A Proposal for Developing Flexible Education Opportunities

There has been considerable discussion in the general and post-secondary media about the potential of various kinds of technology-supported learning. In addition, there is a sizeable academic literature that reports research in this area, and a number of faculty members at SFU contribute to this research. Topics such as MOOCs and flipped classrooms have been debated, and in some jurisdictions politicians have been quick to promote the use of online learning as a panacea for reducing the cost of and improving accessibility to higher education. SFU has been a leader in distance education for decades, and many of our students take fully online courses as part of their degree program. Some faculty members are experimenting with other forms of technology-supported education. We run a few programs completely online, and others are available through blended delivery. To support faculty innovation and efforts in this area, we recently introduced a new learning management system (Canvas), which is highly flexible and customizable at the course level without the direct intervention of central support units. Given the intense interest in technology-enabled learning and alternative pedagogies, it is time to take a broad, comprehensive look at our present and future needs in this area, define our short- and longer-term institutional priorities, and develop a strategic plan for acquiring and deploying the necessary resources to support flexible education at SFU.

In 2012 the VPA created a small working group to review where we stand in relation to recent developments. This group produced a report that was then circulated to select Senate committees for comment. The consensus of the feedback was that the first recommendation of the report should be explored more fully before we make any major decisions about the appropriate direction for the University or some of the more detailed recommendations that were contained in the initial report. The first recommendation stated:

> *A university-wide committee appointed by the VPA should be assembled and charged with assessing current online learning resources (for example, support for online teaching practices) and online learning course provisioning across SFU and making recommendations about further strategic development of online resources and programming.*

As a result of his own research in this area, the VPA wishes to broaden the discussion beyond the consideration of our online programming and delivery system. Consequently, it is proposed that Senate endorse the establishment of a Task Force on Flexible Education (TFFE), which would ultimately make recommendations on the future directions that the University should take in developing and sustaining flexible education opportunities for its students and instructors. The focus of the TFFE will be on technology-supported learning, including the use of fully online programs and fully online courses, "blended" approaches (the integration of digital resources and other media into more traditional learning environments), and mobile learning. It is also anticipated that the TFFE will investigate other areas that are not necessarily technology-mediated, such as the provision of courses and programs outside of the traditional semester timing (learn at your own speed) and the "flipped classroom". In addition, the TFFE will develop an implementation plan with appropriate administrative and budget processes to provide support to students and instructors engaging with the flexible education initiative.

Although the work of the TFFE will contribute to the discussions of course availability, focused attention on this issue will come through other University initiatives and policy proposals. Similarly, while approaches to non-credit program delivery may benefit from the TFFE's

deliberations and recommendations, this area of activity is not likely to be explored in any depth.

Task Force on Flexible Education (TFFE)

Terms of Reference:

1. Produce an inventory of institutionally-supported learning technologies and service units at SFU that support credit and non-credit programs,
2. Perform an environmental scan of trends and directions in flexible learning being used at other post-secondary institutions,
3. Engage in a broad consultation with the university community on the objectives for and issues concerning the development of flexible learning environments,
4. Identify effective and leading-edge practices by referring to the academic literature and efforts undertaken at other institutions,
5. Rely on the investigative work carried out in 1. though 4. to establish thematic working groups consisting of members of the university community with appropriate expertise that would explore various aspects of flexible learning and develop recommendations on an institutional strategy for flexible education at SFU, and
6. Develop an implementation plan for putting the recommendations into effect, including a) a resource model which supports the growth and sustainment of flexible education at SFU, b) a compilation of examples of effective practice that could be adopted and/or refashioned by SFU to create its flexible learning environments, and c) a support model which facilitates faculty engagement in the use of new technologies and pedagogies.

Principles to Guide the TFFE's work:

1. Create high-quality learning environments and experiences for students and instructors.
2. Mobilize interest and leverage expertise from the university community, including students, instructors, and professional staff.
3. Engage in broad, inclusive consultations and communications in all phases of the TFFE's work: information gathering, identifying issues and approaches, and soliciting feedback on draft recommendations.
4. Capitalize on efforts of other task forces and working groups to date and the expertise of existing support units.
5. Appreciate that the success of the flexible education initiative will depend on collaboration and partnership among several stakeholder groups, and the development of an integrated support network.

Task Force Membership:

The Task Force will operate as an executive steering committee for the project and be responsible for the final report, which will include recommendations to the VPA and a strategic plan for their implementation. The membership will be:

- Special Advisor to the VPA and Provost (Chair)
- AVP, Students
- 2 Faculty Deans
- Deans, Lifelong Learning and Graduate Studies
- CIO

- 2 faculty members
- 2 student representatives (1 undergraduate, 1 graduate)
- Director, TLC (non-voting)
- Director, CODE (non-voting)

A project manager, reporting to the Chair, will be hired to supervise a project support team consisting of administrative and research assistants, and temporary and/or seconded staff members.

The TFFE will draw upon additional resources to conduct its work as required.

The TFFE will meet on a monthly basis (or as required) and report to the VPA and Provost. Funding for the project support team will be provided by the VPA.

TFFE Working Groups:

Working groups will be established to explore emergent themes referred to in ToR 5. A member of the TFFE will chair each group. The membership will be drawn from the university community, including students, instructors, and members of academic and support units.

The following are hypothetical examples of topics that could become foci of attention:

- Students' learning experiences: course availability and student satisfaction,
- Instructor education, training, and support: integrating instructional skills programs, professional development and exploration opportunities, and effective practices,
- Business opportunities: distance education, professional and for-profit online (or blended) programs,
- Policy and process: review of existing academic, administrative, and IT policies,
- Resources and support: establishing an integrated, collaborative support system for flexible learning.

Process and timelines:

The work of the TFFE will begin in the spring term 2014 and conclude in the summer term 2015. The project support team will be assembled prior to the first meeting.

Some of the steps outlined below may run concurrently:

1. Produce an inventory of a) institutionally-supported learning technologies and b) units that support instructors and educational staff on the application of such technologies. This inventory will serve as a basis for subsequent planning and coordination of support.
2. Perform an environmental scan of trends and directions in flexible education at other post-secondary institutions in Canada, US, UK, and Australia.
3. Consult widely with the university community on the objectives for and issues concerning flexible learning environments. Public consultations will occur on all three campuses, with each Faculty, with SCUTL and SCCS, and with focus groups representing specific constituencies, such as SFUFA, TSSU, and the Graduate Student Society. In addition, surveys of students, instructors, and professional staff will be undertaken to ensure as many perspectives as possible are sampled.
4. Identify effective and leading-edge practices by surveying the literature and efforts at

other institutions.

5. Create working groups to focus on specific themes and topics. Working group members will be drawn from the university community. Each working group will be responsible for identifying priority issues based on its research, proposing strategic solutions, and outlining appropriate steps for implementation.

6. Compile working group recommendations into a comprehensive report and phased implementation plan.

7. Communicate the draft recommendations and plans to the university community and solicit feedback.

8. Refine the recommendations and plan. Submit same to the VPA who will then consult with Senate.