FINAL ASSESSMENT REPORT
Institutional Quality Assurance Program (IQAP) Review

PhD in Health Policy

Date of Review: April 25 – 26, 2013

In accordance with the McMaster's Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), this final assessment report provides a synthesis of the external evaluation and the internal response and assessments of the graduate program delivered by Health Policy. This report identifies the significant strengths of the program, together with opportunities for program improvement and enhancement, and it sets out and prioritizes the recommendations that have been selected for implementation.

This Final Assessment Report includes an Implementation Plan that identifies who will be responsible to lead the follow up for the proposed recommendations; any changes in organization, policy or governance that will be necessary to meet the recommendations; and timelines for acting on and monitoring the implementation of those recommendations.

Executive Summary of the PhD in Health Policy Cyclical Program Review

The McMaster PhD in Health Policy is an interdisciplinary program that is offered in collaboration with the Faculties of Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities and Business. The PhD in Health Policy program admitted its first cohort of students for the 2008-09 academic year and submitted a self-study to the School of Graduate Studies on April 10, 2013. The self-study presented the program descriptions and learning outcomes, an analytical assessment of the program including the data collected from students along with the standard data package prepared by the Office of Institutional Research and Analysis. Appended were the course outlines for all courses in the program and the CVs for each full-time faculty member in the program.

Two arm's-length reviewers one from Quebec and one from the US and one internal reviewer participated in a two-day site visit organized by the School of Graduate Studies. The visit consisted of separate meetings with students (pre-comp, post-comp and international exchange students), and faculty members in addition to the Provost, Associate VP & Dean of Graduate Studies, Graduate Associate Dean (Health Sciences), Associate VP (Academic, Health Sciences), Graduate Associate Deans of Social Sciences & Business, Dean of Social Sciences, PhD Program Director, Chair CE&B, Department Heads, and support staff. The Review Team submitted then their report on June 12, 2013. The reviewer's acknowledged that the Health Policy PhD program has exemplified an interdisciplinary foundation, which is to the program's credit. The review team judged the educational requirements and learning objectives for the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Health Policy to be quite clear, and fully consistent with the Graduate Degree Level Expectations However, reviewers do note that awareness of the program and its accomplishments seemed to have lagged behind, both among faculty around the university and within University administration. The review of students' performance and conversations with both students and program faculty highlighted the calibre of the students, which have been admitted to the program. Student surveys conducted as part of the self-study and independent meetings held with students all suggest that the quality and availability of graduate supervision is generally strong and in some cases exceptional.

The site visit identified several logistical problems that consistently emerged for students. Some issues related to academic advising, while other issues related to inconsistent offering of courses from different departments at the university – in ways that students were unable to anticipate. The review team notes that many of the challenges are inherent to the interdisciplinary nature of the program and make the recommendation to consider refinements to the current governance arrangements which are addressed in the implementation plan outlined below. Other reviewer recommendations respond, *inter alia*, to the areas for improvement and enhancement identified in the program's self-study report and which are already underway. The following program strengths and weakness were also noted:

- **Strengths**
  - Experiential education
  - High capacity to connect academe to a broader community
  - Integration of global perspectives and students
  - Highly engaged and capable students
  - Highly productive and deeply committed core faculty
  - Program's leadership
  - Program exemplifies ways in which those strategic goals can be recognized
- **Weaknesses**
  - Imbalanced core curriculum
  - Comprehensive exams do not facilitate students' transition to thesis writing
  - Incomplete integration with the rest of McMaster's faculty and academic programs

In its response to the reviewers (September 4, 2013), the Program generally embraced the review team's recommendations, while noting some of the obstacles to their implementation. The Deans' response (October 20, 2013) is likewise generally positive, though it does emphasize that none of the issues identified are "of substantive concern". The Quality Assurance Committee concurs with the Program's assessment and recommends that subject to receipt of a satisfactory 18 month report, no additional program review is to be scheduled prior to that required in the academic review cycle

Summary of the Reviewers' Recommendations with the Department's and Dean's Responses & Follow Up Processes

Recommendation #1: Better articulate the case for an interdisciplinary model of education that reaches beyond the mix of disciplines within the Faculty of Health Sciences to incorporate the Social Sciences, Humanities, Science and Business Faculties. This rationale has not been effectively conveyed throughout McMaster. Establish stronger connections (and working relationships) with students and faculty affiliated with other policy-oriented doctoral programs around campus.
Response: The Program is in agreement and intends to promote the interdisciplinary aspects of its educational design, which distinctively interlaces multiple Faculties throughout McMaster.
Development and membership of an Advisory Committee will be pursued by inviting Deans (or Associate Deans) to join in annual discussions and engage in the program's developments, while equally deepening their understanding of the program through scheduled meetings. Such a meeting was successfully held last year with the Associate Deans, the Program Director and the Program Administrator. This was found to be productive and will be pursued as an annual process for engaging and informing affiliated Faculties.

Responsibility for following up: Associate Deans, Program Director and Program Administrator
Timeline: Begun in 2012 and will continue annually

Recommendation #2: Establish some alternative arrangements that could provide financial support for those applicants who match to faculty who do not have external funding (i.e. fellowship, pooling funds, etc). Build more active connections with departments where there is less of a track record for supervising health policy students, so that both departments and affiliated faculty are aware of the terms in the Memorandum of Understanding that channel funding to departments currently serving health policy students.
Response: The proposal of pooling research funding is not feasible under current Tri-Council funding agreements. In order to expand, the program will need alternate funding sources and is considering how financial support of on-going students whose faculty are not able to provide the expected support may be developed. This will be addressed with Faculty Deans to consider new and existing sources of funding that can engage more interdisciplinary faculty involvement in student supervision.
Responsibility for following up: Program Director
Timeline: Update at 18 month report

Recommendation #3: The program initiates a strategic planning process to rethink the field of social organization.
Response: Program agrees that it must fundamentally re-examine the Social Organization field, and states that this is a priority issue for the coming year. The Program has already taken the following steps to address this:
- Identified and appointed a knowledgeable Theme Leader in 2012
- Theme Leader will accommodate, in an appropriate course, all students preparing to write the breadth comprehensive exam in December 2013
- A new Social Organization reading list has been created for the comprehensive exams
- This process will be evaluated and updated in the spring of 2014
- The Social Org Theme Leader will work with the Executive Committee, the Program Director and the Program Administrator to articulate a clear scope and content for the field
- Members of faculty and courses will be recruited and identified to provide a solid and resilient foundation of courses, supervisors and other resources for students

Responsibility for following up: Program Director and Theme Leaders
Timeline: Begun in 2012. Evaluation and update in 2014.

Recommendation #4: The program identifies one methods course that could provide a broader common foundation for all students in the program.
Response: The program thinks this is an interesting idea and will examine these options during the coming year to assess the content and additional resources that would be required for creating a new course or to adapt present courses to accommodate the additional material.
Responsibility for following up: Program's Advisory Board
Timeline: Update at 18 month report

Recommendation #5: Consider replacing the current breadth section of the comprehensive exam with an exam more focused on a substantive issue that each student has identified as an arena for their doctoral work. This substantive topic could serve as a context for exploring the interface between policy and health (care) outcomes for example.

Response: The program is not convinced that the breadth exam should be eliminated but they acknowledge that the comprehensive exam process needs further refinement. The program is in the process of reviewing all 3 comprehensive exams, their related processes and reading lists.
Responsibility for following up: Program Director and Associate Deans of Graduate Studies
Timeline: Update at 18 month report

Recommendation #6: Consider centralizing responsibility for student advising, either under the auspices of an additional faculty member who would be designated PhD Advisor, an established position in some other departments at McMaster.
Response: The Program understands the underlying rationale for this recommendation, but feels that it can be better addressed by adjusting existing mechanisms in the following ways:
- The Director, and the program Administrator, can work in partnership with each student's primary supervisor to oversee course advice.
- The Director can engage Department Chairs in order to share information about course offerings, anticipated leaves etc. that can affect the ability of students to plan their coursework appropriately.
- The Program Administrator will contact Departments on a regularly scheduled basis to identify courses that will not be offered in a given year due to faculty leaves and departures.
Responsibility for following up: Program Director and Program Administrator
Timeline: Update at 18 month report

Recommendation #7: Changing the formal governance structure, with the current Advisory Committee being transformed into an Executive Committee of comparable size that would maintain authority over curriculum and program policies. Expand the Advisory Committee to include key representatives from other Faculties, departments that operate similar policy oriented doctoral programs, and other key stakeholders from around campus.
Response: The current Advisory Board will be retitled Executive Committee, as recommended. The Program has agreed to re-structure their governance to reflect this recommendation. Program also agrees that all Faculty and department relationships with the program should be strengthened and has taken the following steps:
- Implement an annual complete faculty retreat
- An agenda item for discussion will be: guiding all field faculty members through a student's prototype curriculum during the first 2 years, i.e., an exercise in mapping out a field planning rubric.
- Smaller meetings over the year for field faculty will also be considered
Responsibility for following up: Program Director
Timeline: Update at 18 month report

Quality Assurance Committee Recommendation

The Quality Assurance Committee concurs with the Program's assessment and recommends that subject to receipt of a satisfactory 18 month report, no additional program review is to be scheduled prior to that required in the academic review cycle.