

# External Review Procedures for Academic Units or Programs



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UNIVERSITY

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## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) recommends that all universities in the Maritime provinces develop a quality assurance framework, to continuously improve all of their functions and units, and to improve accountability and transparency. The goals should include regular analysis of, and continuous improvement in, all sectors of the university (e.g., administration, research, etc.), and should apply to all aspects of students' university experience. This document, however, focuses specifically on the process of performing regular external reviews of all academic programs or units on campus. These units might include departments, schools, interdisciplinary programs, the Library, and Open Acadia. Reviews are most commonly conducted at the individual unit level, but could also be conducted at a broader level, such as reviewing a degree program, or a Faculty as a whole.

Reviews of academic programs / units should be student-centered, and have a strong focus on teaching and learning. They should assure the ongoing quality of the academic programs, and ensure that stated goals and outcomes for students can be achieved. The major questions to be answered by the external review process are “Is the program doing what it should be doing?”, and “How well is the unit achieving what it set out to accomplish?”.

In making these assessments, criteria should reflect the university's core mission and values, and link to the university's strategic and other plans. Note that “The mission of Acadia University is to provide a personalized and liberal education; promote a robust and respectful scholarly community; and inspire a diversity of students to become critical thinkers, lifelong learners, engaged citizens, and responsible global leaders.” Note also that an Acadia education, as defined by Senate, “1. Is rigorous and liberal and requires students to gain knowledge and understanding within and across disciplines. 2. Focuses on the whole student and fosters healthy academic, social, and residential experiences to develop well-rounded critical thinkers, engaged citizens, and lifelong learners.” Both members of the unit and members of the review team should be sure to familiarize themselves with the latest version of Acadia's Strategic Plan and Strategic Research Plan.

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR COORDINATION OF A REVIEW

The overall management of all reviews of academic units / programs is primarily the responsibility of the Vice-President, Academic (VPA), who is ultimately accountable to Senate in this regard. To co-ordinate particular reviews, the VPA will work in close partnership with Senate's Academic Program Review Committee (APRC), along with the relevant Dean(s); the units or programs under review; in the case of the library, with the University Librarian and library staff; and in the case of Open Acadia, with the Director of Open Acadia. The recommendations of the APRC on the basis of the review process are advisory. Specifically, the Vice-President (Academic) and the APRC will:

- Develop a schedule for reviews in consultation with the relevant Deans, who themselves will consult with Heads and Directors;
- Receive, review, and comment on the self-study report from the Unit;
- Appoint the review team;
- Develop terms of reference for the review team, in consultation with the unit;

- Receive and transmit the report of the review team to the Unit;
- Receive the unit's response to the review panel report;
- Meet with the Dean and unit head (or University Librarian and library staff) to discuss the report and the unit's response;
- Report regularly to Senate on the status of reviews;

Identify issues of University-wide concern and make recommendations concerning them to appropriate bodies or individuals.

## THE REVIEW PROCESS

### Frequency

Reviews should take place in accordance with a 5 to 7-year cycle, with no unit or program exceeding 10 years between reviews. Newly-established programs should be reviewed after the first cohort has graduated. In scheduling reviews, efforts should be made where possible to coincide with unit accreditations.

### Time Frame

Ideally, the review process is completed over a 12 to 18-month period, as indicated in the following schedule. Time frames may vary, depending on the size of the unit being reviewed.

### Flow of Activity

- APRC to inform Senate which units are to be reviewed in the coming year.
- Self-study initiated; review team nominees submitted to VPA
- Self-study received by APRC
- Terms of reference determined and Review team established; documentation sent to review team
- Review takes place (2 to 3 days)
- Report received by APRC and transmitted to unit
- Unit's response received by APRC
- APRC meets with Unit to discuss the report and the Unit's response
- APRC provides prioritized recommendations to Senate, after first discussing with the unit and relevant Dean
- APRC arranges archiving of materials relevant to each review

Approximately three years after the initial external review, the APRC initiates a follow-up review with the Unit to assess the success of implementation.

### Unit Self Study

Each academic unit being assessed should initiate a self-study process, involving both faculty and students from the program or unit. The self-study can be both descriptive and analytical. It should explicitly address, and be structured according to, the assessment criteria outlined below. However, it may also address other issues the unit deems relevant. The self-study might address such aspects as the unit's history, current status, pending changes, future prospects, and opportunities. Strengths and limitations of the program should be critically examined. Where relevant, the results of an external accreditation process may be included, and/or substituted for the unit self-study, as long as the relevant criteria are addressed.

The members of the unit can determine precisely how to divide up the tasks of the self-study. However, the most successful self-studies are those that involve the majority, if not all, of the members of the unit. In particular, as many members of the unit as possible should participate in examining pending changes, and future prospects and opportunities. Students should be involved in the self-study process, including serving on relevant committees, and taking part in surveys designed to collect data on outcomes. The quality of the self-study report is enhanced if a small steering group is responsible for its preparation, and drafts are circulated to all members for comment. Members of the APRC are available to provide advice on the development of the self-study, if requested. The result of the self-study is a report that serves as a primary document for the external unit review team.

The self-study must address the following criteria, as laid out by MPHEC:

1. Identify the program's goals, i.e., its learning outcomes, degree expectations, and (where relevant) its alignment with the standards of any relevant regulatory or accrediting bodies. What is the program setting out to accomplish?
2. Justify why these particular goals have been selected. Why are they the most appropriate ones for the unit? i.e., address the question "Is the program doing what it should be doing"?
3. Consider also the goals, directions, priorities, and mission of Acadia University as a whole. Are they well-aligned with the unit's goals? If not, why not, and what are the consequences?
4. Discuss the appropriateness of the program's structure, method of delivery, and curriculum for achieving its identified goals.
5. Highlight the achievement of students and graduates, in light of the program's stated goals.
6. Assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of the methods used to evaluate student progress and achievement, in light of the program's stated goals.
7. Comment on the capacity of the program faculty and staff to deliver the program and quality of education needed to achieve the program's goals. Consider the capacity of faculty and staff to meet the needs of both existing and anticipated future student enrollments.
8. Highlight the strengths of the program's faculty. Consider the quality of their teaching and supervision; their achievement in research, or other scholarly or creative activity; and their professional activities and service, as related to the program under review.
9. Comment on the appropriateness of the support offered to the unit's learning environment. This section could include assessing support offered by the library, other relevant units on campus (e.g., Student Services, Registrar's Office, Research and Graduate Studies, Technology Services), as well as human, physical, technological, and financial resources available to the unit. Does the unit have the support it needs from all sectors to achieve its stated goals?
10. Describe the effectiveness and appropriateness of the use made of existing resources in the unit (including human, physical, technological, and financial resources). How is the unit best working with what it already has, to attempt to meet its stated goals?
11. Assess the appropriateness of relevant academic policies, given the program's stated goals. Are issues such as admission criteria, graduation requirements, requests for

- transfer credit, student appeals, etc., appropriately aligned with the program's goals? Assess the appropriateness of the unit's governing and decision-making bodies and structures to oversee these policies on an ongoing basis. Are policies aligned with the unit's goals, and are good structures in place to oversee the relevant policies?
12. Define the indicators the unit is using to determine if it is meeting its goals, and provide relevant data to allow assessment of the program's quality. Some possible indicators might be enrolment rates, graduation rates, time-to-completion rates, student satisfaction ratings, or measures of graduate outcomes (e.g., employment rates, employment in field of study, acceptance to further study, graduate satisfaction, employer satisfaction, etc.). These indicators may be more descriptive or more analytical, and should align with the program's stated goals.

In addition to these required elements, the unit should feel free to include any other information that it feels will be useful to the external reviewers in understanding the unit, and assessing its current strengths and directions for future improvement. Such information is optional. It might include, but is not limited to:

- A brief history of the unit
- Membership in professional or registration / certification organizations
- Past and projected enrollment trends
- Titles and supervisors of recent student theses
- Description of the space available for the program
- Levels of support provided for student assistantships, awards, scholarships
- An appendix with a brief profile / CV of all academic staff, in a uniform format
- A comparison to similar programs at other institutions
- Identification of what makes the program unique
- Assessment of the use of technology to support teaching and research activities
- Assessment of efforts to internationalize the program
- Assessment of formation of meaningful interdisciplinary linkages, and/or plans for such linkages in the future
- A description of the unit's involvement in community service activities

### **Review Team Selection**

The composition of the review team is vital to the success of the process. All members must have credibility both inside and outside the unit under review. Typically, the review team will consist of four members. Two will be internal to Acadia, one from a closely related discipline or area, and the other representing the University at large. At least one of these members shall be a relatively senior faculty member (e.g., full professor, or equivalent length of service). The internal reviewers' roles shall include providing the external reviewers with clarifications on Acadia's context. The review team will also include at least two impartial experts in the relevant area, external to the institution, with at least one coming from outside of Atlantic Canada.

The unit is requested to provide the VPA with the names and contact information of 4 to 6 nominees for the roles of external reviewers, ensuring adequate representation of individuals from outside Atlantic Canada. The unit will also provide the VPA with 4 to 6 suggestions for internal reviewers, ensuring adequate representation of more senior faculty members. A very brief statement shall be given for each nominee, regarding the rationale for their selection.

Members of the review team should be chosen to avoid any conflict of interest, or possible appearance thereof. Where and when appropriate, one of the four members of the team may be replaced by a representative of the relevant professional association. Where appropriate, results of external accreditation may be included in, or possibly substituted for, portions of the external review (with agreement of the VPA and APRC).

### **Terms of Reference for the Review Team**

General terms of reference for external review teams will be provided to all members of the team before their visit, along with any special notes relevant to the specific review. These special notes, if any, will be established by the VPA, working with the APRC, the relevant Dean(s), and the unit under review. The terms of reference will normally be reviewed at the outset of the site visit with the VP Academic (Chair of APRC), Dean, Dean of Research & Graduate Studies, Head of Unit and the members of the review team. If specific issues unique to the Unit under review have been identified, they will be clearly noted and reviewed during this meeting.

Without intending to restrict the scope of the review, the expectation is that the review team will provide an opinion about the strengths and weaknesses of the unit. Again, the guiding principles shall be whether the goals identified by the program seem appropriate, and whether the program seems to be meeting the goals which it has set out. In particular, the review team is expected to offer recommendations for improvement and innovation.

As a research institution, the scholarly activities of faculty and students will contribute to the advance of the field of study under question. It is essential that the review team provide an opinion about the quality of the research and scholarly or developmental activities of the program, and the effectiveness of the relationships between the teaching and research dimensions of the programs—particularly for the early research experiences, honours programs, and at the graduate level.

### **Site Visit**

The review team for each review will meet at the University for an appropriate period of time, normally two to three days, and prepare a comprehensive report on the unit reviewed. It will consult widely in the preparation of this report. Typically, the review team's time will provide opportunities for consultation within the academic unit (faculty, staff and students, with particular care taken to ensure student involvement); with relevant faculty not directly involved in the reviewed program; with relevant members of the University administration; and with the wider network of stakeholders, such as employers, graduates, professional associations, the local community, etc.

The on-site consultations normally commence with a working dinner hosted by the University administration, and end with an exit interview with the Vice-President (Academic), the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies, and the Dean of the Faculty; for the library, the Vice-President (Academic), Dean of Research and Graduate Studies, and the University Librarian.

The visit of the review team is to be advertised widely to the University community, with an invitation for those who have a vested interest in the program(s) to contribute a written brief to the team, which is normally submitted through the Chair of APRC, prior to an advertised date.

Such briefs are for use by the review team, and will be held in confidence by the members of the review team.

The schedule of interviews during the visit will be developed by the unit under review, with appropriate input from the Office of the Vice-President (Academic).

### **Report**

While preparing the report, the Vice-President (Academic), the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies, and the Dean of the Faculty, or the University Librarian will be available to provide any additional information requested. The findings and recommendations of the review team should be presented in the form of a brief, concise, written report (with an executive summary), which will be received by the Vice-President (Academic) on behalf of the Academic Program Review Committee. The report should be received within 30 days of the site visit. Provided that matters of individual sensitivity or confidentiality are handled with appropriate discretion, the report (in its entirety) will be made available to the Dean, the unit under review, the APRC, and other interested parties. Normally, the report will be considered a public document and at the completion of the review process will be available to members of Senate, along with the unit's response.

### **Response and Implementation**

On receipt of the report, the members of the unit will meet in committee for discussion. The unit head will then prepare their response. The response will address the issues raised, and clearly outline priorities and future directions and initiatives for the unit over the next 3 to 5 years. As such, it should be prepared in close partnership with the Dean/University Librarian. The response will be transmitted to APRC. The Unit Head will be invited to meet with the APRC to discuss the Unit's response, and to receive any comments from APRC which will inform the faculty's long-term planning. After a final consultation with the unit and relevant Dean, the APRC will bring prioritized recommendations based on the review before Senate. At the conclusion of each review, the APRC will arrange archival of relevant materials (e.g., unit self-study, external review, unit response, APRC recommendations) in PDF electronic format in the Offices of the relevant Dean and the VPA, and in hard-copy format in the University Archives.

### **Follow-Up**

Approximately three years after the review, and therefore mid-way before the next review, the APRC will initiate a follow-up with the unit. The unit will be invited to prepare and submit a brief report in which members of the unit comment on the consequences of the review and initiatives undertaken in response to it, and respond to any comments from the APRC. In particular, the unit will be asked to describe initiatives and plans until the next review takes place. This follow-up report procedure will normally be completed within 6 months of initiation. Results of this follow-up process will be reported to Senate, and the follow-up report and any comments from the APRC will be made available to Senate. The follow-up report and comments from the APRC will be added to the archived records of the original review.

*\*This document was revised extensively in February 2017, and approved by Senate in March 2017. Note that it draws heavily on the document "Guidelines for Maritime Universities' Quality Assurance Frameworks", as released by MPHEC in 2016. Minor amendments were last approved by Senate in September 2018.*