Understanding Quality Assurance Assessment

Faculty of Graduate Studies
Program Adjudication

Congratulations! You and a team of people have just undergone the often long process of developing a new graduate program (degree or diploma). The consultative and planning process has its own culture, involving colleagues who understand each other, usually share a history and a discourse, or through the planning process come to create it. The new program makes good sense to its creators.

Now comes the university and provincial adjudication and approval process, which occurs outside of the group of colleagues who have a history together. There are two types of “outside” venues and cultures: one occurs at the pan-university level of YorkU Grad Studies; the other occurs at the provincial level of the Council of Ontario Universities’ Quality Assurance Adjudication Committee. Through YorkU Grad Studies, your colleagues from different graduate programs and disciplines need to be able to understand your new or modified program, its outcomes, organizational and pedagogical functions, well enough so that they can assess it according to graduate-level standards at York and with an eye to provincial criteria. In this sense, the pan-university committee (APPC) is your “dry run” and “early warning system” for the second external assessment and approval at the COU Quality Council. There, several other professors, often administrators, not from York, who are not used to our culture and norms (and acronyms and histories and …), will receive the new program brief and try to understand it properly in order to assess it.

“Understand it properly”: The Adjudication Committee members of the Quality Council want to understand the new program as you understand it. They are your colleagues provincially, even if you may never meet them; however, they are obligated to assess your written brief according to the terms of the COU’s Quality Assurance Framework.


Those terms appear below in digested and annotated form.

The more that you and the members of APPC understand the way in which your program will be assessed externally – which forms the basis of a recommendation to the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and University for approval, including provincial funding approval, where applicable – the more effective and efficient the pan-university assessment and assistance process can be. The more you understand the two main “outside” iterations and logics of assessment, the better able you will be to write your program brief for assessment and approval not necessarily
or only in the rhetoric and discourse which makes perfect sense to you as program developers, but rather in translation of that rhetoric and discourse, where possible and effective, into writing geared toward the teaching of smart, outside-of-your-discipline readers. They may be professors, administrators, and highly experienced program development assessors, but they are still “new students” of what you have devised on paper.
Quality Assurance Assessment Categories and Logic

- Perhaps strangely, the QA adjudicator’s assessment template does not mirror the template used by you for program development. The organization and numbering of the categories are different, demanding that assessors draw their information from various parts of your program brief. Central to the entirety of the assessment is the clarity of description of the learning outcomes. The better these are lodged in the assessors’ minds (well and happily), the easier assessors can respond positively and productively to most of the assessment categories and logics as presented to them.
- That process puts more pressure on you as a writer of the program development brief to answer as clearly as possible just what the questions on the template ask.

Objectives (2.1.1)
Right off the bat, assessors have to have digested the entirety of your proposal and stepped back from it in order to comment upon the appropriateness of the program to the university (mission and UAP).

- Immediately issues of “fit” and “differentiation” arise. For the latter, an assessor will draw on information in the “need and demand” section of your brief (Sec. 3 and the support letters in Sec. 7). For the former, the assessor aims to address “fit” in the broader context of “Does the university and offering unit have professorial expertise and truly sufficient academic resources to offer this program to students well?” That answer pertains to Sec. 6 of your brief, the list of Faculty and their CVs, descriptions of labs and space, but not only this section. The assessment is holistic as well.
- Are the program’s requirements and learning outcomes “clear and appropriate … in addressing the institution’s own Degree Level Expectations?”

Admission requirements (2.1.2)
The Program’s learning outcomes basically governs how assessors regard admissions criteria. In other words, “given what students are supposed to be able to do and be by the end of this program, what as a minimum do they need to have in their educational past (academic, work, alt-academic, etc.) at the beginning of the program in order to be able to succeed in it?

- Given their outcomes, some programs have a restrictive set of admissions criteria (“these and no others”).
- Many programs have a preferred set, but also “alternative requirements,” particularly relative to students whose undergraduate degrees are well in the past or whose
professional and employment experiences offset and otherwise address a lack of preferred requirements.

- The same logic of description and explanation applies, however. Given the outcomes, why and how are these alternative admissions requirements acceptable?

**Structure (2.1.3)**
As opposed to content in the next section, structure refers to the program design, including requirements, but also governance and any in-program supports – because the assessment logic here too derives from the learning outcomes: “Given what students are capable of becoming from their learning, is the right architecture in place; for instance, sequencing of learning, if appropriate; advising and supervision; program committee governance oversight, maintenance of student progress, etc. To describe and explain a program’s structure is to detail how it is designed and how it will run with annual intakes of student cohorts.

- Are the requirements within the program appropriate, and has the program been well designed so that students have sufficient time and support to achieve the requirements? You want to avoid having assessors worry whether the program is “too hard, too fast; there is insufficient X; they haven’t considered Y” etc.

**Program content (2.1.4)**
The core of a program is its content; the content is crucially pertinent to the learning outcomes. (Teaching and supervision are crucial to their achievement. Research practice straddles both knowledge content and learning skill). Assessors will ask:

- Does the curriculum address the current state of the discipline or area of study?
- Is there anything unique, innovative or creative about the curriculum or its delivery?
- If applicable, what sorts of research components are there? Are they suitable?
- Are at least two-thirds of the courses at the graduate level. Assessors get itchy very quickly the greater the number of undergrad “swing” courses or 5000-level courses. The source of the irritation is improper academic resourcing, which often implicates “planning challenges” at the institution – insufficient interest and investment of administrators and/or faculty.

**Mode of delivery (2.1.5)**
Back to the learning outcomes first. Do they require in-person, face-to-face course delivery, or are blended or wholly electronic formats also appropriate? Assessors are first concerned about the relation of mode to outcomes and only then attentive to the relation between delivery mode and target audience for admission. Often, of course, outcomes, audience, and mode are intertwined necessarily.
Assessment of teaching and learning (2.1.6)

If the articulation of the learning outcomes is the absolute centre from which all adjudication of a program derives, then the very next concentric circle around them concerns the assessment of those learning outcomes within courses and cumulatively across the delivery of a program.

- In this world of QA, outcomes are only as good and useful as they can be assessed (and measured – proven, essentially. See next arrow). Do not scrimp on the explanation of how an outcome’s achievement will be assessed, and why that mode or mechanism of assessment is appropriate.
- Every program is expected via assessment and other results to be able to document in order to demonstrate that students have achieved the outcomes the programs states that it enables for students. “Document and demonstrate” are not made explicit on the program development template, so it can be a surprise when a program brief is returned by the Council and/or when a report is asked for concerning this information, once a program is up and running (usually 2-5 years later and then 8 years later in the cyclical program review). Students’ achievement of the outcomes is usually represented as a range of proficiency; however, grade spans are not the only (or possibly even the best) way to demonstrate the achievement of outcomes. What students do beyond the program (publications, conferencing, community activities) and after its completion (careers) demonstrate well outcome achievement, provided, of course, the “beyond” elements are clearly related.
- Indeed, for programs associated with external accreditation bodies, documenting and demonstrating is probably nothing new, but for others programs this requirement may be a whole new world of thinking, attention, record-keeping, and staff hours, including relating to a politics that is a sign of the times. The good news, however, is that QA Adjudication asks only for one “plans” for documenting and demonstrating achievement of the learning outcomes. Devising a plan is a useful exercise – because, truly, don’t you want to know down the road whether what you say the program is providing is actually doing so in a way that enables students to achieve those provisions? And remember, eight years down the road in a program review, you will need to present this information. It’s best to plan for that documentation and demonstration now.

Resources for all programs (2.1.7)
Assessors look for how programs plan to use existing “human, physical and financial” resources. If new staff, research or teaching professorial resources are required, then everything turns on the decanal and provostial support letters committing in writing to providing those resources. If such commitment is not in writing or vacillates rhetorically too much, then QAC will return the
proposal or seek a “hiring plan” and confirmation report, some specified number of years (usually 2) into the operation of the program.

- The COU is a great support of the necessity of proper resourcing of programs. They do not support duct tape and bandage resourcing; however, that can put program developers between a rock and a hard place if the institution is not on board with resourcing.
- Assessors drill into the details of faculty resources:
  - Do the CVs of program members demonstrate that the faculty are in-field experts with teaching and supervisory experience?
  - Are there any CVs that are there as decoration – namely: a professor is in-field but on leave; or has so many existing supervisions; and/or has never taught in the program or at the proposed level; or the percentage of emeritus or contract faculty is too high to support the amount of teaching and supervision that the program (and the achievement of the learning outcomes for the amount of enrolment intake) requires?
- Resources are not just faculty members. Are the resources of equipment, technology, labs, classrooms, meeting rooms, the library, etc. sufficient?

**Resources for graduate programs only (2.1.8)**
Assessors use faculty CVs to verify “recent research or professional/clinical expertise needed to sustain the program, promote innovation and foster an appropriate intellectual climate.” They’re also looking for a clear indication of “how supervisory loads will be distributed,” as well as “the appointment status of faculty who will provide instruction and supervision.” The issue of supervision may not apply to a diploma as it might for a research degree; instruction certainly does. “Appointment status” pertains to “full,” “associate,” “instructor,” etc., each of which impacts upon ability or type of supervision. Program GPAs and the Academic Affairs Officer in FGS can verify appointment status.

Additionally, some kind of language which affirms the commitment of the faculty members to teach the courses is ideal: “Professor X commits to teaching required course #1 for Y-number of years.” Indeed, such a commitment may not be easy to procure or provide; however, professors may plan to offer X, Y, and Z courses, and new program briefs are precisely documents are products of the planning stages.

Graduate Program resource issues may also include student funding matters. Where appropriate, assessors look for “evidence that financial assistance for students will be sufficient to ensure adequate quality and numbers of students.”
Quality and other indicators (2.1.10)

Somewhat oddly, this category again asks for “evidence of quality of the faculty (e.g., qualifications, research, innovation and scholarly record; appropriateness of collective faculty expertise to contribute substantively to the proposed program)” – which, beyond the seeming redundancy, confirms just how much assessment turns on being assured of the quality of the faculty members for the program.

As a second stress, it asks for more assessment commentary on the relation between “program structure” and “faculty research that will ensure the intellectual quality of the student experience.”

After asking assessors to report on any “other evaluation criteria” which emerge from the proposal brief as pertinent, QA assessment turns to the external reviewers’ reports, if and when applicable. External reviewers’ reports are “not required for new fields, collaborative programs or new graduate diplomas.”

Most of what follows tasks QA assessors with highlighting elements of the external reviewers’ reports, including

- any “issues or concerns ... raised” pertaining to “standards and quality ... including the associated faculty and material resources.”
- any “clearly innovative aspects of the proposed program.”
- any recommendations made by the reviewers about modifications to the program that were considered to be “essential or otherwise desirable”
- any response made by the program to the reviewers’ report and recommendations.
- any response made by the dean or relevant delegate to the reviewers’ report and recommendations.
- any response by the program to the dean’s response

Institutional approval (2.2.9)

- Very importantly, assessors must confirm that the proposal has “received institutional approval through its internal governance process”
Questions?

Please contact the Associate Dean, Academic (fgsadacd@yorku.ca) and the Academic Affairs Officer (wmoir@yorku.ca) in the Faculty of Graduate Studies to discuss further.