**Report of the
GFC Committee on the Learning Environment
Subcommittee on the Status of USRIs
(June 5, 2013)**

Background

"[The] interdependence and integration of research and teaching is what distinguishes a university from other educational institutions. Although the balance between these activities may vary, all members of the university, whether scholars or students, are learners who extend the range of their knowledge through exploration and discovery, and they are teachers who communicate that knowledge to others." (GFC 111.1)

Because both research and teaching are central to our mission as a university, discussion and support of teaching and learning are of paramount importance. The GFC Committee on the Learning Environment (CLE) is the committee responsible for the promotion of excellence in teaching and of an optimal learning environment, as well as with the provision of appropriate information resources to the university community as a whole. It is within the scope of CLE to develop policy to promote ongoing assessment of teaching and learning at the University.

At the October 3, 2012 meeting of the CLE the Chair proposed that a 2009 report of a previous CLE subcommittee examining the evaluation of teaching at the University of Alberta, and in particular use of Universal Student Ratings of Instruction (USRIs) (see Evaluation of Teaching at the UofA Report of the Subcommittee of the CLE 2009 available for download http://www.governance.ualberta.ca/en/GeneralFacultiesCouncil/CommitteeontheLearningEnvironm/CLESubcommitteeReports.aspx), be revisited and called for a group of volunteers to form a subcommittee to lead discussion and make recommendations based on the 2009 document.

Committee Composition

The following volunteers from CLE agreed to serve on the subcommittee:
Nathan Andrews, Vice-President (Academic), Graduate Students' Association
Dustin Chelen, Vice-President (Academic), Students' Union
Bill Connor, CLE Chair, Vice-Provost (Academic Programs and Instruction)
Larry Kostiuk, Representative for Department Chairs, External to CLE
Sheree Kwong See, Interim Director Centre for Teaching and Learning, Subcommittee Chair
Rachel Milner, Academic Staff, Member of GFC

Committee Mandate

The mandate of the subcommittee was to review the recommendations of the 2009 document, fully consider the recommendations on behalf of CLE, discuss which of and how

the recommendations might be actualized, and in so doing, identify potential changes to GFC policy for consideration by CLE.

Meeting Schedule

The subcommittee met six times to review recommendations of the 2009 document:
November 19, 2012
December 13, 2012
January 31,2013
February 19, 2013
March 12, 2013
March 26, 2013

Summary of Subcommittee Discussion

The previous 2009 document that was the focus of the subcommittee's work made four (4) recommendations. These recommendations are highlighted in bold below. On behalf of the full CLE, the subcommittee had fulsome discussion to flesh out the meaning of the recommendations in the current climate and about how the recommendations might be actualized. Following is a summary of discussion by the subcommittee.

1. **The purpose of the USRI needs to be determined:**
   Is it to improve teaching at the University of Alberta?
   Is it to provide data for evaluating teaching for FEC?

Recommendation 1: Purpose

USRIs in the current form (questionnaire items and open ended comments) have two purposes: formative and evaluative/summative. Though not exclusively, the open ended comments can provide particularly useful information for improvement of teaching (formative). Though not exclusively, student responses to the questionnaire items can if used appropriately and as part if a multifaceted evaluation of teaching, provide useful data for evaluation of teaching. The current purposes of the USRIs are to improve teaching and provide data for summative evaluation. Any revision to USRIs should maintain both components in some form.

2. **USRI instrument**
   a) The use and administration of the USRI (or equivalent instrument) needs be considered in a broader context. Specifically, a teaching evaluation instrument (with proper metrics) should be used in a broader context within course and program evaluation (for examples, see Appendix D from Australia and the UK).
   b) If a decision is made to continue with the administration of teaching evaluation instruments (i.e., the USRI), based on our re view of the literature

we recommend that a professionally developed instrument be created by an expert in this area to ensure validity and reliability.

Recommendation 2a,b: Context, Redevelopment

The use and administration of USRIs should not be focused exclusively on instruction but should also include questions that shed light on the context of teaching and learning. The group does not feel it is within its scope to suggest what else (i.e., whether items providing information on appropriateness of course content and fit in program should be included or not) or in what order questions should be asked. It was felt, however, that USRIs should ask for feedback on more than the instructor's teaching and should have the purpose of enhancing the quality of the student educational experience.

Student feedback is an important component of a multi faceted evaluation of teaching. At the time GFC policy 111 is revisited for inclusion in UAPPOL, this would be the time for revisions (e.g., providing greater clarity on procedures associated with data confidentiality vs. anonymity). At that time principles of good teaching/learning at the University of Alberta needs to be reaffirmed.

It was determined that if USRIs are to be revisited, no one external expert could capture the complexity of purposes of the USRI. Rather, a group, including internal expertise, some members of which have expertise in psychometrics, should be charged to revisit questions and USRIs.

3. **Multi-faceted Evaluation**
   The USRI is designed to be a part of a broader teaching evaluation. Chairs, Deans,
   Supervisors and Faculty continue to struggle with this in FEC (see Appendix A). As per GFC policy, we need an accompanying set of possibilities and/or examples to be used as a guide for facilitating effective multi-faceted evaluation.

Recommendation 3: Multifaceted Evaluation

Concern exists that the item "overall the instructor is excellent" is too dominant in the measure of teaching for the evaluation of instructors. The USRI is designed to be part of a broader teaching evaluation, and in fact per GFC policy, it is supposed to be multifaceted in nature in the sense that it captures the entirety of the teaching and learning experience for the improvement of both students and instructors. What is needed, however, is a guide (or training process) as to what constitutes multifaceted evaluation. The creation such a guide will require a specific working group to be struck with the goal of identifying and developing a set of possibilities and/or examples that will facilitate the kind of evaluation existing policy requires of Faculties.

4. **GFC Policy**
   Quite simply, existing policy is in need of updating

Recommendation 4: GFC Policy

GFC policy does not generally need updating. There is ample clarity in the existing policy as to what USRIs entail and should be used for. What is needed is consistent interpretation and effective implementation across all faculties in a way that accomplishes the multiple purposes of USRIs.

Next steps

The subcommittee suggests:

That a working group be struck to determine how to promote consistent interpretation and implementation of policy. To ensure continuity, at a minimum one member from this subcommittee should be a member of the working group.

In conjunction, that the Provost's Office begins the process of moving GFC policy section 111 to UAPPOL.

Reference and Resource Documents

- GFC Policy Manual section on Teaching and Learning
  http://www.gfcpolicymanual.ualberta.ca/en/111TeachingandLearningandTeach.aspx
- Evaluation of Teaching at the UofA Report of the Subcommittee of the CLE 2009 available for download
  http://www.governance.ualberta.ca/en/GeneralFacultiesCouncil/CommitteeontheLearningEnvironm/CLESubcommitteeReports.aspx

Governance Route
- TOR for Subcommittee (CLE approval January 30, 2013)
- Subcommittee Report (CLE May 1, 2013 for discussion)
- Subcommittee Report (CLE June 5, 2013 for approval)