

FINAL ASSESSMENT REPORT

Institutional Quality Assurance Program (IQAP) Review

Philosophy (Graduate and Undergraduate programs)

Date of Review: February 25th and 26th, 2025

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 Philosophy undergraduate and graduate programs. 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 Philosophy department submitted a self-study report for the undergraduate and graduate programs in December 2024 to the Vice-Provost Teaching and Learning and Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies to initiate the cyclical program review of its program. 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 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 Humanities, and selected by the Vice-Provost Teaching and Learning and Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies. The review team reviewed the self-study documentation and then conducted a virtual site visit to McMaster University on February 25th and 26th, 2025. The review included interviews with the Deputy Provost, Acting Vice-Provost Teaching and Learning and Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies, Faculty Dean, Associate Deans of graduate and undergraduate studies, Chair of the department, and meetings with groups of current students, full-time faculty and support staff.

The Chair of the Philosophy department along with the Chair of Graduate Studies and the Chair of Undergraduate Studies submitted responses to the Reviewers' Report (March 2025). Specific recommendations were discussed and clarifications and corrections were presented. Follow-up actions and timelines were included.

Strengths

“The department’s faculty are productive researchers who are consistently publishing their work in high-visibility venues and attracting a considerable amount of external funding support.

The undergraduate program teaches a high volume of students [...] while maintaining a very high standard of excellence, including the very successful and competitive JPPL program and a high quality Philosophy BA Honours program [...]

The graduate program prepares its students to discover, create, and communicate knowledge in an innovative and inclusive way, as is evidenced by its success in placing its MA students in competitive PhD and law programs, and its PhD students in academic and professional positions.

The department is doing an excellent job of promoting equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility, both through its program design and through its hiring decisions.

The department houses a truly impressive range of programs, including The Bertrand Russell Research Centre, The/La Collaborative, and the Institute on Ethics and Policy for Innovation. These programs generate exciting, engaged scholarship and provide students with opportunities to expand their philosophical training and gain practical experience in applied research contexts.

The department has created a strong sense of community and collegiality among faculty, staff, and students that supports and sustains its work on all these fronts.”

Opportunities for Improvement and Enhancement, including appropriateness of resources

Undergraduate:

The review team comment positively on the sustained success and popularity of the JPPL Program. They also comment on the effectiveness of the Philosophy B.A. Program in delivering high-quality teaching and in introducing popular new courses. However, they identify some opportunities for improvement and enhancement in the Philosophy B.A. program, especially relating to the weaker sense of belonging and cohort among these students compared to JPPL. They made several concrete suggestions relating to this, which are listed below.

Graduate:

The review team comment positively on the success of the Department’s two-year MA Program. They note its distinctiveness and suggest “reinforcing its strengths in the recruitment and development of graduate students.” They also suggest reviewing the purpose of the MA thesis as currently structured and exploring permitting alternate thesis formats, which may be more useful for particular kinds of students, including those applying to PhD Programs.

The review team also comment positively on the Philosophy PhD Program. Nevertheless, they note that there are challenges relating to time and rate of completion. They suggest the Philosophy PhD program could be enhanced by finding “an opportunity in the first year of the PhD program to give students formal and structured guidance on preparing for the Qualifying Exam,” with a view to promoting timely completion.

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

Recommendation #1:

Increase the Department's permanent faculty complement to ensure it can continue to offer its high quality undergraduate programs to the remarkably high volume of students that it teaches.

Review team comments in the report related to this recommendation:

- "If the faculty complement increases, we recommend revisiting previous suggestions for changes to the undergraduate program, including increasing the size of the JPPL cohort."

Department's Response and Actions to be Taken:

- The Department will consult with leadership on this recommendation.

Dean's Response:

- There are many needs in the Faculty. Balancing these needs is challenging. One opportunity that may come up again in the future is the possibility of a permanent teaching professor in the Dept of Philosophy. I encourage my colleagues to be open to such an opportunity if it arises. It may not be net new resources as the CLAs are time-limited, but it could bring more permanent relief.
- Beyond that, I am always looking for ways to add faculty, though that is difficult with a multi-million dollar structural deficit within the Faculty.

Recommendation #2:

Build on current efforts to enhance the degree to which the students in Philosophy BA programs understand themselves to be engaged in a common enterprise with a cohort of peers.

Review team comments in the report related specifically to this recommendation:

- Suggestions: (a) "Restrict enrollment in certain tutorials of required courses to philosophy majors"; (b) "Specify curricular concentrations within the Honours major or otherwise articulating to students a unifying framework for their coursework"; (c) "Revive or strengthen efforts to institute a peer mentoring program within the Honours majors."

Department's Response and Actions to be Taken:

- We support this goal and thank the reviewers for their concrete suggestions
- In response to the three specific suggestions:
 1. It may not be feasible to restrict enrollment in certain tutorials to Philosophy majors – either administratively or given student schedules. But we will investigate this – and the option of nominating certain tutorials in core courses as *chiefly* for Philosophy majors. We will also explore other ways of carving out classroom time for Philosophy BA students specifically, to help build a sense of shared purpose and cohort, with the goal of enhancing student experience and aiding retention.
 2. We are interested in the idea of specifying curricular concentrations within the Philosophy Honours major. This is something we will explore. We will also discuss at

the department level the reviewers' suggestion that faculty try to "formulate a collective sense of what binds the content covered in the curriculum together and then explicitly convey that to students in a number of their classes."

3. We will investigate the possibility of recreating something like the existing (student run and organized) peer mentorship program in JPPL for Philosophy Honours students. This has been very successful in JPPL, so we have a good model to follow.
- On the advice of the MacPherson Institute (MI), we will apply for funding to employ an undergraduate Philosophy student as a "Student Curriculum Consultant." If appointed, the SCC will work with the MI and the department to collect feedback from current students on ways of addressing the goal of enhancing the degree to which the students in Philosophy BA programs understand themselves to be engaged in a common enterprise with a cohort of peers, including (but not necessarily limited to) the reviewers' specific suggestions.

Dean's Response:

- The dean's office supports efforts to increase cohesion and identity within the Hon Philosophy program: peer mentoring, increased social engagement and the like are welcome. We also think there could be efforts to connect the two student cohorts (Hon Phil and JPPL) on some shared activities, while retaining their own program identities.
- Looking at the Hon Phil curriculum periodically to ensure a sense of cohesion makes sense, and involving student voices via MacPherson funding could be fruitful in that work.
- We are not able to support measures that restrict flexibility for students (those within the Hon Phil and those outside of it) by running majors-only tutorials.
- As for curricular concentrations within the Hon Phil major, some thought can be given to this idea, but we would caution against proposals that require students to choose certain pathways or that require the department to offer individual courses more regularly than their faculty complement allows.

Recommendation #3:

Investigate the feasibility of offering an Applied Ethics and Policy certificate at the graduate level.

Review team comments in the report related to this recommendation:

- "The philosophy department might explore possibilities for becoming more deeply integrated into McMaster's strong STEM programs at the graduate level. The department's new clinical ethics internship program is an excellent step in this direction. Another possibility to explore is the development of curricular programs that give students in the health sciences and engineering the opportunity to take a number of classes in ethics and/or political philosophy that are relevant to occupations in these sectors and thereby earn a credential that certifies their resulting competence. In particular, McMaster is known for its practical commitment to ethically guided health science; programs exposing students to philosophical analyses of the moral and political values relevant to the health sciences could provide them with a theoretical foundation that informs, supports, and deepens their commitments. And a credential would allow students to signal the importance of these commitments to those outside the university. The department has already developed such a program at the undergraduate level – the Certificate in Applied Ethics and Policy. It is worth investigating the feasibility of offering a similar program at the graduate level."

Department's Response and Actions to be Taken:

- The Department sees promise in the idea of developing graduate certificates, whether on its own or in collaboration with other programs, to help utilize existing graduate courses to attract new students and to build relationships across campus.
- We are unsure whether Philosophy has the faculty resources at present to support a graduate certificate in "Applied Ethics and Policy" (mentioned as an example by the review team). We note that only one tenure-stream faculty member in the Department (Ariella Binik) regularly teaches graduate courses in applied ethics. Claudia Emerson, who also works prominently in this area, does not teach any courses (undergrad or graduate), given the special nature of her research-heavy appointment. Nevertheless, we agree that some kind of graduate certificate in ethics and policy might appeal to students across campus, including in STEM fields. The Department will investigate this possibility, in coordination with Drs. Emerson and Binik, the Dean's Office, and potentially Prof. Lisa Schwartz in the Faculty of Health Sciences.

Dean's Response:

- We agree that a graduate certificate in applied ethics may be attractive. The draft policy under discussion would make a certificate credential possible with just two completed courses. If a course list of five or so courses (from across two or more units on campus) that are likely to be offered in any given year could be assembled this might be do-able (once the policy is approved). The new Heersink School of Global Health and Social Medicine might make a good partner, including Dr. Schwarz as noted. There could also be interested parties in the Faculty of Social Sciences, including within their new Masters of Public Policy degree.

Recommendation #4 ("Potential Area for Enhancement 1"):

Re-evaluate the two-year MA with an eye to reinforcing its strengths in the recruitment and development of graduate students.

Review team comments in the report related to this recommendation:

- "The McMaster MA in Philosophy is a two-year program, which is relatively unusual. Of the 14 Philosophy Departments in Canada that have doctoral programs, only four offer a two-year MA; the remaining 10 offer a one-year MA program. This difference can be a strength, and indeed both faculty members and students we met highlighted the value of the two-year program in preparing students for advanced graduate studies in Philosophy."
- "We encourage the Department to develop a clear articulation of the distinctive value of the two-year program, and to draw more heavily on the results in their recruitment efforts by, for instance, emphasizing the value of the two-year program in preparing students for admission to competitive PhD programs."

Department's Response and Actions to be Taken:

- The Department supports the idea of better articulating and promoting the distinctive value of its two-year MA Program, with a view to recruitment.
- To advance this goal, the Department will review and adjust the way it promotes its MA program on its website, in its promotional materials (posters and flyers), and in discussions with prospective students before and during graduate recruitment season.

Dean's Response:

- The external review team reported to me that a one-yr MA is the standard in Philosophy Departments in Canada. The numbers reported above bear that out. While I appreciate there may be strengths in a two-yr MA program, I can imagine there are also advantages to a one-yr program. In my mind, it's not surprising that students who have selected a strong two-yr degree would speak highly of their decision. The same goes for faculty members who teach in a successful 2-yr MA program. I am confident it is an excellent program. But I wonder a) whether our pool of applicants would be deeper if we had a one-yr program; b) whether a student completing both an MA and PhD would be able to finish more quickly and with less financial burden and stress related to a longer period of being a FT student; and c) whether the department's faculty resources that currently support a second yr of the MA could be better leveraged by moving to a one-yr MA. What more could be done at the PhD level or with the ug majors (or certificates etc), if we freed up some resources currently invested in the two-yr MA? I don't know the answers to these questions, but I feel they are worth consideration/investigation.
- That said, I also agree that we should do what we can to highlight the programs we have in the most effective way. I support the plans noted above in that respect.

Recommendation #5 (listed as "Potential Area for Enhancement 2"):

Find an opportunity in the first year of the PhD program to give students formal and structured guidance on preparing for the Qualifying Exam.

Review team comments in the report related specifically to this recommendation:

- "The current program structure leaves a gap between the completion of courses in first year (end of April) and the beginning of the PhD seminar in second year (early September) in which students have not yet been given formal and structured guidance on writing their QE. If students were prepared earlier to begin work on their QE, they could make better use of that time, which may improve time-to-completion rates."
- "We recognize that previous external reviews have recommended changes to the PhD seminar, and that its current form is in response to some of those recommendations. This recommendation is not to scrap or heavily modify the existing PhD seminar, which appears to function well. Instead, it's to consider how to deliver one element of the PhD seminar earlier in the program so that students can take better advantage of the Spring/ Summer term of their first year in the program."

Department's Response and Actions to be Taken:

- The Department supports the goal of providing clearer guidance to students in year 1 of the PhD program on the format and expectations of the thesis proposal and Qualifying Exam.
- We will investigate the best way of achieving this goal. The Department has already discussed moving the PhD Seminar to the first year of the program. This is still under discussion. Shifting the PhD Seminar to year 1 would make this goal easy to meet. If the PhD Seminar remains in year 2, this goal could be met in other ways, for instance:
 1. Build discussion of the format and expectations of the Qualifying Exam into each student's first annual supervisory committee meeting (this typically occurs in May). This would be relatively easy to implement in Philosophy, as the PhD Advisor / Graduate Chair routinely chairs all PhD supervisory committee meetings.

2. Create a repository of past successful Qualifying Exam documents and share with all first-year PhD students, to help them more easily understand what is expected. 3. Review and revise our instructions for the thesis proposal in our Graduate Handbook, for clarity. Ensure all PhD students have reviewed these by the end of year 1. 4. Require all PhD students to complete a preliminary two-page thesis proposal, with accompanying working bibliography, by the end of their first summer (September 1), to ensure they use the first summer productively and to help them get a head start on preparing for the QE. • The Department will also review its existing PhD Seminar to ensure it is as useful for the graduate students as it can be, with a view to promoting timely program completion.
Dean's Response: • The recommendation is a good one, and the dept's response seems reasonable. However, I worry a little about adding another requirement (No. 4 above). What happens if students do not finish that prelim proposal or are delayed? But I am sure the dept will come up with workable solutions. • Another idea might be to offer a session/panel run by the grad advisor with grad supervisors and PhD 2s (and/or senior PhDs in the program) as panelists to offer tips, best practices, share perspectives on the challenges they faced etc. The expectations of the QE can be reiterated by supervisors and in the supervisory committee meeting following this session.

Recommendation #6: <i>Explore alternative options for the MA thesis format.</i> Review team comments in the report related to this recommendation: • "The current expectation for the MA thesis is a 21,000 to 35,000-word thesis. While this format is indeed most appropriate for some students, it may not be ideal for all MA students. For instance, a second-year student who intends to apply to a PhD program to specialize in analytic philosophy might be better served by working on drafting and polishing a publishable article as part of their thesis requirement. We encourage the department to consider adjusting the MA requirements to allow alternative thesis formats."
Department's Response and Actions to be Taken: • The Department supports exploring alternative options for the MA thesis format, where this would make sense given each student's research goals and/or career aspirations • The Department has already agreed to permit its PhD students to prepare "sandwich theses" – comprised of a set of publishable articles bookended with an introduction and conclusion – when this makes sense given the student's research and their career aspirations. We will investigate extending this "sandwich" option to MA students, in a scaled down way. We note that providing this option could help MA students planning to apply to PhD programs to prepare a writing sample in time for their applications, an issue highlighted by the reviewers.
Dean's Response: • I support exploring alternative options for the MA thesis, including but not limited to the submission of a sandwich thesis.

Recommendation #7:

Consider finding ways to ensure that the Chair is not overburdened with tasks that might be handled by faculty members in other service roles

Review team comments in the report related to this recommendation:

- “In spite of the large number of service roles, it does appear that the current administrative structure of the Department puts a relatively heavy burden on the Chair relative to the Associate Chairs and others with service roles. The Department might consider finding ways to ensure that the Chair is not overburdened with tasks that might be handled by faculty members in other service roles.”

Department’s Response and Actions to be Taken:

- The Department will review the distribution of service work between the Chair and Associate Chairs / others with service roles to ensure the Chair is not overburdened

Dean’s Response:

- The current chair has been an amazing leader the past four years. But when I compare the governance structure in Philosophy with those in comparable departments, I feel strongly that the chair in this department is asked to take on more time-consuming tasks and responsibility than their counterparts. There are serious downsides to putting so much on one person’s shoulders:
 - The chair’s own career progression can be slowed.
 - The idea of renewal is not likely to be attractive to a strong chair.
 - Other colleagues do not learn as much about the programs/dept procedures as they should, which hampers their own ability to contribute effectively when asked.
 - Succession planning for the chair role is more difficult.
 - If the chair is not strong, more can fall through the cracks.
 - Etc.

Implementation Plan

In the chart below, please outline the recommendations made by reviewers, briefly outline the actions you plan to take, who will be responsible for leading the action, and a timeline for completion.

Recommendation	Action(s) to be Taken	Responsibility for Leading Action (specify the role(s) that will be responsible for each action item e.g. Program Chair.)	Timeline for Completing Action (indicate specific timelines (e.g. not 'ongoing') for action)
<i>Increase the Department's permanent faculty complement to ensure it can continue to offer its high-quality undergraduate programs to the remarkably high volume of students that it teaches.</i>	The Department will consult with leadership on this recommendation.	Department Chair	By the end of August 2025
<i>Build on current efforts to enhance the degree to which the students in Philosophy BA programs understand themselves to be engaged in a common enterprise with a cohort of peers.</i>	In Fall 2025, we will solicit feedback from current students in the Philosophy BA programs about whether and how to implement various possible measures to enhance the degree to which they feel themselves to be engaged in a common enterprise with a cohort of peers. Measures considered will include (but need not be limited to) those suggested by the review team, discussed above.	Department Chair and Undergraduate Chair, with assistance from the undergraduate Student Curriculum Consultant (in Fall 2025), and in consultation with the other faculty in Philosophy (in Winter 2026).	By April 30, 2026

	We will apply for funding from the MacPherson Institute to employ a Student Curriculum Consultant in Fall 2025, who will help us gather this feedback. The department will meet to discuss implementation before the end of the Winter 2026 term.		
<i>Investigate the feasibility of offering an Applied Ethics and Policy certificate at the graduate level.</i>	In Fall 2025, the department will consult with its faculty working in ethics and applied ethics, faculty in FHS, and the Associate Dean (GSR), to discuss options for implementing a certificate that would create links to FHS at the graduate level. Discussions to take place ahead of the next graduate curriculum submission, due January 2026.	Department Chair and incoming Graduate Chair, in consultation with Associate Dean (GSR) and with faculty in FHS.	By January 31, 2026
<i>Re-evaluate the two-year MA with an eye to reinforcing its strengths in the recruitment and development of graduate students.</i>	The department will review how it presents and promotes the distinctive strengths of its MA program and will update its website and promotional materials ahead of the next graduate recruitment cycle.	Department Chair, MA Advisor, and incoming Graduate Chair	By November 1, 2025
<i>Find an opportunity in the first year of the PhD program to give students formal and structured</i>	The department will consider how best to achieve this in connection with a review of its	Department Chair and incoming Graduate Chair, in consultation	By January 31, 2026

<i>guidance on preparing for the Qualifying Exam.</i>	PhD Seminar. It will complete this review ahead of the next graduate curriculum submission, due January 2026 at the latest.	with the other faculty in Philosophy	
<i>Explore alternative options for the MA thesis format.</i>	The department will consider this recommendation in connection with a review of its graduate curriculum, to be completed ahead of the next graduate curriculum submission, due January 2026 at the latest.	Department Chair, MA Advisor, and incoming Graduate Chair, in consultation with the other faculty in Philosophy	By January 31, 2026
<i>Consider finding ways to ensure that the Chair is not overburdened with tasks that might be handled by faculty members in other service roles</i>	The department will consider this recommendation in Fall 2025. Among other things, it will create documents detailing the duties attached to each service role, to help other department officers work independently and to prevent everything going through the department chair.	Department Chair, faculty members in administrative roles (Undergrad Advisor, Grad Chair, MA Advisor; Department Manager), Department Manager	By May 2026, if not before

Quality Assurance Committee Recommendation

McMaster's Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) reviewed the above documentation at the January 22, 2026, meeting. The committee recommends that the **Philosophy undergraduate and graduate** programs should follow the regular course of action with an 18-month progress report and subsequent full external cyclical review to be scheduled in seven years, and to be conducted no later than eight years after the start of the last review.