



**ONTARIO UNIVERSITIES**  
COUNCIL on QUALITY ASSURANCE

**REPORT ON THE  
QUALITY ASSURANCE  
FOCUSED AUDIT OF  
NIPISSING UNIVERSITY**

**AUGUST 2020**

## Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Nipissing University: Focused Audit Report</b> -----          | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Selection of programs</b> -----                               | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>On-Site Visit</b> -----                                       | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Observations of the Focused Audit</b> -----                   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Conclusion</b> -----  | <b>9</b>  |
| <i>Appendix A – Members of the Audit Team</i> -----              | <i>10</i> |
| <i>Appendix B: Schedule for the Focused Audit Meetings</i> ----- | <i>12</i> |

# Nipissing University: Focused Audit Report

Nipissing University, one of Ontario's smallest universities, concentrates primarily on undergraduate education. However, the University also offers six masters programs and a PhD program in Education. The University has remained an actively engaged member of Ontario universities' quality assurance community since the Quality Assurance Framework was first introduced in 2010.

Nipissing was audited in full in 2014-15, as per the requirements detailed in the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF). The subsequent report (dated February 2016) identified three Causes for Concern relating to systemic issues in the University's conduct of its Cyclical Program Reviews (CPRs). As a result of these Causes for Concern and the subsequent engagement between the University and the Ontario Universities' Council on Quality Assurance (the Quality Council), a desk audit was conducted in the latter portion of 2015-16. The report resulting from the desk audit was finalized in July 2016. Given the complexities of the Causes for Concern identified in the initial audit, and in accordance with the provisions detailed in Section 5.2.9 of the QAF, the Audit Committee recommended to the Quality Council that the University undergo another full audit in 2019-20. The Quality Council accepted this recommendation in September 2017. However, in response to the significant progress made by Nipissing over the following year, the Quality Council downgraded the requirement of another full audit in October 2018 to a Focused Audit, which was to examine in detail how the University was progressing in its CPR activities. The Quality Council has also since determined that the University has satisfactorily addressed the three Causes for Concern.

While elements of the QAF's guidelines were used to inform the structure and process developed for the Focused Audit, ultimately the orientation and implementation of the Audit were different from the standard audit process previously undertaken in 2014-15. Overall, the Council determined that the Focused Audit should assess how the recently revised CPR processes were working in practice. Since 2018, the University has completed 18 CPRs – a mammoth task. Five of these were the subject of the Focused Audit.

Since the Framework's introduction in 2010, the University has had three Institutional Quality Assurance Processes (IQAP) approved by the Quality Council. The first IQAP was ratified in 2011, with an amended version re-ratified in 2013. The University then introduced significant changes to the 2013 version of its IQAP, with the further revised IQAP ratified by the Quality Council in April 2019. Given the CPR focus of this audit, changes to the protocols for New Program Approvals and Major Modifications sections within the 2019 IQAP are not discussed in this Report.

It is important to note that Nipissing's size is a key influencing factor in terms of its formal policies and practices related to quality assurance and its day-to-day operations. Over recent years, some externally imposed challenges, such as the change in provincial support for Education programs, have significantly affected Nipissing. The auditors acknowledge that such challenges have resulted in a preoccupation for an otherwise already-stretched institution. They also acknowledge that the senior leadership, most notably the Provost, remains very involved

with and committed to quality assurance. However, there are very few support staff and only three Deans, one of whom is in the process of developing a new teaching portfolio. Committing additional resources for the University's quality assurance work would be in line with the practice at most other universities in Ontario, including at other small institutions that have created dedicated offices to manage their quality assurance activities. However, the creation of the Dean of Teaching position is a positive reflection of Nipissing's commitment to supporting its work on program learning outcomes, a key factor in the promotion of good quality assurance policies and practices.

Overall, the auditors acknowledge that audits are both complex and time-consuming for all sectors of the University, from staff and students to faculty and administration. Nipissing University provided auditors with extensive and mostly complete documentation for the Focused Audit well in advance of the site visit. Requests for additional information and documentation were handled in a timely manner. The site visit, always an intense series of meetings over a two-day period, was well planned, and the auditors commend those responsible for organizing the meetings and offer their thanks for the hospitality and assistance they received throughout their stay. The meetings greatly assisted the auditors' understanding of the evolving commitment and the work that has been done to reshape Nipissing's approach to quality assurance. It is hoped that this resulting Report will assist the University's ongoing efforts to move forward in its quality assurance work.

Finally, it is important to note that, as the Focused Audit was not a full audit, the University's placement in the third year of the Audit Schedule remains unchanged. It is therefore understood that the next full audit of Nipissing's quality assurance activities will take place in 2023-24.

The following comprised the audit team for the Nipissing University Focused Audit (see brief biographical information in Appendix A):

- Dr. Wayne Loucks, University of Waterloo
- Dr. Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale, University of Windsor
- Dr. Peter Sutherland, McMaster University
- Dr. Ian Orchard, Quality Council Secretariat support
- Ms. Cindy Robinson, Quality Council Secretariat support

### **Selection of programs**

The University was invited to choose three examples from its suite of recent CPRs that would then be the subject of the Focused Audit. Nipissing subsequently selected the following three programs:

- Education, BEd/MEd/PhD
- Physical Health and Education, BPHE
- Sociology, BA

The documentation associated with these program reviews was submitted for desk audit, and the site visit included meetings with these program representatives. The auditors subsequently selected two additional programs that had also been recently reviewed which were as follows:

- Nursing, BSc
- Environment, MES/MSc

While the auditors also met with representatives from these programs as part of the site visit, the University was not required to submit any of the associated documentation for these two program reviews.

### **On-Site Visit**

The auditors conducted an on-site visit with Nipissing University from March 2 – 3, 2020. The site visit schedule is included in Appendix B. The purpose of the on-site visit was to meet with University representatives responsible for quality assurance, as well as those from the five programs selected for audit, and to engage with them in a larger conversation regarding how the quality assurance processes are working under the University's 2019 version of the IQAP.

## Observations of the Focused Audit

In a full audit, as described in the QAF (Section 5), the report would include Commendations, Best Practices, Recommendations, Suggestions and, if appropriate, Causes for Concern. These would be based on an audit's findings from a larger sampling of quality assurance activities and meetings with a broader sample of those involved with an institution's quality assurance activities. In the case of Nipissing's Focused Audit, the smaller sample size and specific emphasis led to the conclusion that remarks in the form of "Observations" would be more appropriate and helpful. In some instances, the Observation will include informal suggestions on how the University may look to enhance its quality assurance practices and processes.

### Observation 1: Progress on Quality Assurance

The auditors were impressed with the progress on the attention given to quality assurance at Nipissing. The engagement with quality assurance was noted at all levels of the institution from student leadership to the President. This bodes well for the future of quality assurance at the University. Three specific examples of this engagement: the reorganization of academic Faculties to permit the addition of the Dean of Teaching to the administrative structure at Nipissing, the implementation of tools and workflow management processes by the institutional planning unit to assist in Quality Assurance at Nipissing, and the development and use of the Academic Quality Assurance and Planning Committee's (AQAPC) checklist for self-study assessment.

### Observation 2: Program Learning Outcomes

The role of program learning outcomes is referred to in the IQAP in both the *Purpose of the Policy* section as well as in the *Definition of a New Program* and *Major Modification* subsections. It is of particular note, however, that it is not referenced in the CPR section of the body of the IQAP, although significant detail is provided in Appendix A: *Manual for Cyclical Program Review*.

The need for additional work on program-level learning outcomes, their assessment, and AQAPC's oversight of their inclusion in CPRs was raised with the Audit Team on several occasions during the site visit. The auditors were told during the visit that AQAPC currently considers the appropriateness of program-level learning outcomes only for new program proposals. Giving AQAPC similar oversight of this important element for the self-studies developed for the review of existing programs would significantly strengthen Nipissing's approach to assuring the quality of all of its academic programs.

In addition, while significant progress has been made with the creation of the Dean of Teaching position, important work still needs to be done on establishing and/or confirming the appropriateness of existing program-level learning outcomes and the subsequent assessment of student achievement of their program's learning outcomes. The auditors note the plans of the Dean of Teaching to work with academic units on program learning outcomes and assessments, which should help in this regard.

### **Observation 3: Structure of the IQAP**

The auditors carefully examined the IQAP that was approved by the Quality Council in 2019. Although the three program reviews audited in detail were completed using aspects of both the 2013 and 2019 versions of the IQAP, it has been possible to make observations regarding the 2019 IQAP. It became clear during the auditors' meetings that there was general support at Nipissing for the new processes detailed in this version. This support came from the Deans as well as the faculty members the auditors interviewed.

That said, auditors did find the structure of the 2019 IQAP to be somewhat confusing, particularly with respect to the content and function of, and relationships among, the various appendices. For example, Appendix A, titled *Manual for Cyclical Program Reviews*, is really a manual for the preparation of a self-study. As currently structured, much of the material required by the QAF (such as the evaluation criteria for new program proposals and Cyclical Program Reviews) is only found in the Appendices. This means that the Appendices must be considered a part of the IQAP and, therefore, any subsequent changes to the appendices could also require re-ratification by the Quality Council. Further, the auditors anticipate that external reviewers might find such a long and detailed IQAP unreasonably complex to use and interpret.

Another item of discussion during the auditor's meetings was the AQAPC checklist. This nominally is a checklist for use by AQAPC to verify the completeness of a Unit's self-study. It is an excellent document linking the QAF requirements to chapters in the self-study, and when completed, provides a useful assessment tool. The IQAP would be strengthened if it referred to the checklist. Currently, the IQAP simply states the Provost will bring the self-study to the AQAPC to determine compliance.

### **Observation 4: Schedule of Reviews**

The IQAP scheduling rules related to the timing of CPRs at Nipissing appear to point to some problems ahead. Currently, the IQAP indicates that: "*All programs, graduate and undergraduate, housed in an academic unit, including all majors, specializations and honours specializations, as well as all professional and graduate programs offered by an academic unit in all delivery modes, either solely or in partnership with another academic unit or post-secondary institution, will be reviewed at the same time.*" This requirement, coupled with the recent restructuring related to the new Dean of Teaching, may result in situations where it may not be possible to meet the IQAP's scheduling criteria. The potential for problems is increased, as the IQAP does not include a process for altering the published schedule.

### **Observation 5: Cyclical Program Review Protocol**

The IQAP lacks some specificity and/or clarity in some places. For example, the IQAP's *Manual for Cyclical Program Reviews* indicates that the Dean appoints the IRC in the diagram, yet the text indicates that it is the Provost who appoints the IRC. Similarly, it is not stated in the IQAP who is to verify the arm's length status of the external reviewers. One possibility (seen at other Ontario universities) is a nomination form to be completed and signed by the head of the unit, with a "check" box to be initialed, thereby asserting that the arm's length status has been

verified. The role of the student in the IRC is also not defined, other than being consultative. As currently written, the IQAP describes the IRC, including the student member, as responsible for the development of the unit response to the external reviewers' recommendations. The auditors did not see evidence of this happening in practice. Clarifying details such as these in the IQAP would improve its usability, as well as consistency of application.

### **Observation 6: Student Participation**

It would be helpful for Nipissing to look for ways to provide students with an appreciation of the quality assurance processes that are in place. For those students that do become involved in a quality assurance activity, the University should ensure that they are fully engaged in the ways detailed in the IQAP. The University should also ensure that those students that do participate understand their role in that process. (This observation is not unique to Nipissing, and audits at other universities have frequently come to similar conclusions.) The auditors recognize the difficulty of locating students with the time and interest in participating in various quality assurance tasks. One possibility for locating willing and interested students that emerged during the site visit was to use existing discipline-specific clubs and interest groups as a source of student participants. By participating in such groups, students already demonstrate a heightened interest in the discipline that suggests they might be willing to engage in quality assurance tasks. Such organizations might also facilitate the spread of information about quality assurance, learning outcomes, etc. to the wider student population.

### **Observation 7: Accreditation**

The synchronization between the accreditation review and the CPR has been used very effectively in the case of the Education program (BEd). The needs of the CPR were understood during the accreditation process, and efforts were made to develop accreditation material that also considered the needs of the CPR, which was completed shortly after the accreditation process. As a result, some of the documentation and data collection was done at the same time. It is of note that no requirement of the CPR was replaced by the accreditation documentation. In hindsight, perhaps even more could have been reused from the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) accreditation; however, the OCT surveys did not include permission for the reuse of the information. It was noted during the interview with members of the Nursing CPR group that Nursing also used a similar sequential process. This type of synchronization between accreditation and CPR should be encouraged at Nipissing, as it demonstrates best practice in this particular quality assurance process. Ideally, this process would be captured as one of the possibilities in the IQAP.

### **Observation 8: Executive Summary**

The IQAP currently indicates that an *“Executive Summary of the Final Assessment Report will be created by the Office of the Provost and posted on the University’s website and sent to the Quality Council.”* In addition, on the Web site, the pointer to the page with the FARs is labelled as containing the Executive Summary. However, current practice at Nipissing is that the full Final Assessment Report is posted in place of an Executive Summary. The IQAP should be updated to reflect this practice.



### **Observation 9: Documentation**

The approach to managing quality assurance-related documentation is still somewhat informal at Nipissing. While the auditors recognize this is a small university with limited resources, it still needs to find a way to track and manage the documents and sign-offs associated with its quality assurance work. It is of note that the Nipissing initiative to use of Microsoft Teams to track CPRs, as well as other IQAP processes, may serve to resolve some of these areas. In addition, in some cases, modification to the records already being kept could help.

Examples of steps that need verification documentation include acceptance of the self-study as complete, vetting of the external reviewers, acceptance of the external report as complete, submission of the final FAR and IP to the unit, and submission of the documentation to the Quality Council.

It would be helpful to develop additional documentation to describe the involvement of students in the development of the unit response, the involvement of the unit in the development of the Implementation Plan, and the requirements for submission of the monitoring report.

### **Observation 10: Communications**

During the auditors' meetings at Nipissing, one common thread seemed to be that although there was support expressed for the new IQAP among faculty members, support staff and student leaders, there were also several instances that indicated there were significant gaps in understanding by these stakeholders for their role in the processes. It appears that improved communication with the stakeholders would result in a more effective process. The development of a guidance document specifically oriented to students and other stakeholders engaged in quality assurance activities could assist in this regard.

The faculty members that the auditors met with were not entirely clear about some of the purposes or processes involved in quality assurance. These include the monitoring process for the IP, creation of the FAR, assessment of learning outcomes, the role of students in the IRC and how to use student information in the self-study, and the role of internal-external reviewers. Again, additional guidance to support these areas of Nipissing's quality assurance work may be of assistance in this regard.

Finally, the auditors suggest that the communications with the external reviewer should either include a copy of a template or specific pointers to the portions of the IQAP that apply directly to their role in a CPR and particularly the Evaluation Criteria.

### **Observation 11: Provost Workload**

There has been significant progress at Nipissing in quality assurance, despite the institution's many challenges and the limited number of people expected to carry the load. One aspect of the process that was considered by the auditors was the significant workload placed on the Provost by the IQAP to deliver on quality assurance at Nipissing.

The resolution of the three Causes for Concern understandably necessitated a more hands-on approach by the Provost. And notwithstanding the fact that the current Provost is and has always been focused on and deeply committed to quality assurance matters, nevertheless the fact that the Provost assumes responsibility also for all of the unspecified quality assurance tasks is likely unsustainable. If the Provost were to leave, it is not clear that the next Provost would have the same commitment to quality assurance.

The combination of the Provost plus the two Faculty Deans, as well as the Dean of Teaching, forms a small group that is key to the current success of quality assurance at Nipissing. However, their terms are limited. Without some of the supporting structures found at other institutions, there could be significant issues of the type that resulted in the 2014-15 causes for concern. The net result is a sound, but possibly fragile and, again, likely unsustainable, quality assurance system.

## **Conclusion**

The audit of quality assurance at Nipissing University has revealed significant efforts to meet the expectations of the Quality Assurance Framework, especially in recent years. The institution now has the capacity to develop further a culture of understanding and commitment to program quality. Given the progress observed during this Focused Audit, the Audit Committee would recommend to the Quality Council that no further audit-related action is required by the University at this time. This would include the removal of the requirement for Nipissing to submit an Institutional One-year Follow-up to this Focused Audit, as would normally be required in the case of a full audit. Instead, the University will now return to its regular placement in the third year of the Audit Schedule, with the next full audit of Nipissing's quality assurance activities to take place in 2023-24. It is hoped that the observations that have been provided by the auditors in this Focused Audit Report will assist Nipissing in positioning itself for that full audit.

## **Appendix A – Members of the Audit Team**

### **Dr. Wayne Loucks, *Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Waterloo***

Dr. Loucks, an Electrical Engineer by training, retired in January 2016 after 31 years with the University of Waterloo. He retired from the position of Associate Dean, Undergraduate, in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, a role he held since 1998. This role included membership on the Senate Undergraduate Studies Council, which was responsible for reviewing all new undergraduate programs and undergraduate program changes at the University. During his time as Associate Dean, the University wrote and updated its own program review document, which Dr. Loucks provided input to. Dr. Loucks has also been involved in the Faculty of Engineering's introduction of a number of new programs.

In addition, Dr. Loucks has participated in several separate CEAB visits between 1999 and 2014.

### **Dr. Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale, *Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology, University of Windsor***

Dr. Maticka-Tyndale is a Distinguished University Professor Emerita, retired from the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology at the University of Windsor where she was a faculty member from 1993-2017. Dr. Maticka-Tyndale obtained her PhD in Sociology from the University of Calgary in 1989. Her administrative experience includes: Chair of the department's graduate committee during the approval process for its PhD program in sociology (2000), member of the provincial review committee for the sexuality, marriage and family studies program at the University of Waterloo, president's representative on the employment equity committee (2014-2016), and Associate Dean Research and Graduate Studies in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Science (2012-2017). As a tier 1 Canada Research Chair from 2002-2016 she led or co-led 31 research projects with partners in Canada, the United States, Europe, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia, funded by some \$18 million in grants and contracts. She has served on the executive committees/ boards of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, Canadian Sex Research Forum, and the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality as well as on task forces for Health Canada, the Pan American and World Health Organizations, and the World Association for Sexual Health.

### **Dr. Peter Sutherland, *Physics and Astronomy, McMaster University***

Dr. Sutherland, a theoretical astrophysicist by training, retired on July 1, 2013 after 37 years at McMaster University where he was Professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy. At McMaster University, he gained considerable experience with undergraduate and graduate programs, including teaching, developing and evaluating them, gained in part through service as Chair of Physics (1987-1991), Dean of Science (1996-2005), Director of the Arts and Science Program (2005-2010), and Acting Dean of Science (2012-2013). In 2001-2002, he also served for six months as Acting Provost and then very briefly as Acting President. Twice in the period of 2007-2012 he was President of the McMaster University Faculty Association.

Dr. Sutherland served as a COU Academic Colleague from 2002-2004, and as a member of an Ontario Council for Graduate Studies (OCGS) Appraisal Committee for two years, gaining valuable perspective on graduate programs and issues across Ontario universities. Dr. Sutherland has continued to teach undergraduate and graduate courses during his retirement.

## Quality Assurance Audit Agenda

**March 2 – 3, 2020**

**Audit Team:** Dr. Ian Orchard, Senior Director Academic, Quality Council; Cindy Robinson, Director Operations, Quality Assurance; Dr. Wayne Loucks, Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Waterloo, Dr. Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale, Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology, University of Windsor; Dr. Peter Sutherland, Physics and Astronomy, McMaster University

### Monday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020

| Time             | Participants   | Location |
|------------------|--|----------|
| 08:30 - 10:00 am | Audit Team Planning Meeting  | F307     |
| 10:00 - 12:00 pm | Audit Team meets with senior QA team: Dr. Arja Vainio-Mattila, Provost and Vice-President, Academic and Research; Martee Storms, Executive Assistant to the Provost; Dr. Pat Maher, Dean of Teaching; Debra Iafrate, Registrar; Stephen Tedesco, Director Institutional Research and Planning  | F307     |
| 12:00 - 1:00 pm  | Lunch with Dr. Mike DeGagné, President and Vice-Chancellor and Dr. Arja Vainio-Mattila, Provost and Vice-President, Academic and Research  | F307     |
| 1:00 - 2:00 pm   | Audit Team meets with representatives of Education: Dr. Michelann Parr, Professor Schulich School of Education, Master of Education, PhD in Education and Jessica McMillan, Administrator, Faculty of Education and Professional Studies   | F307     |
| 2:00 - 3:00 pm   | Audit Team meets with representatives of Physical Health and Education: Dr. Graydon Raymer, Director, Associate Professor, School of Physical and Health Education; Dr. Barbi Law, Professor, Graduate Program Coordinator, Physical and Health Education, Kinesiology, MSc, Master of Education, PhD in Education   | F307     |
| 3:00 - 3:15 pm   | Break  |          |
| 3:15 - 4:15 pm   | Audit Team meets with representatives of Sociology: Dr. Amir Erfani, Program Chair, Professor, Anthropology, Sociology, MA; Dr. David Zarifa, Professor, Canada Research Chair (Tier II) in Life Course Transitions in Northern and Rural Communities Sociology, MA, PhD in Education; Dr. Greg Brown, Professor Sociology, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, MA; Dr. Trevor Smith, Associate Professor, Sociology, MA | F307     |

### Tuesday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020

| Time             | Participants   | Location |
|------------------|--|----------|
| 09:00 - 10:00 am | Audit Team meets with Academic Curriculum Committee  | F303     |
| 10:00 - 11:00 pm | Audit Team meets with Academic Quality Assurance and Planning Committee (AQAPC)  | F303     |
| 11:00 - 12:00 pm | Audit Team meets with Deans: Dr. Carole Richardson, Dean, Education and Professional Studies; Dr. Pavlina Radia, Dean, Arts and Science; Dr. Jim McAuliffe, Dean, Graduate Studies | F307     |

|                        |  |        |
|------------------------|--|--------|
|                        | and Research and Dr. Pat Maher, Dean of Teaching   |        |
| <b>12:00 - 1:00 pm</b> | Lunch with Students: Hannah Mackie, NUSU President; Charlotte Foster, VP Advocacy & Awareness  | F307   |
| <b>1:00 - 1:30 pm</b>  | Break  |        |
| <b>1:30 - 2:30 pm</b>  | Audit Team meets with representatives of MES/MESc Environment: Dr. Jeff Dech, Associate Professor, Biology and Chemistry, Environmental Science/Studies, MESc/MES; Dr. Kirsten Greer, Associate Professor, Geography and Geology, History, MA, Environmental Science/Studies, MESc/MES; Dr. April James, Associate Professor, Geography and Geology, Environmental Science/Studies, MESc/MES; and Dr. Steve Hansen, Professor, Physical and Health Education, Kinesiology, MSc, Master of Education, PhD in Education  | F307   |
| <b>2:30 - 3:30 pm</b>  | Audit Team meets with representatives of BSc Nursing: Dr. Tammie McParland, Assistant Professor, School of Nursing, Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) Collaborative, Registered Practical Nurse (RPN) to BScN Bridging Program, Master of Education; Wenda Caswell RN, BScN, MEd, Assistant Professor, Program Manager - RPN to BScN Blended Learning Program, Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) Collaborative, Registered Practical Nurse (RPN) to BScN Bridging Program, Master of Education; Dr. Baiba Zarins, RN, Program Manager, BScN Scholar Practitioner Program (via telephone) | F307   |
| <b>3:30 - 5:00 pm</b>  | Audit Team wrap up meeting   | F307   |
| <b>6:00 pm</b>         | Debrief with Dr. Arja Vainio-Mattila, Provost and Vice-President, Academic and Research; Martee Storms, Executive Assistant to the Provost; Dr. Pat Maher, Dean of Teaching; Debra lafrate, Registrar; Stephen Tedesco, Director Institutional Research and Planning   | Lot 88 |