

Consultation Report

Students at the Heart: Stakeholder Reactions to the MPHEC's Proposed Approach to Quality Assurance at Maritime Universities

Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission

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I. Introduction

The first cycle of the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission's (MPHEC) Quality Assurance Monitoring process was developed following extensive consultation with the region's institutions, governments and other stakeholders. It had, and the second cycle will retain, **two distinct objectives**:

- 1) To provide assurances to stakeholders and the general public that Maritime universities are committed to offering quality programs and have suitable quality assurance policies and mechanisms in place.
- 2) To assist the institutions in enhancing (or, in some cases, establishing) their quality assurance frameworks through a formative process that combines on-going dialogue and detailed advice, including recommendations and suggestions.

While the first cycle of the monitoring process assisted institutions in developing and enhancing their QA programs, it also revealed a number of gaps, including most notably that students and learning are too often at the periphery of institutional QA processes. A second cycle is aimed at addressing the gaps identified in the first.

In preparation for the second cycle of the monitoring process, the MPHEC conducted a round of consultation with stakeholders, which included:

- Release of the discussion paper, *Students at the Heart: Quality Assurance at Maritime Universities* (January 2013). This document outlined a number of elements learned from the first cycle of the monitoring process and described what the Commission is proposing for a second cycle.
- Collection of written feedback from stakeholders in response to the discussion paper (February 2013).
- Hosting a Forum on Quality Assurance at Mount Allison University (March 2013), which allowed stakeholders to provide further input, through a face-to-face dialogue.

Over the course of the consultation process, stakeholders have raised several questions and shared differing interpretations of various elements of the Commission's proposal. This report therefore begins by identifying and responding to a number of key questions raised by stakeholders.

Stakeholders have indicated their overall support for the Commission's proposed approach for academic units. That being said, there was much debate regarding an appropriate approach and scope in relation to non-academic units. Section III provides a summary of the comments raised to date, either in response to the discussion paper or during the group discussions at the Forum. This input is being used to finalize the Commission's proposed process and Standards¹, expected to be circulated in late 2013 or early 2014.

II. Key Questions Raised

1. **Why is a second cycle of the monitoring process needed, especially if the Commission already receives a copy of all external reviews of existing programs?**
 - The Commission does not receive on a systematic basis copies of external reviews conducted at Maritime universities.

¹ As a result of feedback from stakeholders, the Commission is currently considering modifications to the proposed *Standards for Institutional Quality Assurance Policies*, including the possibility of a change in title; however, as such modifications are currently under consideration, and a decision has not yet been made, this document will continue to refer to "Standards."

- The first cycle of the Commission's monitoring process focused on ensuring that all institutions had an implemented policy to support on-going quality assessment and improvement. This goal has largely been achieved, but some gaps remain. Given that the first cycle of the monitoring process was successful in ensuring the development and enhancement of QA programs, the Commission is preparing for a second cycle to address the remaining gaps.

2. What is meant by first cycle and second cycle?

- The first cycle of the monitoring process means the first round of a validation process, which used as a basis the Guidelines for Institutional Quality Assurance Policies collaboratively devised with the universities and released in 1999. The Commission is developing revised *Standards* to support a second cycle of a similar validation process, namely to address the gaps identified during the first cycle.

3. Will the shift from *Guidelines* to *Standards* lead to requiring the same expectations for all Maritime institutions?

- No. The MPHEC is mindful that each institution is unique and that any QA process must have built-in flexibility to allow for a variety of approaches across (and within) institutions. The formative nature of the proposed process for the second cycle will emphasize this through individualized advice/recommendations.

4. Will the *Standards*/Monitoring Process infringe on institutional autonomy?

- No. The monitoring process is designed to respect institutional autonomy while providing stakeholders with information they seek about the quality of universities. Universities are responsible for designing and implementing quality programs and assessing them on an on-going basis. The *Standards* are meant to provide institutions with guidance in this respect, while allowing for flexibility in response to their individual context.

5. Why are the *Standards* more focused on the quality of learning than on the value of research?

- Evaluating teaching and assessing the student's experience, student learning outcomes and curriculum (against established standards) were identified as areas of gaps in the first cycle, while research featured fairly prominently in most reviews examined over the course of the first cycle. That being said, research is clearly included within the proposed assessment standards.

6. How can institutions address the expanding expectations with limited resources?

- The MPHEC's expectations have in fact changed very little since 1999; the proposed revisions were devised in response to requests from institutions to provide more specific guidance on ways to enhance their current quality assurance practices as well as to help clarify expectations.

7. Would Senates be required to take on the review of non-academic units?

- The Commission realizes that the current wording in the *Standards* may have suggested that non-academic units should fall under the Senate's purview, though this was not the Commission's intention; the Commission will clarify this in the next version of the *Standards*.

8. Can an institution have more than one QA policy?

- Yes. The main point is to ensure the requirements/procedures for each type of QA process are documented (whether within the same policy or within separate policies).

9. The Commission indicated that only 61% of approved programs had been reviewed by institutions. Is a small number of institutions bringing the average down, perhaps skewing the overall results?

- No. Results to date (late 2012) show that nearly half of the institutions within the Commission scope have reviewed less than 61% of their programs that were approved by the MPHEC (between 1999 and 2006 for Bachelor and PhD programs and between 1999 and 2009 for Certificate, Diploma and Masters programs). There was a wide range of program review activity across institutions, ranging from 0% to 100%.

10. Will all programs be subject to the same quantitative measures of quality?

- No. The Commission believes that metrics are essential in quality assessment, but that to be useful, measures must be relevant and applicable to the program or unit. The Commission's proposed standard with regard to measures is therefore suggesting that *institutions* identify measures that will add value in their specific context.

III. Other Comments from Stakeholders

Consultations with stakeholders in preparation for the second cycle of the monitoring process have included the release of a discussion paper, *Students at the Heart: Quality Assurance at Maritime Universities*, and hosting of a Forum on Quality Assurance. The [discussion paper](#) (which outlines the proposed *Standards for institutional Quality Assurance Policies*¹) is available online, along with the [forum agenda](#) and the [slideshows](#) presented that day.

Stakeholders have provided an abundance of thoughtful feedback on the Commission's proposed approach to the second cycle through responding to the discussion paper and sharing additional input at the Forum on Quality Assurance. An overview of this feedback is outlined below, organized along the key questions posed to stakeholders. Please note that the many specific comments made by stakeholders that cannot all be outlined herein, including requests for clarification of terms used within the *Standards*, have been forwarded to the AAU-MPHEC Quality Assurance Monitoring Committee for consideration.

Academic Units

1. *As a result of responses from the institutions to the first set of Standards (1999 Guidelines), the Commission has further fleshed-out the various elements supporting an institutional QA policy. Considering **academic units**, how suitable are these standards (sections I-V of the Standards)?*

- For most stakeholders, sections I-V of the proposed *Standards* for academic units seemed suitable (i.e., Purpose of the Standards; Guiding Principles; Scope, Objectives and Components of an Institutional Quality Assurance Policy).
- There was discussion around the appropriateness of the term *Standards*. A number of stakeholders wondered what the implications were for the shift from *Guidelines* to *Standards*, particularly in light of some overly prescriptive terminology throughout the document. Another common comment was that the content of the document seemed more like *Guidelines* than *Standards*.

- There was general agreement on the importance of institutions seeking student input as part of their quality assurance efforts. Stakeholders supported involving students on committees dealing with program review and quality assurance as well as students participating in surveys designed to collect data on a number of student and graduate outcomes; a few stakeholders expressed significant reservations regarding mandatory student course evaluations.
2. *Also as a result of responses from the institutions to the first set of Standards (1999 Guidelines), the Commission has provided additional direction in terms of the assessment standards for the assessment of academic units (section VI of the Standards). Will these assessment standards allow institutions to adequately assess the quality of their academic programs/units? If not, what is missing?*
- There was general agreement among stakeholders that the proposed assessment standards would allow institutions to adequately assess the quality of their academic programs/units.
 - While some viewed the proposed revisions as additional requirements that would add further strain on existing resources, others found them helpful in clarifying expectations.
 - It is important that measures focus on what adds the most value, rather than what is the easiest to track. In addition, it will be more difficult to develop measures of quality for some programs (e.g., liberal arts) than others (e.g., professional programs). For example, not all programs lend themselves to the tracking of labour market outcomes.
 - Some stakeholders were concerned that they lack the resources/expertise needed to track and assess student outcomes. It was suggested that the MPHEC work with universities to help them develop assessment tools and expertise that would allow them to effectively assess student learning across a variety of programs.
 - The *Standards* might be expanded to include more input-related questions (e.g., levels of funding, sufficiency of resources, etc.), which would help gauge how feasible the *Standards* are for each institution.
3. *With respect to the revised Standards overall, are there any omissions (as they apply to academic units)? Are any corrections or clarifications needed?*
- Stakeholders indicated that some accreditation processes would meet the Commission's *Standards* and that efforts ought to be made to avoid duplication of efforts. Similarly, the Commission should communicate with governments to avoid duplicating requirements of institutions.
 - Stakeholders wondered whether there would be penalties associated with not meeting the Standards; while some recommended implementing penalties to increase compliance, others raised concerns with such an approach.

Non-Academic Units

1. *Now, thinking of **non-academic units**, to what extent are Sections I-V of the Standards (Purpose of the Standards; Guiding Principles; Scope, Objectives and Components of an Institutional Quality Assurance Policy) suitable for the assessment of non-academic units?*
- Many of the proposed *Components of an Institutional Quality Assurance Policy* stood out to stakeholders as not being suitable for non-academic units, given their strong focus on academics and consistent use of academic terminology.
 - It was suggested that additional consultation with more individuals directly involved in non-academic units may be needed to address this element.

- Some stakeholders were uncertain whether Senates would be responsible for non-academic unit reviews; others noted that they would expect a different body to oversee such assessments.
 - Given that institutions are at varying stages with respect to non-academic unit reviews, it would be helpful if the Commission hosted an event/workshop that includes experts in this field and also allows for the exchange of best practices between institutions in the region.
 - It was unclear to some stakeholders whether non-academic units do fall under the Commission's jurisdiction.
2. *Also in response to feedback received from the institutions, the Commission has developed Assessment Standards for non-academic units (section VI of the Standards), while recognizing that the diversity of these units made the development of a comprehensive list equally suitable to all units challenging. How appropriate are these standards? What is missing?*
- Stakeholders were generally supportive of the proposed assessment standards for non-academic units. That being said, stakeholders indicated that the Commission should be careful of homogenizing requirements for non-academic unit reviews given the broad range of such units.
 - It is important to be aware of collective agreements and how they can relate to (and possibly conflict with) the assessment of some non-academic units.
3. *What are the main benefits and potential pitfalls institutions and the Commission ought to consider in developing the evaluation framework for these units? Should the scope of units be further defined? If so, how? And on what basis?*
- A resource-effective approach for the Commission would be to draw upon the variety of existing tools already being used by these units.
 - Some institutions find it challenging from a resource perspective to ensure all non-academic units undergo a comprehensive (and cyclical) review.
 - There was a lot of feedback on what would be an appropriate scope for non-academic unit reviews; some questioned whether non-academic units ought to be assessed at all, others insisted that non-academic units be reviewed, while most supported such assessments but recommended narrowing the scope to focus on priority units.
 - Stakeholders also questioned the appropriateness of the term *non-academic units* and made other suggestions, including: *academic support units, academic support services* and *all other units*.

Proposed Approach for the Second Cycle of the Monitoring Process

1. *How appropriate are the proposed steps for the second cycle of the monitoring process? Which changes ought to be considered?*
- Stakeholders generally found that the proposed steps for the second cycle of the monitoring process made sense and would allow for flexibility across institutions.
 - A few stakeholders suggested adding more opportunities for dialogue throughout the process (e.g., sharing best-practices, workshops on definition and assessment of student learning outcomes, etc.), while others suggested some steps be removed. For example, some suggested that the site visit not be required, or only be required when gaps were identified.

Yet, others felt there was significant value in a being able to establish a face-to-face dialogue which the site visit provided on campus.

- It was suggested that a staggered approach, possibly including a pilot phase, would be appropriate.

2. *What are the main pros and cons to the proposed process? From an institutional standpoint? From the students'? Governments'? The public's?*

- Many stakeholders were pleased with the proposed focus on students and learning.
- In times of growing resource restraints, it will be important to establish a process and supporting standards that provide value for money, and can be applied equally well across all institutions.
- As it stands, there appear to be no repercussions for not participating in the monitoring process, though it seems to be in each institution's best interest to participate to showcase their results. Even so, it may be appropriate to add either incentives or penalties to encourage compliance.
- Although non-academic unit reviews were part of the first cycle, not all institutions reviewed such units (and even fewer reviewed them systematically). It may be difficult from a resource standpoint for institutions to undertake these reviews, particularly when some are already struggling with the review of academic units.

3. *Are there more effective alternatives to implement a monitoring process to reach the objectives?*

- While the proposed approach generally seems appropriate, institutions will likely need time to align their policies and procedures with the proposed *Standards*. Details on when the process is expected to begin would assist institutions in this respect.
- A process that focuses on supporting rather than on monitoring may be what institutions need most at this stage, particularly with respect to the more challenging components of institutional quality assurance processes (e.g., non-academic unit assessments, developing/measuring student learning outcomes, etc.).

IV. Closing Remarks from the Commission

The Commission sincerely appreciates that so many of its stakeholders have provided thoughtful feedback in response to its discussion paper and during its Forum on Quality Assurance. This will go a long way in developing a quality assurance approach for the second cycle of the monitoring process that satisfies the Commission's mandate and meets the needs of its stakeholders.

In light of feedback from stakeholders, the Commission's AAU-MPHEC Quality Assurance Monitoring Committee is considering modifications to the proposed process for the second cycle, including revisions to the content and title of the proposed *Standards for Institutional Quality Assurance Policies*. In particular, the Commission will be mindful to take steps to minimize duplication of efforts (e.g., with government, external accreditation bodies, etc.). The Commission will also be exploring a different approach for non-academic units. To this end, the Commission intends to conduct additional consultation with stakeholders across the region.

Once again, the Commission would like to thank all those who dedicated their time and effort to this important work.

Appendix A

Overview of the Commission's Consultation Process

Discussion Paper

- In January 2013, the Commission released the discussion paper *Students at the Heart: Quality Assurance at Maritime Universities* to facilitate a dialogue on quality assurance in Maritime universities, and the Commission's future work in this area.

Written Responses to the Discussion Paper

- Stakeholders were asked to submit written feedback to the discussion paper by February 15, 2013; 16 responses were received from a variety of stakeholder groups (e.g., students, universities, governments). In addition to providing insight into stakeholders' impressions of the Commission's proposal for a second cycle, this feedback also helped shape the Forum on Quality Assurance.

Forum on Quality Assurance

- The Commission held a Forum on March 25, 2013, at Mount Allison University to provide an opportunity for greater dialogue. We would like to thank Dr. Robert Campbell, President of MTA and Chair of the Association of Atlantic Universities, for hosting the Forum and welcoming participants to the University, as well as Dr. Rick Meyers, President of Algoma University (and past Commission Chair), for moderating the Forum.
- With a total of 79 participants, the Forum brought together a variety of post-secondary education stakeholders, including student, institution and government representation from all three Maritime provinces. Feedback from participants echoed much of what was outlined by stakeholders in response to the discussion paper, while allowing for a more in-depth discussion and consideration of the issues at hand.

Smaller Group Meetings

- The Commission has been meeting (and will continue to do so upon request) with smaller groups to address their specific questions regarding the Commission's proposal for a second cycle, or quality assurance more broadly. These meetings will continue as the second cycle is further developed.

The Commission would like to extend a big “thank you” to all those who participated in its consultation process, including the Forum participants who provided the following feedback:

Great experience as a student to interact with administrators as well as academic deans!

I particularly valued the MPHEC’s positive attitude, willingness to collaborate and desire for feedback.

I very much liked the opportunities to challenge the assumptions made in the QA project and the chance to hear the opinions of my colleagues.

Greater student outreach is needed.

Great format, loved the carousel discussions.

Thank you for a great day!

I was not sure what to expect coming to this Forum, but I was pleasantly surprised by how it turned out. As a student, it was a great learning experience.

I really valued the small group discussion format.

Very useful.

I particularly valued the opportunity it offered to look at numerous issues to do with quality assurance process from a variety of perspectives.

The Forum would have exceeded my expectations if there had been more para-academic participants to hear from (registrars, student services).

I particularly valued the chance to hear what others are attempting /doing re Quality Assurance and the invitations to students to participate.

The Forum would have exceeded my expectations if there had been more time for carousel discussions – very informative and great opportunity to learn from one another.

What I particularly valued about the Forum was the MPHEC’s interest in feedback, transparency, accountability, quality & ‘students at the heart.’

Many opportunities to contribute.

I liked the format. A great deal of helpful information was shared in a very short period of time. Nicely done.

It was great to have staff personnel at every table!

What I particularly valued about the Forum was the:
-Openness of the Commission (members, exec directors & Staff) to competing ideas and constructive criticism
-Sense of pan-institutional convergence, i.e. we agree on many things! (and should talk more often!)
Great networking opportunity in the region.