

## Identifying Vancouver Island University's 'Niche' as a Teaching/Regional University in British Columbia

### Background:

The University Act identifies VIU as “a special purpose, teaching university that serves a geographic area or region of the province.” The University Act also states that VIU should provide “adult basic education, career, technical, trade and academic programs leading to certificates, diplomas and baccalaureate and masters degrees.” Further, it notes that VIU “so far as and to the extent that its resources from time to time permit (offer) . . . applied research and scholarly activities to support the programs of the special purpose, teaching university” (10: 47.1).

In November 2010, following endorsement by Senate, the Board of Governors approved VIU's Academic Plan. The development of the Academic Plan was informed by The University Act and consultation with faculty, staff and students. The Academic Plan is VIU's frame of reference for much of its academic planning. The Academic Plan identifies VIU's Purpose:

*As a leader in providing high-quality learning, Vancouver Island University supports the well being of the people of Vancouver Island and coastal British Columbia by promoting a high quality of life for their communities through commitment to student success, community engagement and associated scholarship.*

VIU's Core Values are identified in the Academic Plan as: learning, discovery, engagement, achievement, diversity, celebration, and sustainability. The Academic Plan identifies five key Objectives for the Institution:

1. *Student learning, engagement and success;*
2. *Academic community;*
3. *Program quality;*
4. *Community engagement; and*
5. *Institutional effectiveness.*

While The University Act and Academic Plan provide significant direction for academic planning and development, broader questions and issues suggest that our institutional community examine VIU's place within the special purpose, teaching university model in British Columbia. For instance, VIU has developed a strong reputation, as evidenced in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE); our geographic location is unique when compared to most other BC PSE institutions; and our history and culture as a College with a highly regarded trades component sets us apart from many other institutions. Those factors have framed who we are and who we believe we are. As competition for students increases, available traditional student numbers from VIU's primary catchment area decrease, government financial support continues to decrease, and global, national, and regional cultural, economic, environmental and social issues continue to frame post secondary education needs and wants, VIU must ensure that the culture of VIU, its sense of place and purpose and its identity are clearly understood, articulated and enhanced.

In light of the foregoing, a discussion was held with faculty and students about VIU's 'niche' as teaching regional university. Three goals were identified to help frame the discussion. They were:

- Explore VIU within the context of the preceding;
- Identify an appropriate focus for VIU within the preceding context;
- Determine a 'place' for VIU within the foregoing that sets VIU apart and provides support for the identification of a 'niche' within the context of BC post secondary institutions.

Three key questions to be answered were:

- How does VIU create an identity that separates itself from other similar institutions?
- How is that identity informed by the preceding discussion?
- How can such discussions make VIU more resilient, viable and stable?

Eight 'workshops' were held with faculty across VIU's campuses (Cowichan, Nanaimo, Powell River). A survey of students was conducted by the Office of University Planning and Analysis and a survey of students who were attending a field trip was also completed.

### **Findings:**

Faculty:

Approximately, 100 faculty members attended the 'workshops'. Three questions were posed. A summary of the feedback on "key features of VIU" and 'Key areas of regional/community engagement" is provided below:

- Key Features:

*Island location:* water boundary, coast, setting, location

*Community engagement:* community relationships, support, partnerships, community based;

*Aboriginal/local student focus:* teach our own, attract island region, accessible to First Nations in region, connections to Aboriginal communities;

*Economic role:* programs feed regional needs, contribution to local economy;

*Research:* opportunity for undergraduate research: greater interaction enables students to attain goals such as graduate school and employment;

*Quality of faculty/teaching:* student success is high, support for non-traditional students, student support;

*Our model:* flattened hierarchy, role as critic/observer of society, smaller classrooms, discipline/faculty collaboration, student centred and support student success;

*Access to faculty/engagement:* faculty know students, quality faculty/student engagement, trustworthy relationships between faculty and students, accessible faculty, First Nations programmes;

*Varied/Wealth of Programmes:* continuum of education: access to advanced/ Aboriginal, International, local engage, mix of programmes: academic and trades, multiple ways of knowing;

*Small Class Size:*

*Teaching focus:* culture of teaching, focus on teaching

- Key areas of regional/community engagement:

*Community research:* research into community, relevance of research, experiential, community identified research, applied research for community;

*Community engagement:* ethos of service to community (Philosophers Café), advocacy for disenfranchised groups (Clemente), social engagement: arts, music, cultural connections, engage with emerging regional needs/demographics, inter-institutional collaboration, mutual learning, technology and digital media economy;

*Aboriginal:* Aboriginal engagement, Aboriginal community connections, focus on non-traditional learners;

*Regional/International:* regionally relevant/globally significant, ESL

Students:

A total of 180 students were randomly selected, 20 from each Faculty, and 33 responses were received (18% response rate). There was, however, a good cross-section of student respondents from across all Faculties. Two questions are examined below, with key responses noted.

What factors differentiate VIU from other, similar institutions?

*Location:* close to home, views, campus design (walking trails, nooks/crannies), on an island, geography, climate

*Small Class sizes:* allows increased engagement in class discussions, professors know students by name, allows opportunity to know professors

*Engagement with professors/instructors:* friendly, personable, help outside classroom, approachable, working relationship, enthusiastic professors, care about student success, professors open to feedback, get to know professors

*Acknowledgement of Aboriginal culture:* artwork, Gathering Place

*Support from Administrative staff:* exceptional service, care about students

*Combination of trades and academic programming:*

*Sense of community:*

*Hands on learning:*

In selecting VIU, what were the primary factors influencing your decision?

*Reputation:* quality of programs, course content, teachers, small class sizes

*Close to home:* convenience, less expensive than other universities, affordable, live in Nanaimo, location, proximity of family

*Cost:* lower cost, could commute,

### **What does this mean?**

There is a theme that runs through the conversations with students and faculty. It is one that confirms the anecdotal observations and conversations that occur at VIU.

### **VIU's Niche:**

*Adjacent to the rugged coastline of the Salish Sea, Vancouver Island University is proud of its unique history and culture as a teaching university that:*

- *welcomes and celebrates learners, from local, regional and international communities, and non-traditional students, as the heart of the institution;*
- *supports and celebrates student success;*
- *provides high quality teaching, affordable high quality programs and multiple ways of knowing;*
- *promotes campus communities offering small class sizes that encourage rewarding faculty/student engagement;*
- *supports Aboriginal learners and connections to Aboriginal communities;*
- *fosters a global awareness within the campus and external communities; and*
- *promotes community engagement for students and faculty that fosters scholarship, research and creative activity.*