SUMMARY OF THE PRINCIPAL FINDINGS OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE AUDIT OF WESTERN UNIVERSITY

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Western University is the third university to be audited in the first eight-year cycle of quality assurance audits under the new Quality Assurance Framework for Ontario universities. The objective of the audit is to determine whether or not the institution has complied with the provisions of its Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) for cyclical program reviews and the development of new programs, as ratified by the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (the Quality Council). Three arm's-length auditors who are members of the Quality Council Audit Panel conducted this review. Quality Council staff assisted throughout the audit.

The audit involved a review of Western University's IQAP and a selection of a set of the University's programs that have gone through quality assurance under its IQAP. This detailed review involved a desk audit of all documents pertaining to each program and a three-day site visit (from November 18 – 20, 2013), during which the auditors met with faculty, staff and students involved in each program and with the senior academic leaders of the University. The support and professionalism of all members of the Western University community who participated in and assisted with the audit is gratefully acknowledged.

The audit focused on:
- Four cyclical program reviews – Environmental Science: BSc; History: BA/BAH, (Huron University College); French: MA/PhD; Geology/Geophysics: MSc/PhD
- Two new program approvals – Chemical Engineering: BESc (Dual Degree offered with Zhejiang University); Master's of Public Health: MPH
- One expedited review – Transitional Justice and Post-Conflict Resolution: Collaborative program at the Master's and Doctoral levels
- One major modification to an existing program – Medical Biophysics: Clinical Physics Concentration

In summary, the audit team concluded that Western University has engaged in a concerted effort to integrate quality assurance practices into its educational practices and has continued to enhance these processes to integrate quality assurance standards throughout its academic mission. The audit team identified no causes for concern.

The audit team saw examples of documents from various stages in the evolution of the IQAP procedures and noted significant work by members of the University to improve the standards of documentation and the protocols for approval of the documentation, and to inform more fully those involved in constructing cyclical program reviews,

program proposals and program modifications. The development of an online database to record, track and report the IQAP-related activities from across the University and the affiliated colleges will mark a significant transition in the development and integration of quality assurance in the operations of Western University. Initiatives, such as this particular one, indicate the dedication of the administrative teams in supporting quality assurance activities. In meetings with faculty, staff and students, the audit team also saw positive further approaches to developing the quality assurance practices.

In recognition that the development and integration of quality assurance practices is still a work in progress, the audit team identified a set of six general observations on quality assurance at Western University. These observations are intended to support the University's current practices and suggest areas for review and enhancement. These observations include suggestions about the following:

* revision to the Western IQAP to make it more consistent with the Quality Assurance Framework;

* a close review of the external review process, including comments on the advisement of the reviewers and the content of the external review document;

* further development and integration of learning outcomes into the program proposals and program reviews, with a more systematic connection of these to degree-level expectations and methods of assessment;

* increased engagement of and support for students involved in quality assurance processes;

* a review of the feasibility of allowing a link between graduate and undergraduate cyclical program reviews where such a link would be appropriate; and

* a review of the content of all documentation to ensure it conforms to the IQAP requirements established at Western University.

In addition to these general observations, the auditors have included 12 recommendations concerning areas where Western University was found not to be in compliance with its own IQAP or with Ontario's Quality Assurance Framework. These more specific recommendations emerge from the general observations outlined above.

The report also makes 18 suggestions that may be helpful to Western University in strengthening its quality assurance processes to ensure best practice. These suggestions are generally concerned with clarifying stages in the various processes and communicating important aspects of the process to those undertaking a cyclical program review or proposing new programs or major modifications to existing programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Any audit process is inherently detailed and precise, and these recommendations identify areas where Western University has not complied with the provisions of its own IQAP or where Western should modify its IQAP.

Western University must:

1: ensure that every program is reviewed at least once every eight years.

2: ensure that all sub-programs are included in the self-study documentation and reviewed by external consultants as part of cyclical program reviews.

3: ensure the inclusion of a methodology section outlining the role of faculty, staff and students in preparation of the self-study for cyclical program reviews.

4: ensure that identified authorities who approve the self-study check that the content of the self-study includes all the relevant information required by the IQAP.

5: enhance the methods of briefing the external consultants on the requirement to address all the evaluation criteria set out in the University's IQAP.

6: ensure that Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans contain all of the required elements, as identified in the IQAP.

7: ensure that concerns and recommendations raised in previous reviews are taken into account as part of the subsequent self-study as specified in the IQAP.

8: ensure that all existing programs develop and assess program level learning outcomes as part of the cyclical program review.

9: include on the Periodic Review Schedule all programs offered and indicate where there are partner institutions and multiple sites.

10: develop learning outcomes, mapped to degree level expectations, for all new programs and ensure these are included in the New Program Proposal.

11: Western University must clarify the role(s) of the internal reviewer in the new program approval and the cyclical program review processes in the IQAP.

12: add a section to its IQAP on the Evaluation Criteria required for Major Modifications to existing programs as per the Quality Assurance Framework.

SUGGESTIONS

Western University should:

1: consider developing a student's guide about their role in quality assurance activities as outlined in the IQAP.

2: consider developing a formal review protocol designed to ensure greater consistency between the information provided in the self-study and the IQAP requirements.

3: update its Guide to Curriculum Review to ensure that it is consistent with the IQAP and provides more focus on learning outcomes and the relationship to IQAP requirements.

4: review its IQAP to seek ways in which it may be made clearer and more user-friendly as a means of ensuring it is consistent with the Quality Assurance Framework.

5: strengthen templates, guidelines, formalized verbal instructions and review with the Review Team to ensure consistency with the IQAP and the Quality Assurance Framework.

6: consider implementing a process for dealing with external consultants' reports that do not meet the requirements of the IQAP.

7: consider adding a description of the role of the Dean of affiliated colleges in cyclical program reviews to the IQAP.

8: provide appropriate data for use in the self-study for cyclical program reviews to all academic units at Western University and its affiliated colleges to ensure data integrity.

9: clarify in the IQAP who approves the self-study and at what stage(s) in the process.

10: consider including a description in the IQAP of the role of Educational Policy Committees in the cyclical program review process.

11: consider strengthening its IQAP by requiring and clarifying the role of the Dean in responding to the external consultants' report in cyclical program reviews.

12: consider establishing a stage in the process at which the Vice-Provost has seen and accepted the content and findings of the Review before the documents move on to Senate Committees.

13: inform Programs about the reasons for "with Report" status assigned by SUPR-U or SUPR-G.

14: institute a formal notification system to signal the start of the cyclical program review. Such a notification system would help in tracking the time taken to complete a review.

15: identify appropriate support for graduate programs in developing and assessing learning outcomes.

16: develop a standardized method of indicating how external consultants were chosen and how each consultant satisfies the requirements for an "arm's-length" relationship to the department or program under review.

17: ensure individual academic units are notified concerning the Final Assessment Report and expected follow up, if any, on cyclical program reviews approved by Senate.

18: include the date of the last review on the Periodic Review Schedule will assist the University in monitoring that it is in compliance with the eight-year cycle.