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
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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

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.