

Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations

Response to the discussion paper of the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission: “Students at the Heart: Quality Assurance at Maritime Universities” / “Les étudiants d’abord : l’assurance de la qualité dans les universités des Maritimes”

February 13, 2013

The Federation of New Brunswick Faculty Associations (FNBFA) is generally wary of attempts to do quality assessment of university education. Any assessment effort will divert money, time, and effort from education, and may not actually lead to improvements sufficient to justify the expense. Also, higher education is a very complex domain, and the most important results may not be easily measurable, or even measurable at all. As a result, quality assessment will typically measure very imperfect surrogates of what we want to measure. This may lead institutions to take actions to improve the “numbers” on these surrogates, even when those actions do not improve, and may in fact degrade the education offered.

Before requiring large expenditures to perform quality assessments, it might be useful to get a general idea of whether there is a problem with the quality of our universities. Now, one might argue that until we have a quality assessment system, we won’t know if there are any quality problems. But, in fact, assessments occur all the time in universities.

Students, of course, are constantly getting graded on their projects, reports, performances, tests, and papers. They are graded on their ability to show they have achieved the learning objectives set for their courses (and for non-course work, such as theses). Faculty always have these learning objectives in mind as they set up and deliver their courses. But the objectives often do not admit easily of simple expression – university education does not consist of, say, memorizing a set of facts. Instead students learn ways of thinking and how to recognize and address problems. While it is currently popular to think that writing down learning objectives would be useful, it isn’t clear that doing so will improve the educational experience of students. Since in our current system, the attaining of the courses’ learning objectives by students is what is evaluated when the professor submits a grade, Appendix A’s item VI.2 is unclear – it either asks for yet more evaluation of student achievement or it is already accomplished in our current system.

The work of faculty (professors and academic librarians) is measured at every stage of their career, in every activity they undertake, and in a public and transparent way. These measurements occur through graduate school, during the appointment procedure, in the tenure process and during the promotion procedures, through pre-tenure and post-tenure evaluations by academic administrators (often annually), through anonymous student questionnaires on teaching, in research grant competitions, through the peer-review processes followed by academic publishers and journals, and by way of citation indices. Therefore it is very plausible

that faculty, as individuals and as a collective, are subject to more intense scrutiny and are accountable to more diverse constituents than any other member of the university community. The evaluation of faculty by Deans and Directors are often regulated by collective agreements, and it would be better if the MPHEC were to call for types of information without requiring any specific way of gathering that information. For example, Appendix A, V.6 calls for “mandatory student course evaluations”. While it may make sense to involve students and collect information on their views, the use of anonymous student questionnaires is simply one method of doing this, and it is one which is clearly not appropriate in certain cases (such as classes containing only a handful of students).

In addition to all the assessments of our academics, new people with new ideas are flowing into the universities: over a quarter of undergraduate students are replaced each year, while a surprisingly large percentage of faculty are new hires in any one year (due to retirements, replacements of faculty on leave, and the hiring of contingent academic staff).

We would know if we had serious quality problems if we had a decline in applications for admission to our universities that could not be explained by demographics, or if our graduates could not gain admission to graduate programs outside the province. We would also think we have a problem if employers would refuse to hire graduates with degrees from our universities. But this is not the case.

While we don't seem to have major quality problems in our universities at the present time, it still makes sense to assess the quality of what we are doing. But in so doing, we must be careful not to divert too many resources from the educational endeavour. We should assess the quality of our operations in a cost-effective way. Specific changes proposed, such as Appendix A, V.5, which adds (without, by the way, highlighting this change with red lettering) the requirement that one of the two external experts come from outside Atlantic Canada would increase the cost of the external reviews. Other proposals would, of course, have even greater effect on costs.

In fact, one problem with the revisions to current policies listed in Appendix A is that the MPHEC enunciates in fairly great detail the types of measures desired, instead of leaving it up to the institutions – which differ greatly in size and in mission – to themselves devise appropriate and cost-effective measures.

Besides our concerns about the costs of quality assurance efforts, the FNBFA is also concerned about the meaning of the term “student centered”. While it may sound nice, it isn't clear whether we should be concerned about what students want or what they should want. Indeed, it is fairly typical that years after finishing their degrees, graduates reappraise their experience and value more highly certain events, teachers, courses, etc. than they did while they were students. In addition, studying the quality of the student experience (which may include their success in

finding jobs, and their success at those jobs) may require costly longitudinal studies over many years following graduation, where the validity and interpretation of the data are unclear.

In its discussion paper (“Students at the Heart”), the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) talks both about student learning and the student experience. And it notes that while procedures have been developed for performing quality assessments of academic units, such procedures are lacking for non-teaching units, such as student services, registrar offices, etc. The document asks for advice as to whether quality assessments for the non-academic units of the university require different methods than the assessments done of academic units.

It seems likely that the Commission is right to wonder if assessment methods for the non-academic units should be different from those used for the academic units.

Assessment methods for the academic units, including site visits by external experts in the discipline, have been practiced for several years. While there is no universally accepted curriculum, there are somewhat vague standards in the different academic disciplines about what is reasonable, in terms of qualifications of professors, curriculum, teaching methods, and research topics. Even where an academic area is divided into different schools of thought, there is some agreement about what is reasonable within each school. New ideas constantly arise in the academy, and it is important to ensure that our universities are keeping up to date. Whether this requires the frequency of assessments that the Commission might desire is unclear. Assessing too frequently – say, a five-year cycle – is costly in time and money. A longer cycle – say, seven to ten years – might actually even be more effective.

The current assessment methods give an idea of whether programs attain the standards desired, but do not permit comparisons and rankings of universities. This makes sense, given the different sizes and missions of our universities. Most assessors recognize that the universities are living in a time of restraint and that recommendations of large-scale expansions of programs are unlikely to be useful. There is, in a way, a sort of value-for-money approach in the assessments of academic programs, or what accountants might call a “performance audit” side to the assessments.

If the Commission now proposes to move to assess the non-academic units, such as student services, the registrar’s office, etc., then the notion of value-for-money seems to take on greater importance. The Commission is probably right that these units are not currently subject to any external assessment. Their effect on student learning may be very hard to determine, so, if student learning is the aim of the university, then these may be low priority units. The non-academic units will, of course, affect the “student experience”. The Commission’s document does not list all the non-academic units at our universities, but surely these will include ancillary enterprises (such as the residences, the bookstore, the cafeterias, etc.), sports teams,

student services (including tutoring, health services, counselling, job placements, etc.), registrar, fund raising, support staff (for academic and for non-academic units), research and commercialisation offices, etc. Non-academic units which affect the student experience may include student governance, student newspapers, student clubs and associations, etc. Non-academic spending may include payments made by the university for outside lawyers and consultants. It may also be necessary to assess the number (and compensation) of senior administrators to see if we are getting value for money.

It would be very hard for the Commission to devise ways of assessing the quality of these non-academic units in terms of their effects on student learning and the student experience. But a first step might be to encourage universities to adopt policies of transparency, so that it would be easy for others to arrive at their own assessments. These policies of transparency could then be assessed by the Commission. The easiest thing to be transparent about is spending on the non-academic units. Much of the spending on these units consists of compensation to those working in the units. The Commission may wish to call on the universities to establish policies of transparency on the costs of these units, including the costs of compensation of senior administrators in these units (which already occurs in Nova Scotia and several other provinces), as a first step which would permit us to start assessing whether these units produce value for money.

The MPHEC, in proposing to assess the quality of the non-academic units in our universities is taking into account the fact that stakeholders, i.e., government, students and taxpayers, have a legitimate need for assurance about the cost effectiveness of institutional programs and services. In our view, this would require that universities take steps to become more transparent in their operations.