UPEI Academic Planning 2005: Guiding Principles

A report of the Academic Planning Facilitation Committee based on the 2004-2005 consultative process

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Introduction and Background

In the fall of 2003, the Academic Planning Facilitation Committee (APFC) was formed[1] to facilitate development of an overall academic plan for UPEI. The objective established for the Committee was the development of a framework and a process for creation of an Academic Plan which built on the historic tradition of UPEI as a university centred on a liberal arts and sciences core. The Academic Plan would in particular aim to:

- support teaching and learning success
- utilize students' interests and market demands to assist in identifying potential programs
- develop a strategy which links academic planning to space, budget and infrastructure planning
- support student recruitment and enrolment planning
- reflect upon the role and direction of on-line learning

The Committee identified a process based on broad consultation with members of the university community. The process began in September 2004 with an open forum featuring four panelists, attended by 80 participants, discussing some of the issues related to academic planning. This was followed by a series of sixteen consultations with UPEI groups, led by an independent facilitator, to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the university. More than 220 faculty and staff took part and provided feedback. The results of that feedback were analyzed, collated and presented for consideration and discussion at the next stage of the process, also organized by the external facilitator. This stage asked members of the UPEI community to consider the implications of the environmental scan for academic planning. Focus was directed towards two questions: "First, what should the academic profile of the university be in five years: in what ways the same, and in what ways different? Second, How do we propose to achieve that?"

Open discussions took place at two "town hall" meetings in February 2005, and members of the UPEI community were also encouraged to forward comments in writing to the Facilitation Committee. Detailed notes were taken of the discussions, following which the Committee met to distill the discussions and submissions into a series of themes and recommendations. These were outlined in a draft version of this document to inform the final stages of the consultation process, during which the outlined principles and recommendations were widely circulated to elicit further comment, and meetings were held with Faculties, the Student Union, and during two open meetings.

During this stage, which took place in September and October 2005, support was given to the overall thrust of the document, but a number of points were made leading to honing of the text, and these were incorporated in a draft edition discussed by Senate. In its meetings of October and November 2005, Senate directed in particular that the document should be modified to emphasize the centrality of liberal arts and sciences to its program provision, and the importance of research in all its academic life.

APFC Committee

David Buck, Ryan Gallant / Clare Henderson / Shaun Coady (Student Union), Suzanne Jones, Clive Keen, Richard Kurial, Debbie MacLellan, Judy Lynn Richards, Vianne Timmons (Chair), Miles Turnbull, Don Wagner.

1 Chair: VP Academic Development; two faculty appointed by the faculty association; two senators; one ARPC member; one ASG member; one departmental chair; two members at large appointed by ARPC; one student appointed by Student Union.

Principles and Recommendations

The consultative process gave rise to widespread agreement on a number of general principles, and these are described below. A broadly based consultatative process does not, however, lend itself to decisions on precisely how each principle should be put into effect. To ensure that action is indeed taken, and that this Academic Planning document does not simply gather dust on a shelf:

1. within each theme, "next step" procedures are proposed, with defined responsibilities for action;
2. it is recommended that the Academic Planning Facilitation Committee becomes responsible for monitoring progress towards the general objectives, and is required to prepare an annual synoptic report for Senate.

Theme 1: Increasing the Diversity of the Student Body

The clearest consensus emerging from the consultative process was that UPEI should take action to increase the diversity of its student body.[2] Reasons included the projected decline in the PEI high-school student population, but went well beyond this, referring to the various pedagogical and community benefits accruing from increased diversity. Participants were particularly enthusiastic about the potential for increasing international student participation.

This Academic Planning document thus proposes measurably increasing the proportion of international, mature, out-of-province, and aboriginal students at UPEI, while examining methods of improving gender balance. Targets would be reviewed and articulated for each by the Enrolment Analysis Committee for approval by Senate and inclusion as an appendix to the Academic Plan.

Achievement of a more diverse student body has implications for many aspects of the university's operations, going well beyond recruitment and promotional activities. Factors contributing to increased diversity include program development; support services; scholarships and bursaries; ESL provision; transition/bridging programs; development of prior learning assessment and recognition procedures; and modes of delivery. It is thus recommended that data on the diversity of the student body be prepared for inclusion in the annual report prepared by APFC for submission to Senate, along with a report on activities leading towards achievement of the targets.

Theme 2: Focus on Areas of Strength and Distinctiveness – The Student Experience

One of the more constant comments made throughout the consultative process was that UPEI should not attempt to be all things to all people, but should focus on some specific area, by further development of a particular strength. The theme that commanded wide support was that UPEI should make the student experience the hallmark of UPEI distinctiveness. Many participants urged that the size of UPEI and its longstanding sense of community were areas of great strength, and should be clearly articulated and nurtured. Development of a distinctive student experience could be based on elements which include: further development of excellent teaching, in which UPEI has already built a reputation; a

2 The current undergraduate student body is comprised overwhelmingly of recent high-school graduates from PEI, with significantly greater representation from the Charlottetown area than from more distant parts of the Island. In 2004-2005 82% of UPEI undergraduate students were in the 18-24 age range, compared to a Canadian university average of 71%, and 77% of undergraduate students originated from PEI. 30% of students graduating in 2005 were male.

faculty which maintains currency with the most important discoveries and intellectual advances of their disciplines; with maintenance of reasonable class sizes; a non-hierarchical climate, with ready access to professors; direct involvement of students in faculty research; enhancement of a sense of community and connectedness; and a student-centred administrative system.

It is recommended that if development of this area of differentiation be approved, an appendix to this document be prepared outlining developmental steps, led by the APFC with close involvement of the Webster Centre and the Academic Support Group.

Theme 3: Improving Student Preparedness and Success

There was a widespread sense during the consultation process that a minority of current students were unable to benefit fully from their university experience, failing to achieve the level of success they desired, because of limitations to the level of their preparedness. A number of possible actions were suggested both on this theme and on actions that might contribute to high academic achievement. It is recommended that these interventions be explored by the Academic Review and Planning Committee with a view to formulating a specific program of action for Senate approval as an addendum to the Academic Plan. Elements of the study would include:

- examining current entrance requirements, in the light of the level of success and retention of students entering with marginal high-school grades;
- considering the possible development or expansion of bridging, transition and student success programs for students in at-risk groups;
- considering policies regarding provision of scholarships for students with high academic potential;
- working with high schools and the Department of Education to identify and rectify impediments to success of entering students;
- where appropriate, introducing testing methods to check on preparedness for particular courses or programs.

Theme 4: Graduate Program Development

The issue of graduate programming was discussed at some length throughout the consultative process, in a number of contexts, including discussions which focussed on the central importance of research in the university's academic operations. While it was generally felt that UPEI was and should remain a primarily undergraduate university, numerous contributors to the consultative process argued that existing graduate programs were a strength, and that a limited number of new graduate programs, carefully chosen, would enhance UPEI's offerings, help expand the university's research output, and meet the growing national and regional demand for programs at this level.[3] The following actions are proposed:

1. Development by the Academic Planning and Review Committee of revised guidelines for proposals for new graduate programs, formulated in the light of this Academic Plan.

3 Approximately 2% of UPEI students in 2004-2005 were studying at the graduate level, compared to an average of 13% at other Canadian universities. In the past decade demand for graduate programs nationally has been increasing at a level well in excess of undergraduate programs, and the federal government has called for an expansion of graduate provision at the rate of 5% per annum.

2. Identification by the Enrolment Analysis Committee of graduate programs in areas of high demand or high need, and distribution of the collected information to departments and faculty councils as appropriate.
3. Subsequent to the completion of the above tasks, the encouragement of proposals to ARPC, at the initial conceptual level only, leading to the creation of a list of desirable graduate programs which could potentially be resourced within a reasonable time frame. This "wish list" would become an addendum, regularly updated, to the Academic Plan.

Theme 5: Collaboration and Cooperation

A theme repeated a number of times during consultations was that UPEI, as a small university, cannot do or expect to do everything on its own, but should seek to benefit wherever possible from collaborations in both teaching and research with other universities, colleges, and organizations. In the same vein, it was argued that it should attempt to maximize interdisciplinary and interdepartmental initiatives, drawing together strengths from diverse areas which do not currently have formal links.

Examples given of successful collaborations between UPEI and other bodies included the Bachelor of Education specializing in teaching French Immersion, offered in association with l'Université de Moncton, and the Bachelor of Business in Tourism & Hospitality, articulated with Holland College. Suggestions for enhanced interdisciplinary and interdepartmental links included initiatives which combine the strengths of the Atlantic Veterinary College – which is unique to the Atlantic region – with departments within the Faculty of Science.

While this theme does not at this stage lead to specific recommendations for actions, it is recommended that it gain the status of a general principle informing judgements regarding proposed initiatives covering modes of delivery, program planning, and academic support services. It would in addition form a report item for the annual APFC report to Senate.

Theme 6: Responsiveness to the Community

A number of participants in the consultative exercise recognized that, as the only university in the province, UPEI has a particular responsibility to be responsive to the needs of the community. It was argued that UPEI should strive to recognize and respond to the needs of PEI communities beyond Charlottetown; should focus wherever appropriate on regional concerns and needs in its program provision and curriculum; should support and encourage research relevant to Island needs; should consider the further extension of co-op, community service, and similar opportunities to deepen relationships with PEI organizations, businesses and communities; and in particular should be conscious of changing needs of the community and economy.

It is recommended that the Enrolment Analysis Committee prepares a report and recommendations regarding mechanisms to monitor community needs and expectations. This might include developing close collaboration with PEI Sector Councils to monitor and react to the developing workforce needs of their industries; close monitoring of HRDC guidance on employment opportunities in the province; and systematic liaison with Holland College to build an overview of emerging needs and potential provision. This report, following Senate approval, would form an appendix to the Academic Plan. The results of the mechanisms would form an item in the annual monitoring report to Senate of the APFC.

Theme 7: Finding the Best Balance in Undergraduate Programming

As stated in the Introduction, a liberal arts and sciences education is central to UPEI's undergraduate programming, bringing outcomes – which include critical thinking, quantitative literacy, communication skills, ethical reasoning and civic engagement – that are both highly valuable in their own right and highly prized by employers. A number of respondents nevertheless argued that programs directly related to specific careers are, and need to remain, a part of UPEI's program mix. Submissions argued that UPEI should stay alert to the opportunities to identify and develop undergraduate programs which were consistent with the University's strengths but recognized changing patterns of employment and student intentions.

It is recommended that the Enrolment Analysis Committee prepares annually, for inclusion in the APFC monitoring report, information on patterns of student and employer demand, and that this be used to inform the course and program development process. The intention would not be to make academic planning subordinate to market trends, and would certainly not be to encourage action on short-term trends, but rather to ensure that opportunities consistent with the University's objectives and strengths are recognized rather than overlooked. The University's academic planning would not be "market led", but it would be "market aware."

Theme 8: Employment of Learning Technologies

It was noteworthy that relatively little feedback was gained during the initial consultative process about utilization of new learning technologies, in spite of the fact that "reflect(ing) upon the role and direction of on-line learning" was flagged as one of the five issues which the Academic Plan was intended to address; this could be taken as evidence that the university community does not as a whole wish to depart substantially from its current modes of teaching and learning. However, the issue was given greater attention during the second round of consultations, and some faculty members felt strongly about the potential of distance learning opportunities in diversifying the student body and recognizing their ever-growing sophistication in the use of computer-assisted learning. Questions of policy are also pressing to some faculty members, as demonstrated by written submissions. These questions include:

- Should utilization of new technologies be left essentially to the discretion and enthusiasm of individual faculty members, or is there need for some central direction and coordination?
- Are there some areas where utilization of new learning technologies is particularly appropriate, and which should receive particular support?
- Should technological support efforts be directed primarily towards enhancements to existing face-to-face learning, or should they be directed towards new modes of delivery and learning?
- Does the university wish to participate actively in online-learning consortia, or utilize courseware developed by other universities?

It is recommended that APFC creates a sub-committee to address these and related questions, with a view to developing recommendations which, after Senate approval, would form an addendum to this Plan.

Theme 9: Research and Scholarly Activity

Throughout the consultative process concern was expressed about maintaining an appropriate balance between teaching and research. The importance of involving research in the University's teaching activities is made evident by its inclusion in Themes 2, 5 and 6 above. The consultative process also made it clear that research and scholarly activity must be recognized as having a value beyond contributing to the purposes described within those themes: that the essential role of a university lies not simply in transmitting existing knowledge but in staying abreast of intellectual advances and developing new knowledge. It is recommended that the Research Plan currently in development by the Research Committee be treated, on completion and approval, as a complementary document to this document.