

## **FINAL ASSESSMENT REPORT**

### **Institutional Quality Assurance Program (IQAP) Review**

#### **Medical Sciences Graduate Programs**

**Date of Review: March 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>**

*In accordance with the University 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 programs delivered by Medical Sciences. 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.*

*The report includes an Implementation Plan that identifies who will be responsible for approving the recommendations set out in the Final Assessment Report; who will be responsible for providing any resources entailed by those recommendations; any changes in organization, policy or governance that will be necessary to meet the recommendations and who will be responsible for acting on those recommendations; and timelines for acting on and monitoring the implementation of those recommendations.*

#### **Executive Summary of the Review**

In accordance with the Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), the Medical Sciences program submitted a self-study in January 2022 to the Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies to initiate the cyclical program review of its graduate programs. The approved self-study presented program descriptions, learning outcomes, and analyses of data provided by the Office of Institutional Research and Analysis. Appendices to the self-study contained all course outlines associated with the program and the CVs for each full-time member in the department.

Two arm's length external reviewers and one internal reviewer were endorsed by the Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences, and selected by the Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies. The review team reviewed the self-study documentation and then conducted a review on March 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. The review included interviews with the Provost and Vice-President (Academic); Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies, Vice-Dean and Associate Dean, Grad Studies and Research, Assistant Dean of the Program and meetings with groups of current students, full-time faculty and support staff.

The Assistant Dean of the program and the Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences submitted responses to the Reviewers' Report (May and August 2022). Specific recommendations were discussed and clarifications and corrections were presented. Follow-up actions and timelines were included.

- **Strengths**

- The Program is collaborative and inclusive (p1).
- Admission to the program is a fair and inclusive process designed to recruit high-achievement domestic and international applicants (p3).
- An overarching – and perhaps unique – feature of the Program is the interactions among bench scientists, clinician scientists, and clinicians (p3).
- The program provides strong opportunity for cross-disciplinary training supporting translational research (p3).
- The program has a great emphasis on fostering scholarly achievements and its depth of mentorship (p4).
- Research and Scholarship is a significant and well demonstrated as a program strength (p5).
- Dr. Judith West-Mays (Assistant Dean of Medical Sciences) provides strong leadership and commitment to the Program (p5).
- Impressed with the quality and commitment of faculty and administrative staff in supporting the Program's academic goals (p6).
- The study plan and the progression of students throughout the program are consistent with high-level and world-class graduate programs (p6).
- There was unanimous agreement that one of the strengths of the program is the diversity of the topics covered in the curriculum (p7).

- **Areas for Enhancement or Improvement**

- Faculty are not aware of the Facilitated Indigenous Admissions Program (FIAP) (p3).
- It was apparent that there is some disconnect between the Area Coordinators (ACs) and the students in their respective pillars (p4).
- There was some frustration expressed by students (via questionnaire and interviews) that the program does not offer a sufficient number of courses on a year-to-year basis (p4).
- Students and faculty viewed the Program website as antiquated (p5).
- The Program lacks a venue where all students can gather on a regular basis and present their progress to their program cohort (p8).
- Students agreed that current funding would not sustainably support future students given inflation demands and current Hamilton housing costs (p9).
- Students and some faculty expressed concern that a supervisor stipend contribution can be decreased when a student achieves an external scholarship/award (p9). In addition, there is the discrepancy of funding within a lab group when students are from different programs, and a lack of a guaranteed TA for master's students (p9).
- Interactions with SGS were deemed challenging (p10).

## **Summary of the Reviewers' Recommendations with the Department's and Dean's Responses**

Recommendation	Proposed Follow-Up	Responsibility for Leading Follow-Up	Timeline for Addressing Recommendation
<p>For the program to continue to thrive and promote bench-to-clinic interactions it is recommended that McMaster reinvigorate the clinician-scientist model and/or enhance opportunities for clinicians to engage with research faculty.</p>	<p>Our program is unique in the bench-to-clinic interactions we currently have.</p> <p><b>Next step:</b> The program will continue to encourage doctoral supervisory committees to include a clinician where appropriate. Recent initiatives to add associate committee members (perhaps clinicians) to committees has been implemented.</p> <p>The program will continue to support collaboration between research program students and MD/PhD students to exchange different perspectives.</p>	<p>Assistant Dean</p> <p><b>Key Contributors:</b> Department Chairs and Executive Committee</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>
<p>We encourage the program to consider adopting a core course. This would serve to provide a standard knowledge model and perhaps more importantly provide students an opportunity to develop a program-based sense of community.</p>	<p>The program will re-examine its curriculum needs and consider the concept of a core course.</p> <p><b>Next step:</b> The program's Executive team, in conjunction with the Curriculum Committee, will begin discussing the possibility of having the highly enrolled course, MEDSCI 771 (Research Methodology in Health Sciences), as a core course. The</p>	<p>Assistant Dean</p> <p><b>Key Contributors:</b> Curriculum Committee and the Executive Committee</p>	<p>Summer/Fall 2022</p>

	number of faculty needed to deliver this course on an ongoing basis will be considered.		
We recommend increased awareness and promotion of McMaster's FIAP program.	<p>A description of the FIAP program is posted on our website and will continue to be highlighted in our newly updated website. Nonetheless, we will take action to make it more visible to our stakeholders</p> <p><b>Next step:</b> The Assistant Dean in collaboration with the program staff will send out emails to the Department Chairs and other stake holders to clearly describe the FIAP program.</p>	<p>Assistant Dean</p> <p><b>Key Contributors:</b> Admissions Director and Program Staff</p>	Summer 2022
We recommend continuing to introduce the Area Coordinators during the fall orientation, and adding a mandatory group-based midsemester check-in meeting. This second meeting would provide students an opportunity to ask Area Coordinators question(s) that they may not have had at the orientation meeting.	<p>We believe that part of the disconnect between the Area Coordinators (ACs) and students the past two years was due to the pandemic and online orientation. This will be remedied by in person orientation this Fall, and other measures as outlined below.</p> <p><b>Next step:</b> The Executive Committee will meet and plan for the next in person orientation for the fall to improve the introduction/meeting of the ACs with the students. We will also discuss the implementation of a</p>	<p>Assistant Dean</p> <p><b>Key Contributors:</b> Area Coordinators And Program Staff</p>	Fall 2022

	second, mid-semester meeting with the ACs		
We recommend that SGS provide greater support and timely response(s) to student, faculty, and administrative inquiries.	<p>We recognize that there has been some difficulty for students to get timely responses from SGS.</p> <p><b>Next step:</b> Students will be directed to the HSGS Advising Service to help reduce instances of being directed to SGS as the key resource. Program staff to be better informed as to SGS request prioritization.</p>	<p>Assistant Dean</p> <p><b>Key Contributors:</b> Program Staff and SGS</p>	Fall 2022
We recommend that supervisor contributions to student stipends are not scaled back when a student is awarded a tri-council (or other) grant, or that the Program adopt a consistent policy for stipend reduction in the event a student is awarded a tri-council – or other – scholarship.	<p>Currently, we do not require supervisors to ‘top’ up students’ stipends when they receive an award.</p> <p><b>Next step:</b> We will discuss this and determine a required ‘top’ up amount to the students’ stipend when they are awarded a tri-council – or other – scholarship. We will look to other similar graduate programs for comparison.</p>	<p>Assistant Dean</p> <p><b>Key Contributors:</b> Executive Committee</p>	Fall 2023
We encourage the program to provide master’s students with funding letters indicating that a TA is not guaranteed in the funding package.	<p>TA guarantees are explicitly stated in offers of admission. If there is no mention of a TA, there is no guarantee.</p> <p><b>Next step:</b> We can put a general statement on the website stating no TA</p>	<p>Assistant Dean</p> <p><b>Key Contributors:</b> Executive Committee and Program Staff</p>	Fall 2022

	guarantee at the master's level. We will also outline this and other stipend details at our fall orientation.		
We encourage the development of a student-run and program specific seminar series emphasizing topics such as academic and industry opportunities and diversity in the workplace.	<p>The program will re-examine its curriculum needs and consider the concept of a program-run seminar series</p> <p><b>Next step:</b> The program's Executive team, in conjunction with the Curriculum Committee and student body/representatives will begin discussing the possibility of introducing a program-run seminar series. Careful consideration will be made to not overlap with current seminar series that the students are already involved in.</p>	<p>Assistant Dean</p> <p><b>Key Contributors:</b> Executive Committee and Student Body</p>	Fall 2022
We recommend a mechanism to include student input as part of the Medical Science program governance structure.	<p>Our program typically has students attend our executive committee meetings but due to the pandemic and online nature of our meetings this was somewhat overlooked. This will be remedied as outlined below.</p> <p><b>Next step:</b> The program will resume with having student representatives attend our executive committee meetings.</p>	<p>Assistant Dean</p> <p><b>Key Contributors:</b> Executive Committee and Student Body</p>	Fall 2022

## Faculty Response

The reviewers commented favourably on the extensive stable of faculty who are approved to supervise Medical Sciences students. They suggest that the program should increase its efforts to involve clinicians on supervisory committees. It is important to note that supervisory committees are required to be composed of McMaster faculty members, normally with graduate degrees and involvement in research. However, as Dr. West-Mays notes in the program's response, the Faculty has recently implemented a Senate-approved policy that permits Faculty of Health Sciences graduate programs to appoint an additional "associate member" to a properly constituted supervisory committee. The associate member policy is an ideal mechanism to address this recommendation, where it is appropriate for a particular student's needs.

The reviewers also raised issues about the inclusiveness of the admissions process, particularly as it applies to members of equity-deserving groups. Dr. West-Mays indicates that she will consider whether the FIAP policy that applies to Indigenous applicants can be better advertised. The Faculty encouraged the Medical Sciences program leaders to consider going beyond this. The current FIAP process in the program is underdeveloped and it applies only to Indigenous applicants. There are useful models emerging in other graduate and undergraduate programs in the Faculty, where there are well-elaborated internal policies for facilitated admissions of both Indigenous and black applicants. The applicability of these models to research-oriented graduate programs is unclear, but this is an area of active discussion in the Faculty.

The reviewers made several comments about student funding. They note that a supervisor's laboratory may include students from different programs with unequal funding packages and they frame this as an issue of equity. The Faculty noted that graduate programs at McMaster are required to provide a minimum stipend for full-time PhD students, but programs have flexibility to decide how to fund students above this level. They believe it essential to preserve this flexibility. Programs recruit in different competitive environments, and they are supported in departments and by faculty with varying abilities to pay. They do strongly agree that transparency in how funding is determined by the program is desirable. Along those lines, we observe that the letter for an offer for admission issued from the School of Graduate Studies clearly specifies the student's guaranteed minimum funding package. No student admitted to graduate study at McMaster has a reason to be confused about whether they are entitled to TA employment at admission. The TA hiring process is subsequently governed by a collective agreement.

The Faculty was interested that the reviewers commented unfavourably about quality of service from the School of Graduate Studies. This observation has not emerged in other recent graduate IQAP reviews in the Faculty of Health Sciences. They will follow-up to better understand this perception. The Office of the Vice-Dean of Graduate Studies for Health Sciences has implemented a graduate advising service to facilitate faster and better targeted communication between the Faculty's graduate program administrators and students and the appropriate service providers in the central campus, including the School of Graduate Studies, the Student Fees Office, and the Aids and Awards Office. They find that this liaison service is effective but underused and have been promoting it among the programs. Dr. West-Mays notes that Medical Sciences intends to increase its use of this service. During the pandemic, the School of Graduate Studies implemented an online chat function which appears to have improved the routing of inquiries. The School has also rolled out the new Slate admissions system with the potential to significantly improve the efficiency of the admissions process. Finally, the central university has

embarked on a major “Customer Relationship Management” technology initiative that is intended to integrate all of a student’s interactions with institution, across diverse administrative systems, into a single interface.

**Quality Assurance Committee Recommendation:**

**McMaster’s Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) reviewed the above documentation, and the Committee recommends that the Medical Sciences Graduate Programs should follow the regular course of action with an 18-month progress report and a subsequent full external cyclical review to be conducted 7 years after the start of the last review.**