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

FEBRUARY 2016

Summary of the Principal Findings of the Quality Assurance Audit of Nipissing University

February 2016

Nipissing University was audited in the third year of the first eight-year cycle of quality assurance audits under the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for Ontario universities. The objective of the audit is to determine whether an institution has complied with the provisions of its own Institutional Quality Assurance Policy (IQAP), as ratified by the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (the Quality Council). In addition, the audit provides the opportunity to identify any inconsistencies between an institution's IQAP and the QAF, and, as appropriate, note best practices and share suggestions about other best practices.

The audit involved a review of three cyclical program reviews, two new program developments, and two major modifications conducted under the provisions of Nipissing University's IQAP.

Cyclical Program Reviews:
- Social Welfare and Social Development: BA
- Native Studies: BA
- History: BA; MA

New Programs:
- Social Work: BSW
- Kinesiology: MSc

Major Modifications:
- Teacher Education: BEd
- Master of Education: MEd

In the desk audit phase, the auditors reviewed both the June 2011 and the re-ratified June 2013 versions of Nipissing University's IQAP and all the documentation related to the audited cyclical program reviews, new program proposals and major modifications sent by Nipissing University. During their site visit (March 25-27, 2015), the auditors met with the President and other senior administrative leaders, faculty, staff, and students involved in the quality assurance processes at Nipissing University. The auditors wish to express their sincere thanks to the individuals at the University who committed time to meet and discuss openly and frankly their quality assurances processes.

The eight recommendations made by the auditors concern instances in which the University's practices were not in conformity with its IQAP. These inconsistencies were most often observed in the case of cyclical program reviews.

Three recommendations are related to issues identified as "causes for concern". These include the failure to prepare and post on the University website the Institutional Executive Summary and Associated Implementation Plan for each cyclical program review; the failure to prepare and send the Final Assessment Report and Implementation Plan for each cyclical program review to Senate and to the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance; and, the failure to comply with the IQAP requirement to implement the follow-up monitoring process identified in the IQAP for each program review.

One recommendation is about ensuring that all existing program are included on the schedule for review. There are also recommendations related to the selection and appointment of arm's-length reviewers. The remaining recommendations concern the need to document approval and sign-off by the authorities as defined in the IQAP.

The seven suggestions from the Auditors are designed to assist the university to strengthen its quality assurance practices. The Auditors found a few instances in which the University might clarify or streamline its processes, have formal sign-off or create templates to assist programs in developing self-study documents that line up well with the IQAP requirements.

The auditors commended the University for some "best" practices. Notably, the Provost and Vice-President, Academic and Research is thorough in briefing the external reviewers on their roles in program reviews. He does so both in telephone conversations before the site visit and in writing at the time of invitation. A further best practice is the provision of a template for the reviewers' report that assists them to address all of the evaluation criteria. The University is also commended for including an array of student input to its evaluation of programs including feedback from current students and from graduates.

The audit report concluded with a strong call for action by the University to follow-up on the reviews of existing programs to ensure actions required to address quality issues in programs are taken in a timely way. The Quality Council requires the University to address the "Causes for Concern" by a specified deadline.

The audit report contains eight Recommendations and seven Suggestions. They are intended to support the University in achieving its quality assurance goals. The Recommendations identify instances where Nipissing University's practice is not in compliance with its IQAP. These Recommendations will require that the University amend its IQAP and/or its practices. The Suggestions are meant to encourage actions the University can take in any efforts to improve its current quality assurance practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nipissing University must:

1. comply with its IQAP to follow the processes for appointment of internal and external reviewers for cyclical program reviews or change the IQAP

2. prepare and post on its website the Institutional Executive Summary and Associated Implementation Plan for each cyclical program review

3. prepare and send the Final Assessment Report and Implementation Plan for each cyclical program review to Senate and to the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance **CAUSES FOR CONCERN**

4. comply with its IQAP and implement the follow-up monitoring process identified in the IQAP for each program review

5. ensure that the external and internal reviewers appointed are at "arm's-length" from the program to be reviewed

6. ensure that the relevant officials (e.g. Dean; Provost and Vice-President, Academic and Research) review and provide feedback to the program on self-studies created for cyclical program reviews to ensure that the self-study contains the information required in the IQAP

7. review its list of programs offered against its cyclical program review schedule to ensure the review schedule is up-to-date and that every program is scheduled for review at least once every eight years

8. ensure that there is formal documentation of the approval of relevant governance bodies including Faculty Council, Senate Committees and Senate for quality assurance processes that require these approvals

SUGGESTIONS

Nipissing University should:

1. consider requiring that the responsible authority sign and date the self-study as confirmation that it has been approved

2. consider developing a template for self-studies for cyclical program reviews

3. clarify the role of the Provost and Vice-President, Academic and Research in the preparation of Final Assessment Reports to the Planning and Priorities Committee, and ensure that written documentation of Senate approval is included in the files

4. clarify the role of the Planning and Priorities Committee in reviewing the self-study for cyclical program reviews

5. consider clarifying in the IQAP who the final authority is to sign off on the documentation to be sent to the Reviewers for a cyclical program review

6. ask external reviewers to send their Reviewers' Report to the Provost and Vice-President, Academic and Research

7. consider naming an arbiter to assist in identifying when a program change is a major or minor modification or a new program

DESK AUDIT REPORT ON NIPISSING UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSE TO THE CAUSES FOR CONCERN

JULY 2016

AUDITORS' REPORT ON NIPISSING UNIVERSITY'S FOLLOW-UP TO CAUSES FOR CONCERN
JULY 2016

Introduction

The quality assurance practices at Nipissing University were audited in 2014-15. The Quality Council approved the Report on the Quality Assurance Audit of Nipissing University and its accompanying Summary in February 2016. The Report included eight Recommendations and seven Suggestions. The Quality Council was of the view that Recommendations #2, #3, and #4 should be considered Causes for Concern, requiring immediate action. The shortcomings identified in the three Recommendations were:

- The failure to prepare and post on the University website the Institutional Executive Summary and Associated Implementation Plan for each cyclical program review.
- The failure to prepare and send the Final Assessment Report and Implementation Plan for each cyclical program review to Senate and to the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance.
- The failure to comply with the IQAP requirement to implement the follow-up monitoring process identified in the IQAP for each program review.

On February 25, 2016 the Chair of the Quality Council sent a letter to the Vice President Academic & Research (VPAR) at Nipissing University, advising him that these Causes for Concern needed to be addressed right away. Nipissing was requested to submit to the Executive Director of the Quality Council by the end of May 2016 the outstanding Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans for each cyclical program review that had been conducted under its IQAP.

A team of three auditors from the Quality Council Audit Panel was asked to perform a desk audit of the thirteen outstanding Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans. The auditors commend Nipissing for submitting all the outstanding Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans to the Quality Council by the end of May 2016, as requested. In reviewing the Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans, the auditors found some instances of non-compliance with Nipissing's IQAP and some places where the IQAP should be clarified, and they had some concerns about the practices around monitoring and follow-up of recommendations. The following comments are intended to assist Nipissing as it

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modifies its practices and policies prior to the deadline for the submission of its One-Year Follow-Up Response to the Audit Report.

Commentary

The auditors noted some areas in which the Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans did not meet the requirements of Nipissing's IQAP, in particular Part 1 Sections C and D and Appendix G. Nipissing will have to eliminate the discrepancies between the Final Assessment Reports and its own policy as it works to address Recommendation Three of the Audit Report.

Examples of some of the discrepancies the auditors noted include:

- In specifying the format of the Final Assessment Reports, Appendix G requires that the Final Assessment Reports provide a summary of the Planning and Priorities Committee (PPC) conclusions (Section B) and that the Final Assessment Reports provide comments by key review criteria (Section C). These requirements struck the auditors as good ones, but they noted that the Final Assessment Reports they reviewed did not provide summaries of the PPC conclusions or comments by key review criteria, although they did for the most part include a direct quotation from the Review Team Reports summarizing the reviewers' views of the programs. The auditors commend Nipissing for including in its IQAP an Appendix that specifies the format for Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans, but they note both that it is important that there be a closer match between the format laid out in Appendix G and the requirements as specified in the IQAP Part 1 Section C, and that the Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans need to comply with the requirements as specified in the IQAP, including in any Appendices.
- IQAP Part 1 Section D requires that the Implementation Plan included in the Final Assessment Report identify the Senate as responsible for approving the recommendations included in the Implementation Plan, the VPAR as responsible for providing the resources necessary to implement those recommendations, the Dean and the Chair/Director as responsible for acting on those recommendations, and the timelines by which the recommendations are to be acted on and/or monitored. The Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans the auditors reviewed met the last two requirements, but they did not make explicit Senate's authority to approve the recommendations included in the Implementation Plan or the VPAR's responsibility for providing the resources for the approved recommendations. To be compliant with its IQAP, statements to this effect must be included in the Implementation Plans.

The auditors noted some cases where Nipissing, while not in contravention of its IQAP, could make modest changes to the IQAP that might improve both its IQAP and its Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans. These changes include:

- making it clear that the 'report' prepared by the VPAR for PPC that is cited in IQAP Part 1 Section C is indeed the Final Assessment Report and Implementation Plan, if that is what is intended;
- making it clear that the 'formal written response' received by PPC that is cited in IQAP Part 1 Section E is indeed the Final Assessment Report and Implementation Plan, if that is what is intended;
- making it clear that the boxed recommendations at the bottom of the Final Assessment Reports (and the 'Specific Recommendations' referenced in Appendix G) in fact constitute the Implementation Plan;
- including a line on the Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans on which the date they were approved by Senate;
- replacing 'Projected Date' in the table in the Implementation Plan by 'Reporting Date' so as to increase the likelihood of timely follow-up.

The auditors had two general substantive concerns about the Final Assessment Reports they reviewed. First, they are of the view that Nipissing would be better served in its commitment to improving the quality of its academic programs if its Final Assessment Reports included commentary that reflects PPC's evaluation of the quality of the programs against key review criteria (as required by Appendix G). Second, the auditors were concerned that several of the recommendations included in the External Review Team Reports did not make their way into the Implementation Plans, often with no rationale or with rationales that the auditors did not always find compelling. They noted that this resulted in some Implementation Plans having no recommendations or only a single recommendation, despite the External Review Team Reports including several recommendations that reflected the reviewers' perception of the quality of the programs being reviewed. The auditors also noted that several of the recommendations that appeared in External Review Team Reports (and that were included in the Final Assessment Reports) appeared in the reports of several programs; that some of the External Review Team Reports noted that the same recommendations they were making had been made by external reviewers for that same program in the previous cyclical program review; and that several recommendations included in External Review Team Reports were dismissed by PPC as not falling within the mandate of the cyclical program review process.

The auditors acknowledge both that the Quality Assurance Framework is clear that resource decisions are the responsibility of the institution and that Nipissing is not well

placed right now to act on many of the recommendations that require additional resources. However, the auditors think PPC is mistaken to think that assigning responsibility for follow-up on some recommendations requiring resources is not within its purview. PPC itself may not have the authority to assign resources or determine that resources be assigned or reallocated, but where the lack of resources is seen to affect the quality of an academic program, it is surely within PPC's purview (or, at least, within the purview of the VPAR, who is the author of the report that PPC is to recommend to Senate) to instruct other officers or committees within the University to investigate whether a reallocation of resources or a more efficient use of resources is possible, or to conduct an investigation into whether some programs and/or activities cannot be continued.

Because the Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans were prepared and approved in the spring of 2016, it is too early to comment on whether Nipissing is performing the follow-up and monitoring required by its IQAP Part 1 Section E, as required by Recommendation Four of the Audit Report. However, given what looks like a recent history of not following up on some of the recommendations from previous cyclical program reviews, Nipissing will have to make concerted efforts to follow-up on and monitor the implementation of recommendations resulting from cyclical program reviews in order to demonstrate that it is making a real effort to meet Recommendation Four.

Recommendation Two of the Audit Report required that Nipissing prepare and post Executive Summaries and Implementation Plans for each cyclical program review. While the auditors note that Nipissing has posted the Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans approved by Senate in May 2016, they did not see evidence that any Executive Summaries had been prepared or posted, and they remind Nipissing that this is a requirement of the Quality Assurance Framework (4.2.5) and of Nipissing's own IQAP (Part 1 Section C). The auditors suggest that it might be helpful if the IQAP were to specify who is responsible for preparing and approving the Executive Summary and to provide guidance about its content.

Conclusion

Nipissing seems to have been generally well served by its External Review Teams and the auditors saw evidence that programs and Deans submitted their responses to the External Review Team Reports, as per IQAP Part 1 Section C. However, the auditors were concerned by how many of the recommendations from the External Review Team's Reports that were cited in the Final Assessment Reports (and which seemed to the auditors to concern the quality of the programs) either did not make their way to the

Implementation Plans or appeared in a very watered down form, and they suggest Nipissing rethink the narrow interpretation it seems to have given to the scope of the cyclical program review process.

With these provisos and with some clarification and alignment of the language of the IQAP Part 1 Sections C and D with that in Appendix G, Nipissing should be well on its way to producing Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans that will be useful in identifying action items required to improve continuously the quality of its academic programs. Nipissing will then have to be vigilant about its follow-up and monitoring of approved recommendations.

In its One-Year Follow-Up Response, Nipissing must show how it has addressed all of the eight Recommendations (including the three identified as Causes for Concern) contained in the 2015 Audit Report. The comments provided in this Report identify ways in which Nipissing must change some of its practices and parts of its IQAP in order to meet those Recommendations identified as Causes for Concern and do so in ways that contribute to the enhancement of the quality of its academic programs.