Ontario universities, including the institution where this research was conducted. Career counsellors in the central SAS department are also registered psychotherapists, bringing a clinical model to their approach to career development in post-secondary students (CU, 2017b).

On campus, mental health services have needed to grow alongside the increased

presence of this issue. Universities provide psychological services to students through their medical centres, and there has been a significant increase in wellness-based activities, programs, and services that exist outside of the traditional medical service delivery model (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2011; CACUSS & CMHA, 2013). The CACUSS Mental Health Framework, developed with the Canadian Mental Health Association (2013) describes three dimensions of services and resources provided to categories of students – all students, students with concerns about coping, and students with mental health concerns. The actions to support all students include the broad organization of the institution, including implementing policy related to mental health, pursuing awareness of mental health on campus and building a supportive and inclusive campus. The next level of the framework, addressing students with concerns about coping, includes developing community capacities to respond to student concerns (CACUSS & CMHA, 2013). Some Ontario institutions have begun to offer Mental Health First Aid training for students and other university community members to increase the ability of community members to respond to early indicators (CACUSS & CMHA, 2013; Pfeffer, 2016). The third level, supporting students with mental health concerns includes a robust and accessible mental health service on campus and developing crisis management procedures (CACUSS & CMHA, 2013). There is space in this framework for traditional approaches to mental health, as well as the health and wellness programs and services that may not be medical in nature whose purpose is to increase the conversation around mental health and provide an accessible space for students to access wellness activities to support themselves.

The Province of Ontario dedicated \$6 million in funding per year for the next three years in the 2017 budget to address mental health on college and university campuses. This

funding is intended to increase access to existing mental health services on campus and support campus specific initiatives including resources to hire additional staff (Ontario Newsroom, 2017). Post-secondary students are a priority group in terms of mental health policy, representing a large portion of young adults in the province (COU, 2017).

Opportunities for Research

The crises on campus regarding student mental health and student employment have yielded calls for action in media, policy, and the public. Much of this work in PSE institutions falls to SAS staff, indicating the importance of this field in PSE, and the need for further research to better understand this field. SAS has yet to secure a consistent space in research on Canadian higher education; much of the research on students, access, pedagogy, and more in higher education in Canada is of significant interest to staff in SAS, but the staff themselves have infrequently been featured. There is a dedicated group, however, producing interesting descriptive work, mainly out of the Ontario Institute of Education at the University of Toronto (Seifert & Burrow, 2013; Seifert, Arnold, Burrow, & Brown, 2011), as mentioned previously. Importantly, my research builds on these explorations of the structure of staff in SAS in Canadian higher education by exploring their role and relationship to and with labour market policy. This research seeks to understand how SAS staff in an Ontario research university enact skills development policy in their work with students. As such, it is poised to contribute simultaneously to the work of policymakers working on issues related to the labour market and higher education, to the public post-secondary institutions policy intends to govern, to the academic community producing scholarship on higher education more generally in Canada, and to the work of SAS staff themselves. My research uniquely addresses policy in its exploration of the work of SAS staff, with the intention of

understanding how the scope of skills development policy extends into the everyday reality of professionals in higher education who are ultimately responsible for its realization in post-secondary institutions.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the theoretical framework that guides my research. I explored the effects of neoliberalism as a governing rationality on the structure and operations of PSE. I also explained how a critical policy analysis, in contrast to a traditional rationalist analysis, brings notions of power to the fore, examining assumptions at work in policy and prioritizing an exploration of the lived experiences of those governed by policy. In this section, I draw specifically on Ball and colleagues (Ball, 1993, 2015; Ball et al, 2011; Braun et al, 2011), and Bacchi (2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2015) to ground my research in a critical approach. In this chapter I also provided an overview of the existing literature relevant to this research. In particular, I explored the skills agenda in Ontario, with attention to how the issue of skills has discursively been addressed in the media, by institutions and organizations, and in policy. I provided a background on the field of SAS and on the pedagogical tool that is a major focus of skills development efforts, Experiential Learning. I also described some important theories that guide the work of SAS staff from the field of Student Development. Finally, I explore the issue of student mental health on university campuses, an emergent issue of major significance to those studying or working in higher education. I additionally described how my research uniquely addresses a gap in the Canadian literature on higher education, student success, and SAS staff. In the following chapter, I will describe the design of the research, including the context of the research sites

and participants, the process of data collection, and I explain my approach to analyzing the data.

CHAPTER 3: Research Design & Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the methodological framework and methods used in my study, including a discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of this qualitative research, the design of the study, participant selection, and data collection and analysis. Using document analysis and semi-structured interviews with SAS staff, my study explored how SAS staff enact provincial policy related to skills development at a large research-intensive university in Ontario, to which I refer to as City University (CU). In this chapter I discuss the theoretical background informing my methodological choices, justify my study design, describe my participants and the particular policies I selected to include in my study, and explain how I analyzed the data.

Introduction

Qualitative research broadly seeks to understand phenomena “from the perspective of those being studied” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 1). However, the qualitative tradition also acknowledges the role that the researcher’s own experiences, beliefs, and biases have in the process of research from developing particular questions, to the collection of data by way of the researcher as the instrument, to the ways in which a researcher goes about answering those questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, my experiences as a student, as an emerging professional in the field of SAS, and as a graduate student researcher in education, all play a significant role in how this research was designed.

The philosophical underpinnings of this study, that is, the ontological and epistemological positions, draw largely on an interpretivist framework recognizing that realit(ies) are socially constructed and individuals create unique subjective meanings of their experiences of the worlds in which they live (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell, 2013). In

interpretive research, the specific context in which the participants live and work is important, as this approach to research acknowledges the complexities of social and cultural histories of particular sites (Creswell,2013). As mentioned, interpretive qualitative researchers often reflect critically on their own background and experience to “position themselves” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25) as thoroughly as possible. Relying on the views of the participant’s experiences as they share them with me, and acknowledging the experiences I bring to this research, the methodology I explore in this chapter allows me to make a particular interpretation of the data collected in the context of the research site.

However, moving beyond the interpretivist positioning, I also bring a theoretical framework to the study that requires a critical, subjectivist position. In doing so, I aim to bring a critical lens to this research, recognizing that realit(ies) exist within particular socio-political historical contexts, where power is unequally distributed and leveraged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Certain realities are privileged within the context of this study, and the methodology of this research aimed to identify and address the implications of this.

Research Sites

This research was conducted at one of Ontario’s large public research-intensive universities, to be referred to in this analysis as City University (CU) to maintain confidentiality. CU consistently ranks within the top ten universities in Canada (QS Rankings, 2018; Maclean’s, 2017) for academic research, student experience, and in a recent ranking, graduate employability (QS Employability rankings). As a research-intensive university, a strong emphasis is placed on faculty, graduate, and undergraduate research. CU is often located as one of the top institutions for quality student experience on campus (Maclean’s, 2017). Additionally, in the university’s most recent *Strategic Mandate*

Agreement with the Province of Ontario, CU is committed to significantly increasing opportunities for students to engage in experiential learning alongside, and within, their academic modules (CU, 2017). Limiting this study to one university allowed me to better understand the dynamics within the central SAS department at CU, how these staff conceptualize their roles within the specific context of their institution, and higher education at large.

CU's main SAS department is operated centrally, however, SAS staff also operate out of faculty- or departmental-specific units, conducting similar work for their smaller and more specific student populations. My study is focused on the staff operating in the central SAS department, who are responsible for designing and implementing campus-wide programming, across programs, departments, faculties, and year of study. This central department coordinates programming in several different areas of student development, including leadership development, student on-campus employment, orientation and transitions, career development, career counselling, employer relations, and experiential learning.

In this research, I also consider the relevant policies and statements as 'sites' within which research can be conducted and around which policy actors assemble. My research analyzes documents from City University, the Province of Ontario, the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, the Council of Ontario Universities, and the Conference Board of Canada. These organizations are key actors in the space of Ontario PSE and skills development, as determined by my research on this topic to prepare to conduct the study.

Interview Participant Selection

Participants for my study were recruited from the online public directory of the SAS Department at City University following approval from the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (Appendix C) from Western University, where I am a graduate student. Based on my familiarity with the field of SAS, and with the SAS department at CU, I was interested in recruiting participants with a particular expertise or working relationship with the issue of skills and career development in students at CU. This is known as purposive or purposeful sampling, where the researcher makes particular recruitment decisions with the intent of “select[ing] a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). The selection criteria for this study was therefore limited to staff active during the 2017/2018 academic year in the central SAS department at CU, which has a broad mandate of providing programs and services to students at CU with the goal of creating opportunities for student success through skills development, community engagement, experiential learning, promoting health and well-being, and supporting student transitions to the workplace. (CU, 2017b). The central SAS department’s focus on these aspects of the student experience, in particular, developing ‘workplace-relevant transferrable skills,’ experiential learning, and community engagement, made this department a purposeful site within which to conduct this research, rather than in another SAS unit, for example, CU’s Residence & Student Housing department or SAS staff embedded within a specific faculty. Recruiting staff from the central department was an important criterion-based selection decision so as to maximize the potential for learning from information-rich sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97).

17 SAS staff were invited to participate in my study via their institutional email addresses. If interested, participants were required to send an email in return to myself, the

student investigator. One interview 45-60 minutes in length was required to participate in my study, as well as completing an optional member-check by providing feedback on the interview transcript within three weeks of the initial interview date. The intent was to recruit ten participants for my study. Ultimately, six staff responded to my invitation to participate in the research, and one additional participant was recruited via snowballing from the initial set of participants. These participants represent those in the SAS department in management (Directors), in direct student-facing roles (Coordinators and Counsellors), and in a new Special Project Team, and thus also represent a range of experiences and time of service in the field of SAS and at CU. Nearly all participants hold a Master's degree in Education or a related field.

Data Collection

Following the receipt of ethics approval from the NMREB, I invited the identified SAS staff to participate in the research. I also collected documents relevant to this research from the Province of Ontario and the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, the Council of Ontario Universities, the Conference Board of Canada, and from City University. The data collected for this research therefore came from two sources: interview transcripts from semi-structured interviews with SAS staff and policy documents from stakeholders in the skills and PSE policy arena.

Documents. My research includes an analysis of policy documents related to skills development in PSE institutions, and in particular, policy documents from the context of the province of Ontario in Canada, and City University, the institutional site of my research. Documents play an important role in this research, and my use of documents in this research is guided by Bacchi & Goodwin's (2016) conceptualization of policy problematizations, or

problem representations through policy. In particular, this analysis recognizes the role of documents and statements in the enactment of policy, and the power of problematization of the issue of skills in post-secondary students. These documents, statements, and policies have material form that has significant implications in policy and in the lived realities of those intended to be governed.

There are an abundance of documents including research and technical reports, policy directives, and media coverage related to the ‘skills gap’ in PSE in Ontario (Millar, 2014; Brown, 2016; Usher, 2014; Hirsch, 2013; McKinsey & Co, 2015; Council of Ontario Universities, 2012; Council of Ontario Universities, 2015; Province of Ontario, 2016; Wynne, 2016; Stirling et al, 2016; Conference Board of Canada, 2015). These documents assist in creating a context within which SAS staff are enacting career-readiness policy, that is, their work is influenced by external sources of pressure and assessment, not bounded solely within the institution. Documents included in this analysis are from particular actors, including the Ontario provincial government broadly and the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD), as well as significant actors in the higher education sphere such as institutions themselves, the Council of Ontario Universities, the Conference Board of Canada’s Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education.

These documents were selected for this study using the same purposeful sampling used to identify participants for semi-structured interviews, with the intention of maximizing the potential for learning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The documents were selected for their relevance to the issue with consideration for the authoring organization. For example, institutional documents were collected only from City University, where the semi-structured interviews were also being conducted. The documents collected were available publicly on

each organization's respective website. The criteria for the inclusion of these documents was first to represent a scope of actors specific to PSE, the field of SAS, and skills development policy in Ontario. The skills discourse has a global, national, provincial, and local context. While these contexts certainly influence each other, my study focuses on the provincial and local contexts and thus I selected documents that would represent this. Then, I ensured that these documents were created in reference to the 'skills gap' or to the pedagogical tools offered as solutions to the problem of the skills gap, such as experiential learning. I chose to exclude documents produced by actors in industry, by which I broadly mean the workforce, so as to maintain a focus on the practices within educational institutions. Documents were collected and analyzed in early 2018.

The documents from City University include the university's *Strategic Mandate Agreement* (SMA) and the central SAS department's *Strategic Plan*. The SMA is a policy document that is produced in partnership with the Ontario MAESD. Each post-secondary institution in Ontario produces this document to state the institution's specific unique offering to students that differentiates them from other institutions for a certain time period. These agreements are renewed every three years. The Ontario MAESD web page (2018) for Strategic Mandate Agreements indicates that these documents are intended to promote "student success and institutional excellence" and "encourage institutions to work with the government to help build a highly skilled workforce". The central SAS department's strategic plan is a policy document produced internally at CU to describe the vision and action plan of the department to achieve key outcomes and growth towards supporting student success at CU. Two documents from are included from Ontario governmental actors, including the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy* (HSWS), and the MAESD *Guiding*

Principles for Experiential Learning. The HSWS document is an Ontario policy document that was produced by an expert panel and includes the recommendations for action and timelines for implementation of the policy. The HSWS includes sections specific to PSE in Ontario. The *Guiding Principles for Experiential Learning* is a policy document produced by the MAESD and provides specific guidelines for experiential learning opportunities in Ontario institutions, including what can be considered experiential learning and what must be included for the opportunity to receive that label. I also include a document from the Council of Ontario Universities, an organization that represents all universities in Ontario. This document, *Bringing Life to Learning*, intends to promote the experiential opportunities that exist at Ontario universities and includes testimonies from students and from industry actors about the skills developed through experiential learning that increases opportunities for career success. The final document included, *The State of Skills and PSE in Canada*, is a research report from the Conference Board of Canada, describing the ‘state’ of skills and PSE in Canada. The report outlines the key issues in the problem of the ‘skills gap’ and offers recommendations for policy and practice. A list of these documents, and brief versions of the descriptions above, can be found in Table 2 below. Documents collected from City University are identified by their general purpose, rather than the document’s specific title, to maintain the institution’s anonymity.

Table 2

Policy Documents

Document title	Organization	Year	Brief description
Strategic Mandate Agreement	City University	2017	An agreement created between the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development

			and City University to indicate the institution's specific and unique priorities for the period of 2017-2020.
SAS Department Strategic Plan	City University	2017	The central SAS Department at CU's vision and action plans for the time period of 2017-2023.
Building the Workforce of Tomorrow: A Shared Responsibility (Ontario's Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy)	Province of Ontario	2016	A report produced by the Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel outlining the recommendations that form the Ontario Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy.
Bringing Life to Learning at Ontario Universities	Council of Ontario Universities	2014	A promotional document highlighting the opportunities for skills development through experiential learning available at Ontario universities.
Guiding Principles for Experiential Learning	Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development	2017	A government document stating the requirements for experiential learning opportunities to be used by post-secondary institutions.
The State of Skills and PSE in Canada	Conference Board of Canada (Authors: Munro,	2014	A research document created by a non-governmental organization describing the key issues addressed by actors in regards to skills and post-secondary education.

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The purpose of collecting these documents and conducting a policy analysis of this issue was to understand how the issue of skills development in post-secondary students is being represented by the various stakeholders, and therefore how the ‘problem’ is recommended to be solved, contributing to the analysis of my research questions:

- What initiatives do SAS staff engage with in their work as sites to enact skills policies?
- What discourses and actors emerge as powerful in the enactment of skills policies and what is the effect of these powerful discourses on the practices of SAS staff?
- What discourses and actors are excluded/marginalized and what is the effect of this exclusion on the practices of SAS staff?

In particular, the policy analysis in this study helps to identify discourses that are guiding the issue of skills in the PSE space in Canada. The policy analysis, as it includes policy documents from both institutional and governance sources, will assist in identifying how skills development policy in Ontario is enacted at City University, a research university in Ontario.

Interviews. In this research, I utilized semi-structured interviews, where I engaged in “conversations with a purpose” (Dexter, 1970, p. 136 as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108) with participants intentionally sampled from the central SAS department at City

University, a large research-intensive university in Ontario. Given that the intent of this study is to understand the experiences of staff in the field of SAS, interviews were selected as the most effective method to do so. The purpose of the interviews was to engage directly with the staff themselves through conversation to learn how they interpret the issue of skills and career development in their roles as staff supporting student success. Merriam & Tisdell (2016), outline the general characteristics of semi-structured interviews, including,

Interview guide includes a mix of more and less structured interview questions; All questions used flexibly; Usually specific data required from all respondents; Largest part of interview guided by list of questions or issues to be explored; No predetermined wording or order (p. 110).

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for participants to emphasize what is important and meaningful to them based on how they interpret the questions, and for myself, the researcher, to follow up or probe further on particular topics that the participant may bring up themselves that are interesting or revelatory in the context of the study. This interview structure, and my guiding questions, assumed that all participants would share a common language around student development, SAS, and general post-secondary student career development initiatives such as experiential learning or work-integrated learning. Patton (2015) writes, “using words that make sense to the interviewee, words that reflect the respondent’s world view, will improve the quality of data obtained during the interview” (p. 454). My familiarity and experience in the field of SAS lends to my ability to authentically connect with participants over this shared experience and shared vocabulary. Interviews were conducted following this series of questions:

1. Describe your job in this department. How long have you been in this role? How did you come to work in the field of SAS?
2. What are the most important issues for students you take up in your day to day work? Why are these important?
3. In your experience, how are students being prepared to transition to the world of work following their undergraduate education?
4. What kind of programs do you work on that help students develop transferable skills?
5. What is the 'skills gap' in Ontario? How does this show up in your work with students?
6. How would you describe the importance of preparing students for the workforce in your work?
7. Are you familiar with Ontario policies like the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy* or the *Career Kickstart Strategy*?
8. Does this policy impact your work? Who in your department talks about this policy?
9. What aspects of the policy, as you understand it, are most applicable to undergraduate student career readiness/preparation?

The interviews were conducted in person. Staff were given the option of selecting a location, on- or off-campus, for the interview. All staff elected to host myself, the student researcher, on-campus, in the office of the SAS department, either in their personal office or in a central board room. To begin each interview, I offered a brief review of the Letter of Information that had been provided to them in the initial invitation and addressed any questions the participants may have had related to the study. I also received consent from each participant to be recorded and reiterated that all efforts to maintain confidentiality and

anonymity would be taken, including any direct quotations from the interview used in publication of the study would be ‘blinded’ and not directly attributed to them. My interviews followed a semi-structured approach, with a list of questions that guided the flow of the interview but allowed for flexibility within the interview based on the participant’s expertise and familiarity with the topic area.

Following the interview, I transcribed the data verbatim, spending time with the recorded interview creating the transcript to familiarize myself with the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcript and given the opportunity to complete an optional member-check, providing any clarifications or revisions to the transcript. Member checks are a measure of internal validity, ensuring that I, the researcher, was not misinterpreting the participant’s responses and that the participant felt that their voice and experiences were appropriately reflected in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). Data from the semi-structured interviews sought to further answer my research questions above by investigating the experiences of student affairs staff enacting policy related to skills development in the PSE context. All participants indicated an interest in receiving a copy of the study results following completion of the project.

Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis is to make sense, or make meaning, of the data collected. In my study, data analysis occurred throughout the data collection process, so as to help identify emergent themes as they came up and to begin to draw connections between the literature, my theoretical framework, and the data. In my discourse analysis, I used Carol Bacchi (2009, 2012) and Ball’s (1993, 1994) conceptualization of policy as discourse to broadly guide the analysis. Specifically, to analyze the policy documents, I used Bacchi’s (2009) WPR

approach. I used Merriam & Tisdell's (2016) 'inductive and comparative' thematic coding method to analyze the findings from the interviews to identify emergent discourses. I began the data analysis by analyzing the documents, then conducted the interviews and analyzed the interview data. However, the data analysis process for these two types of data overlapped and informed each other. I returned to the data frequently as I progressed through data collection and analysis, which strengthened my understanding of the issue and of the participants' experience. Together, these findings begin to reveal how discourse shapes policy and practice in this space.

Document analysis. Ball and colleagues' (1993; Maguire, Hoskins, Ball, and Braun, 2011) conceptualization of policy as discourse relies on a Foucauldian approach to discourse, that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1986, p. 49 as cited in Maguire et al, 2011). In this way, policies as discourse are formative and productive, shaping the actions and behaviours of those the policy intends to govern. Bacchi (2009) extends this analysis in the 'what's the problem represented to be?' approach, asking how policies as discourse actually begin to form the problems they claim to be solving by way of the representation of the problem in the policy itself.

'What's the problem represented to be?' In this approach, also known as the WPR approach, Bacchi challenges the presumption that policy serves to solve social problems and she explores how policies themselves imply a particular conception of the problem needing to be solved. She says that "Policies give *shape* to 'problems'; they do not *address* them" (Bacchi, 2009, p. x, emphasis in original). Bacchi's emphasis on problems, or problematizations, is important because it "directs attention to the ways in which particular representations of 'problems' play a central role in how we are governed" (Bacchi, 2009, p.

xi). Using a lens of critical policy analysis, this research used the WPR approach to analyze policy documents (Table 2) and to analyze data from interviews with SAS staff by drawing attention to problematizations and the assumptions that underpin problem representations. Bacchi asks a series of questions to draw attention to problematizations in policy. Bacchi's questions are a guide and can be utilized by researchers creatively to best achieve their research goals. That is, not all questions need to be answered to effectively conduct a critical policy analysis (Bacchi, 2009). Bacchi's guide of six questions are as follows:

1. What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences?
Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced? (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2)

In this analysis, I chose to focus mainly on the question of 'what's the problem represented to be?' and 'what presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?' (Questions 1 and 2). Bacchi (2009) describes Question 1 as a "clarification exercise" (p. 2). The purpose of asking what the problem is represented to be is to begin to trouble the supposed problem the policy intends to solve. Bacchi suggests looking to solutions to 'work backwards' to better understand how the problem is constructed and represented in policy. I also investigated Question 4, what is left unproblematic or silenced in the problem representation. This question begins to bring about the "critical potential" (p. 12)

of the WPR approach. Specifically, Question 4 intends to bring attention to the ways problem representations restrict or constrain the issue at hand by creating particular conditions in which the problem exists. By identifying what is left silenced, the analysis can begin to glean other factors or issues that fail to be examined due to the dominance asserted by the particular problem representation in the policy. Finally, I used Question 5, what effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’? to discuss the implications of the problem investigation. Question 5 extends the critical analysis and intends to better understand how policy problem representations “function to benefit some and harm others” (p. 15). My analysis focuses on the discursive effects that result from particular problem representations. That is, how the representations of problems in certain ways limit the ways we understand what the problem is and what solutions might be possible.

Key concepts, categories, and binaries. Central to this approach to policy analysis is disrupting the assumptions and ‘conceptual logics’ that underpin the problem representation. Bacchi (2009) describes these as binaries, categories, and key concepts. Binary relationships, like public/private, nature/culture, and others, imply a hierarchical relationship wherein one is better than the other. Binaries can limit how we understand and interpret certain issues. For example, skills policy often implies a binary of skilled vs. non-skilled workers. The policy discourse that utilizes this type of binary limits the possibilities for students to recognize different skills, as the scope of skills required to be considered ‘skilled’ in this policy context becomes narrowed. Similarly, particular conceptions or meanings of key concepts employed by policy impacts how that policy constructs a problem. Categories, and in particular, people categories, “reflect a way of organizing behaviours and people that has not always existed across space and time” (9). In a WPR analysis, binaries, categories, and key concepts are

important to identify and explore “where they appear in policies and how they function to shape the understanding of the issue” (p. 7). Bacchi’s conception of policy and the WPR approach are useful in this research to explore how different actors understand and utilize the issue of skills based on their representation of the issue in policy efforts.

Thematic coding of interview data. To conduct analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews, I utilized ‘inductive and comparative’ (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 195-221) thematic coding. The purpose of conducting a thematic analysis of the interview data was to interpret the meaning that SAS staff assign to the notion of skills and post-secondary students, as well as their processes of interpreting and implementing policy in this field, answering my research questions. In this analysis of interview data, I also followed Bacchi’s WPR approach, continuing the analysis conducted on the data collected from documents. To do this, I used Merriam & Tisdell’s method of thematic coding to identify significant discourses that emerged through the interview data, which I refer to as themes. Together with the analysis of relevant documents, my data provides insights regarding the meaning-making processes and practices of SAS staff at City University in the context of skills development policy recommendations for post-secondary institutions in Ontario, Canada.

Merriam & Tisdell (2016) recommend an ongoing process of analysis beginning during data collection. Guided by this structure, I began data analysis during interview data collection by maintaining a regular research journal and taking jot notes during interviews where I intuitively recorded important themes, unexpected answers from participants, and specific wording/language used by participants. Following the completion of the interview data collection period, I organized interview data (transcripts) into broad categories or

themes by coding data ‘potentially relevant’ for answering my research questions. This initial open coding process allowed me to then return to the data and group codes into the categories or themes. I repeated this process across all interview transcripts, ultimately constructing “categories or themes that capture some recurring pattern that cuts across [the] data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 207).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical review of this study was conducted by the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board at Western University in London, Ontario, Canada, the institution in which I am enrolled as a graduate student. This study is subject to ethical considerations due to inclusion of human participants through in the interview process. In my study, all participants were over the age of 19, self-selected to participate, provided their consent to participate in the recorded interview process, were provided the opportunity to complete member-checks, and could withdraw their participation at any time. Participants were provided with a Letter of Information (LOI) in advance. The LOI indicated that there were no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study (see Appendix C). By participating in the study, participants would have the opportunity to contribute to a growing field of research in Canadian higher education on the work of student affairs staff and student success. Participation in this research was in no way linked to the participant’s performance in their professional roles. In addition, any and all efforts to maintain confidentiality and anonymity were taken, including using pseudonyms and other anonymous identifiers for institutional programs and services that may have been identifying, and attributing direct quotations only to pseudonyms or other de-identified descriptors.

Trustworthiness

The procedures for this study were designed with trustworthiness or validity of the data in mind. In particular, I transcribed the interviews myself as soon as possible following the interview, using the audio recordings, and referencing any notes I took during the interview, so as to ensure the transcripts accurately represented the conversation that occurred. Member checks were utilized to allow the participants to give feedback regarding their interview transcript, ensuring their voice was heard through this process.

I also sought to address my positionality in this research as an ‘insider’, considering my previous experience in the field of SAS, a relatively small field, particularly within a single province. I had previously encountered some participants in this study through my work in the field, however I had no influence over the participants in their choice to participate in the research, or not. While my familiarity with the field did allow me to connect quickly and authentically with participants, I made every effort to continually acknowledge my own biases and assumptions by avoiding leading questions or sharing my personal opinions. Keeping a research journal alongside the interview process allowed me to approach this work with autoethnographic sensibility. Approaching this work ‘autoethnographically’ means that I acknowledge how my experiences are embedded in the data. In conducting this research, I endeavoured to be aware of my positionality as an emerging professional in the field of SAS, a user of career-readiness and skills development programs, and as an educational researcher invested in the topic. I also acknowledge that my knowledge and analysis of this topic is informed by my past and ongoing experiences (Mosse, 2006; Anderson, 2006).

Throughout this research I also engaged in critical self-reflection through a regular journal practice. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018)

describe critical reflexivity as a tool for internal validity. Ongoing self-reflection with an auto-ethnographic sensibility is important to this research, as I am deeply connected to the topic as a student in the Ontario PSE system, user of skills development and career readiness programs at the University, an emerging professional in the field of SAS, and an educational researcher. At times, my sense of self and professional identity is significantly wrapped up in the site and topic and research. A reflexive practice such as journaling allowed me an opportunity to acknowledge and incorporate my experiences and familiarity with the site into the data, reflect on the interconnectedness of my knowledge, the site of research, and the data collected (Mosse, 2006), and theorize about broad social phenomena based on these observations. I was first introduced to similar programming offered through the central SAS department at City through roles I held at another institution in Ontario, previous to the completion of this study. My involvement in these roles certainly had an impact on the development of my interest in experiential learning and the kinds of programs implemented by SAS staff. These experiences play a role in framing how I understand, question, and critique the issue of skills and post-secondary students. While I do not consider my reflexive practice a formal source of data in this study, I acknowledge my connection to the topic and the site of research in an effort to make my positionality explicit in this research.

Another method of internal validity is triangulation. In my study, I utilize multiple methods and multiple sources of data, two types of triangulation discussed by Denzin (1978). By collecting data in documents and in interviews, I was able to check my findings against each other to ensure they were credible. While I interviewed SAS staff, the staff that participated came from different perspectives, representing different functional areas and

levels of responsibility in the central SAS department. In ensuring this, I conducted a method of triangulation to ensure that my data was not coming from a singular source.

Limitations

A limitation of this research is that it does not aim to provide insight into the experience of students participating in the SAS programs. Many students do not participate in programs or services offered by this field in the institution and continue to persist to graduation and into the workforce with success. How do students conceptualize their education and their futures in the workforce? What type of skills development training do students wish to receive based on how these conceptions? Why do students see value, or not, in participating in programs offered by SAS departments? Future research in Canadian higher education should consider how the student experience influences programs and services offered on campus to answer questions such as these. In addition, it is possible that the experience and actions of SAS staff practicing in faculty-specific units, particularly those with already established curricular experiential learning opportunities, may be different than those of the participants in this study practicing in a centrally operated SAS unit. Finally, the small sample size of this study limits the opportunity for grand conclusions or generalizable findings about the field of SAS in Canada; however, this is not the intention of the research. Rather, the rich insights provided by the participants in this study provide an opportunity to better understand how SAS staff operate locally at City University in relation to provincial level policy, with hopes of encouraging further research in this field.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the methodological framework and the specific methods used in my study. I provided a justification for the use of semi-structured interviews and

document analysis to answer my research questions related to the enactment of skills development policy by SAS staff in an Ontario research university. The processes of participant selection, data collection, and data analysis methods were also shared, as well as brief explorations of the ethical considerations, triangulation methods, and study limitations.

Chapter 4: Findings

The following chapter describes the findings from data I collected, from relevant policy documents and semi-structured interviews, to complete this study. The data presented in this chapter are presented with the research questions identified earlier in this report in mind and seek to answer these questions so as to better understand the experience of SAS staff in enacting provincial skills development policy in their roles at the university working directly with post-secondary students. Specifically, I present data collected from documents using Bacchi's concepts of problem representations and key concepts, categories, and binaries. The data from interviews with SAS staff participants is organized into themes that emerged through the process of coding data, addressing discourses SAS engage in in the enactment of skills development policy.

Document Findings

In this research, I analyzed six policy documents released by actors with interest in the issue of skills and PSE. These actors were selected for their relevance to the issue and relation to the site of research, first by ensuring that documents represented actors from government, PSE, and non-governmental research organizations, and then by ensuring the documents were specifically related to the problem of the 'skills gap' and the practices employed to solve it. To analyze the documents, I utilized Bacchi's (2009) series of questions, the WPR approach, and specifically used Question 1, "what is the problem represented to be in a specific policy?", and Question 2, "What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?" (p. 48). The findings presented in this chapter will highlight these two questions.

Representations of the Problem of the ‘Skills Gap’

Following Bacchi’s (2009) approach to policy analysis, this section presents three significant representations of the problem of the ‘skills gap’ present in the documents I analyzed.

University program structure. Actors suggest various solutions to the problem of the ‘skills gap’, including making experiential/work-integrated learning eligible for academic credit and/or required for completion of the Bachelor’s degree, increasing opportunities for students to explore entrepreneurship and have international experiences alongside their academic career, increasing prevalence of skills development programming by SAS staff across campus, and cultivating a deeper connection in the undergraduate curriculum to industry specific needs. This common representation of the problem of the ‘skills gap’ is in relation to the structure of the full-time undergraduate degree; the traditional four-year Bachelor’s degree program allows little space for flexibility in terms of accessing opportunities that develop skills that will help students find success in the workplace. The problem of the ‘skills gap’ is therefore that the structure of a full-time undergraduate university degree is not reflective of the current needs and desires of students and of industry, that academic courses are not providing a complete learning experience in terms of skills development. There is little, if any, attention paid to the experiences of part-time students in the documents, and a significant focus on the structure of a full-time program.

Opportunities for credit. City University’s institutional *Strategic Mandate Agreement* (SMA) (CU, 2017a) and the central SAS department’s *Strategic Plan*¹ (CU, 2017b) specifically indicate their dedication to increasing opportunities for experiential or work-

¹ To maintain the institution’s anonymity, direct quotations from these documents will not be used.

integrated learning that are eligible for academic credit. In these documents, City University shares in the provincial goal of providing meaningful experiential opportunities to all students before graduation (CU, 2017a, 2017b), and reports on shift in these opportunities being provided only as co-curricular to curricular, embedding ‘real-life’ experience into the university’s academic mandate. The central SAS department lists embedding for-credit SAS programs and services in academic programs as goal in their vision to strengthen collaboration between SAS and academic divisions of the institution (CU, 2017b).

Entrepreneurship. Actors also call for greater attention in the post-secondary sector to exposing students to entrepreneurship and international experiences during their degrees. The *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy* (HSWS) refers to entrepreneurship as an ‘new and collaborative approach’ to skills development in the post-secondary sector (Province of Ontario, 2016). Entrepreneurship as a career pathway is represented in the HSWS as an option that needs greater promotion to students through the implementation of entrepreneurship hubs or ‘incubators’ on campus. These entrepreneurship hubs are experiential in nature, cultivating creative and innovative student ideas and connecting students to industry leaders, in recognition that today’s economy “has a greater call on these competencies” (Province of Ontario, 2016, p. 16).

Similarly, the Conference Board of Canada (Munro, MacLaine, & Stuckey, 2014) identifies a reliance on entrepreneurs in Canada’s economy, coupled with a disconnect in student perception of the entrepreneurial skills they developed at university. The Conference Board’s report (Munro et al, 2014) states that,

Seventy-three per cent of students said that university contributed significantly to their ability to work independently and a slim majority (51 per cent) said it

contributed significantly to *general* skills and knowledge relevant for employment. On other employability and life skills, however, few students believed that university made much difference. Only 44 per cent reported that university contributed to *specific* employment-related skills and knowledge and a mere 18 percent thought that it improved their entrepreneurial skills. Given Canada's persistently weak innovation performance and high reliance on entrepreneurial endeavours, this result is especially troubling (p. 50-51).

City University's SMA (2017a) is aligned with the importance the Conference Board (Munro et al, 2014) places on developing entrepreneurship on campus, indicating the institution's dedication to fostering entrepreneurship through physical space on campus for student entrepreneurs for skills development that are relevant both to their businesses and more broadly in life or other fields of work.

The Council of Ontario Universities' (2014) report, *Bringing Life to Learning*, shares testimonies from multiple students in regards to their experiences engaging with entrepreneurship and experiential learning on campus and with industry actors that partner with universities to provide these experiences. This report emphasizes the existing opportunities at universities in an effort to convey that a significant amount of experiential learning opportunities are already in place in Ontario's universities, promoting examples of robust co-operative education programs, community-engaged learning, entrepreneurship and technology innovation hubs and more. Of these, the majority are focused in STEM fields, with clear connections to industry partners or industry relevant research. The report also utilizes quotes from business and industry actors to ground the claims about universities, skills development, and student employability in the 'real' world of work.

International experiences. Opportunities to go abroad for work, study, or research, are also touted as critical experiential learning opportunities for Ontario students. The Council of Ontario Universities report (2014) states that,

Ontario universities offer a plethora of programs that introduce international perspectives and tackle global issues. These programs incorporate experiential learning to bridge barriers among cultures, foster relationships that grow Ontario's economy, and work toward global social justice. Travelling internationally as part of a degree program can offer a better understanding of a field of study, develop curiosity into practical knowledge about the world and help build global networks (p. 24).

The concept of 'bridging barriers' across cultures is frequently cited as a main purpose for promoting international experiences. 'International' or 'globally-aware' as a skill is highlighted in other documents, particularly in the SMA between the Province of Ontario and City University (2017a). The Agreement uses language common to this issue like 'cross-cultural competencies' and 'culturally literate' to describe the benefits to students who pursue international experiential learning opportunities. The Agreement, and the CU SAS Department *Strategic Plan* (2017b) both list developing globally-aware students as a high priority, and employ international experiential learning opportunities like field schools, internships, or co-op placements, to do so. The Conference Board of Canada lists global skills like "living in an international world," and "understanding of national and global issues" as basic citizenship skills (Munro et al, 2014).

...less than half of graduates said that university had contributed significantly to an appreciation of the arts (29 per cent), living in an international world (44 per cent), or

understanding of national and global issues (47 per cent). Not all disciplines are suited to developing skills in all of these areas, but some of these are basic citizenship skills that most universities claim to be interested in transmitting to their graduates (p. 51).

Attention to global skills is largely linked to preparing students for a globalized world, and actors in this space call for an increase in global experiential learning opportunities as part of the university experience to ensure that students are prepared for success both as citizens in a global world and as workers in a global economy.

Industry connection. A major theme in the representation of the problem of the ‘skills gap’ is the perceived disconnect between universities and the realities of the workforce. The binary of the “real world” and the university continues through this theme, and the problem of the ‘skills gap’ is therefore represented as the university not providing an economically relevant education, and that PSE should be directly tied to workforce needs as they fluctuate so as to ensure a streamline of workers exiting the PSE system into the workforce. Actors reinforce this problem representation by continually expressing their dedication to aligning experiential learning opportunities to workforce needs. The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) writes in the *Guiding Principles for Experiential Learning* (2017) that,

The ministry has developed principles of experiential learning (EL) through extensive consultations with colleges, universities, employers, and students, to meet the needs of all EL partners. These principles clearly reflect a common goal for EL: that students have greater access to high-quality, educational work-related experiences before they graduate. The principles draw on research and best practices in designing

high-quality EL placements, while also including students' perspectives and priorities. Colleges and universities have advocated for flexibility, and these principles provide institutions with the opportunity to experiment and adapt a wide range of EL activities. *The principles have also been designed to support and align with the types of EL and work-integrated learning (WIL) being championed by employers* (p. 2, emphasis added).

Directives for PSE in the HSWS (Province of Ontario, 2016) link the outcomes of a university degree to the labour market, claiming that,

Post-secondary institutions can do a better job of measuring and credentialing the general cognitive and transferable skills that have been *identified as important to the labour force*, and identifying which teaching practices and schooling experiences most help in the development of these skills. (p. 36, emphasis added)

Assessment. In addition, actors in this space call for a move towards creating competency or skills-based assessment frameworks in addition to traditional grade-based assessment for academic classes and degree conference. One of the goals listed in the HSWS (Province of Ontario, 2016) explicitly states that post-secondary institutions should “shift focus away from solely measuring traditional credentials – i.e., degrees and diplomas – to better recognizing competencies that speak to important skills in the workplace” (p. 37). In these accounts, workplace skills are needed outcomes for the university to be considered to be contributing to a productive workforce. The City University SMA (2017) introduces a competency-based degree outcomes framework to directly link the learning in university courses to workforce relevant competencies. This is introduced in an effort to facilitate effective articulation of skills learned in university beyond the academy. Importantly, CU

insists that these skills are already implicit in the university curriculum, that is, workplace relevant skills are not being added to the university curriculum as part of the competency-based outcome framework, but rather the framework just gives students tools to describe these skills. The central CU SAS department also makes an effort to connect their programs and services with the degree outcomes framework proposed by the university for academic degrees in their *Strategic Plan* (2017b).

Binaries, Key Concepts, and Categories

The following section presents significant binaries, key concepts, and categories present in the documents. Bacchi's (2009) approach to policy analysis pays particular attention to how these tools shape policy problem representations.

The “real world”/university. A significant binary is created in these documents of ‘real’ experience and the academic classroom, wherein experiential learning and skills development is presented as the solution. This binary carries across all representations of the program, ultimately suggesting that the university is a bounded space where learning happens, but is disconnected from the ‘real’ world of work. Related to this, actors in this space have also created a binary of experience/academics, implying that the learning from these two things are inherently different, and one (experience) is more useful. These binaries also imply that the “real world” is industry or the workforce, and the university exists and operates separately. CU's SMA (2017a) uses this language to describe how students benefit from experiential learning as a pedagogical tool; Theoretical concepts learned within the classroom are fully understood once applied in the ‘real-world’ to ‘real challenges’ that exist beyond the classroom. The Council of Ontario Universities' report (2014) uses an equation to make this explicit: “classroom learning + real-life learning = career success” (p. 1) implying

that classroom learning is only beneficial to students planning for a career once combined with experience. The COU (2014) also states that,

A different kind of learning occurs when there is no exam to study for, no essay to write – just the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills that have been learned to a real life project. From medicine to engineering and fine arts, experiential learning is where curiosity gets tested in the real world (p. 12).

The HSWS also refers to the ‘real-world’, especially as it relates to the transition students make into the workforce (Province of Ontario, 2016). Similarly, the Conference Board of Canada’s (Munro et al, 2014) report relies on the concept of ‘reality’, often in reference to what is or is not happening in the university. For example, they write about the tradition of the university in cultivating critical thinking skills, but in the current reality, universities are having to also provide skills development that is economically relevant, as seen in the growth of professional degree programs in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields.

Shared responsibility. The HSWS (Province of Ontario, 2016) makes a significant effort to convey the message that developing skills (broadly, and specifically in post-secondary students) is a ‘shared responsibility’ across sectors including actors in education, industry, and government. This key concept continues to work on the binary of the ‘real world’ and the university by indicating the two are separate actors that are currently not working together. The report states that:

Implementation of these recommendations is a shared responsibility among all parties. These parties must work together to: 1) communicate and be open minded to the possibilities of different ways of learning; 2) understand the changing nature of

work; and 3) rethink traditional roles and responsibilities when it comes to effective and timely labour market development (p. 4).

With reference to ‘different ways of learning’ and ‘rethink[ing] traditional roles and responsibilities’, the HSWS is implying that skills development will require an innovative and collaborative approach for success. This concept of a shared responsibility is echoed across other policy documents, with frequent reference to ‘partners’ in education and industry working together to bring experiential learning to students.

In the CU SMA (2017a) and CU’s SAS department *Strategic Plan* (2017b), the local community around the institution is often cited as a partner for experiential learning. Engaging with the community is a significant priority for the institution and the ‘shared responsibility’ takes on two meanings: first, to work together to support students in experiential learning, and second, to contribute directly to community development, using experiential learning as a vehicle for improvement, change, and practical application of the resources and knowledge at the institution.

In summary, the documents I analyzed for this study carry a consistent binary of “real life” versus the university throughout their accounts of the skills issue in PSE. Experience in the ‘real’ world is hailed as a significant and critical space for learning that does not exist in existing structure of a university degree. Actors present various solutions to the issue, including increasing the flexibility of the university degree by offering experiential learning opportunities that are credit-bearing and thus eligible to contribute to the completion of a student’s degree program, and by promoting programs in entrepreneurship and international opportunities like study abroad, field schools, or placements. These documents also emphasize the need to draw a clear connection between university and industry, calling for

workplace relevant skills development throughout the undergraduate degree, including a shift towards skills or competency-based assessment rather than the traditional grade-based assessment.

Interview Findings

Interviews with seven staff participants from the central SAS department at City University were conducted to help elucidate the experiences of SAS staff in their everyday work addressing the issue of skills and career development in post-secondary students. The interviews provided a chance for SAS staff to reflect on their interactions with policy related to skills and career development. Additionally, the interviews revealed issues related to skills and career development that SAS staff find particularly important and that guide their program development and delivery. The findings from these interviews are clustered into themes that emerged in conversation with these staff.

Milestone messaging. Framing the discussion around skills and career development, participants frequently cited stress they witness in students, or experienced themselves, around achieving certain milestones in life, of which PSE is one of many. Importantly, PSE is framed in every account as the step immediately preceding ‘get a job’. One participant reflected,

When I graduated university, from my first undergrad degree. I really didn't know anything about what I was going to do, I had an idea of what I thought I would do but it was so unrealistic - like a lot of undergrads! - I didn't know this service existed, and I was a first generation university student. It was kind of like - you know, the messaging - you go to university, you get a job, you work your way up, get married,

have a baby, you retire, happily ever after. I didn't know that wasn't the way it actually worked. (Participant 4)

Participants spoke about the issues that arise for students they work with when the students realize that the 'path' they believe they were on in terms of their career may shift or actually begin to look entirely different. For some staff, this realization manifested as a concern for seeing students struggle with their emotional wellbeing. Another participant shared,

I think it's the pressure of, what [are students] going to do when [they're] done school? And the assumption is [they're] going to get a job but then, [they're] like, in what? So, inevitably, it's like, [they] have to do well so that [they] can get a job or get into grad school because [they] don't feel like my undergrad [degree] is going to get [them] a job. So, now [they] need to go to grad school to get a job. I think their academics stress them out because they think this is the answer to the job. (Participant 3)

The interactions that my participants were having with students revealed to them that career anxiety was present for many students early in their university career, in addition to managing the academic workload required of a post-secondary education. At City University, the career development model incorporates a counselling approach. One participant, a registered psychotherapist with a career counselling specialty, spoke of some of her interactions with students about career planning,

A few different things that come up that they're really concerned about is that school is stressful and it's overwhelming and it is anxiety provoking. And there's this messaging that they receive that university is the 'be all, end all'. And again, they need to be following that linear path. That's the messaging that they're hearing. On

top [of] that, they have to figure out what they're going to do with the rest of their lives - at least that's the way they perceive it. So, they come in overwhelmed and they don't know what to do and they're lost and don't even know how to begin. They don't even know how to think about a career, let alone, how do they make a decision that's going to last for the rest of their lives? I have to kind of break that down a little bit and then help them work through that process. (Participant 4)

Other participants spoke about how the programs that are most valued in career development, such as experiential learning programs, work-integrated learning, or co-ops, are critical in contributing to a student's competitiveness in the job market, but expressed concern that these same programs also disrupt the traditional post-secondary timeline of the four-year bachelor's degree.

Not enough City University students are exploring the co-op option because maybe it's not practical for them because it might add some time to their degree and they want to be able to graduate with their friends. If we were to take an eight-month internship, or a 12-month internship, or 16 month internship, it throws that chronology off. What they forget is that, yes, it may be an extra year, but they will get the requisite skills and experience and career confidence that they need to parlay that right into a job. So their friends who may graduate in four years, 'on schedule' may struggle post-graduation, it may take them a year or two years to procure a good career position. And so if they have just taken that extra year, they would've been in the market place sooner. (Participant 5)

Stress related to milestone achievement, particularly the completion of PSE and eventual transition into the workplace was an important issue for participants in their understanding of the issue of skills and careers for post-secondary students.

‘Skills gap’ talk. When asked about the ‘skills gap’ as frequently cited in the media and in policy, all participants were familiar with the issue and firmly communicated that the issue was not one of a lack of skills or mismatch of skills between students and the workplace, but rather that it was an ‘articulation’ gap; students struggle to accurately articulate what skills they have based on their experiences during PSE.

I definitely see that, in my experience, there's not so much of a skills gap as there is a skills *articulation* gap, trying to help students distill everything that they've done in a way that's meaningful. (Participant 3)

Another participant echoed this sentiment and expressed their belief in student capabilities.

I think that there isn't actually the major skills gap that people and employers assume there is. I think what we need to do a better job at is helping students articulate how the skills they have translate into work. I just don't think they realize what they're actually capable of or are able to translate and articulate what those are to employers. So, I don't think this skills gap is as big as it's made up to be. I think it's actually, as my acting director has put it and I'm very on side with her, it's a '*translation of skills*' gap, not an actual skills gap. (Participant 6)

Similarly, this participant also expressed how they believe students are skilled, but struggle to communicate their abilities.

I think in many ways students are already coming with quite a skill set in terms of leadership and such. I think how they communicate those skills how they put them into practice - that's where it takes time and some finessing. (Participant 1)

Participants were also very confident in the connection between their programs (career education, experiential learning, co-op, etc.) and the opportunities for skills development and successful transition to work.

We recognize that the best strategy a student can have when transitioning to industry from education is to have boxes ticked and skills that align with the career that they're going into and practical experience that supports the application. So think of a co-op or an internship or a practicum, degree related experience. It puts them at an advantage in being able to make that transition smoothly. (Participant 5)

Another participant directly linked these programs to student desire, suggesting that institutions and students may be misaligned on this issue,

There are discrepancies between the institution and what students want - the students come into school because they think that getting a degree will get them a job and City University in my mind hasn't quite caught up with the fact that they need to now structure their education to help students get jobs. The old philosophy is that's what colleges are for, universities are to teach students how to learn. But the fact of the matter is students are coming to university to get jobs so how can we prepare them for jobs. Experiential learning opportunities help bridge that gap, narrow the skills gap, get students networking, connecting, trying on career paths and all those pieces - it's what students want. (Participant 7)

Other participants echoed this view, taking the position that there is critical learning to be done outside the classroom too:

Courses alone are not necessarily giving students job ready skills. So we have to give students opportunities to develop those marketable skills. That being said, they're also developing transferable skills in their academic courses and other experiences that they have, that they don't know kind of translate. (Participant 3)

One participant had a particularly interesting take on the issue, suggesting that the 'skills gap' as an issue in the form it takes in media, policy, and for SAS staff, does not concern students. Students are more concerned about their credentials – is an undergraduate degree enough? Do I need to get a graduate degree? The result is similar, but this participant's experience with students uses a different language to explore the issue.

To be very honest, I don't ever hear students talking about the skills gap. Like, never. I would say I more hear about students being not sure that they want to go to graduate school but feeling like they should because they don't know what else to do because they don't feel that they can leave an undergrad and get a job. I certainly talk to a lot of students who are concerned about graduating fourth year and not going on to grad school or special programs because what they're told is that an undergraduate couldn't get them at least an entry level position. In some cases, that's true, but there [are] certainly opportunities for students leaving undergrad to begin a career. But also expectations need to be realistic in terms of what they may be starting in in terms of a position. (Participant 1)

This participant also expressed how skills may not be the most important or pressing issue for students on campus given the many other stressors that exist for students in PSE:

When I'm working with more of the 'at-risk' students, in a lot of cases, skills isn't in their vernacular because there are so many other compounding issues. Skills really falls off the radar. (Participant 1)

This participant was particularly tuned into issues that students face during their time at university that are unrelated to skills and career development. This reflection highlights the complex realit(ies) that students exist within and bring with them to their university education, and emphasizes how their studies are not disconnected from the rest of their lives.

Access. While SAS staff were certainly aware of the 'skills gap', there was a strong consensus among the staff that the issue was not that students exiting PSE lack the skills to be successful in the workforce. Participants spoke with sincerity about the capabilities of the students they worked with to have great success in their time at university and in their transition to work and were confident in the capacities of SAS programs to assist students in doing so. However, staff also spoke at length about the responsibility of the student to 'self-enroll' in these programs; preparing for success in their transition to work requires planning ahead, managing priorities, and investing time in career development early in their academic career. These extra- or co-curricular programs are not required for completion of a degree and for those students with employment, family, or other obligations, may be viewed as periphery, optional, or not a priority. There seemed to be a tinge of resentment for the lack of awareness of their programs and services despite their efforts to promote to students from 'day one'.

I think this is something that's is changing the landscape of postsecondary, certainly from when I went to post-secondary. I don't really recall any sort of career related workshops or really thinking about it. It was just something I knew. Obviously when I

was done university, unless I went on to grad school right away, I needed to get a resume together and it wasn't really something that I remember there being much focus on - it could be to that I did my final year abroad. Now I feel, even though a lot of students will still report into surveys and such that they didn't know career services was available, it boggles my mind because there you know huge signs up there is drop-in hours every single day in the center to do cover letter, resume, LinkedIn support, all of that, so there are a lot of services available! (Participant 1)

Another participant reflected on some of students they work with accessing SAS programs and services at the last minute.

One of the most frustrating things that we hear is, for example, we'll get a fourth year student close to graduation coming in saying I wish heard about your services earlier, I wish I'd known about this. But we're present from day one. We're going out to them, but there's information overload. They're bombarded with services and they're not in the mindset to receive that information and they don't buy into how they need it at the time. (Participant 2)

Few participants addressed the issue of access to these types of programs and services. One participant reflected,

In all fairness, my role predisposes me to work with super motivated highly achieving students. When they're in this program, you're getting students self-selecting to sit in two or three hour sessions talking about leadership development. (Participant 6)

The 'self-selecting' student has time and ability to spend time participating in these programs, investing in their skills development. Another participant viewed the provincial goal of every student participating in a meaningful experiential learning opportunity by the

time they graduate as a means to increase access to these critical learning opportunities to help students see success in their transitions to 'real' work after graduation, assuming that work students engage in during their degree is largely unrelated to their eventual career or that students are not working at all.

We still provide a lot of co-curricular opportunities, there's no doubt, but I think there's probably more of a push now, thanks to the province, to build them right into the curriculum itself because students have to get certain credits to get their degree. If we can build the opportunities right in, then we can guarantee that maybe every student on campus had access to it or participated in one but the co-curricular are voluntary. We can't force any student to do that. So, if we can build it into the curriculum, we can arguably, for a lack of better words, enforce more students to participate in things. (Participant 3)

Moving the skills development work to the online space or in take-away formats was an equity-seeking project for another participant, allowing students to access important information and skill development tools on their own time when it is convenient for them.

Sometimes we offer programs and we have only five students participate. It's that balance of wanting to offer those programs to help students get entry level jobs and get positions [with], yet, very few students with the ability to uptake. A lot of our focus has been on building resources that are available online and in that 24/7 space so that they don't have to necessarily always attend a workshop because they could get information from other sources. (Participant 1)

In my experience, SAS staff maintain a particular focus on equity as a critical responsibility. This is reflected, too, in the CACUSS Identity Project (2012). However, this reflection on

student ‘ability to uptake’ and action from SAS staff to remove barriers and provide their services and programs to students online, a different option than the typical in-person events, is the first time I found a participant start to address inequities in these programs.

Student mental health. While I was absolutely aware of mental health as an important issue facing post-secondary students, I did not expect this topic to carry such weight in discussions surrounding skills development and policy in SAS work. A participant’s earlier reflection on ‘at-risk’ students and other ‘compounding issues’ was frequently echoed by other participants, Participants spoke about witnessing a significant increase in mental health concerns among students. They spoke at length about mental health issues on campus, both related to career development and more generally. Mental health was independently brought up by almost all participants in discussions of their work related to post-secondary student skills and career development. The connection between mental health and careers is actually made quite explicit through the structure of the SAS department, specifically in terms of career education.

Over the last number of years, we've certainly seen an increase in the number of times that we're seeing clients who either tell us that they have a mental health concern that they are getting support with through other supports either here on campus or elsewhere, or we suspect that there may be a mental health concern just from the basis of our discussions with them and our work with them. There is no question that the number of times that we're hearing about mental health concerns is up over the last number of years. And this is the key reason why our staffing model includes people who are trained in counselling psychology and have graduate degrees in this area.

(Participant 2)

This reflection, from a participant in a director role, indicates how student mental health has influenced the structure of the department and team she oversees, which is specifically related to career development. The inclusion of mental health professionals in a career development space is working to constitute that space in a certain way, and thus constitute the problem of skills and career development in a certain way.

We have some stats that talk about that mental health can be impacted by career uncertainty. I had a client referred to me by psychological services a number of weeks ago, a student that they're working with who has been really unmotivated about her current studies because she doesn't know where it's going to take her. And she's found the university experience is different than what she thought it might be.... for example we will be talking to many of our clients around anxiety as it relates to the job search process. Maybe they are coming from a background where their parents want them to do X but they want to do Y. Dealing with that kind of situation and navigating that kind of situation is very common because we've had many years in the recent past where we have a very engaged group of parents, and we know that parents are very influential on their students career decisions and not always for reasons that we would say are key reasons why to make certain career decisions. (Participant 2)

Participants acknowledge the wide range of factors that contribute to student mental health, especially as it relates to career development. Another participant working in career counselling spoke about the connection between career and well-being:

We really do look at it from a holistic wellness mental health focus. If you're doing great in your career or school or whatever, your mental health, or your wellness, is probably going to also go up. Anytime one of those two parts has a dip you know

they're both going to come down, and when you think about the stress and ambiguity or uncertainty that comes with their careers. As a student transitions into the workforce there are certain interventions that you need to use that addresses the well-being with a career context. (Participant 4)

Other participants who work with students in regards to skills development and experiential learning outside of specifically career related programming spoke about how prevalent mental health is in their program planning. The participant speaks about preparing students for 'life beyond the campus experience' in reference to a career post-graduation and building a well-rounded life.

We're really confronted with student mental health and resiliency on a very regular basis. We're trying to ensure that we're doing the best that we can to educate, support, lift up and prepare students for life beyond the campus experience because we know that stress doesn't disappear. It's really about trying to work within those parameters. We do lots of proactive programming but we know the numbers are certainly increasing year upon year in terms of accessing mental health supports. We hear from parents, we hear from professors, we hear from students themselves that that this is an area that is a concern and that they're struggling. Mental health is something that is top of mind all the time and just making sure that our programming builds in these elements. (Participant 1)

Other participants reflected on how student access of programs and services related to career development is impacted by the 'compounding' issue of mental health.

There are a lot of services available to help prepare for that next piece but it's that awareness that you actually need some help or the actual follow through. Again,

when we're talking about students who are in the unhealthy stress realm those things are some of the first to not be accessed. I often wonder about our students who are less engaged or who are having more of the either high stress or mental health issues...how we can also build in some of these protective and resiliency pieces. Obviously if they're in a crisis situation you can't do it at that point, but as they're rebuilding and in a healthier state trying to ensure that they're also aware that these types of programs can be really helpful for future and having that built in reflection time too. (Participant 1)

Ultimately, participants believe in a holistic approach to student success and development during their time at the university – one that contributes to their academic learning, career learning and exploration, and to their well-being in general.

I think there should be just as much value in student experience in terms of mental health and experiential learning opportunities and career counselling and all of those pieces. I think there needs to be just as much emphasis on that as there is on academics because students will only be successful when they have a solid well-being and a solid grasp on why they're doing what they're doing and how they can maximize the experience. (Participant 3)

This reflection emphasizes the connection this participant sees between student well-being and the career development they do through the promotion of experiential learning on campus, and calls for an equal valuation of these portfolios, typically addressed separately.

Community connection. Another major theme that participants discussed in the context of skills development, experiential learning and their roles in PSE was the connection to the local community of their institution. Many staff saw experiential learning as directly

connected to community based work and projects that would strengthen the ties between the student, the institution, and the community.

Rather than students working on any assignment that a faculty or course instructor created that's really just theoretical, why not have the students work on a project that actually meets a need within the community itself so they get the chance to contribute and invest in the community and also get the chance to apply their theory into practice. (Participant 3)

To participants, the community is the site of practical, real-life learning, and promoting experiential learning that is community-engaged also contributed to developing well-rounded students.

The idea of going out and presenting yourself professionally and building connections with a community partner and selling yourself in that way I think is really important as is the idea of being civically minded, of being community engaged, being more than just a student who goes to the library every day, who is passionate about getting to know their community and learning and developing. (Participant 7)

Participants also connected community engaged experiential learning with the desires of students seeking the 'practical' application of their academic learning.

Five years ago or so we were seeing a large increase in college enrollments and the university enrollments were stagnant. Some of that demand from students was to have the practical application of whatever they were doing. Students don't want to be just stuck in the basement of the library beside the dusty books writing essays. They want an opportunity to get out in the workforce or get out in the community and build those relationships and develop skills. I think we saw a demand for that and now you see

experiential learning growing to accommodate that. We need to make sure that classes with experiential learning components are building relationships with community and that students are taking the skills that they are learning in that class that in the past had been relegated to a 10 page essay, are now actually putting into action and helping a community partner or collaborating with community partners. I think you do see growth in that area and based on the trends that I've seen in the last year or so I suspect that uptake for experiential learning is going to continue to grow.

(Participant 6)

The images this participant invokes, such as students 'stuck' in the library with old, dusty books, or the dismissive reference to a 10 page essay, are indicative of the deep-seated binary that has been created between the 'real world' and the experiences a student has at university. This participant utilizes this binary to connect the student to the local community and uses the frame of service and volunteerism to justify their work.

Policy awareness & anxiety. When asked about policy related to their work, in particular the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy*, all participants were aware of the policy's existence, but the majority of participants were quick to address that they were not entirely familiar, or that they do not use policy in their everyday work, with one participant referring to their connection to policy as 'very, very peripherally'. An uneasiness around policy and what was expected of them in terms of knowledge of policy for the interview was palpable. Responses were typically similar to this participant, who said, "I've heard of them. They get brought up in our meetings but I don't know I can say I know anything in-depth about it. But I've heard of them." Another participant said, "It has been a long time since I've actually read the Highly Skilled Workforce Report. I know it's there and I know it's informing my work

from a breakdown of what they said.” Another participant told me that they had at one time read the policy papers but had not yet memorized them. Despite their anxieties about their familiarity with the policy, staff were generally on board with the priorities in the provincial policy, displaying a sincere belief in the potential of experiential learning.

The Highly Skilled Workforce Report has, I think, pushed the province to start paying more attention to this and experiential learning seemed like an answer to address that. I think students have always been calling for it. They don't know the right words but if anyone is asked what was the most influential point in your education, I guarantee you every single person you ask will describe something that was experiential in nature. (Participant 3)

This participant sees the policy as finally addressing what students want from their education, asserting that experiential learning is the most impactful learning opportunity at university. Another participant similarly asserts that the provincial focus on experiential learning has been long-called for:

I agree that putting focus on the work integrated learning is the way of the future and we're now in that future, we're operationalizing. The career kickstart strategy, the career ready dollars - I'm a big fan of that money being a good investment.

(Participant 5)

The funds that this participant is referring to is, in part, supporting the staffing of units specific to experiential learning development at Ontario universities. This participant felt that the SAS department was now seeing the financial support necessary to develop meaningful work-integrated learning opportunities, moving into the future that SAS staff have been envisioning for some time.

Participants in coordinator roles (i.e. not a director of a team), were also quick to refer the responsibility of knowing and using policy up to their supervisors, suggesting that the director would be capable of representing them and that the more intricate knowledge of policy was only required at the director level. This participant said, “likely we won't have much input because the leader of our team would do that on our behalf.” This participant also suggested that while it is typically the case that more senior staff discuss policy, perhaps other staff should also begin to get involved.

I think probably senior leadership talk about that [policy] more than people in administrative or coordinator roles. It's more talk of the table of the associate directors and the directors. I think it's brought up in staff meetings or in cases where there's positions hired using funds allocated by these policies. I know about it in so far some colleagues are funded by Career Kickstart funds. But to the extent that we, here in our department, talk about those policies: probably not as much as we should.

(Participant 3)

Another participant described the weekly staff meeting and indicated that policy was sometimes referred to in this space.

Every Monday morning - the whole team comes together for a large staff meeting for an hour. The career kick start, it's come up a few times but we don't sit down and discuss it in depth and look at the policy - that's what some teams do, and leaders mostly are involved in that sort of policy work. Then it just trickles down where it needs to. Everybody can't be involved in everything. (Participant 4)

This participant described how they understand policy as peripherally connected to their work.

We had a politician come in and speak a little bit about policy and strategy around internships. So there's some discussion there. We're not intentionally saying what does this policy say and what are we doing and how the two fit together.

Conversations that we have about how we decide how to do our work, we're really thinking about what do we know about the needs of the students and what employers want and how do we connect the two. So we think about it more in that way rather than explicitly saying this is policy and let's follow it. (Participant 4)

When I spoke with the three participants in director roles about policy, they described their relationship with policy as a funds-seeking mission – when policy initiatives are implemented there are frequently funds attached (directly and indirectly) to be granted to institutions who propose programs that seek to address the policy goals.

I feel like we don't have a lot of time to discuss policy so much but we we're more in the realm of hearing about potential grants and funding opportunities and research, what's coming up so we can apply and hopefully get funded. So we're aware of priorities and of policy papers and all of that but I think what it really comes down to is around funding opportunities and chasing after the dollars. (Participant 1)

Other participants spoke about the challenge of necessary resource allocation in increasing the potential for them as staff, and for their programs, to begin to address the policy's goals.

I think what's misunderstood is how much administrative staff time and coordination goes into ensuring that they're [experiential learning programs] actually high quality. I think you could call a whole bunch of things experiential learning and say that every student has an opportunity. But if we want to make them meaningful and high quality and high impact, then a lot of time and thought and resources and preparation and

coordination with the students, employers, community partners has to go into it. So I think they are all doable but there is a significant cost attached with doing that.

(Participant 7)

When the challenge of resource allocation was brought up, some participants referenced the possibility of moving experiential learning into the credit-bearing space, which would require support from and collaboration with academic faculty, another potential challenge.

Experiential learning and work-integrated learning is such a huge focus right now. I support that and I think our students generally want that as well. I think it's a little harder sometimes to get some professors on board, not all, but I think there's certainly still faculty who believe we need to be just focusing on critical thinking. I think everyone needs critical thinking regardless. (Participant 3)

In this conversation, the participant starts to reference a separation between experiential learning and its advocates like SAS staff and students, and professors, inferring that professors may be resistant to this shift in approaches to learning. Another participant also made this reference, though less explicitly:

I believe that as the light continues to shine brightly on work integrated learning and this sense of career preparation, institutions will shift towards more careers focus and more internships focus. Are there going to be people who stand in the way of that? Probably. (Participant 5)

Generally, participants believed that experiential learning, despite the challenges that accompany it, is an important endeavor in both academic and student affairs programming, referencing that a 'spotlight' is on student affairs now that provincial policy is specifically recognizing the value of experiential learning opportunities, a pedagogy SAS staff have long

been utilizing. However, participants still exhibited some hesitancy around policy and what their relationship to policy as staff should be.

I feel in a lot of ways we don't think about policy in terms of lobbying for different issues because we feel that we're in a more reactive type role rather than lobbying for what we feel should be done. (Participant 1)

When this participant shared this, I wondered if they were inferring that what they (SAS staff) feel should be done is different from what policy is directing. In all accounts, even this participant's, experiential learning as the directive from policy is supported. This participant begins to reveal how, from their perspective and experience in SAS, there are opportunities for improvement in this practice.

In summary, interview data revealed the significant discourses that SAS staff interact with in the work around skills development for students. These staff spoke to me about a wide range of issues that impact their work, like mental health, student study timelines, skills articulation, and community development. Most notably, participants were concerned about the messaging that students are receiving in life, often outside of the university, about the path they should be taking – graduate high school, attend university, graduate from university in 4 years, get a job in their field, get married, have kids. Participants felt that the pressure students face in the time they are supposed to attend university, successfully graduate in four years, and move into a job in their field contributes to the growing crisis around student mental health on campus. Mental health was a major issue SAS staff spoke about, as it plays a significant role in the work that all staff in the central SAS department do, whether they are in a role specific to this issue or not. Participants also spoke about the issue of the 'skills gap' at length, particularly in how they view the issue as one of articulation rather than of actual

skills. Participants also spoke about how they consider access to experiential learning in their planning and development for different programs and services, and about the importance of connecting experiential learning to the larger civic community CU exists within. Finally, participants spoke, with some trepidation, about their interactions with Ontario policy like the *Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy*. There was an awareness that policy exists and impacts their work in some way, but these participants were quick to tell me that they probably did not know enough or that only senior staff needed to know about policy.

This chapter described the findings from data I collected for this study, including from documents relevant to the issue of skills development and PSE and from interviews with SAS staff at City University, a research-intensive university in Ontario. The findings were presented in themes, representing significant discourses that emerged through the documents and through the semi-structured interviews that shape the problem of skills and PSE in Ontario and shape the practice of SAS staff. The following chapter will provide an analysis of these findings, grounding the research in my initial research questions about discourses impacting the work of SAS staff in enacting skills development policy at the university level.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of my study was to better understand the experiences of SAS staff in enacting skills development policy. In particular, I was interested in exploring the discourses that shape the issue of skills and skills development in PSE, both in policy and policy documents from actors in the space of skills and PSE, and in the daily practice of SAS staff. In this final chapter, I present an analysis of the research findings and discuss their significance. In this analysis, I aim to answer my overarching research question: how do the discourses of skills and skills development policies shape the work of SAS staff in enacting these policies at the university level? Specifically, in this analysis, I seek to answer the following questions:

- 1) What initiatives do SAS staff engage with in their work as sites to enact skills policies?
- 2) What discourses and actors emerge as powerful in the enactment of skills policies?
- 3) What discourses and actors are excluded/marginalized?

In addition, throughout this analysis, I seek to bring attention to the ways in which discourses and actors that emerge as powerful may differ between the policy documents and the experiences of SAS staff at CU, asking where and how do they align or differ, and what the implications of this might be. Finally, I suggest recommendations for future practice and research in the field of post-secondary student success and development as it relates to skills development and career preparation in SAS.

Initiatives and Activities: Where Does Skills Development Happen?

For SAS staff, skills development is viewed as an entirely holistic endeavor, happening in almost every corner of the institution and in the student experience. Participants

in this study spoke about their programs and services delivering skills development across portfolios based in the SAS department, as well as in student-led activities, and in academic courses. In particular, SAS staff see, and participate in, intentional and meaningful skills development in programming developed for career preparation, mental health and wellness, community engagement and volunteer programs, student leadership and student organizations, and in experiential learning (broadly defined). Using student development theory, the guiding framework employed by SAS staff, we can better understand why these sites are important for skills development for SAS staff.

Career preparation programming. It is not surprising that intentional skills development is embedded in SAS programs around career preparation. Given the prevalence of the issue of skills and student employability, career development services have grown in post-secondary institutions to include job search services and online platforms, interview and networking workshops, employer relations teams to recruit students on campus, individual counselling, and more. Foundational theories in student affairs like Chickering & Reisser's Vectors of Development (1993) point us to particular dimensions of student development that are critical during a student's time at university. Development of purpose related to a student's chosen vocational path, as a developmental milestone for SAS staff, coupled with the demand from students as described to me by SAS staff in interviews, is clearly a priority for programming decisions in SAS departments.

Findings from interviews also revealed how participants believe students are quite capable to develop a well-rounded skillset through their university education but struggle to articulate these skills effectively to an employer. In career preparation programming, and specifically in individual career counselling, participants employ values-based and strengths-

based advising to lead students towards vocational decision-making that feels purposeful and authentic to them.

Enacting skills development policy through career development and preparation initiatives is expected. The representation of skills in policy documents links this issue to industry and to workforce issues, and universities respond to this by driving skills development for post-secondary students through their career development programming. This works to solidify the connection between skills and work to promote career exploration throughout the students' time at the university. However, enacting skills development policy through career development initiatives may limit the scope of possibility in terms of what skills are prioritized and for what industries. At a large annual CU career event in 2017, the majority of employers present to network with students were based in STEM (City University, 2017c). This is not to say that STEM employers do not also recruit students with backgrounds outside of STEM, but it is possible that these events mainly attract students from STEM fields, prioritize STEM skills, and as such, communicate that skills development is prioritizing STEM-based skills, rather than a broad set of employment skills.

Mental health and wellness. SAS staff view programs and services related to mental health and wellness as a site for skills development broadly, including skills related to resilience and coping and skills related to career success like teamwork, problem solving, and self-confidence. This relationship is reciprocal; career skills development programs can also be a site for mental health and wellness education, and SAS staff frequently treat these programs as such. In an article posted to *Academica*, a large Canadian higher education consulting organization, Catherine Maybrey (2017), a career development practitioner specializing in higher education, argues that “It’s time to treat career preparation as a student

wellness issue,” drawing attention to the connections between student mental health and wellness and career-related pressures students face. Maybrey refers to a study at Ryerson University (Waddell et al, 2015), following two nursing cohorts through their education – one cohort received targeted career counselling interventions, and the other cohort did not receive targeted interventions, but were still able to access all career services as they typically exist as optional programs and services. The nursing students receiving career counselling throughout the degree “showed greater career resilience and a stronger ability to shape their academic experiences to reflect their career goals” (Maybrey, 2017), whereas the non-intervention cohort reported greater stress and anxiety, and “a pervasive sense of uncertainty across the years of their academic program” (Waddell et al, 2015). Other research in this field (Hinkelman & Luzzo, 2011; Pace & Quinn, 2000) has also advocated for greater attention to the connection between mental health and career development. SAS staff have linked these two issues, mental health and wellness and career development, as sites for skills development that will help students find success in their academic programs and in their transitions to the workforce. This has particular implications for how services related to skills development and career preparation are delivered, which I will discuss later in this analysis.

Community engagement. SAS staff participants felt a close connection between experiential learning, skills development, and engaging with the institution’s local community. In their accounts of community engagement programs, participants frequently referenced the community as the ‘real-world’ and a place where theories finally get applied and students understand what they have learned. Participants also positioned engagement with the community as a necessary act to give back to the community, to share knowledge and participate in community development, rather than exist as a bounded campus.

Community-engaged experiential learning opportunities frequently fall under the category of volunteer or service, and this is true at CU as well. The programs participants most frequently discussed, related to community engagement, included large-scale volunteer and service programs offered through the institution's Orientation programming and through a volunteer network database for students to access throughout the year. Participants also emphasized the importance of community engagement happening through academic courses (for credit). I would categorize both of these as volunteer or service, rather than a co-op, practicum or example of work-integrated learning, as students participate without compensation (other than an academic credit, where applicable). The incentive to participate, however, remains, as these opportunities are promoted to students as necessary experiences for skills development and success when they eventually transition into the workforce.

Raddon and Harrison (2015) write that,

...in addition to cultivating students (and their institutions) to be caring and socially responsible, service-learning makes the disposition to volunteer into a credential, which students are encouraged to display on their transcripts and resumes and in electronic portfolios (Cambridge, 2010; Jacoby, 1999). Not only are service-learning courses considered more relevant to "real world" issues, but the practice of incorporating service-learning experience into personal identity statements makes students more marketable. (p.145).

For SAS staff participants, community engagement through service-learning, community-engagement learning, or volunteering, is a way to effectively pursue skills development and instill a sense of citizenship in the local community of the institution. In slight contrast to how enacting policy through career development initiatives may

specifically target industry-specific skills, skills development through community engagement certainly shifts focus to the development of ‘soft’ skills and connects students to larger civic issues. However, community engagement in the context of neoliberal influences and their impact on higher education may reveal the discursive work of policy in developing particular subjectivities in students.

Brown (2015) asserts that neoliberal influences and the resulting dominant economic rationality have implications for the functioning of democratic society. The history of higher education as a site for social, cultural, and political development of citizens is challenged by economic rationalities that see students increasingly pursuing education in pursuit solely of the potential for economic output, a job. *Homo economicus*, the self-investing, rational, economic being, is prioritized at the expense of *homo politicus* or *homo legalis*, all of whom Brown maintains are necessary characters in the broad field of the democratic society (2015). Brown (2015) writes,

...*knowledge, thought, and training* are valued and desired almost exclusively for their contribution to capital enhancement. This does not reduce to a desire only for technical knowledges and skills. Many professions today – from law to engineering to medicine – require analytical capacities, communications skills, multilingualism, artistic creativity, inventiveness, even close reading abilities. However, knowledge is not sought for purposes apart from capital enhancement, whether that capital is human, corporate, or financial. It is not sought for developing the capacities of citizens, sustaining culture, knowing the world, or envisioning or crafting different ways of life in common (p. 177-178).

Service learning, however, is touted as a site for student civic engagement, learning about the ‘real’ world, and having an impact on local communities. The connection that SAS staff make between experiential learning, a tool in the development of students for participation in the workforce, and service learning, particularly in relation to their community and to local civic issues, could be seen as contradictory. Raddon and Harrison (2015) argue that service learning acts as the ‘kind-face’ of the neoliberal university, distracting from the shift in priority of the university from public good to ‘market-oriented institutions’ meanwhile “reflect[ing] and produc[ing] neoliberal discourses, such as individual responsibility and social entrepreneurialism” (p. 144). Although service learning may incite interest in local civic issues and encourage students to give back to their communities, this pedagogy discursively constitutes students as self-responsibilizing “moral subjects” (Raddon & Harrison, 2015, p. 144), and as such, universities “facilitate the privatization and outsourcing of civic work to volunteers by producing socially engaged citizens with an orientation and willingness to bear the costs of caring for community” (p. 145).

Assessment and tracking of experiences. Assessment is an identified priority for SAS staff in Canada. The Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), the professional organization for these staff in Canada, lists assessment as a professional priority in the organization’s Identity Project, and hosts an assessment-specific Community of Practice. Assessment of this nature focuses on assessing the impact of the work of SAS staff on student experience. Assessment in this space also includes the introduction of tools for students to track, reflect on, and showcase their experiences at university alongside their academic grade assessments, using additional credentials that highlight their ability to participate in additional skill-building activities. These tools, most

notably, the Co-Curricular Record (CCR), are early developments in competency-based degree outcome frameworks called for by industry and government actors to better communicate how a university degree contributes to a student's employability in the workforce. SAS have advocated for this tool within institutions and with employers, aiming for recognition of the CCR transcript as a legitimate record of experiential learning through co-curricular opportunities (Elias, 2014). Using the transcript style and official institutional presentation, the CCR attempts to meet the academic transcript's or the resume's use in applications for employment or further study, and is promoted as such (Elias, 2014). By incorporating reflection into the verification process, SAS staff ensure that the Principles for Experiential Learning (MAESD, 2017) are met. Assessment of student experience through tools like the CCR visualize student participation in campus activities and provide data on the skills students identify that they are developing, helping SAS staff to 'speak back' to policy through reporting structures at the university, demonstrating the impact of SAS programs and services on skills development in the university. Neoliberal discourses of assessment and measurement, and credentialism, as they act through tools like the CCR, are performative, constituting students as solely economically motivated. The effect of the dominance of using assessment and tracking tools as a site to enact skills development policy is significant because learning and experience becomes only valuable as it can be measured in terms determined by workplace relevance.

Sites in policy. By understanding the professional context of SAS staff, we can also understand why these aforementioned initiatives are important to SAS staff to engage with as sites for skills development. In policy, skills development is represented as happening largely in connection with industry. Actors in industry or representing industry suggest the

development of more robust work-integrated learning and co-op programs developed with industry partners to ensure students are receiving these experiential learning opportunities (Province of Ontario, 2016; Munro, MacLaine, & Stuckey, 2014). There is particular attention to STEM fields, as these fields have a more seamless integration with industry. The explicit connection to industry was not a priority for SAS staff, as they demonstrated through interviews that their approach to skills development included a holistic approach, yet it dominated the policy documents.

The disconnect between policy and practice was communicated to me during interviews mostly in terms of a resource issue. Participants were generally aligned with the overall goals of the policy and did not critique the policy's focus on industry connections, but were open about the challenges they faced in terms of resources. For example, a participant commented on the policy's goal of ensuring every student participates in a meaningful experiential learning opportunity during their degree. They shared that the purposefully broad definition of experiential learning at the ministry level makes this more accessible, but that to designate something as meaningful, there is a significant increase in the level of staff coordination and resources needed, and they shared that this is not necessarily supported in actions by the policy at large or by the institutions in their experience doing the work because of limited funding opportunities for such large endeavours, both internally and externally. As a result, SAS staff who contribute to student skills development seek other areas where this can happen that may be less resource-heavy than other experiential learning opportunities, such as in existing programs, or in other initiatives like Orientation Week. Similarly, SAS staff see student mental health as a space for skills development opportunities, responding to the conditions of student life they see in their daily work, but this discourse is not present in

the policy documents I analyzed. The conflicting representations of skills development in policy documents and in the daily practice of SAS staff discursively constitute skills as different issues – of a lack of resources, or as a student mental health issue, or as an inability to effectively articulate in workplace relevant language. Each of these representations presents certain possibilities for solutions and limit others. However, the neoliberal influences under which universities operate today function to constitute skills development in particular ways, even across disparate representations of the problem.

Discourses Shaping the Issue of Skills

Student mental health. Mental health stood out as an important discourse in the interview data. Across every interview, student mental health seemed to be top of mind. Participants spoke about mental health issues in students related to career preparation and skills development without being prompted. Care for the wellbeing of students is deeply embedded in participants' purview as SAS staff. As I mentioned in the reporting of the findings, I did not expect mental health to play such a significant role in the development and facilitation of skills development programming. Importantly, mental health was not present in any of the policy documents related to skills development and PSE. The inclusion of mental health as a significant representation of the problem of skills and post-secondary students is a direct result of the lived experience of SAS staff working with students face-to-face in their everyday work.

I argue that the inclusion of mental health as a significant discourse shaping the work of SAS staff in skills development work is constructing the central SAS department at CU as a particular kind of place. Bacchi (2016) writes that “the designation of ‘places’ plays a critical role in how governing occurs” (p. 96). The adoption of a mental health discourse in

this space also takes into account the prevalence of mental health issues on campus. As campus resources specifically for mental health become overrun and unable to keep up with student demand, the overflow often falls to SAS staff, who are typically familiar faces to students through other work they do. These staff report that the prevalence of mental health issues in students is overwhelming, and so it is understandable that programming around mental health, wellness, and resiliency becomes a major priority for the department.

Braun et al. (2011) assert that context has great impact on policy enactment, and that "...schools have different capacities for 'coping' with policy and assembling school-based policy responses. Schools produce, to some extent, their own 'take' on a policy, drawing on aspects of their culture or ethos, as well as on situated necessities" (p. 586). At CU, SAS staff draw on the 'situated necessities' and campus culture around mental health to enact skills development policy in a particular way. However, this is not without contention.

In an article for a Canadian SAS community website, the former Vice-Provost Students at Ryerson University writes, "By design, we are educational institutions—we are not mental health facilities, hospitals, or addiction treatment facilities" (Lane, 2015). She challenges the expectations placed on universities to be the sole provider of solutions for mental health issues in students, a capacity that the institution may not be able to fulfill. A participant in my study reflected on resource allocation, specifically in terms of the significant amount of which is allocated to mental health on campus ("*...but I wouldn't want to take that away, it's 100% where it should be*") and not enough being allocated to experiential learning opportunities. Yet, SAS staff are expected to produce meaningful experiential learning opportunities for every student on campus. So, in response to the student experiences of mental health issues being presented to them, and the responsibility

they feel to provide opportunities for skills development to students, SAS staff have constituted skills development in a way that prioritizes student mental health, a practice not seen in the discursive representation of skills development in the policy documents. This may have subjectification effects, shaping the way skilled students are perceived as skillful at managing their mental health and intentionally pursuing their career development simultaneously and in ways that these reciprocally benefit each other. As one participant stated, students feel more connected and motivated and have improved reports of mental health when they feel clarity on areas of their life including their education, and their career interests, and potential career path, and so, SAS work in career development follows this guide based on their experience in practice. In connecting career development with student mental health in this way, SAS staff are discursively linking mental health to one's economic role in society as a worker.

Skills articulation gap. Another significant discourse shaping the representation of the issue of skills and PSE was the clarification from SAS staff that the 'skills gap' was actually a gap in the ability of students to effectively articulate their skills. In conversation about this shift in thought, SAS staff were sincere in communicating just how capable they believe students are. SAS staff that participated in my study work with students every day, sometimes one-on-one, sometimes in large groups, and often see students from their first days at university through to their graduation day. They spoke genuinely about the connections they cultivate with students over the course of their degrees and told me they feel incredibly impacted by their interactions with students – it the 'why' of their work: why they believe in a university education, why they advocate for student success, why they love to come to work every day. They take responsibility for providing students with an education

that assists them in sharing how capable they are, what skills they have developed, and how they can contribute to a future employer. We see a range of services related to the tools and techniques used in job applications like resumes, CVs, cover letters, LinkedIn, and online applications, educating students on how to effectively and successfully use these tools to articulate their experiences in a way that employers can understand.

These tools and techniques utilize a particular language of skills that are designed with employers in mind. The types of skills that are prioritized in articulation are only those that would be effective in a job search, limiting the scope of the skills that students may share. Participants in my study shared how students struggled with articulating their many varied experiences during their university experience in a way that employers would understand. It seems the depth of their experiences were not easily translated into workplace relevant language, or that the articulation would not sufficiently communicate what they experienced. The language itself seems also to be contested, with no consensus existing in regards to the type of skills that is meant in skills policy and the related discourses. While some actors refer to more technical skills, others prioritize a standard set of ‘essential’ or ‘soft’ skills, commonly listed as critical thinking, teamwork, communication, and problem solving. The ambiguous nature of the concept of skills allows different actors to discursively construct skills in ways that serve their interests. Powerful actors, like those in industry, can dominate problem representations, and in this case, limit the possibilities for articulation to those skills prioritized by industry. SAS staff who design these programs and services to assist students in articulation, and the students who participate, are thus constituted as skilled subjects in this particular way to fit the limited notion of skilled and competitive in the workforce.

The ‘real world’ and the university. The binary of the ‘real world’ and the university was pervasive in the data. Particularly in the policy documents, but also with frequent mention throughout the interview data, this binary works to create and sustain a hierarchy of learning and experience that is directly tied to industry. Separately, the two concepts require unpacking. First, there is no specific indication in the data what any actor is referring to when they use the term ‘real world’. However, its use in the binary designates the ‘real world’ as separate from what the student experiences in university. This binary represents the university as a bounded space and renders it irrelevant to life outside. It is dangerous to discount the experiences of students in university – a time that is shown to have profound impacts on identity development, career development, worldview, etc. (Patton et al, 2016). This binary also assumes that university is a time when students are not experiencing ‘real’ issues – on the contrary, life continues during university. Especially today, when the population of ‘non-traditional’ (mature or later-entry, low-income/working, with family responsibilities, not supported financially by family, self-financing, etc.) is quickly growing (Glauser, 2018). Additionally, the ‘real world’ binary as it relates to work assumes that students do not engage in work during their time as a student and categorizes education as not a form of work.

Students are experiencing the ‘real-world’ every day, spending formative years studying at the university, whether they are traditional-aged or not. The ‘real’ as experienced by the student during their time in university is not valued and discursively is treated as such. The neoliberal economic rationality that is embedded in this binary of the ‘real-world’ and the university limits the value of certain experiences while privileging others. Investments in an individual’s skills, knowledge, or experience through education, a space not considered

‘real’, would be valued only if those investments were in experiences that would contribute to a student’s economic competitiveness later on.

The discursive effects of this representation of the problem include the decisions that seem possible about a university education. When university is represented as separate from the ‘real world’ in this way, students and families want to invest in an education that will best serve them in the ‘real world’, grounding their decisions in their economic effects. And therefore, begin to prioritize programs and courses of study that are the most applicable, which may have implications for the structure of public post-secondary institutions, like which academic programs see enrolment increases or receive increased financial support in the institution, or what new programs are introduced on campus.

Marginalized Discourses

Access & equity. While access to skills development opportunities like experiential learning was acknowledged as an issue by SAS staff participants in my study, the context of the ‘access’ they were referring to was not what I expected to hear. When speaking about access to the types of programs and services they provide for student skills development, participants spoke about the levels of awareness in the student population about the programs and services and the possibility for students to choose to participate. For example, multiple participants lamented the fact that promotion of their programs and services began before students even arrived on campus, but accessing those services was seemingly not a priority for students. One participant acknowledged the role that social and cultural capital may play in the types of students they interact with in their programs most frequently, referring to ‘super motivated high achieving’ students. There was minimal acknowledgement in the

interviews that other factors may impact how a student accesses skills development opportunities considered so critical to their success.

Experiential learning and co-curricular activities have clearly been identified by participants and in policy as beneficial to skills development, identity development, and successful employment. Lehmann describes that this is part of a larger “pervasive public discourse about the benefits of higher education” (Lehmann, 2009, p.137). Students face increasing pressure to attend university, as higher education is marketed as the pathway to social mobility, job stability, and financial security, however, various institutional and social barriers impede their success and persistence to completion (Lehmann, 2009, 2013a, 2013b, Bok 2009).

Marginalized students, such as racialized students, women, LGBTQ+ students, or non-traditional aged students, report that they are subject to particular experiences that are specific to their identity at university in their interactions with other students and in navigating the university structure that impact their sense of self-worth and ability to feel integrated into the social fabric of the campus (Samuel, 2004; Ivcevic & Kaufman, 2013). In campus activities, racialized students reported feeling tokenized and unwelcome (Samuel, 2004, p. 420). There is evidence that suggests racialized students are less involved in campus activities outside the classroom than their White counterparts (Flowers, 2004; Webber, 2013). In addition, many working-class or low-income students maintain part-time employment or are responsible for various family obligations throughout their university experience, limiting their availability to participate in the kind of experiential programs being promoted at the university (Lehmann, 2013a; Bok, 2009). This begins to reveal how opportunities like experiential learning, and other SAS programs and services are differently

accessed by racialized students attempting to navigate an institution in which non-dominant forms of capital are not valued (Bourdieu, 1986; Goldenberg, 2014).

When we consider this alongside the trend towards assessment and tracking of experiential opportunities through pseudo-credentialing tools like the Co-Curricular Record, it is important to consider how activities like experiential learning and skills development for careers that exist as optional, or complementary to, a university degree, become necessary or built into a script of success as the student transitions out of the university. Particular scripts inform student aspirations, or ideas of their ‘possible selves’ (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011), and I think it is important to acknowledge that involvement in activities outside of the classroom, like experiential learning may not be a possibility in every student’s higher education aspirational script, however, the dominant higher education student success script *requires* involvement in some kind of extra-curricular or co-curricular program. That is, investment in the self through these programs as means to develop skills and compete in the job market is created discursively through the representations of the problem of the ‘skills gap’ in post-secondary students. It is this contention that creates inequitable spaces for marginalized students within the push for skills development opportunities for post-secondary students.

The marginalization of equity discourses in this space shapes how the ‘student’ is represented in experiential learning and skills development initiatives. Categories of students, including racialized students, LGBTQ2A+ students, Indigenous students, low-income students, and others, are included in policy documents, but attention to the particular barriers facing these students in participating in experiential learning and skills development stops there. It seems as though there is a reliance in policy and in practice on the assumption that the ‘student’ is a traditional aged student with the ability to invest time (additional to their

degree requirements) to participate in activities. The implication of this is that skills development programs can serve to perpetuate inequities in access to the labour market by maintaining an overarching curricular system that is based in dominant white, masculine, heteronormative culture.

As I have mentioned, my experience in the field of SAS is that equity is a top priority across different areas of practice, and it is featured as a key area for research in the CACUSS Research Agenda (2018). The intersectional understanding of equity and inclusion I've explored above is silenced in skills development policy because equity and inclusion is discursively constituted as a meritocratic project, which SAS staff are subjected to in the university setting. Liasidou and Symeou (2018) call this the "neoliberal version of inclusion that aims at facilitating the production of the 'ideal student'" (p. 160). Students who invest in themselves through experiential learning opportunities thrive under "neoliberal policy imperatives" (Liasidou & Symeou, 2018, p. 160) at the expense of an intersectional equity-driven practice.

Broad Implications

The purpose of this study was not to evaluate whether or not skills development policy in Ontario is 'working' or if experiential learning is good or bad, or the best pedagogical tool to address skills development and career preparation in students. The purpose of this study was to investigate how this issue is shaped by particular discourses, and what the effects of this are.

The findings show that there are a broad range of initiatives (programs and services) within which SAS staff engage as sites to enact skills development policy. Overall, there was considerable alignment across policy and in practice by participants. The discourses of skills

articulation, the ‘real world’, and developing connections to industry to support students were prevalent across the data. Participants felt that policy in Ontario, and particularly its attention to experiential learning, bolstered their profile as staff on campus, putting a ‘spotlight’ on their work. Participants shared their belief in the possibilities for experiential learning to be a space for meaning-making, critical reflection, and did not hesitate to support the direction that policy was guiding them as higher education professionals. SAS staff also adjust the policy to their particular context, placing a significant focus on mental health, arguably the most prevalent issue facing SAS staff.

A quote from a participant stood out in my head as I was completing this study: “I feel in a lot of ways we don't think about policy in terms of lobbying for different issues because we feel that *we're in a more reactive type role rather than lobbying for what we feel should be done.*” This participant’s perception of policy was that any change or action happens at the top, at the site of policy making, both provincially, and in their institution. However, the data shows how SAS staff purposefully engage with other sites for skills development that are not recommendations of policy, but based on their lived experience working with students. This participant suggests that what SAS staff feel should be done may be different from what policy suggests, but they feel they aren’t in a place to challenge or address these inconsistencies as they exist in policy. Rather than directly address them through traditional policymaking processes, they enact policy in their specific contexts, drawing connections between skills development and mental health, and with community engagement.

This participant’s reflection continued to resonate with me as I continued to do analysis and interact with the data, so that the pressures on SAS became visible. Participants

frequently spoke about the real world and preparing students to get jobs, but also spoke about how incredible it was to witness a student grow and change over the course of their degree, expressing their belief in a well-rounded university education that exposes students to field across the disciplinary spectrum, rather than focusing on a single professional output. Brown (2015) writes about the challenges of this tension, when a neoliberal economic rationality takes hold and we are focused on preparing students for the ‘real world’,

“the question is not immoral, but obviously shrinks the value of higher education to individual economic risk and gain, removing quaint concerns with developing the person and citizen or perhaps reducing such development to the capacity for economic advantage” (p. 23)

The implications of this rationality that SAS staff are grappling with are in the possibilities we create in post-secondary institutions for an education for democracy and for civically engaged citizens. The ‘quaint’ concern of a student’s personal and civic development remains central to the work of SAS (CACUSS, 2013), but SAS staff also seem greatly burdened by their responsibility to prepare students for the ‘real world’, which they see skills development and experiential learning as accomplishing.

Ball and colleagues (1993; 1994; Ball et al, 2011; Braun et al, 2011) and Bacchi (2009, 2012) tell us that policy as discourse works to create particular truths through policy problems or problematizations. However, the critical analysis required to uncover these truths is complex and messy. Bacchi (2012) writes,

The task is complicated, however, by the norms embedded in practices – the “rules one prescribes to oneself and the reasons one ascribes” (Foucault, 1980b: p. 42 in Flynn, 2005: p. 31) – that “determine how we go about constructing who we are and

what we know” (May, 2006: p. 104). That is, since we are all located within practices and problematizations that shape us to an extent, it is difficult to stand back and study their operation (p. 4).

Bacchi’s (2012) analysis here helps me to understand why SAS staff have very little critique of the ‘skills gap’ and its related discourses and proposed solutions. Students, as well, are not in opposition to this shift in focus. In fact, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA), the largest provincial student organization in Ontario, actively lobbies for increases in experiential learning opportunities at the undergraduate level, indicating their strong belief in the benefit of this pedagogy to all students that they represent (Aitchison & Siekanowicz, 2018). This is confirmed by my SAS staff participants, who frequently told me that experiential learning is ‘what students want’ and that this trend towards skills- or competency-based assessment and experiential learning is student driven. Raddon and Harrison (2015) write that students and educators in PSE,

...may critically identify aspects of their service-learning, such as volunteering and credential seeking, as serving the neo-liberal state, they nevertheless may embrace such practices not only for their own economic survival but also for the pleasures of becoming self-realized neo-liberal subjects through such activities (Miller & Rose, 2008), just as instructors may take up service-learning partly as a project of the self, to become enterprising, socially responsible and pedagogically innovative (Simons & Masschelein, 2006). (p. 147).

Under neoliberal influences, the student is forced to pursue economically viable careers and to do whatever possible to ensure that they are successful. Alongside the student, their advocate, the SAS staff, pursues pedagogies and strategies to assist the student in

preparing for the ‘real world’ and is rewarded by the validation of their work through policy. It is not surprising then, that the SAS staff I interviewed were largely in support of the discourses around skills development. However, they situate the policy within their own context, negotiating its meaning and purpose in relation to the ‘real world’ of student life they see sitting in front of them in their daily work. In doing so, they reinterpret policy and construct their programs and services in ways that are relevant to their communities, such as the focus seen in the data I collected in interviews on student mental health.

Understanding policy as discourses brings attention to the ways in which problems, and their potential solutions, are represented that limit the possibilities of seeing the problem in other ways. This research reveals how a complex assemblage of discourses give shape to the issue of skills in PSE in Ontario, and specifically explores the experiences of SAS staff as an important site for skills development work at the university level. In this assemblage, different discourses are championed by different actors, and may seem at times conflicting or disparate, however, there are certain pervasive assumptions about students, skills, and work that underpin the representation of the problem of skills and impact the daily practice of SAS staff.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Future directions for this work include an investigation into student perceptions of career preparation and their experiences participating in experiential learning, as this study did not engage directly with students. I also believe that this research adds to a growing field of literature on SAS staff. For this field of research to grow, SAS staff must deliberately engage with researchers and with their institutions to create opportunities for further research to happen. In completing this study, I faced some challenges in recruiting participants. I

believe this may have been mitigated if the study had been conducted online or using a methodology that provided access to staff from other institutions. Requiring an investment of time and limiting the study to one institution provided me with rich insights into the work happening at CU, but also prevented some staff from participating. In my early communications with participants, some expressed that they did not think they would be eligible for the study or a 'good' participant because they 'did not know much about policy'. Anxiety around the policy focus of the study was evident early on. Understanding this, I still call for SAS staff to participate in research wherever and whenever it is available to them, including, and especially, when the topic of the research is not entirely familiar. To grow the field and better understand how SAS is impacting and impacted by the broad field of PSE, policy, law, media, and more, we need to get involved in the research, and do the research ourselves. CACUSS recently proposed a research agenda, drawing attention to issues around supporting diverse students, the profession itself, and emerging issues in the field (CACUSS 2018). SAS staff should make it a priority to engage with this research agenda through practitioner-initiated research and collaborations with institutions and other researchers.

I believe this is true for SAS staff and policy, as well. Participants frequently spoke about their disengagement from policy beyond knowing the headlines and being aware that there are impacts on their work. How might policy development be impacted with the deliberate inclusion of SAS voices? Outside of the official policy development process, I see an opportunity for SAS staff to bring a policy awareness to their work to better understand what their role is as political actors in this space. In an interview, one participant reflected that they felt SAS staff were in a more 'reactive' role in relationship to policy, rather than lobbying for issues they felt were important. This was significant to me as a researcher, as I

felt it demonstrated how SAS staff may feel different issues are priorities in their work but must work flexibly and creatively to engage with policy that is often narrowly siloed.

Institutions continue to acknowledge the important role SAS staff play in creating and facilitating a well-rounded student experience. However, the field must also remain critical of their own work. To do so, I propose a deliberate engagement of all staff in the field in exploring their roles in policy and other structures that impact PSE at large, and prioritizing participation in research about the field.

Reflection & Conclusion

The results from my research illuminate how skills development discourses are underpinned by neoliberal economic rationalities that ultimately have effects on how skills development as a problem is represented, how it is addressed in practice by SAS staff, and how these programs are experienced by students at the university level. I believe that my research is relevant and useful to policymakers, SAS staff, and universities more broadly, and that it will contribute to the growing body of literature on SAS staff in Canadian PSE.

I was interested in pursuing this work because of my experiences in the field of SAS as a student and as a professional. While I had incredibly positive and transformational experiences through the programs and services offered in SAS during my undergraduate degree, I had also developed an awareness of some of the issues facing the field, from the obvious inequities in how SAS programs are accessed on campus to the search for legitimacy as a professional field in an academic environment. Pursuing graduate study and completing this research study has allowed me to better understand how SAS programs in the university are subject to larger societal discursive patterns, and how SAS staff are political actors in this sense, constructing and constructed by social issues that extend beyond PSE.

Foundational to my study and to my scholastic goals is my sincere belief in the possibilities that exist for students in PSE for personal, professional, and civic development. I believe that students attending university today are intensely complex, and present new opportunities and challenges for the administration of PSE. This work has presented me with an opportunity to explore the complexities of a part of the student experience through the work of a professional field I closely identify with, I am confident that what I have learned through conducting this study will make me a better educator when I return to the field of SAS as a scholar-practitioner.

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APPENDIX A: Letter of Information and Consent



Letter of Information and Consent

Project Title

Provincial Skills Policy Enactment in a SAS Department
in an Ontario Research University

Document Title

Letter of Information for Study Participants

Principal Investigator/Thesis Advisor + Contact

[REDACTED]

Student Researcher + Contact

[REDACTED]

1. Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to participate in this research study designed to understand the role of student affairs and services staff in undergraduate student skills development. The invitation to participate in a semi-structured interview comes as a result of your employment in [REDACTED]. Individuals who are employed in a student affairs and services role in the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] during the 2017/2018 academic year and are over the age of 18 are eligible to participate in this study.

2. Why is this study being done?

This study aims to understand how student affairs and services staff interact with and enact provincial policy related to undergraduate student skills development. Using document analysis and semi-structured interviews, the intent of this study is to better understand how the issue of the 'skills gap' is perceived and addressed in higher education institutions and by provincial policy by engaging with the staff responsible for student development programming.

3. How long will you be in this study?

Interviews for this study will be conducted between February and April 2018. Participation in this study would involve a semi-structured interview conducted in

person at a location convenient for you. Following the interview, you will have the opportunity to review the interview transcript and offer any clarifications or changes within two weeks following receipt of the transcript.

4. What are the study procedures?

Participants are being recruited from staff in the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] during the 2017/2018 school year. If you agree to participate you will be asked to:

- Participate in one semi-structured interview [REDACTED] [REDACTED], for 45-60 minutes in a location convenient for you in [REDACTED]. At the time of the interview, you will be asked to provide written consent to being audio-recorded during the interview. Audio recording is mandatory for participation in this study.
- A transcript of your interview will be provided to you within one week of the interview date. You will be asked to provide feedback or clarification to the researcher within two weeks of receiving the transcript of your interview.

5. What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

6. What are the benefits of participating in this study?

The potential benefits of this study to society include developing a more nuanced understanding of who these staff are in post-secondary institutions and how their actions, as guided by the skills policy priority, impact student success in the workplace. Participants in this study will benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their work and positionality in the policy context of skills development. Participants will also benefit from sharing their experiences in the field of student affairs and services and contribute to the growing body of research on this field.

7. Can participants choose to leave the study?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants may choose to not participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed please let the researcher know (contact information above).

8. How will participants' information be kept confidential?

Every effort will be made to protect participants' information. All study participants will be assigned a pseudonym to replace identifying information such as their name. The researcher will keep any personal information (full name and email) about you in a secure and confidential location for a minimum of seven years. A list linking your pseudonym with your name will be kept by the researcher in a secure

place, separate from your study file. [REDACTED] will conduct and transcribe the interviews and all participants will have the opportunity to review their transcript for accuracy. If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used. If the researcher uses quotations from interviews in the dissemination of this study, she will do so without attributing any identifying information and all quotations will be attributed to study participants using de-identified descriptors (for example, specific job titles that could be identifying will not be used). Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. While we do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project which may be required to report by law we have a duty to report.

9. Are participants compensated to be in this study?

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

10. What are the rights of participants?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on your employment status. We will give you any new information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study. You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form

11. Whom do participants contact for questions?

If you have questions about this research study please contact [REDACTED]

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact the thesis supervisor, [REDACTED]

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Written Consent

1. Project Title

Provincial Skills Policy Enactment in a Student Affairs and Services Department in an Ontario Research University

2. Document Title

Written Consent for Study Participants

3. Principal Investigator/Thesis Advisor + Contact

[Redacted]

4. Student Researcher + Contact

[Redacted]

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research

YES NO

Print Name of Participant

Signature

Date (DD-*MMM*-*YYYY*)

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

Print Name of Person
Obtaining Consent

Signature

Date (DD-*MMM*-*YYYY*)

Version Date: 08/02/2018

APPENDIX B: Semi-Structured Interview Guide



Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Project Title

Provincial Skills Policy Enactment in a Student Affairs and Services Department in an Ontario Research University

Document Title

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Principal Investigator/Thesis Advisor + Contact

[REDACTED]

Student Researcher + Contact

[REDACTED]

10. Describe your job at [REDACTED]. How long have you been in this role? How did you come to work in the field of student affairs and services?
11. What are the most important issues for students you take up in your day to day work? Why are these important?
12. In your experience, how are students being prepared to transition to the world of work following their undergraduate education?
13. What kind of programs do you work on that help students develop transferable skills?
14. What is the 'skills gap' in Ontario? How does this show up in your work with students?
15. How would you describe the importance of preparing students for the workforce in your work?
16. Are you familiar with Ontario policies like the Highly Skilled Workforce Strategy or the Career Kickstart Strategy?
17. Does this policy impact your work? Who in your department talks about this policy?
18. What aspects of the policy, as you understand it, are most applicable to undergraduate student career readiness/preparation?

APPENDIX C: Ethics Approval



Date: 15 February 2018

████████████████████
████████████████████
Study Title: Policy Enactment in a Student Affairs and Services Department

Application Type: NMREB Initial Application

Review Type: Delegated

Full Board Reporting Date: 02/Mar/2018

Date Approval Issued: 15/Feb/2018 11:24

REB Approval Expiry Date: 15/Feb/2019

Dear ████████████████████

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

Documents Approved:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Email Recruitment Script ██████ Initial Submission	Recruitment Materials	16/Jan/2018	1
Interview Guide Questions List ██████ Initial Submission	Interview Guide	16/Jan/2018	1
LOI Consent ██████ Response to Recommendations	Written Consent/Assent	08/Feb/2018	2

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

████████████████████
Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).

APPENDIX D: Curriculum Vitae

Shannon McKechnie

EDUCATION

- 2016-2018 **Master of Arts, Education (Critical Policy, Equity, and Leadership)**
Western University
Thesis title: *Provincial Skills Policy Enactment in a Student Affairs and Services Department in an Ontario Research University*
Supervisor: Dr. Melody Viczko
- 2011-2016 **Honours Bachelor of Arts, Anthropology (Society, Culture, Language)**
University of Toronto

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

- October 2016 to present **Research Assistant, Faculty of Education, Western University**
 - PI: Dr. Melody Viczko, Dr. Rita Gardiner
 - Participated in international research collaboration with Digital Methods Initiative, University of Amsterdam (July 2017, Winter School January 2018)
- September-December 2015 **Research Project Contributor, Ethnography Lab, University of Toronto**
 - PI: Dr. Tania Li
 - Project Title: *What's in a Rank? Universities and Student Satisfaction: The Role of Student Services Practitioners in Creating Successful Students*
- April-December 2015 **Research Intern, Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation (Kerala, India)**
Research Project Contributor, Ethnography Lab, University of Toronto
 - PI: Dr. Tania Li
 - Project Title: *'Crestians' identity performance in a post-graduate skills training program in India*

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- August 2015-April 2016 **Residence Life Staff, New College, University of Toronto**

September 2014- April 2016 **Student Life Assistant – Leadership and Mentorship Programs**
 May 2014- July 2014 **Leadership Development Programming Assistant, Division of Student Life, University of Toronto**

PUBLICATIONS – CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

McKechnie, S. (2018, April). *Digital Methods for Educational Research*. Paper presented at the Robert Macmillan Graduate Research in Education Symposium, Western University Faculty of Education, London, ON.

McKechnie, S. (2018, February). *Addressing the ‘Skills Gap’ with Student Affairs Practitioners*. Paper presented at the Graduate Policy Research Challenge Award Ceremony, Policy Research Symposium, Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, Toronto, ON.

McKechnie, S. (2017, May). *Addressing the ‘Skills Gap’: Student Affairs and Policy Enactment*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, Toronto, ON.

McKechnie, S. (2017, May). *Equity & Extra-Curriculars: Race, Class, Gender and the ‘Successful Student’*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, Toronto, ON.

PUBLICATIONS – JOURNAL ARTICLES

Viczko, M., Lorusso, J., & McKechnie, S. (2018). *The ‘problem’ of the skills gap agenda in post-secondary education policies: Homogenizing, inequitable neoliberal discourses in the Canadian context*. Under review.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS AND ACTIVITIES

- January 2017 • **Conference Proposal Reviewer**, Canadian Association of College and University Student Services
- September 2016 to present • **Member**, Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education
- September 2014 to present • **Member**, Canadian Association of College and University Student Services
- **Member**, American College Personnel Association

AWARDS

- November 2017 Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development Graduate Policy Research Challenge Award
- May 2017 Delta Delta Delta Foundation Sarah Shinn Marshall Scholarship
- September 2016 Western University Faculty of Education Graduate Research Scholarship
- June 2016 University of Toronto New College Graduation F.E.W. Wetmore Honour Award
- April 2016 University of Toronto Alumni Association Gordon Cressy Student Leadership Award
- February 2015 University of Toronto Faculty of Arts and Science Dean’s International Initiatives Fund Grant Recipient