

**Program Progress Report**  
**Institutional Quality Assurance Program (IQAP) Review**  
**HEALTH POLICY PhD**

**Date of Site Visit: January 26 & 27, 2021**

**Progress Report Prepared by: Julia Abelson\*, Program Chair**

**\*Arthur Sweetman, Department of Economics, became the interim Program Chair as of January 2023. He became Program Chair as of September 1 2023.**

**Please note the report has been updated to current (October 2024) practices.**

**Please outline below how recommendations from the initial program review have been addressed.**  
**[Please fill in one table for each recommendation from the original Final Assessment Report]**

Recommendation: Adequate resources should be devoted to support the program doing what it already does well, and to enable it to take advantage of a growing interdisciplinary community at McMaster and beyond (this includes exploring the idea of central program financing in alignment with University's increasing emphasis on offering interdisciplinary programs).
Responsibility for Implementation: Program Director
Anticipated Timeline for Completion: June 2021 – Aug 2022
Additional Notes/Commentary:  Proposed action: Meetings with relevant Deans and Associate Deans to discuss the resourcing of interdisciplinary programs while noting that resourcing decisions are outside the control of the program.
Progress (check one) <input type="checkbox"/> Completed <input type="checkbox"/> In Progress <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain): This is an ongoing issue. It will always be "in progress".
Department's Comments:  The program has undertaken, and is continuously undertaking, financial planning. It has developed a better understanding of the financial implications of its actions/decisions and is making tactical decisions to improve its financial standing. Note that the HP program's financial status has never been precarious but has the possibility of being stronger. The Associate Deans in FSS, and especially in FHS,

are aware of relevant issues. (Communication with the Faculty of Business has been less active in the last few years; we should take steps to improve the relationship. More below.) Also note that the financial structure of the Health Policy program is such that any financial weakness experienced by the program is in the first instance transferred to the sponsoring departments/faculties, so all supporting departments have an incentive to support the financial success of the Health Policy program.

**Note:** this issue applies to items below where the proposed action is to meet with Associate Deans from other Faculties.

Dean's Comments:

We agree that the monitoring of finances and resources is an ongoing and essential process. However, the Reviewer's suggestion to explore "the idea of central program financing" does not align with the accountability model that underpins interdisciplinary programming at McMaster. The program is administered by the Department of HEI within the Faculty of Health Sciences, which provides oversight of its core administrative infrastructure. It is self-financed through its own revenues and remains accountable to HEI for its expenditures. As noted in the Program's response, there is a detailed schedule outlining how costs and revenues are attributed to contributions from the various Faculties, and this model has proven effective.

QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):

The committee agreed that the program's progress report was strong, comprehensive, and well presented. Members noted that despite the program's complexity stemming from its tri-faculty, interdisciplinary structure, it appears to be functioning effectively with stable leadership and well managed resource-sharing practices.

Recommendation: More explicit recognition should be given to the community benefits of affiliating with interdisciplinary programs in merit review and tenure and promotion processes.

Responsibility for Implementation: Program Chair

Anticipated Timeline for Completion: June 2021 – Aug 2022

Additional Notes/Commentary:

Proposed action: Meetings with Associate Deans and Department Chairs to discuss opportunities for reinforcing the benefits of affiliating with interdisciplinary programs like HP.

Progress (check one)

- Completed
- In Progress

Other (please explain): This is an ongoing issue. It will always be "in progress".

Department's Comments:

Given the change in the directorship of the Health Policy program little action has been taken on this front with the Associate Deans by the new director although the previous director met with most department chairs to discuss this and other HP-relevant issues. The new director participated in the meeting with Economics (in his previous role as the lead of the Health Economics stream) and that meeting seems to have had good results in building relationships and aligning incentives. This will continue to be pursued and will need to be undertaken repeatedly given turnover among department chairs etc. It is not obvious how to institutionalize a “good relationship”, esp. in departments receiving modest funding flows from the HP program.

**Dean's Comments:**

It is true that there was some disruption in the follow-up to the report. However, the program now benefits from stable and strong leadership. The recent appointment process also served as a valuable opportunity to bring together the Associate Deans from the three participating Faculties and orient them to the program. We agree with the program's view that regular meetings between the Director and the Associate Deans are important, and we will take steps to initiate and support these meetings moving forward.

**QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):**

See above

**Recommendation:** Faculty renewal and succession planning will be important to ensure the program has deeply committed faculty in the program who will be active champions for the program in coming years.

**Responsibility for Implementation:** Program Chair

**Anticipated Timeline for Completion:** June 2021 – Aug 2022

**Additional Notes/Commentary:**

**Proposed action:** Meetings with Associate Deans and Department Chairs described above will include discussions regarding faculty renewal and succession planning and opportunities to leverage complementary interests and/or gaps to fill.

**Progress (check one)**

- Completed
- In Progress

Other (please explain): This is an ongoing issue. It will always be “in progress”.

**Department's Comments:**

Since the IQAP visit, the Health Policy program has recruited a new program director and a new theme lead for Health Systems and Society stream. Both of these appointments have expanded the core faculty supporting the program.

More broadly, and more importantly, the HP program has been actively recruiting new faculty to serve as supervisors and thesis committee members, which is a normal pathway into the program and this is the group from which faculty are sought to undertake administration roles within the program.

The program have also been exploring co-supervisorship as a form of mentoring for (especially) junior faculty. We feel we have been quite successful on this front in the past year or more, but there is also much work to be done going forward. This is an issue that requires ongoing attention, and the HP Executive and Admissions Committees are aware of the issues. In practice, the Admissions Committee is more directly engaged in recruiting new faculty since the recruitment of new supervisors and thesis committee members for incoming students is an important avenue for yielding relationships between faculty into the program; it is engaged in this ongoing challenge and (again) we are feeling quite positive about recent successes.

**Dean's Comments:**

We agree that the recruitment of Dr. Sweetman from Social Sciences was an important step in the renewal and broadening of the program's engagement across the Faculties. Dr. Sweetman has been proactive in identifying opportunities to engage faculty across the institution in ways that align with their existing responsibilities and academic interests.

**QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):**

See above

**Recommendation:** Development of MOUs between the health policy program and its affiliated departments to create more program sustainability, to help address succession planning issues and to encourage adequate recognition of, commitment to, and compensation for teaching in interdisciplinary programs.

**Responsibility for Implementation:** Program Chair

**Anticipated Timeline for Completion:** June 2021 – Aug 2022

**Additional Notes/Commentary:**

**Proposed action:** Meetings with relevant Associate Deans and Department Chairs to establish MOU between program and affiliated Faculties and departments.

**Progress (check one)**

- Completed
- In Progress
- Other (please explain)

**Department's Comments:**

If there is a broad desire to develop MOU use, then the program is willing to pursue this effort. However, the program is not convinced that doing so is the best use of scarce resources at present.

The HP program communicates at least twice each year with active department chairs regarding financial transfers (& see the second recommendation above). The current HP program director, in particular, is not convinced that developing new MOUs with Faculties is worthwhile. Doing so with individual Departments would be unusual since the program is supported by three Faculties on behalf of their departments. Having said that, there may be a future need for MOUs if specific potential joint ventures between programs arise.

The current model seems to be working well, though perhaps it needs to be advertised more broadly. Communication may be the solution to the concern raised in this recommendation more than MOUs.

As background, at present there is a de facto MOU regarding financial revenue sharing in the form of an Excel spreadsheet that was agreed upon by the Faculties many years ago. Although there is discussion of a minor tweak in the near future (largely in response to McMaster adopting a new budget model that charges Faculties/Departments for space), overall the approach seems to work well and is broadly supported by the program's three sponsoring Faculties.

Academic matters are (in principle) handled through the graduate curriculum committees in the three Faculties. This brings together relevant associate deans, other program directors and the like and seems like an appropriate avenue for the communication and support motivating this recommendation. Previously, the relationship with the graduate curriculum committee in Health Sciences has been very strong, that with Social Sciences has been weaker, and that with the School of Business has been particularly weak. However, an effort is being made to strengthen the relationship with the latter two committees. This seems to be going in the right direction. Of course, unlike in MOU, communication is an ongoing challenge, but the graduate curriculum committee structure seems an appropriate avenue for supporting that ongoing communication need.

#### Dean's Comments:

The participating Faculties have acknowledged the need for a new MOU for the program. Since the report, we have reviewed the revenue-sharing model, which is now significantly more specific, transparent, and detailed than most existing MOUs. We agree that this model—along with other collaborative mechanisms for curriculum review, revision, and approval—effectively functions as a de facto MOU. We support the recommendation that these mechanisms be reviewed on a regular schedule to ensure continued clarity and alignment.

#### QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):

See above

**Recommendation:** Review and renewal of the Social Organization field to identify relevant domains of knowledge and courses that provide a clearer identity for the field while allowing for appropriate tailoring and flexibility to support focused study within the broader field.

**Responsibility for Implementation:** Program director and key program faculty and students

**Anticipated Timeline for Completion:** June – December 2021

**Additional Notes/Commentary:**

<p>Progress (check one)</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Completed (the key recommendations have been addressed)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> In Progress (additional updates are under consideration)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain)</p>
<p>Department's Comments:</p> <p>Several field changes have been made in response to this recommendation and a new field leader has been recruited:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The field name has been changed to Health Systems &amp; Society (HSS) (all curriculum committee approvals have been sought and granted and program and grad calendar documents now reflect these changes)</li> <li>• The reading list for the comp exam for this field was extensively reviewed and updated (with student and faculty input).</li> <li>• A new field leader has been identified to oversee the curriculum-related aspects of this field</li> <li>• Course delivery has been revised and is stabilized</li> <li>• This field is expanding and has seen new faculty supervisors and committee members added in this area.</li> </ul>
<p>Dean's Comments:</p> <p>We are satisfied with the program's update.</p>
<p>QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):</p> <p>See above</p>

<p>Recommendation: Review and renewal of course content to include the work of and frameworks from indigenous researchers and a decolonized perspective.</p>
<p>Responsibility for Implementation: Program director and Executive Committee members (faculty and students)</p>
<p>Anticipated Timeline for Completion: June – December 2021</p>
<p>Additional Notes/Commentary: This activity was initiated prior to the IQAP visit through additional readings and sessions integrated into the doctoral seminar and comp exam reading lists in 20-21.</p>
<p>Progress (check one)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Completed</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In Progress</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain)</p>
<p>Department's Comments:</p> <p>This is unlikely to be a “completed” task given the need for continuous review and revision of this curriculum content. A living document and repository of EDI-IR resources has been developed for our</p>

learners and program faculty to access and integrate into their course reading lists and learning activities. Students also have access to the newly established resources at McMaster including the Indigenous Health Learning Lodge which opened in January 2022. In addition, the HP Program was one of the co-applicants on a successful University-wide STEER/R funding application - the *HEI Equity-Supportive Ecosystem Initiative* - which aligns very closely with the aims of our ongoing curriculum review and renewal efforts.

**Dean's Comments:**

We appreciate the program's progress to date. As a policy program that spans both the Health Sciences and Social Sciences, there are emerging opportunities to further advance the Indigenous health policy agenda. In addition to fostering deeper engagement with the Faculty of Health Sciences' Indigenous Health Learning Lodge, we encourage the program to strengthen connections with the Indigenous Studies Department in the Faculty of Social Sciences. The newly established Master's in Indigenous Studies may also serve as a valuable pathway into the Health Policy PhD program.

**QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):**

See above

**Recommendation:** Solidify the availability of qualitative methods course offerings within the program and across the University.

**Responsibility for Implementation:** Program director + relevant program faculty

**Anticipated Timeline for Completion:** June 2021- August 2022

**Additional Notes/Commentary:**

**Proposed action:** We are committed to offering our students reliable access to a qualitative methods course, and ideally a suite of courses to allow tailoring to student needs.

**Progress (check one)**

- Completed
- In Progress
- Other (please explain)

**Department's Comments:**

This teaching priority for the program continues to be communicated, primarily through the HEI Education Council. HP has introduced a new course (HP 747), which has been offered in each of the past few years – though it was cancelled for this year given changes in the Health Research Methodology (HRM) curriculum. The HRM program has also developed and now offers (Sept 2024) a new Qualitative methods course which is open to health policy students. As well, some students find the qualitative methods course offered in the Nursing Program to be most appropriate for their research interests. We feel that this issue has been well addressed on various fronts with the HP 747 course on the books for future years as required.

Dean's Comments:

We are satisfied with the program's update.

QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):

See above

Recommendation: Review current structure of comprehensive exams (i.e., 7-hour sit down exam) and consider the replacement of the methods and field exams with a take-home style exam or grant application (for methods) and a paper (for disciplinary-focused exam).

Responsibility for Implementation: Program director with comp exam committee members and students

Anticipated Timeline for Completion: June – October 2021

Additional Notes/Commentary: A working group was established following the IQAP visit to oversee this review with activities including:

- a review of each exam's purpose and structure
- a review of comp exam structures in comparable programs
- student/program alum survey to assess strengths and weaknesses of current structure and proposed alternatives

Progress (check one)

Completed

In Progress

Other (please explain)

Department's Comments:

The format of the breadth exam was changed in Spring 2022 to place greater emphasis on the integration and application of core curriculum content with current policy topics to align more directly with the program's learning outcomes. These changes were generally well received by both faculty and students in the program. Incremental changes will be made based on the first year's experience with the new structure.

Modest changes have been made to all field exams to allow for additional tailoring to students' thesis research areas and to revise the number of questions and readings required. These changes have been well received by students and faculty in the program.

The comprehensive exams were again restructured in May 2024 to include an oral component. The oral portion is meant to ask students to explain their written answers, not to ask new questions. This change was approved by the FHS's GCPC as well as GPCC in FSS, and Senate. While the oral component has just recently been added the faculty involved feel the oral component has been helpful in assessing the students.

We are also in the midst of setting up a “continuing” Avenue site for the comprehensive exams to improve communication with faculty and students, and provide better structure for student preparation.

We feel the current comprehensive exams are appropriately challenging (and not overwhelming) for the students, and prepare them well for both their thesis research and post-PhD career needs.

**Dean's Comments:**

We appreciate the program's thoughtful and ongoing review of their comprehensive examination process.

**QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):**

See above

**Recommendation:** Enhance communications with students about the exams to reinforce the purpose and benefits of the process and to help in managing exam-related stress (draw on upper-year students and program grads to help with this).

**Responsibility for Implementation:** Program director and comps review team

**Anticipated Timeline for Completion:** September 2021 – August 2022

**Additional Notes/Commentary:**

**Progress (check one)**

- Completed
- In Progress
- Other (please explain)

**Department's Comments:**

We have worked hard to address this recommendation over the last 2 years. With the changes described in the previous section, we believe that students understand and appreciate the learning benefits of the comprehensive exam process and have the necessary supports to prepare for their exams. We will continue to look for ways to enhance communications in this area and will continue to review the value of the exam process for our students.

As mentioned, we are also in the midst of setting up a “continuing” Avenue site for the comprehensive exams to improve communication with faculty and students, and provide better structure for student preparation.

Further, HP-711 is now better aligned with the comprehensive exams and includes tasks similar to those in the comprehensive-exams in the curriculum.

**Dean's Comments:**

We are satisfied with the program's update.

**QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):**

See above

Recommendation: Program expectations regarding time to completion should be more clearly communicated to students and faculty with guidance provided about student funding sources beyond the four-year in-time period (viewed as especially important for international students).

Responsibility for Implementation: Program director and Program admin

Anticipated Timeline for Completion: July 2021 – Aug 2022

Additional Notes/Commentary:

Progress (check one)

- Completed
- In Progress
- Other (please explain)

Department's Comments:

In recent years, we have been more explicit with students about time to completion expectations and about funding constraints beyond the 4-year in-time funding period. Following the IQAP review period, we conducted an in-depth review of the program's time to completion data, including the reasons associated with completing outside the in-time period, as well as funding supports provided and available beyond this timeframe. Our students are a heterogeneous group with respect to the range and level of their funding support arrangements over their trajectory in our program. Our review did not identify any clear patterns or specific factors that influence time to completion; however, the flagging of this issue through the IQAP review process has sensitized us to these issues and to the particular challenges faced by our international students in this area. We review our students' funding arrangements beyond the 4-year in-time period on a case-by-case basis and are prepared to support our students where need arises and funding is available.

We have also undertaken a major revision of our Student Handbook with this as one of the issues in mind.

It is worth noting that Covid 19 had a serious negative effect on timely completion, but we hope that that was a temporary effect. At the same time, we have noted that University changes facilitating students working while in school, and other incentives faced by PhD students, appear to have increased the number of students working – indeed some working full time – while pursuing the PhD. It is unclear yet how this will affect timely completion.

Dean's Comments:

Monitoring and supporting student progress remains an ongoing and complex challenge within the Health Policy program. We agree that the heterogeneity of student needs and circumstances plays a significant role, and that focusing solely on median completion times may obscure important insights found at the extremes. We encourage the program to continue its proactive approach to early

intervention—not only with students, but also with their supervisors. We also support the view that this process should begin as early as admissions and onboarding, to help set clear expectations and identify potential challenges from the outset.

QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):

See above

Recommendation: Program should consider subsidizing 1-2 years of student funding for junior faculty members.

Responsibility for Implementation: Program director and Associate Deans

Anticipated Timeline for Completion: July 2021 – Aug 2022

Additional Notes/Commentary:

This recommendation relates to more fundamental issues of how interdisciplinary programs are supported (covered in previous sections). Our experience is that challenges related to student funding support are not restricted to junior faculty members. As the reviewers noted, this is an issue for all faculty members, and in Social Sciences and Business, in particular, where students are more generously supported by their home departments, and don't require the same level of faculty contributions that is generally expected in the Faculty of Health Sciences.

Progress (check one)

- Completed
- In Progress

Other (please explain) This is not a recommendation that the program believes will adequately address the program's funding support issues.

Department's Comments:

As mentioned above, we have been encouraging co-supervision models where the senior supervisor takes on most of the financial responsibility. Although not a full response to this recommendation, it does address it to some degree.

Dean's Comments:

It is common for junior faculty to receive support in the form of subsidies for student stipends; however, this is typically the responsibility of their home departments, often provided through recruitment packages and faculty development initiatives. In contrast, the Health Policy program is responsible for ensuring that all admitted students receive guaranteed funding packages to support full-time study for four years. The program's primary contribution to student stipends comes from its allocation of the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) Scholarship Fund, which is intended to support full-time PhD study and currently provides a nominal amount of \$8,000 per student per year. We acknowledge that stipend support models vary across Faculties. For example, it is standard practice in the Faculty of Health Sciences for faculty to contribute to stipends through research grants and contracts, whereas this approach is less common in other parts of the university.

<p>QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):</p> <p>See above</p>
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<p>Recommendation: Review and take stock of recently introduced career competencies initiative to identify relevant and appropriate supports for students to monitor and complete these in a manageable way.</p>
<p>Responsibility for Implementation: Program director and program admin</p>
<p>Anticipated Timeline for Completion: May - September 2021</p>
<p>Additional Notes/Commentary:</p> <p>Progress (check one)</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Completed</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> In Progress</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain)</p>
<p>Department's Comments:</p> <p>We surveyed our students in April 2022 to assess their experience with the career competencies initiative since its introduction into the program in Fall 2020. While the value of this tool was noted, its uptake has been low, primarily because it is not formally integrated into the program. We have now included it in our program's year-to-year milestones document which students use as an independent planning resource and to support discussions with their supervisors and committees.</p>
<p>Dean's Comments:</p> <p>We are satisfied with this update.</p>
<p>QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):</p> <p>See above</p>

<p>Recommendation: Increase opportunities for building connections between the Health Policy program and other policy-related programs and initiatives across the University to leverage complementary skills, explore shared interests, and to deepen students' network of peers.</p>
<p>Responsibility for Implementation: Program director with program executive (faculty and students) and student ambassadors</p>
<p>Anticipated Timeline for Completion: July 2021- Aug 2022</p>
<p>Additional Notes/Commentary: The Health Policy Program has, historically, fostered links with other policy-relevant programs and initiatives throughout the University through its special relationships with several McMaster-wide entities including the Centre for Health Economics and Policy Analysis</p>

(CHEPA), the McMaster Health Forum and Health Economics at McMaster (HEAM). Each of these groups is comprised of faculty members that contribute in significant ways to the HP Program.

Completed  
 In Progress  
 Other (please explain)

Department's Comments:

The ability to act on this recommendation has been impeded by the unusually long period of remote learning and exchange that has become the norm for our students over the first few Covid years. Opportunities for building and maintaining connections among our students, let alone those with other programs and initiatives across the University, have been significantly hampered by the lack of opportunity for in-person events where the all-important networking and informal exchange happens. Our return to campus in Fall 2022 provides us with the opportunity to resume these exchange activities and to re-build long-standing relationships with other policy-related programs and initiatives.

Dean's Comments:

We encourage the program to continue prioritizing opportunities for in-person connection and networking as part of its ongoing development and community-building efforts.

QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):

See above

Recommendation: Enhancing program material and communications to help students navigate “how things work” more effectively and efficiently (with support from upper-year PhD students, program graduates and through strengthening of the existing Buddy System).

Responsibility for Implementation: Student representatives and program admin

Anticipated Timeline for Completion: June – December 2021

Additional Notes/Commentary: There are numerous “how things work” resources already available to students in the Student Handbook and through the program’s incoming student orientation. We recognize, however, that there may be additional informal knowledge about the program’s workings that might lend itself to being more systematically organized and communicated.

Progress (check one)

Completed  
 In Progress  
 Other (please explain)

Department's Comments:

This issue was discussed at our June 2022 retreat. In May 2024 we asked our 3 program executive student members to thoroughly review the student handbook. They made several excellent suggestions and additions. We adopted these changes to the 2024-25 handbook. We also included a detailed explanation of a new faculty wide funding claw-back policy regarding award recipients.

Beyond the student recommendations, we undertook a major revision of the Student Handbook this year – keeping this recommendation in mind.

Dean's Comments:

We are satisfied with the program's update.

QAC Comments (to be filled in by Quality Assurance Committee):

See above