

QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS AUDIT

ASSESSORS' REPORT

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

DATE OF SITE VISIT: [March 13 and 14, 2017](#)

PREPARATION DATE: [March 14 to 22, 2017](#)

SUBMISSION DATE: March 22, 2017

PREPARED BY: [Panel of Assessors](#)

Overall Assessment

Summary:

The Assessors concluded that SFU meets the highest contemporary standards and practices in academic quality assurance. The process of review and subsequent improvement is characterized by thoroughness and dedication. The three units (Computing Science, English and Health Sciences), whose materials were available to the panel, all derived significant benefits through the whole process: during the meetings the panel saw and learned in detail that the process is working in these three cases. The Institution Report (p.49) recognizes that “work needs to be done in order to ascertain how well it (sc. the process) serves each of the units that undertake the process.”

(NB. The three units here were reviewed before the current version of the Senate Guidelines was approved in July 2013.)

Commendations

Provide clear statements that articulate areas where the institution has shown exemplary practice in the field of program quality assurance and improvement. These are mechanisms that are especially noteworthy and may be worthy of emulation by other institutions in the system.

SFU has several areas of exemplary practice in its regimen of quality assurance. Here the Panel records that the preparation and development of the Institutional Report (January 13, 2017) for this Audit were exemplary (see *Report*, pp.36-38). The SFU “Senate Guidelines for External Reviews of Academic Units” are very clear and comprehensive, and the implementation of those guidelines in the Reviews of the three units presented to the Panel was first-rate.

Affirmations

Provide clear statements that articulate areas where the institution itself has found a weakness, identified the weakness, or intends to correct it (a plan of action has already been developed). In effect, this is affirming the institution’s judgment and findings in its Institution Report.

The Assessors have identified three areas where they can confidently affirm the wisdom of the institution’s actions and their continuing effect: the gradualist approach to the shift to a focus on learning outcomes (*Report*, pp.28-30, 60-61); the Faculty Budget Model, introduced in 2011 (*Report*, p.46), which promotes responsiveness to student needs (*Report*, pp.43ff.); and the new Student Evaluation of Teaching and Courses (SETC) initiative launched in 2016 (*Report*, p.23). SFU has a demonstrated commitment to continuous improvement (*Report*, p.47), which was evident throughout the site visit. The Assessors strongly support the need for “specific time limits for any particular step of the process” (*Report*, p.56) in external reviews.

Recommendations

Provide clear statements that articulate areas needing improvement.

Recommendations may also be made in relation to areas of concern identified by the institution in its Institution Report, and for which no plan of action has been articulated by the institution.

The following list sets out suggestions that emerged during the Panel's many meetings, in most cases receiving a favourable reaction. (NB. The ordering of the list has no significance.)

- The Action Plans should identify time limits for each action and the individual(s) responsible for executing the action(s).
- Consider restricting the length of the self-study report (for example, 30-35 pages; appendices as additional).
- In the development of new programs, at an appropriate stage, and prior to submission to the Ministry, the draft should be subject to external peer review; in some cases, a desk review would suffice, while in others a site visit may be needed.
- Exercise flexibility in deciding the number of external reviewers (for example, allow for as many as four); the test is what number of reviewers are needed to perform the task of review).
- Include the line-deans in the selection of external reviewers; the line Dean should be included at each significant step of the process.
- Increase the emphasis on the importance of teaching quality in various processes: for example, in all important personnel decisions (appointment, tenure and promotion) by recommending the need for evidence of teaching quality beyond course evaluations, and in the external review process (starting with the self-study).
- Consider how to harmonize the accreditation and external review processes to reduce 'review fatigue'; explore what other universities are doing in this regard.
- Consider ways in which revision (and often simple tweaking) can be made to the Senate Guidelines to strengthen attention to curriculum (e.g. the first purpose in the second section of Part 2) and to encourage critical self-reflection.

Signed:

Chair of the QAPA Team:

ON FILE

(Signature)

(Date)

Sam Scully

(Printed Name)

QAPA Assessors:

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Stephen Grundy

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1. Overall Process

<i>Does the process reflect the institution's mandate, mission, and values?</i>	
CRITERIA:	COMMENTS / RECOMMENDATIONS:
The institution should be able to demonstrate that it has an established institutional and program review planning cycle and process to assess the effectiveness of its educational programs and services, their responsiveness to student, labour market, and social needs.	SFU has a long-established, Senate-approved process for external reviews of academic units, normally to occur every seven years. The panel was given a schedule for reviews and review updates through 2023/24, and the materials developed through three unit reviews (see below). The <i>Report</i> (pp.31-33) describes the policy and the process as well as the University Planning Framework. The whole process is effectively managed by professional staff in the Office of the Vice-President Academic and Provost.
The process should contribute to the continuous improvement of the institution.	All the elements of the quality assurance process at SFU contribute to the institution's continuous improvement, as Sections 2 and 4 of the <i>Report</i> argue persuasively. This process includes the care taken in hiring excellent faculty; the biennial review of faculty performance in teaching and research; the faculty tenure and promotion processes; student admission and student performance; the periodic unit reviews, including the action plans; curriculum reviews; and the process for developing new program proposals. To this menu of processes SFU has now added institutional accreditation (<i>Report</i> , p.34). The panel heard that this addition has served to strengthen the university's existing processes.

<i>Is the scope of the process appropriate?</i>	
CRITERIA:	COMMENTS / RECOMMENDATIONS:
(i) There should be evidence of a formal, institutionally approved policy and procedure for the periodic review of programs against published standards that includes the following characteristics:	The Assessors received very complete materials on three unit reviews that were initiated under the SFU Senate policy at the beginning of this decade. This documentation was very extensive, and included the following

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A self-study undertaken by faculty members and administrators of the program based on evidence relating to program performance, including strengths and weaknesses, desired improvements, and future directions. A self-study takes into account: • the continuing appropriateness of the program's structure, admissions requirements, method of delivery and curriculum for the program's educational goals and standards; • the adequacy and effective use of resources (physical, technological, financial and human); • faculty performance including the quality of teaching and supervision and demonstrable currency in the field of specialization; • that the learning outcomes achieved by students/graduates meet the program's stated goals, the credential level standard, and where appropriate, the standards of any related regulatory, accrediting or professional association; • the continuing adequacy of the methods used for evaluating student progress and achievement to ensure that the program's stated goals have been achieved; • the graduate satisfaction level, student satisfaction level, and graduation rate; and • where appropriate, the graduate employment rates, employer satisfaction level, and advisory board satisfaction level. <p>➤ <i>An assessment conducted by a panel that includes independent experts external to the institution. The assessment should normally include a site visit, a written report that assesses program quality and may recommend quality improvements; and an institution response to the report;</i></p> <p>➤ <i>A summary of the conclusions of the</i></p>	<p>items:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The unit's self-study and substantial supporting materials; 2. The itinerary of the reviewers' site visit; 3. Terms of Reference for the reviewers; 4. The External Review report; 5. The unit's action plan; and 6. The unit's mid-cycle report on the status of the action plan. <p>Most of the items listed under this criterion were addressed in these materials, though not always with the same thoroughness. The panel has recommended above that the topic of curriculum be made more explicit in the Senate guidelines, and the next reviews of these units should attend more explicitly to this need. SFU's embrace of Learning Outcomes followed the initial stages of all three reviews, and is covered in the 2013 Senate Guidelines; the three units will have to include this criterion in the imminent preparation of their self-studies. Some other topics need more work in this next cycle.</p> <p>The next stages of the process included all of the steps mentioned here. The external teams were strong. Their assessment included a full site visit, and there followed detailed and informative written reports. These in turn prompted detailed Action Plans, which were approved by the Senate Committee on University Priorities and the Senate, and then a mid-cycle update on subsequent progress.</p> <p>A full review of English is scheduled in 2018-2019, and of Computing Science and of Health Sciences in 2019-2020.</p>
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<p><i>evaluation that is made appropriately available.</i></p>	
<p>(ii) The institution can demonstrate that it has a policy and process for new program approval that includes peer / external review by appropriate experts.</p>	<p>The Institution Report describes the SFU Process for New Program Approval (pp.52-53). The panel had the opportunity to discuss and review the process: it includes a notice of intent that is reviewed by two Senate committees and then a full proposal. The process is clear and rigorous. It was not clear to the panel that the process consistently involved review by external peers, hence the earlier recommendation in this report.</p>

Are the guidelines differentiated and adaptable to respond to the needs and contexts of different units, e.g. faculties or departments or credential level?

<p>CRITERIA:</p>	<p>COMMENTS / RECOMMENDATIONS:</p>
<p>(i) Are the guidelines adaptable to the range of programs and offerings within the institution?</p>	<p>The SFU Senate Guidelines for External Reviews of Academic Units (approved July 2013) are adaptable to the range of academic units within the institution. Thus the three unit reviews included in this audit were drawn from three quite different units: a department in Arts (English), a school in Applied Sciences (Computing Science), and a faculty that also goes through accreditation. In each case, the guidelines worked very well.</p>
<p>(ii) Do the guidelines provide measurable, consistent means and direction to undertake diversified program review?</p>	<p>The Guidelines provided clear and sufficient direction for the review process in all three reviews. They have been updated over time to reflect current expectations for academic cyclical reviews that are consistent with best practice in quality assurance at peer institutions.</p>
<p>(iii) Are the guidelines consistent with institutional Mandate, mission, vision and associated strategic goals?</p>	<p>The Guidelines are manifestly consistent with the mandate and mission of the institution (<i>Report</i>, pp.40ff.), and support SFU's vision of engaging students, engaging research, engaging communities (<i>Report</i>, p.15). They also support the University 's Planning Framework (<i>Report</i>, p.16).</p>

<i>Does the process promote quality improvement?</i>	
CRITERIA:	COMMENTS / RECOMMENDATIONS:
(i) The institution should be able to demonstrate that it has appropriate accountability mechanisms functioning for vocational, professional and academic programs.	The three reviews that formed part of this audit represented an appropriate range for this purpose. Each unit reported that the process was effective for them and resulted in significant improvements. The panel found that the unit self-studies, while containing much valuable information, could be condensed to focus on the issues of real importance to the unit. Valuable information should be placed in appendices.
(ii) The institution should be able to demonstrate how faculty scholarship and professional development inform teaching and continue to be a foundation for ensuring that programming is up to date.	The panel raised this issue in several meetings during its visit. It heard, not surprisingly, that there is a continuing process in which the research and scholarship of the faculty feeds into the teaching, and in this way the curriculum maintains currency (see <i>Report</i> , p.46). All three units included in this review have great strength in research and scholarship, and the synergy between this strength and the unit's teaching is continuous. SFU's Centre for Teaching and Learning was praised for its support by the representatives of the English Department.
(iii) The institution should be able to demonstrate how learning outcomes are being achieved and how student progress is assessed and measured.	SFU has adopted a very reasonable and responsible approach to the development and implementation of learning outcomes (LOs). All units undergoing academic review are expected to have program LOs and assessment processes. New program proposals are required to articulate how their curriculum and learning outcomes (educational goals) are linked and aligned. There is no requirement to articulate assessment processes at the program or course level in new program proposals; this action occurs at a later date. Proponents of new course proposals are encouraged to identify course outcomes and to include them on course outlines. This process has

	<p>facilitated the provision of support resources across the institution. The Senate Guidelines (section 3.2) require the unit to provide information on student academic achievement.</p>
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Quality assessment issues raised by the institution in its self-study that the institution would like the assessors to address.

CRITERIA:	COMMENTS / RECOMMENDATIONS:
<p><u>N/A</u></p>	<p>The <i>Institution Report</i> (pp.68 and 70) identifies several topics on which its authors hoped that the Assessors would be able to provide guidance. The Assessors regret that they have little to add to current SFU practice. None of the Assessors has engaged in any of these activities in a substantive way. Their advice is that SFU seek out institutions that have done so in order to learn what has worked for them. For example, several Canadian universities have focused on curriculum development that embraces “Indigenous ways of knowing and living”. On a topic not listed here, but of contemporary interest, namely, the assessment of the achievement of learning outcomes, SFU should look to Ontario where both the universities and the degree-granting colleges have now had substantial experience in working with Learning Outcomes.</p>

2. Review findings

Were the responses to the sample program review findings adequate?

CRITERIA:	COMMENTS / RECOMMENDATIONS:
<p>The institution has a follow up process for internal program reviews and acts in accordance with it.</p>	<p>The cyclical review process culminates in the development of an Action Plan by the academic unit. In a departmentalized unit, that Plan is discussed and ultimately agreed to by the Dean, and then reviewed and approved by the Vice-President Academic,</p>

	<p>the Senate Committee on University Priorities and the Senate. “In the fourth year of the review cycle, a progress update is submitted by the unit to the Senate to ensure that the unit is on course with its action plan (<i>Report</i>, p.57).” The <i>Report</i> (p.42) summarizes the results of an analysis of five unit review updates from 2015, which included English: it found that 72% of the items in the Action Plans had been completed, and that 22% were ongoing. This finding is consistent with the panel’s sense of the progress in the three Action Plans it reviewed. The panel found it difficult to assess who was responsible for the various actions and what the time frame was for the actions, hence the earlier recommendation on these matters.</p>
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<i>Does the process inform future decision making?</i>	
CRITERIA:	COMMENTS / RECOMMENDATIONS:
<p>The program review ensures that the program remains consistent with the institution’s current mission, goals and long-range plan.</p>	<p>The site visit enabled the Assessors to see how this criterion is met during the reviews of academic units. The institution’s mandate and vision are embedded in all steps of the review process, and throughout SFU’s planning. While the criterion is not explicit in the Senate Guidelines, the Institution Report (section 4.1.1, pp.40-49) addresses it.</p>

<i>Are the review findings appropriately disseminated?</i>	
CRITERIA:	COMMENTS:
<p>The institution has a well-defined system to disseminate the review findings to the appropriate entities.</p>	<p>SFU has a well-defined system of dissemination. The Action Plans and the mid-cycle updates mentioned above all go to the Senate Committee on Academic Priorities and the Senate for approval. The Board of Governors also receives the Action Plan and the External Review Report for information. The <i>Report</i> (p.67) states: ‘All documents are considered “public documents” and appear in the Senate agenda/minutes. Also, some units</p>

	<p>publish their reports and action plan on their website (faculty self-portal).’ Given the challenges of navigating university websites, this last practice should be strongly encouraged, if not required.</p>
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