



Environmental Studies, Bachelor of Environmental Studies (BES), Master of Environmental Studies (MES) and PhD

Cyclical Program Review – 2008 to 2015

Final Assessment Report and Implementation Plan Executive Summary

Reported to Joint-Committee on Quality Assurance: December 4, 2017

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Program Description:

Founded in 1968, the Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES) at York University was the first of its kind in Canada. As an innovative experiment in graduate interdisciplinary pedagogy, with individualized Plans of Study, field experiences, and a qualitative grading system, FES began with the Masters in Environmental Studies program in 1969, including a focus on urban and regional planning. Over two decades later, in 1992, the Faculty expanded and developed an undergraduate (BES) and a doctoral program (PhD).

Environmental Studies	Registration (new intake) 2015/16	Enrolment FTES 2015/16	Degrees Awarded 2016
Bachelor of Environmental Studies (BES)	115	474	96 Hons; 32 90-credit; 4 minor
Undergraduate Certificates	n/a	n/a	56
Master of Environmental Studies (MES)	114	224	90
PhD	14	68	6

Reviewers appointed by the Vice-Provost Academic:

Paul Robbins, Professor and Director, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Dan Walters, Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Nipissing University
Steven Tufts, Associate Professor, Department of Geography, York University



Documentation Provided to the External Reviewers

Prior to the site visit, the external reviewers are provided with the following:

- Dean's /Principal's Agenda of Concerns
- Faculty Overview Statement
- Program Self-Study Brief, which includes program structure, curriculum and learning outcomes, program reflection, enrolment and retention data, resources, student input and quality enhancement opportunities
- Faculty CVs
- University, Faculty and Program planning documents

Site Visit: Monday, November 21, 2016

The review team began their visit with Alice Pitt, Vice-Provost Academic and Barbara Crow, Dean Faculty of Graduate Studies, the Dean, Noël Sturgeon, the Associate Dean Research, Ravi De Costa and University librarians. Following a tour of the campus and Environmental Studies building, the reviewers met with faculty and staff from the graduate program (Liette Gilbert, Graduate Program Director, Ouma Jaipaul-Gill, Graduate Program Assistant Rod MacRae, MES Program Coordinator, Anna Zalik, PhD Coordinator). The following coordinators also met with reviewers: Jennifer Foster, Planning Program Coordinator/Urban Ecologies Certificate, Leesa Fawcett, Associate Dean (Students), Traci Warkentin, Environmental & Sustainability Coordinator Mark Winfield, MES/JD Program, Peter Timmerman, Business & Environment Diploma Coordinator. The reviewers met with 18 staff members and had meetings with undergraduate students and two graduate student groups.

Outcome:

The Joint-Committee on Quality Assurance concluded that the Dean's Implementation Plan adequately addressed the recommendations arising from the review process. Progress on the recommendations will be included in the Follow-up Report due June 2019. The next CPR will launch in the Fall of 2023.

Strengths:

The external review report noted that, "the major area of innovation in the curriculum and delivery of the program, one upon which the identity of the graduate program is centered, is its high level of integration and curricular flexibility." The reviewers noted that graduate... "Program requirements and learning outcomes are clear, moreover, and completely appropriate and in alignment with the relevant degree expectations at the Masters and PhD levels."

The Reviewers wrote, "It must be noted that the research activity demonstrated in the appendices is significant and impressive in terms of faculty grants and output. FES researchers and instructors have an international reputation and publish in over 100 peer reviewed journals."

Opportunities for Enhancement:

The Review Report provided a fulsome and robust discussion of the materials included in the self-study, the Dean's agenda of concerns, and the challenges and issues that were raised during the site visit.

The reviewers made a number of observations and recommendations for the Programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Graduate Programs:

The reviewers noted, "The intensive individual plan of study approach, especially in the MES program, taxes faculty time and labor heavily. The experience of students seeking high-touch supervision absorbs faculty attention, potentially at the expense of undergraduate contact, PhD supervision, and other key activities." They also observed that approximately 40% of students are pursuing the planning option, which is more course focused and meets the OPPI accreditation standards.

With regards to Faculty complement, "The Review Committee did, however, find that there was a mismatch in the allocation of faculty resources. Specifically, the amount of time dedicated to advising and supervising MES students dominates the workloads of several faculty members." They expressed concern about the uneven distribution of advising and supervision amongst faculty.

The External Review Report and the Dean's Agenda of Concerns noted that the time to completion, on average, in both MES and the PhD programs is longer than desirable (more than 6 terms in the MES and more than 17 terms in the PhD). The reviewers indicated the likelihood "that the unusual program structure and the mixed levels of commitment to PhD students, in particular, are contributing to the time to graduation."

The Review Report offers an analysis of the Plan of Study approach for the MES. This has been an innovative part of the curriculum; however, there are concerns. The Report briefly explored the possibility "for creating three paths within the MES program: thesis: course based; and individualized study." They also commented on the high credit load for the programs (72 credits) and on concerns about the complex admissions procedures and potential advising inconsistency for students. The reviewers noted concerns about additional staff resources required to use the in-house "dossier" system and wondered whether there was value for students in these processes.

The reviewers offered the following speculation for consideration: "A more course-focused, separate degree program in planning might be established to meet student demand and ease the overall burden of supervisory labor." They stress that this idea need not result in changes to what makes the existing programs special.

Undergraduate Program

The Reviewers and the Dean noted the recent decline in enrolments in the undergraduate programs. The review report reflected on the student concerns about program flexibility, particularly in light of the prescribed first year courses, and access to the experiential learning opportunities due to time and financial constraints.

Students noted that sometimes upper year courses were not offered when they were ready to take those courses.

The external reviewers were supportive of a potential merger with Geography and Urban Studies and stated that, "A merger of these units would result in a Faculty structure consistent with other institutions." They noted, however, that many groups expressed concern of the demands on faculty and staff resources to facilitate the transition and wondered about central support to undertake this.

Review Report Recommendations

The Reviewers concluded their report with a list of specific recommendations (appended) organized around five areas, focusing on the issues raised in the sections above.

1. Merger with Other Units
2. Undergraduate Program
3. MES program
4. PhD program
5. Faculty Complement

Dean's Implementation Plan

Interim Dean De Costa has provided a Dean's Implementation Plan document that responds to the Reviewer Report and the recommendations made in that report.

Early in his document he makes the following observation, "The review report emphasizes characteristics of FES programs (interdisciplinarity, individualized learning, critical inquiry and experiential education) that comprise our identity and strength, and which manifest themselves in our pedagogy and internal organization.

However, some of the challenges currently facing the programs (recruitment/enrolment and time to completion) must also be attributed to these commitments. Our task then is to reimagine these commitments in ways that enable us to become more effective and sustainable."

He notes, “However, both the reviewers and the program response acknowledge an overarching need to provide more resources to our undergraduate program. Subsequently he makes this statement, “As the previous Dean noted in her Agenda of Concerns, the issues to do with program effectiveness and quality have significant budget implications, most seriously the challenges facing our undergraduate enrolment. While it is the responsibility of the Dean to manage the budget situation, the program responses to the reviewers’ report offers few new ideas to deal with this, in the short term at least.”

And again, when talking about the core characteristics of the Faculty he suggests, “Where our own approach, when understood in relation to other related academic endeavours, might be improved is in our urban and planning offerings. Reviewers suggest a dedicated structure internal to the Faculty be developed in this area, allowing greater visibility and coherence.

The Interim Dean makes notes of the advancement towards a merger with the Department of Geography and the possibility of including the Urban Studies program, although there is work to be done to achieve consensus with both groups.

The Implementation Plan includes a comprehensive chart incorporating the Review Report recommendations, the program response and the Dean’s Plan for implementation; this chart is appended to this report.

A report on the progress of these initiatives will be provided in the Follow-up Report which will be due in June 2019.

Alice J. Pitt
Vice-Provost Academic
York University

Recommendation	Faculty response/action (pages refer to “Responses to Reviewers” report)	Decanal Comment	Responsibility	Progress/ timeline
<i>Undergraduate</i>				
Increase BES recruitment and retention	Increase school visits where possible; maintain strong conversion support; review retention issues.	Growing applicant pool is essential and the Dean will support those efforts. We need to consider international applicants and how to support them.	Dean’s Office, SEM group	2017-
Merge ENVS 1000 and ENVS 1200	Undergraduate program attempted this change in Spring 2017 but did not receive collegial support	1200 in its current configuration is not sustainable. The Dean urges the UCC to reconsider the proposal as part of the merger, addressing concerns raised.	UCC	2017-2019
Consider the “benefits and challenges of over prescribing the structure of the major”	FES adopted a more strongly prescriptive degree structure in 2014; review will need to be done as part of merger process.	Continue close monitoring of effects of earlier changes to program. Merger could see multiple undergrad programs, allowing for greater choice and flexibility for students.	UWG; UCC; FES Faculty Council.	2017-19: working timeline is to have curricular proposals ready April 2018; a complete package of governance and program changes to Senate in Fall 2018.
Appeal to non-BES majors	Consider ways to appeal to undeclared majors.	Identification of courses offered for breadth will be identified as program offerings are developed with the merger; advance inter-faculty collaboration eg Las Nubes, Markham.	UPD; Dean’s office	2017/18
Expand access to experiential education	FES has considerable strength in experiential education but would be	Communicate EE offerings effectively; hire experiential education coordinator; create	Associate Vice President Teaching &	2017/18

	pleased to develop this strength further.	additional EE supports in Faculty eg a Faculty-based T&L Innovation Fund to support EE initiatives; promote further take-up of AIF.	Learning; Dean's Office	
Other BES innovation: capstones, first year seminars...	Merger discussions have encompassed a variety of innovations already	Dean's office is strongly supportive of initiatives which make our undergraduate program(s) more appealing.	UWG; UCC	Through 2017/18, with proposals ready in Winter 2018.
Graduate				
Create distinct graduate planning program, including course-based program	Present challenges are desire to keep POS pedagogy and budget constraints; possible to be taken up in merger discussions.	Urban /planning colleagues seem disinclined to pursue this, though the merger (especially if it includes URST) may make that position unsustainable	Planning Sub-committee; GWG; MES PCC	Through 2017/18, with proposals ready in Winter 2018.
Streamline program requirements including POS	GPD/MES curriculum has presented a package of proposals to make MES administration clearer and less burdensome.	Proposed changes have been passed through Committee of Instruction and have much potential to improve program. However, we have not yet accepted collectively that the "one-size-fits-all" model is not working. We cannot continue to have a large, undifferentiated and very resource intensive program.	GPD; MES PCC	Fall 2017

Strengthen relationships between FES faculty and MES applicants	GPD did assign advisors upon admission to A students but impact appears minimal without follow-up by supervisors	Likely to be driven by changes to graduate funding formula. Dean to encourage faculty members to engage in recruiting graduate students to their research programs/grants.	MES PCC; Individual Faculty members	
Maintain MES enrolment targets	Maintain/grow (p10)	In the short-medium term this is unrealistic and contradicts most of the rest of the report: we have not met existing targets for some years and applicant pool is not deep. Moreover, SHARP means rebalancing undergrad vs grad commitments significantly so grad enrolment needs to be reduced in the short term. P/T option now in small pilot with 2 students.	Dean; SEM group	2018 targets

<p>Develop transition plan to post-GA environment</p>	<p>Responses document suggests it is too late for this (p11).</p>	<p>Graduate Fellowships have considerable benefits, which will become clearer over time.</p> <p>However, faculty researchers will need to seek external funding, leveraging the Fellowships that comprise graduate funding packages where possible.</p> <p>ADR to mentor junior scholars; FES internal research support to create incentives for external grant applications.</p>	<p>Dean; ADR</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>
<p>Address uneven supervisory workloads</p>	<p>The review advocated shifting resources to BES program from graduate programs and this will help. However, unevenness is both qualitative and quantitative. There remains a mismatch between graduate applicants and faculty research.</p>	<p>Dean to take this into account more effectively in making teaching and advising/supervising assignments. Changes to create an “interim supervisor” designation as a way towards better articulation of workload were recently rejected by collegium.</p>	<p>Dean; Committee of Instruction</p>	<p>2017/18</p>