Year One Peer-Evaluation Report

Simon Fraser University

Burnaby, British Columbia

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

Located in Burnaby, British Columbia, Simon Fraser University (SFU) was created in 1963 by the government of British Columbia. Initially, the intention in creating the university was to relieve pressure on the University of British Columbia; basic programs in the arts and sciences and teacher education were offered initially. At the time of its opening, the mandate was expanded to include graduate education and research. The university has grown into a comprehensive teaching and research intensive institution located on three campuses serving approximately 35,000 for credit students and 19,000 non-credit learners.

The university describes its culture as “experimental, fluid, and ... consciously democratic”. They are distinguished by their continuing willingness to try new ideas in an environment that supports bold new initiatives. They note several firsts among Canadian institutions: introduce a trimester system, offer athletic scholarships, create an EMBA, implement computerized registration, and appoint a woman president.

Simon Fraser University has become one of Canada’s premier comprehensive universities and British Columbia’s second largest research intensive university. It boasts three campuses in three adjacent cities within the lower mainland of British Columbia: Burnaby (the main campus), Vancouver, and Surrey. SFU has approximately 35,000 students enrolled in for credit classes, 19,000 participants in non-credit programs annually, 3000 faculty and staff, and over 100,000 alumni. The economic impact of SFU in 2009-2010 was estimated at $3.65 billion.

Simon Fraser University sought accreditation through the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), beginning the process in 2009 with their initial application. In 2012, the Commission approved SFU as a Candidate for Accreditation at the doctoral level. Canada does not have an overall accreditation process for colleges and universities; SFU has elected to seek external accreditation through the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities regional process. The newly adopted Vision/Mission and Goals (2011) are descriptive of the focus for the university and shape the 2012 University Planning Framework. The mission and core themes are integral to the plan, and the indicators provide the measures to assess institutional direction and mission fulfillment. This work reflects their commitment to accreditation and program excellence. Actions taken as a result of recommendations from the 2012 NWCCU were described in the Year One Self-Evaluation Report, an additional indication of the commitment to accreditation. The scope of this review was an off-site year one peer panel review.
Assessment of the Institution’s Self-Evaluation Report and Support Materials

The Year One Self-Evaluation Report was prepared using the 2010 standards of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. The self-study addressed Eligibility Requirements 2 and 3 and Standard One: Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations. The report was provided to committee members in the timeline identified by the Commission in paper and electronic copy.

In addition to the information provided in support of Standards 1.A Mission and Standard 1.B Core Themes, the university included information on progress on recommendations received from the initial visit that were noted in the Candidacy Evaluation report in October 2011 and provided addenda that reflected the integrated planning process resulting from the current mission, vision, and goal driven planning framework. This information provided context to the ways in which the mission and core themes are central to the university.

The report was straightforward, easy to read, and provided an introduction to SFU. The information appeared to be complete and accurate, addressed each component of Standard One, and provided information the evaluation committee needed to provide its review.

Topics Addressed as an Addendum to the Self-Evaluation Report (if any)

Simon Fraser University did not have any addenda to address in the Year One Self-Evaluation Report.

Eligibility Requirements

Simon Fraser University provided evidence of meeting Eligibility Requirements 2 and 3. SFU was established in 1963 by the British Columbia University Act. The governance structure of the university was defined in the act. The university’s mission, vision, and goals were approved in through the university governance process with approval of the University Board of Governors occurring in November 2011.

Mission, Core Themes, and Expectations

Standard 1.A Mission

The Vision/Mission statement, adopted in November 2011 and launched in February 2012, is titled An Engaged University and is articulated as: “SFU strives to be the leading engaged university defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting edge research, and far-reaching community engagement”. The university tag-line was changed to “Engaged University” to reflect this change in vision and mission.

SFU was founded in 1963 through an amendment of the University Act that governed the University of British Columbia and opened its doors in 1965. The university explains that its culture was influenced by the cultural ferment of the mid-1960s and continues its vision of an “experimental, fluid, and … consciously democratic” university. A number of firsts (among Canadian universities) are cited as evidence of this spirit and culture. The commitment of SFU to teaching, research and community engagement is reflected in the Vision/Mission statement and forms the basis for institutional goals and core themes.
The Vision/Mission statement was developed through an extensive consultative process that included input from students, faculty, and staff as well as alumni, community partners and, supporters. Once developed, the SFU Senate affirmed that the Vision/Mission had been developed through a thorough process and reflected the rich history and aspirations of SFU; the University Board of Governors then approved the Vision/Mission. The Mission/Vision statement is published and easily accessible on the university web site and was publicized in the Simon Fraser University News.

An institutional priority was the operationalization of the Vision/Mission and core themes. Three goals were established and indicators of performance were identified for each goal. Six underlying principles supporting the core themes and three supporting activities – necessary infrastructure - have been identified as well. The University Planning Framework was developed out of this process. The Vision/Mission is at the core (center) of the process with successive rings including priorities and goals; academic and strategic research plans; faculty and departmental plans; and 16 supporting areas. These circles are constrained by the outer two circles, financial model and governance model. Short- and long-term planning processes are defined to support the periodic review of the Vision/Mission, supporting plans, accreditation and assessment, and execution and monitoring leading to analysis of mission fulfillment.

Simon Fraser University has defined the acceptable threshold for mission fulfillment as “all indicators for the outcomes for the set goals point[ing] toward a positive trend”. Statistics will be gathered to provide trends for each indicator; positive trends will indicate that the goals are being met and that the mission is being fulfilled. Once positive trends are established, targets will be set to further assess mission fulfillment.

The Vision/Mission has been clearly articulated for Simon Fraser University; it is consistent with its stated role and describes essential attributes of the university. Strategic goals, the foundation of the core themes, have been identified, and a new tagline was established. The Integrated Planning Framework is based on these goals and provides a structure for planning and assessment. Mission fulfillment is defined as a positive trend for each identified indicator.

**Standard 1.B Core Themes**

The mission of Simon Fraser University has been interpreted through three strategic goals which also serve as the core themes reflecting the essential elements of the mission: Engaging Students, Engaging Research, and Engaging Communities. The core themes are consistent with and add definition to the fundamental aspects of the mission statement and, in the aggregate, capture the elements of the mission. The core themes are described as interdependent, each contributing to the other.

- **Core Theme 1: Engaging Students** is stated as a goal “To equip SFU students with the knowledge, skills, and experiences that prepare them for life in an ever-changing and challenging world”. Examples of strategies to support this core theme include a supportive learning environment, development of critical skills required for global citizenship, and access to experiential learning. Core Theme 1 is supported by three outcomes and three indicators of achievement.

- **Core Theme 2: Engaging Research** is stated as a goal “To be a world leader in knowledge mobilization building on a strong foundation of fundamental research”. The core theme represents the focus on cutting edge research, developed through research strengths,
dissemination of knowledge, and transfer of information. Core Theme 2 is supported by three outcomes and four indicators of achievement.

- Core Theme 3: Engaging Communities is stated as a goal “To be Canada’s most community-engaged research university”. Strategies in support of this core theme include expanding community partnerships in support of engaged learning and research, developing partnerships between the three campuses, meeting lifelong learning needs and providing a public square for dialogue on public issues. Core Theme 3 is supported by three outcomes and three indicators of achievement.

Outcomes (objectives) are identified for each core theme. The nine outcomes provide a basis for assessment of the core themes, and indicators of achievement are identified for each objective. Some outcomes and associated indicators do not fully capture the descriptions of the core theme provided in the strategies. Two examples follow: 1) strategies for Core Theme 1 focus on learning opportunities and environments while two of the outcomes and indicators of achievement focus on graduation rates and numbers of students employed or in further studies and 2) strategies for Core Theme 3 focus on connections and partnerships that create opportunities for SFU and the community to benefit from each other while two of the outcomes and indicators of achievement provide primarily quantitative data (e.g., number of participants) with limited qualitative information to fully assess the core theme. While the indicators are generally assessable and verifiable, some indicators provide limited information to assess the core theme as defined through the goal statement and/or strategies and provide an incomplete evidence base to assess and verify attainment of the outcome, the core theme and mission fulfillment.

Concern: Meaningful, assessable, and verifiable indicators of achievement are not fully developed for all of the outcomes.

Summary

Simon Fraser University has an approved mission statement from which three core themes and strategic goals have been derived. The university has identified outcomes (objectives) and indicators of achievement for each of the core themes and has articulated a plan to develop trend lines and then set performance levels to determine mission fulfillment. There is unevenness in the match of indicators of achievement with some strategies used to describe core themes, limiting the opportunity to assess fully all outcomes, performance on the three core themes, and the extent of mission fulfillment. SFU has developed an approach to institutional planning that imbeds the strategic goals and core themes within the structure of the university.

Commendations and Recommendations

Commendations

1. Simon Fraser University has developed a University Planning Framework based on the Vision/Mission, core themes, and strategic goals, providing a consistent and integrated implementation and assessment structure in support of mission attainment.

Recommendations

1. While the university has identified core themes, outcomes, and indicators of achievement, the evaluation committee found unevenness in the indicators of achievement in relationship to the
goals, stated strategies, and outcomes. The evaluation committee recommends that outcomes and indicators of achievement be aligned to provide evidence consistent with the goals and strategies for all core themes on mission fulfillment (Standard 1.B.2).