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MEMORANDUM

ATTENTION Senate **DATE** May 22, 2012
FROM Jon Driver, Vice-President, Academic and Provost, and Chair, SCUP **PAGES** 1/1
RE: Principles for development of Learning Outcomes and Assessment processes (SCUP 12-13)

At its May 16, 2012 meeting SCUP reviewed and approved the principles that will guide the development of learning outcomes and assessment processes.

Motion:

That Senate approve the principles that will guide the development of learning outcomes and assessment processes.

encl.

c: P. Budra



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MEMORANDUM

ATTENTION Senate
FROM Jon Driver, Vice-President, Academic
RE: Learning Outcomes and Assessment Working Group

DATE May 07, 2012
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Background

In Fall 2011, I established the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Working Group (LOAWG), a committee chaired by Dr. Paul Budra and mandated to provide me with recommendations regarding the appropriate framework and processes for the establishment of learning outcomes across the SFU curriculum. As part of that work, the Working Group was asked to draft a set of principles that will guide the establishment and use of learning outcomes for curricular assessment at SFU. Learning outcomes and assessment will help us to improve the student academic experience at SFU, and will contribute to improvements in curricular review processes. Feedback from students in surveys over the past few years has indicated that students want greater clarity about their curriculum requirements, and I have identified the establishment of learning outcomes and their use in assessment processes as a key priority in both the current and forthcoming Academic Plans. I also anticipate that the establishment of learning outcomes will help academic units focus their discussions about curriculum, and will reduce the amount of time that is spent in curriculum revisions.

The attached principles were drafted by the LOAWG, and I am seeking Senate approval of these principles. An earlier draft was sent to the SFU community for comment, and following the feedback received, the original draft was revised. Some of the feedback I received was on the broader topic of learning outcomes in general, and some on the relationship between accreditation and learning outcomes. With regard to the latter, it should be understood that the establishment of learning outcomes and assessment processes is separate from the process of seeking accreditation.

The establishment of the principles will allow this project to proceed to subsequent stages. As further developments occur there will be extensive consultation with faculty, staff and students. Senate approval will be sought for conceptual and substantive changes to current practices.

Motion: that Senate approve the principles that will guide the development of learning outcomes and assessment processes

Information about learning outcomes and assessment

In the feedback I received, it was requested that a definition of Learning Outcomes be provided to better inform the discussion. There are many ways to define Learning Outcomes, and it is important to

acknowledge the deep expertise of many in the Faculty of Education on this topic, but for the purposes of the current work being done by LOAWG, the following is the working definition:

A learning outcome is a specific knowledge, practical skill, area of professional development, attitude, higher-order thinking skill, etc., that a faculty member expects students to develop, learn, or master during a course or program. Learning outcomes are observable and measurable.

Learning outcomes are distinguished from broadly configured teaching goals. A teaching goal is anything that an instructor or a program coordinator intends that students will learn in their course or program. Such goals not only include specific curriculum items but also more generic goals such as critical thinking, communication abilities, collaboration skills, etc. Like learning outcomes, these can also be explicitly stated to students, or can exist more implicitly in the fabric of the planning and teaching of a course or a program. Learning outcomes form a subset of teaching goals and flow from them. Learning outcomes, unlike many teaching goals, are specific and assessable.

A well-written learning outcome defines what a student is able to do and to what quality level, in a measurable form. A model such as Bloom's taxonomy can be helpful in identifying quality levels in the cognitive domain, e.g., "On successful completion of the program, the student should be able to critically analyze research papers in the discipline."

Types of learning outcomes include:

- Institutional level—what students should be able to do upon completion of a degree or other credential
- Program level—what students should be able to do upon completion of a particular program
- Course level—what students should be able to do upon completion of a particular course.

Learning outcomes are most broadly defined at the institutional level (e.g., critical thinking, creative thinking, global citizenship, literacy, numeracy, knowledge of discipline) and become more specific at the program and course levels. At the institutional level Senate will define the learning outcomes. At the program and course levels, faculty members and academic units determine and control what are appropriate learning outcomes, and, as is the case now, faculty members remain responsible for the content, teaching, and assessment in their courses. The intent is that learning outcomes at the three levels are aligned, and incremental work on learning outcomes and assessment over the next few years will move SFU toward that framework.

If learning outcomes are defined, the University can be accountable to students, the broader society and academic colleagues through an assessment of whether students are meeting the learning outcomes. There are various ways to assess outcomes. Some assessments can be captured through the normal evaluation of students through assignments. For example, if a learning outcome of a course is that students understand a particular theoretical concept, the percentage of students meeting that outcome could be assessed in a final exam. Other assessments take a more comprehensive look at what students have learned. For example, "capstone" requirements can be used to assess students' abilities to synthesize knowledge they have acquired in an entire program. While the nature of assessment will vary, it will be important to accumulate data on outcome assessment in a systematic way.

More detailed information on the definition of learning outcomes, useful resources, links to examples, and information about the work being doing at many other universities in North America in this area, can be found at the website for the Learning Outcomes and Assessment project:

http://www.sfu.ca/vpacademic/committees_taskforces/LOAWG.html

Learning Outcomes & Assessment Principles

Preamble

In an effort to improve upon existing pedagogical practices and to facilitate greater student achievement, Simon Fraser University intends to institute learning outcomes and their assessment across all courses, programs, Faculties, and the University, informed by a consultative approach and guided by the Principles articulated herein.

Curriculum development and learning outcomes at SFU will be informed by the institutional goals recently articulated in the University's *Strategic Vision*¹. They are summarized as follows:

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

There are many models of learning outcomes and assessment to examine, and SFU will draw knowledge from the best practices of other communities and institutions. The use of these practices will ultimately improve curriculum and the learning experience of SFU students at the course, program, and degree levels.

Learning outcomes and assessment should fit within our existing curricular development and review processes. SFU departments and units will analyze learning outcomes assessment data and act on findings independently, and will retain institutional autonomy over curriculum.

¹ <http://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/engage/StrategicVision.pdf>

Principles

1. SFU will establish learning outcomes and assessment processes in order to communicate transparently the purposes of all degree, program, and course requirements.
2. As per its *Strategic Vision*, SFU is committed to academic and intellectual freedom. Learning outcomes for courses and programs will be developed and determined at the local academic unit level and will reflect local disciplinary cultures. These will be aligned with enduring institutional goals, values, and principles as articulated in the *SFU Strategic Vision*.
3. SFU values regular assessment of the achievement of specified learning outcomes as a means of promoting continuous improvement of its courses and programs, and acknowledges that appropriate assessment of learning outcomes can occur before, during and after completion of a course or program.
4. Processes required by the establishment of learning outcomes and their assessment will be integrated into the regular processes of curricular and program review and renewal and disciplinary accreditation wherever possible.
5. Learning outcomes assessment will enable instructors to improve upon existing curricula and teaching methodologies. Processes of regular assessment will allow the academic units and the University to collect data concerning unit- and University-level achievement of identified learning outcomes. Learning outcomes assessment data will not be utilized for the evaluation of individual instructor and TA/TM performance, nor will the data be used as evidence to demote, fail to promote, dismiss or otherwise penalize individuals.
6. It is the responsibility of the University to provide resources (human, capital, technological) to academic units as required to enable and support learning outcomes and assessment procedures. Provision of this support is intended to minimize any addition to the net workload of instructors, TAs/TMs, and department staff.
7. As much as possible, the documentation generated by the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Working Group will be made broadly available to the SFU community for transparency and in accordance with SFU's sustainability goals.