

Mid-Cycle Peer-Evaluation Report

Simon Fraser University

Burnaby, British Columbia

April 1-2, 2019

*A confidential report of findings prepared for the
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities*

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|--------|
| Evaluation Team | pg. 3 |
| Introduction | pg. 4 |
| Site Visit Overview | pg. 6 |
| Assessment of the Self-Evaluation Report and Support Materials | pg. 6 |
| Part One: Overview of Institutional Assessment Plan | pg. 7 |
| Part Two: Operationalizing the Mission | pg. 8 |
| Part Three: Moving Forward | pg. 9 |
| Conclusion | pg. 11 |

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Introduction

On behalf of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), the evaluation team submits the following report on the review of Simon Fraser University's (SFU) Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation Report and resulting onsite visit. The onsite evaluation was conducted over two days beginning on April 1, 2019 and concluding on April 2, 2019. The purpose of the Mid-Cycle Review is to assess the preparations and preparedness of SFU to meet the requirements and standards of the comprehensive Year Seven Self-Evaluation. The evaluation team received a well-prepared Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation report in advance of our visit and were welcomed warmly to the campus during the onsite evaluation. We would like to thank SFU leadership and the campus community for the time they dedicated to our site visit and for the responsiveness to our questions and observations.

Evaluators were also asked by NWCCU to analyze responses to two outstanding recommendations resulting from the institution's Fall 2014 Mid-Cycle Report. These recommendations were addressed in SFU's Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation. They include:

Recommendation 1

"The Commission recommends that the institution identify and publish expected course, program, and degree learning outcomes. Expected student learning outcomes for courses, wherever offered and however delivered, are provided in written form to enrolled students." (Standard 2.C.2).

Recommendation 2

"The Commission recommends that Simon Fraser University undertake the necessary steps toward ensuring that the General Education components of its baccalaureate degree programs have identifiable and assessable learning outcomes that are stated in relation to the institution's mission and learning outcomes for those programs." (Standard 2.C.10).

Per NWCCU's request, the 2019 evaluation committee's response to the Commission regarding these outstanding recommendations is being submitted separately to NWCCU and is not discussed within this report.

It is also noted here that at the time of the Mid-Cycle visit and this report, the NWCCU has launched a comprehensive review of its Standards of Accreditation, Policies, and Eligibility Requirements. It is expected that revisions to these will be voted on by the commission and membership in Fall 2019, with final implementation in January 1, 2020. As such, new standards may be in place for SFU's comprehensive Year Seven Self-Evaluation and site visit. Observations in this report and in discussions with SFU leadership were made in this context.

Mission and Core Themes

Simon Fraser University is a public research university in British Columbia with campuses in Burnaby, Surrey, and Vancouver. Because of its location in Canada, SFU is not required to become accredited with NWCCU but elected to do so for internal reasons. SFU was granted initial accreditation at the baccalaureate, master's and doctoral levels effective September 1, 2015. The institution's mission and core themes reflect its important role in the province, its commitment to students, and its place as one of Canada's top research-intensive universities. SFU strives to align its goals and strategies with the goals and accountability plan of British Columbia's Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, which are:

Goal 1: Lasting Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in British Columbia by fostering access and success in post-secondary education and training.

Goal 2: Learners are supported to achieve their full potential with accessible, affordable, and equitable education and training opportunities.

Goal 3: Ensure a high quality and relevant post-secondary education and skills training system that provides the services people count on for good-paying jobs and opportunities to reach their full potential.

SFU was the first to undergo a “Quality Assurance Process Audit” during a pilot established by the Minister of Advanced Education, Skills and Training in 2017. In addition, SFU must submit an annual Institutional Accountability Plan and Report required by the province. These processes were noted by SFU as positive external drivers of ongoing strategic planning and reflection.

SFU’s “vision/mission” is *“To be the leading engaged university defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting-edge research and far-reaching community engagement.”*, with a complementary tag line: *“Engaging the World.”*

To that end, SFU’s core themes and goals are:

1. *Engaging Students:* To equip students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences that prepare them for life in an ever-changing and challenging world.
2. *Engaging Research:* To be a world leader in knowledge mobilization building on a strong foundation of fundamental research.
3. *Engaging Communities:* To be Canada’s most community-engaged research university.

SFU also asserts a “Fundamental Theme” of “Leveraging Institutional Strength”. This theme addresses the institution’s recognition that it needs to be financially sound and flexible, and continue to strengthen its infrastructure and processes to achieve its goals in the core themes.

In accordance with NWCCU guidelines for preparing a Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation, SFU engaged in a reflection of the institution’s core themes and indicators presented in its 2017 year-one report. The institution presented a clear and thorough “University Planning Framework” for reviewing its core themes and indicators. The framework includes a University Planning Committee and four “Theme Teams”, each led by an Associate Vice President and responsible for a core or fundamental theme. Using this framework, the institution engaged in an analysis of the core themes and measures of mission fulfillment.

Evaluators note that while the institution has established clear objectives and indicators for each core theme based on a comprehensive strategic planning process, some indicators, especially for Engaging Students, are still based on indirect measures, and many of the targets seem to be extrapolations of existing trends rather than strategically selected targets. These are noted here as they were also noted in the institution’s 2016 Initial Accreditation Evaluation. In addition, evaluators discussed the possibility of revisions to NWCCU’s standards that may include the elimination of “core themes” in the standards. Evaluators advised that even if core themes are no longer present in the standards, indicators of mission fulfillment will still be an important element of the standards. As such, SFU can likely continue using the planning framework they have in place.

Site Visit Overview

The site visit was well-organized and attended by faculty, staff, administration and a few students. Evaluators had ample opportunity to address prepared questions, and for deeper inquiry and follow-up on topics of interest. The participants were gracious and eager to engage in discussions about opportunities and challenges, and to express their pride and optimism regarding the institution's accomplishments and future.

The participants are too numerous to mention all of them by name but the evaluators would like to acknowledge the groups we met with: accreditation steering committee, university planning committee, individuals engaged in assessment of student learning and program review, individuals involved in improving the student experience, and those from the president and provost's office. We'd like to express our appreciation to everyone who took the time to meet and engage with us.

The visit and our prepared questions focused on the following themes: 1) institutional planning and assessment; 2) student assessment and educational goals; 3) program reviews; 4) student experience; 5) assessment examples; and 6) planning for the Year Seven comprehensive evaluation.

The evaluators note that, if possible, it will be useful during the Year Seven visit to arrange for at least some of the evaluators to visit each campus. While not really possible in a day and a half visit with two evaluators, we nonetheless realize we did not gain a full appreciation of the differences between the campuses, and how they are integrated or not, given that we only had direct exposure to the Burnaby campus.

Assessment of self-evaluation report and supporting materials

The Mid-Cycle Self-Evaluation report presents a thorough review of SFU's progression since the Year-One Self-Evaluation, and thorough responses to the outstanding recommendations noted in the introduction.

The report does well in describing the institution's planning framework and process, and its engagement with the university community in strategic planning. The report lays out in graphical and narrative form the university planning process, including the relevant committees and subcommittees. It includes a clear process whereby mission fulfillment is assessed in light of theme indicators by "theme teams", including how changes to themes and indicators happen in the process. In addition, the planning framework clearly shows how core theme planning intersects with other institutional planning processes such as academic planning, strategic research planning, community engagement planning, and the annual Institutional Accountability Plan and Report required by the province. The Academic Plan, the Strategic Research Plan, and the Community Engagement Strategy form the main linkages between the Vision/Mission and the Faculty Plans, the Departmental Plans, and functional plans. The report also provides two illustrative assessment examples and detailed responses to the outstanding recommendations.

Support materials provided in the evaluator's work room were thorough and informative. The materials were arranged by the meeting schedule so that evaluators could review relevant materials prior to and during meetings. Additional materials were made provided promptly on request. The thoroughness and availability of the materials offered evidence of the institution's care in planning and preparation.

Part One: Overview of Institutional Assessment Plan

As articulated in the self-evaluation, SFU engaged in an “extensive community consultation process” to develop a strategic vision/mission that builds on the institution’s strengths. This process began in February 2011 and resulted in a vision/mission approved by the University Board of Governors in November 2011. The vision/mission and resulting core themes were reaffirmed at a Vice-President’s retreat in June 2016, and another community consultation process began in 2017, resulting in a spring 2018 report entitled *Engaging the Vision: Community Consultation Report*. In addition, the institution prepared a 72-page Quality Assurance Audit Report in 2017 as part of the Ministry’s quality assurance process, resulting in a conclusion by the assessors that “SFU meets the highest contemporary standards and practices in academic quality assurance.” These processes indicate an ongoing process of institutional assessment, reflection and adjustment that is strategic and community-based.

As presented in the self-evaluation, SFU engages a university planning framework and process to review its indicators of mission fulfillment. It does this through a University Planning Committee that consists of “theme teams” for each of the core themes.

Each theme team presented an assessment of progress, concluding that on all indicators the institution either “meets” or “exceeds” expectations. Each theme team also made recommendations for adjustments to each core theme. For instance, under the “Engaging Students” core theme, the team made the following recommendations:

- To replace indicator 3.3 regarding undergraduate assessment because the survey it relies on no longer poses the question used as an indicator
- To consider indicators that speak directly to levels of student engagement
- Whether to include students studying in “Lifelong Learning” programs

These examples indicate that the institution’s planning process includes analysis of goals and indicators that results in recommendations to “close the loop” of institutional assessment. The evaluators recognize the thorough and collaborative planning processes in place at SFU, with an intentional and transparent linking of core themes and strategic planning. This approach was evident in both the self-evaluation and during each meeting of the visit, and provides for a solid foundation of ongoing quality improvement.

The institution concludes in its “Overview of Institutional Assessment Plan”, that its outcomes and indicators are “reasonable and provide a consolidated measurement reflecting SFU’s Vision/Mission fulfillment”, and that “Based on the Theme Team reports and this overall assessment, SFU is confident that all of its goals and outcomes are being achieved. Therefore, it can be said that SFU is fulfilling its Vision/Mission.”

As mentioned in the introduction to this report and in the 2016 Initial Accreditation evaluation report, some of the core theme outcomes are based on indirect measures, and some targets seem to be extrapolations of existing measures rather than strategic targets. During the visit, some participants noted the tension they experience between setting achievable targets or setting stretch targets that may not be achieved. This tension seemed to result from questions about how failing to achieve certain targets might be viewed by NWCCU and future evaluators. These evaluators expressed the opinion that NWCCU and future evaluators, especially in light of how the proposed changes to standards are taking

shape, would likely be most interested in how SFU is strategically setting targets and organizing to achieve those targets, rather than whether they were necessarily meeting all of the targets.

Part Two: Operationalizing the Mission

The institution provided two illustrative examples of institutional assessment, one focused on assessment of student learning and another focused on using data to improve student support. Each example was detailed in the self-evaluation, and representatives of each program were made available to discuss the examples.

As stated in the self-evaluation, “The Beedie School of Business has fully embraced learning outcomes by articulating program and disciplinary educational goals, curriculum mapping, and course-embedded assessment.” The example provides a detailed and informed approach to using assessment of student learning outcomes in writing to improve the curriculum. It provides an impressive example of closing the loop using data to drive a multidimensional change in the curriculum, from restricting class size to adding new courses to better develop writing skills.

Evaluators note that programs that are professionally accredited, such as business, are often ahead of the institution in terms of assessing student learning outcomes and using the results to drive change. The Beedie School of Business has demonstrated an example of thoughtful assessment that could serve as a model for other parts of the institution. It will be important in the Year Seven Report to provide examples of assessment of student learning for non-externally accredited programs to demonstrate the institution’s progress in measuring student learning.

The second example, the Back on Track program, is focused on retention of students who have been required to withdraw from the institution due to repeated low academic standing. The program, described as one of the “largest and longest-running retention programs of its kind in Canada”, provides students an opportunity to access an extended academic probation period by joining a three-term program. The program helps students identify challenges and strengths, and develop strategies to improve academic success.

The program assesses several outcomes using a variety of methods, such as “minute essays” at the end of learning sessions, journaling, and pre- and post-evaluations. In addition, the program measures retention as a result of student participation. The self-evaluation report notes that as of Sept. 2018, there were 613 students in the program. Of those, 77% at the end of the program were able to continue at SFU. Evaluators note that this appears to reflect a good success rate for a program of this type.

The program seems to be a thoughtful approach to the specific problems faced by students who are underperforming academically. In addition, the example demonstrates how the program was adjusted after a trial period to address issues with the original design (e.g., moving from a two-term to a three-term model). This is another example of using assessment to make adjustments to an intervention.

Part Three: Moving Forward

The institution identified in its self-evaluation the following steps and focus areas in preparation for its Year Seven Self-Evaluation Report due in 2023.

Strategic Review (2022)

The institution will conduct another strategic review in 2022 as part of its ongoing assessment of mission fulfillment. Theme teams will provide an assessment of core theme outcomes and indicators. The institution is currently committed to targets set in its 2018 strategic review.

Academic Plan 2019-2024

The Academic Plan was released in 2018, building on academic plans of each of the academic units and support services. It focuses on five equally important challenges:

- Student Life, Learning and Success
- Academic Quality/Curriculum
- Engagement
- Bridging Divides/Interdisciplinarity
- Faculty and Staff Renewal

In addition, the institution will consider two important themes:

- Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
- Aboriginal Reconciliation

Strategic Research Plan 2021-2025

SFU will refresh its strategic research plan to continue to build the institution's status as a one of Canada's top research-intensive institutions.

Community Engagement Plan and Carnegie Community Engagement Classification

SFU is the lead institution in Canada to coordinate and convene a cohort of 16 Canadian post-secondary institutions to participate in the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification self-assessment process. This aligns with one of SFU's core themes.

Calls to Action for Reconciliation

SFU will continue work on 34 calls to action guiding the efforts of an Aboriginal Strategic Initiatives (2018-2021) supporting safe and welcoming Indigenous workspaces, student pathways and supports, and innovation and Indigenization in curriculum and research

Advance the New Associate Vice-President, Learning and Teaching Portfolio

SFU will continue to refine and advance the portfolio of a relatively new position that focuses on educational goals/learning outcomes assessment, curriculum review and flexible learning.

Student Experience Initiative

This initiative is focused on improving the student experience in each of eight key action areas.

Institutional Accountability Plan and Report (Annual)

SFU will continue to produce this annual report as required by the province, integrating it with SFU's goals and outcomes.

Evaluators discussed the following suggestions with SFU leadership in preparation for the 2023 Year Seven Self-Evaluation.

Degree Program Assessment

Evaluators noted that SFU has made good progress on program learning outcomes (SFU uses “educational goals” as a term that is more consistent with ongoing faculty dialogue, and to capture a broader set of activities). Their plan to integrate this into program reviews, which happen every seven years, has resulted in all but a few programs with educational goals and assessment plans. These programs are slated for the next cycle of program reviews at which time they will complete their assessment plans. In addition, course-level educational goals are now required for new program proposals. Evaluators suggested that SFU consider adopting a policy that course syllabi contain course educational goals so that these goals are communicated to students in writing. As stated in a previous section, we suggest SFU prepare examples of full assessment cycles from non-externally accredited programs for the Year Seven Self-Evaluation, and demonstrate how their planning processes continue to incorporate program assessment of learning.

“General Education” Assessment

As articulated in the self-study’s response to the Fall 2014 Mid-Cycle Recommendation 2, undergraduate education in Canada differs from that in the United States in that they have not historically had general education programs or requirements. That said, in 2006 SFU adopted a set of common learning requirements and a breadth requirement (collectively called “WQB”), essentially replicating what many U.S. institutions call general education. The common learning requirements focus on writing and quantitative reasoning. Unlike US institutions, SFU has not created a standalone suite of courses to meet general education (writing, quantitative and breadth) requirements, but instead designates courses at the lower and upper division throughout the curriculum that may be taken as electives or as part of a student’s major program coursework. Breadth requirements are met outside of the major program subject and may or may not be electives. Students must meet specified numbers of credits in each of W, Q and B as part of their graduation requirements.

In addition, as postsecondary education in Canada has not experienced a movement toward assessing learning outcomes like American colleges and universities have, SFU had not previously developed a plan or infrastructure to engage in assessment of learning outcomes. Nonetheless, a basic infrastructure is in place to assess educational goals for the writing and quantitative requirements, and use the results of that assessment to modify the requirements as necessary. This is especially true given that changes to the NWCCU standards may move away from general education language and focus more on core learning outcomes, however students are expected to learn those.

To the end of strengthening assessment of educational goals common to all students, SFU added a new position, Associate Vice-President, Learning and Teaching, devoted to educational goals, assessment, curriculum review and flexible pedagogies. This is an important step as someone in leadership must be empowered to organize and champion these activities. At the time of the visit, and in the self-evaluation, SFU is incorporating the WQB learning objectives into undergraduate degree level educational goals. There was also some discussion of revisiting the WQB goals and whether they still made sense for the institution. Evaluators shared their opinion that the WQB construct is generally sound from a regional accreditation perspective.

Evaluators noted in the closing meeting that current drafts of revised NWCCU standards suggest assessment of student learning outcomes as a key measure of mission fulfillment perhaps plays an even

stronger role. As such, it would be prudent for SFU to expand and accelerate its efforts to systematically assess common learning outcomes. Evaluators strongly suggested that whatever direction they take with these common educational goals, they would need to show progress in collection of data from direct measures for those goals, and using that data to drive curricular change.

Institutional Assessment and Mission Fulfillment

As noted in this report, SFU has a clear, engaged, and collaborative planning framework and process that links strategic planning with core theme assessment. This provides a strong foundation for continuous quality improvement. SFU provided extensive material demonstrating how core theme outcomes and indicators were chosen, and how they link with the vision/mission. Again, this provides a strong foundation as they approach a Year Seven Self-Evaluation. Also noted in this report is the observation that some outcomes and indicators rely primarily on indirect measures, and targets for those seem to be extrapolations of historical trends rather than a strategic choice. The evaluators suggest that the institution engage its thorough and collaborative planning process to continually assess and reflect on core theme outcomes, indicators and targets to ensure they reflect the strategic direction of the institution and mission fulfillment.

Conclusion

SFU has embraced its voluntary participation in the regional accreditation process as an opportunity to strategically strengthen the institution, and engage in continuous improvement. Its planning framework and processes are inclusive and collaborative, resulting in what seems to be broad buy-in to the strategic direction. It was evident in our visit that SFU leadership, faculty, staff and students take great pride in SFU and its place in the community and the province. Further, it was evident that SFU is purposefully integrating its provincial and regional accreditation planning and reporting processes so that they are mutually reinforcing.

While previous regional accreditation self-evaluations and visits resulted in important recommendations, SFU has embraced the opportunity to establish and improve infrastructure and processes to engage in meaningful assessment of mission fulfillment. We encourage SFU to remain on the path of continuous improvement, and expand its efforts to collect and disseminate assessments and indicators of achievement across the campus community to help guide planning, decision making, and resource allocation.