

Policy Pertaining to Digital Learning Resources and Field Trips

Preamble

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU) regulates fees that universities charge to students. Fees charged in addition to tuition are governed through the Ministry's ancillary fee protocol.

In December 2013, the Ministry revised their Tuition Fee Framework and Ancillary Fee Guidelines for Publically-Assisted Universities, 2013-14 to 2016-17. These guidelines consider a compulsory non-tuition-related ancillary fee to be "a fee which is levied to cover the costs of items which are not normally paid for out of operating or capital revenue." Below is Nipissing University's policy in response to the guidelines that relate to learning resources and field trips. **Appendix A** provides a decision tree that illustrates the guidelines on the use of learning resources in Nipissing University courses

Policy Related to Digital Learning Resources

Nipissing University recognizes the benefits that technology-enabled resources can provide to both students and their instructors, through enhanced engagement, greater achievement of learning outcomes and the provision of a broader array of assessment tools. Technology-enabled learning is firmly established across the spectrum of teaching and learning activity at Nipissing University. This includes fully online and blended courses, digital content, online examinations and quizzes, electronic submissions of assignments and reports, discussion groups, etc.

Nipissing University also recognizes the additional costs that learning resources pose to students, and that these costs need to be considered in balance with the enhanced learning environment they provide. ***Instructors should endeavor to keep the total costs of all learning resources used in any course at a level that students can reasonably afford.***

Prior to the most recent Ministry guidelines, the Ministry effectively prohibited universities from requiring students to purchase digital learning resources and associated assessment tools created by third-party vendors. The latest Ministry guidelines recognize the "contribution that these resources can make to the quality of teaching and learning, including support for adaptive learning and formative assessment." Importantly, the Ministry has delegated the responsibility for developing policies on the use of third-party digital learning resources to universities, and this document outlines these policies for Nipissing University.

The Ministry's revised ancillary fee guidelines establish clearly that institutions can require students to purchase third-party digital learning resources that can include test/assessment tools. The guidelines indicate further that "where a course or program relies substantially on assessments that are included with a learning resource, such as an online textbook, the Ministry expects universities to have a policy with respect to their students' interests in these situations."

In the spirit of these guidelines, Nipissing University has determined the following:

- When instructors choose to use physical and/or digital textbooks that have bundled software or online access to additional learning resources used in assessment, students must have options to purchase the component used in assessment separately.
- When digital learning resources support the learning objectives of the course (such as simulations, online quizzes and other interactive assignments), instructors may use digital

learning resources provided by third-party vendors for assessment, provided that the cost of these resources is no more than¹ \$100 (for a single term three-credit course) and the assessment constitutes 10% or less of the final grade in the course.

- If either of these conditions (cost or grade value) are not satisfied, the instructor must provide students with a no fee alternative. For example, this can take the form of alternative assignments, tests or quizzes (which could be online, but at no cost to students), an alternative grading scheme for the course, or access to the digital learning resource used for assessment through on-campus lab at no cost to students.

Nipissing University recognizes that there may be unique instances that are not captured in the above guidelines. These situations should be discussed with the Dean of the Faculty who will ensure, to the extent possible, that student interests are upheld, course learning objectives are met, and instructors are encouraged to provide the richest learning environment possible for students.

Nipissing University has determined that the above policy strikes an appropriate balance between the desires to incorporate technology enabled learning, and the expense that these resources can impose to students. Instructors should communicate details concerning the use of third party digital resources clearly in their course outlines.

In addition to costs, careful consideration must be given to the quality of the online learning material, the effectiveness on the teaching and learning experience and the supporting pedagogical and technical resources required on campus.

¹ The \$100 (before tax) cap applies to the total cost of the resources used in a single term three-credit course.

Policy Related to Field Trips

Field trips associated with credit-earning courses are also subject to the Ministry guidelines. Instructors shall indicate as early as possible (e.g., in the course syllabus made available at the start of the term, and certainly no later than the course registration deadline) whether additional fees are associated with their courses, and the fee amount.

Instructors should be aware of the following:

- Students cannot be charged fees for **compulsory** field trips outside the province of Ontario².
- Students can be charged fees for the reasonable, direct costs of travel and accommodation on **compulsory** field trips within the province of Ontario. Fees cannot contribute to the salaries and benefits, or travel and accommodation, of instructors or teaching assistants participating in the field trip. Charging students a tuition-related activity fee for compulsory field trips is not permitted.
- Students can be charged fees for the reasonable, direct costs of travel and accommodation on **elective**, credit-earning field trips both within and outside the province of Ontario. The fees charged to students can contribute to offsetting the travel and accommodation costs of instructors or teaching assistants participating in the field trip but not their salaries and benefits. Any fees charged to students which offset instructor or teaching assistant costs must be approved by the Dean of the Faculty. Instructors are encouraged to seek financial assistance from their department or faculty in helping lower students' costs, where possible, and to make trip costing information readily available to students.

Questions

Please direct any questions regarding the Policy Pertaining to Digital Learning Resources and Field Trips to the Office of the Provost and Vice President Academic and questions regarding the use of digital learning resources to the Office of the Dean of Teaching.

² Exemptions may be granted by the Ministry.

FAQ - Policy Pertaining to Digital Learning Resources and Field Trips

Q1. What types of alternative methods of assessment may be provided?

A1. *Alternative methods of assessment may include an option for the students to access the learning resource in the classroom/lab, or providing accessible physical copies of similar assessment tools.*

Q2. How did the University arrive at the figure of \$100?

A2. *The figure was determined after reviewing the range of costs per course for digital learning materials currently available.*

Q3. What do “bundled” and “stand-alone digital assessment tool” mean?

A3. *“Bundled” learning materials may include a group of products such as a text book with a code to access digital learning materials. The “stand-alone digital assessment tool”, using the example of a text book and code, would refer to the code portion only.*

Q4. Why is the threshold cost based on the cost for the stand-alone digital assessment tool?

A4. *The University recognizes that a cost-effective method of obtaining learning materials is through the purchase of used textbooks. Therefore a stand-alone version of the digital learning materials must be made available. Basing the threshold on the stand-alone version provides a uniform value across the University.*

Q5. What if the cost for the digital component, when bundled, is under the threshold?

A5. *The University recognizes that purchasing textbooks with the bundled assessment tool provides a reduction in the overall cost; however, for the reasons outlined in question 4, the threshold is based on the stand-alone cost.*

Q6. If more than one digital learning resource is required per course, does the threshold change?

A6. *No. The \$100 threshold is currently a total cost for digital learning materials used in assessment per three-credit course*

Q7. The Ministry Guidelines suggest a threshold for assessment – i.e. a substantial portion of the grade – when using digital learning materials. Why is the University using a dollar figure?

A7. *The University is aware that even a small percentage of a mark is of importance to our students. Requiring students to purchase potentially expensive digital learning materials for any assessment value may prove financially onerous.*

Appendix A

Learning Resource Decision Tree

