Western UNIVERSITY · CANADA

Sociology
Final Assessment Report & Implementation Plan
September 2023

Faculty / Affiliated University College	Social Science	
Degrees Offered	Master of Arts (MA) Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	
Date of Last Review	2014-2015	
Approved Fields	Aging and the Life Course Health and Health Inequality Inequality, Power, and Social Regulation Social Demography and Migration Work, Occupations, and Professions	
External Reviewers	Dr. Victor Satzewich Department of Sociology McMaster University	Dr. Shelley Clark Department of Sociology McGill University
Internal Reviewers	Dr. Catherine Nolan Don Wright Faculty of Music	Stephanie Ann Giza Ph.D. Candidate Medical Biophysics
Date of Site Visit	March 30 & 31, 2023	
Date Review Report Received	April 25, 2023	
Date Program/Faculty Response Received	Program: June 9, 2023 Faculty: June 11, 2023	
Evaluation	Good Quality	
Approval Dates	SUPR-G: September 11, 2023 ACA: October 4, 2023 Senate (for information): October 13, 2023	
Year of Next Review	2030-2031	
Progress Report	June 2026	

Overview of Western's Cyclical Review Assessment Reporting Process

In accordance with Western's Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), the Final Assessment Report (FAR) provides a summary of the cyclical review, internal responses, and assessment and evaluation of the Sociology Graduate Program delivered by the Faculty of Social Science.

This FAR considers the following documents:
- the program's self-study brief;
- the external reviewers' report;
- the response from the Program; and
- the response from the Dean, Faculty of Social Science.

This FAR identifies the strengths of the program and opportunities for program enhancement and improvement, and details the recommendations of the external reviewers – noting those recommendations to be prioritized for implementation.

The Implementation Plan details the recommendations from the FAR that have been selected for implementation, identifies who is responsible for approving and acting on the recommendations, specifies any action or follow-up that is required, and defines the timeline for completion.

The FAR (including Implementation Plan) is sent for approval through the Senate Graduate Program Review Committee (SUPR-G) and ACA, then for information to Senate and to the Ontario Universities' Council on Quality Assurance. Subsequently, it is publicly accessible on Western's IQAP website. The FAR is the only document from the graduate cyclical review process that is made public; all other documents are confidential to the Sociology Graduate Program, the Faculty of Social Science, the School of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies (SGPS), and SUPR-G.

Executive Summary

Established as a separate department in 1966, the graduate offerings in Sociology consisted of an MA program. The PhD program in Social Demography was later approved in 1978. Currently, the MA program in Sociology has two curriculum options: 1) a six-term thesis option; and 2) three-term Masters Research Paper (MRP) option which was later introduced in September of 1999. The PhD program in Sociology is a 12-term program requiring students to take a minimum of 8 half-courses and complete two comprehensive examinations, a research apprenticeship, a thesis proposal, and a dissertation. Over the last 5 years, the average total enrolment of both MA and PhD students was 72 students with about 27 new MA students and 8-9 PhD students annually.

To inform the self-study, the program held a departmental retreat, program townhall sessions and administered a qualitative survey to obtain comments from MA and PhD-level students.

The external reviewers shared a positive assessment of the Sociology Graduate Program. They offer six recommendations with considerations for further enhancement.

Strengths and Innovative Features Identified by the Program

- Opportunity for students to study in one of two Collaborative Specializations - Migration and Ethnic Relations and Transitional Justice and Post-Conflict Reconstruction.
- In the May 2022 survey, students expressed particular satisfaction in the following areas: 1) high quality of supervision/mentorship, overall support from faculty and staff; 2) congenial culture and applicability of content to real-world situations; 3) Interesting course material, assignments and research projects encourage creativity; 4) program progression is supportive of student success (e.g., course availability and flexibility); and 5) excellent departmental support, including funding which contributes to the competitiveness of this program.
- An active Sociology Graduate Students' Association along with social events supported by the department.
    - Graduate students also run their own peer-reviewed academic journal – The Journal for Social Thought.
- The graduate professional seminar (PROSEM), a milestone in the PhD program, exposes students to knowledge related to pursuing a career in sociology in academic and non-academic settings.
- The focus on methods and statistics for social research at both the MA and PhD levels, supported by highly research-oriented and productive faculty members, exposes graduates to diverse research and methodologies, which distinguish this sociology program from others within Canada.

- Recent incorporation of EDID initiatives into all aspects of the program – recruitment, curriculum, hiring, and the formation of an EDID Committee.

Concerns and Areas of Improvement Identified and Discussed by the Program

- Continued focus on ensuring that the program provides the skills needed in the job-market. For instance, greater exposure to multiple software environments and more diverse types of writing assignments.
- Continue to incorporate EDID in all aspects of the program – admissions, curriculum and training, selection of colloquia speakers, and research.
    - Expand comprehensive exam reading lists to incorporate EDID perspective.

Review Process

As part of the external review, the review committee, comprising two external reviewers, one internal reviewer and a graduate student reviewer, were provided with Volume I and II of the self-study brief in advance of the scheduled review and then met virtually (due to pandemic restrictions) over two days with the:

- Vice-Provost of the School of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies
- Associate Vice-Provost of the School of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies
- Associate Vice-Provost, Academic Planning, Policy and Faculty
- Director, Office of Academic Quality & Enhancement
- Dean of the Faculty of Social Science
- Associate Dean (Graduate), Faculty of Social Science
- Department Chair
- Graduate Program Chair
- Graduate Program Committee
- Associate University Librarian
- Graduate Program and Department Staff
- Program Faculty Members
- Graduate Students

Following the virtual site visit, the external reviewers submitted a comprehensive report of their findings which was sent to the Program and Dean for review and response. Formative documents, including Volumes I and II of the Self-Study, the External Report, and the Program and Decanal responses form the basis of this Final Assessment Report (FAR) of the Sociology Graduate Program. The FAR is collated and submitted to the SGPS and to SUPR-G by the Internal Reviewer with the support of the Office of Academic Quality and Enhancement.

Summative Assessment – External Reviewers' Report

External reviewers shared that *"Western's Sociology graduate program is both healthy and innovative and helps the university achieve its larger pedagogical and social objectives. Its commitment to focusing on theoretically informed empirical sociology is admirable, as its commitment to training in methods."*

Strengths of the Program

- Strong commitment to the development of research, analysis and critical thinking skills helps to create an informed citizenry that is well placed to make the positive impacts that Western expects.
- Strong commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. For example, successfully incorporating EDI into the admissions process and contributed to wider Western community EDID discussions.
- Curriculum is especially well-designed to prepare students to continue to work on issues both inside and outside of academia. Further, it addresses a gap in methodological training in sociology in Canada.
- Both MA and PhD graduate students have the opportunity to earn a specialization in either Migration and Ethnic Relations (MER) or Transitional Justice and Post-Conflict Reconstruction (TJ).
- Faculty member research is superb, making important and novel contributions to all five main research areas.
- Many faculty members have connections to federal government agencies, including Statistics Canada and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. This speaks well of academic/government linkages and helps to ensure that the department's research culture promotes innovation and a vibrant intellectual culture.
- The department's success in recruitment is attested by the high percentage of admissions offers that are accepted.
- Varied academic and social events organized by the department promote a supportive and collegial culture among faculty, graduate students, and staff which facilitate learning and enhances the mental health and wellbeing of graduate students.

Areas of Concern or Prospective Improvement

- A need for the development of a mission statement that clearly captures the program's identity, clarifies program fields, and which helps position itself in the future.
- Inconsistent expectations for Masters Research Paper, as guidance varied across supervisors and methodological orientation.
- Opportunity to harmonize expectations for comprehensive exams and the allocation of teaching resources.
    - Possible development course guidelines which identify benchmarks for the number of readings, time spent outside the classroom on homework and projects, and grading.
- Consider required training in both methods to better align with the department's comparative strengths and fully meet the learning objectives.
- Specify how MA and PhD students without a background in theory, statistics and/or methods are assessed and what measures are in place to address potential deficits in these foundational aspects of the program.
- As possible, heighten efforts to attract more international students.
- Supervisory loads among tenured faculty are somewhat unevenly distributed.

Summary of the Reviewers' Recommendations and Program/Faculty Responses

The following are the reviewers' recommendations in the order listed by the external reviewers. Recommendations requiring implementation have been marked with an asterisk (*).

Reviewers' Recommendation	Program/Faculty Response
Recommendation 1*: Develop a mission statement that best captures the department's identity now, which would help in positioning itself in the future.	**Program:** The department engaged in a Delphi process to identify core areas and the department's mission statement which is prominently published on its website's main landing page. The statement is not repeated on the graduate nor the undergraduate pages; however, it can be added to those pages, so it is not missed in the future. The department has had some tension over aligning the four areas of the undergrad program with the areas of the graduate program. A group of colleagues have had concerns with the update despite efforts to streamline and align the two. The alignment to four areas is needed to avoid confusion for students, which was a problem in the past. The alignment is also needed to help the department to effectively pursue opportunities at the university wide level and to attract outside donors and partnerships. **Faculty:** The Dean's office agrees with the department that their current mission statement aptly distinguishes Western Sociology from others. Nevertheless, in the spirit of continuous review, we support including this as a retreat topic.
Recommendation 2*: Consider the extent to which the department seeks to distinguish itself from other Canadian programs: 1) for its empirically based research with a particular strength in quantitative training; and 2) maintaining the department's historic reputation as a leader in social demography.	**Program:** The department will continue to review its course requirements and the content of methods courses; which already has a heavy methods focus in line with other programs in Canada and has few elective options for students. While awaiting the IQAP report, the department has already focused a full segment of a department retreat on this issue and will continue to do so going forward. The department requires two theory courses because of the high number of students that do undergraduate, MA and PhD degrees all in the department and who exhaust theory options required in both the MA and PhD. The department will consider options to pursue on this front. The graduate committee will study U15 sociology departments for their MA and PhD requirements and will look at a handful of R1 (US) methods-focused departments to consider how it can improve course offerings and requirements.

	For both the methods and theory issue, the department will consider working with other units to help offer a wider range of course options and to allow for more depth in either of these areas, and especially to align available courses to the program's stated strength in quantitative methodologies. **Faculty:** While the Dean's office supports the idea of reviewing the depth of quantitative methods training, there is less conviction that the same is required for demographic methods. The department need not be tethered to "historical reputation", but may ponder such as they review their coursework complement. At eight required courses already for the PhD, the Faculty cautions the department about balancing the departmental mission against completion times. The average completion time for the review period seems to be near 6 years for this 4-year program. A pre-program math/stats camp may help avoid this problem and may be something that could be dovetailed with other departments such as Political Science.
Recommendation 3*: Revise the comprehensive exams by considering: 1) a requirement for students to generate a syllabus rather than an essay - considering how such alternative documents would be evaluated and their overall utility for students; and 2) how requirements for these exams could be lowered by completing only one exam, asking fewer questions, making them shorter, or more directly linking each exam to specific substantive graduate courses that are regularly offered.	**Program:** There is broad consensus that the comprehensive examination process in the department should be updated, as discussed in the Spring 2022-2023 departmental retreat. The options discussed were: 1) alternative options to a standard exam, such as developing a course syllabus but there was little interest in pursuing that; and 2) Alternative outputs such as scoping reviews or papers did gain interest. No interest in lowering the number of exams was expressed and some colleagues expressed opposition to reducing the number of exams. **Faculty:** Any review of the comprehensive exams should include consideration of completion times which are quite high, but not necessarily out of step with much of the rest of the Faculty. Time to completion must be balanced against learning outcomes. The program should be completable in four years. This is recommended as a topic for discussion at the upcoming Sociology retreat.
Recommendation 4*: Revise the PROSEM to afford greater flexibility in the timing when students participate in particular sessions. Consider including MA students in sessions pertaining to non-academic topics.	**Program:** The department agrees with this recommendation and is already in the process of revising the PROSEM and aligning it with the MRP student research practicum. **Faculty:** The Dean's office supports reviewing this scheduling.

Recommendation 5*: Rethink the timing and content of the Sociological Research Practicum Milestone by starting it in the fall term.	**Program:** The department agrees with this recommendation but notes that the MA program in fact already does have important milestones in the Fall term that were missed by the reviewers, namely selection of supervisor, and applying to the 2-year thesis stream for interested students. **Faculty:** The Dean's office supports reviewing the content and timing of this milestone.
Recommendation 6*: The department's explanation of how MA and PhD students without a background in theory, statistics and/or methods are brought up to speed should be made more explicit to students.	**Program:** This is a problem that was discussed in the Spring 2022-2023 retreat in line with the revision of course requirements. The department will work through this in tandem with the updating of course requirements. **Faculty:** The Dean's office supports reviewing such background preparation to set students up for success completing in the expected timeframe.

Implementation Plan

The Implementation Plan provides a summary of the recommendations that require action and/or follow-up. In each case, the Graduate Program Chair, in consultation with the SGPS and the Dean of the Faculty is responsible for enacting and monitoring the actions noted in Implementation Plan.

Recommendation	Proposed Action and Follow-up	Responsibility	Timeline
Recommendation #1: Develop a mission statement that best captures the department's identity now and help position itself in the future.	• Update the mission statement on the graduate and undergraduate webpages. • Integrate a review of the department's mission statement, and substantive areas, to ensure coherence across undergraduate and graduate programs as part of an upcoming retreat.	Chair Graduate Chair	By September 2024
Recommendation #2: Consider the extent to which the department seeks to distinguish itself from other Canadian programs: 1) for its empirically based research with a particular strength in quantitative training; and 2) maintaining the department's historic reputation as a leader in social demography.	• Review the course requirements at U15 and R1 schools. • Gather information on theory and methods courses in other departments at Western to help expand options for students. • Propose options for the department to discuss at a dedicated retreat and to adjust curriculum for the next academic year.	Chair Graduate Chair Graduate Committee	By September 2024
Recommendation #3: Revise requirements related to the comprehensive exams.	• Integrate this topic in an upcoming program retreat. • Propose options for discussion in a departmental assembly to be adopted as soon as possible.	Graduate Committee Graduate Chair Chair	By September 2024

Recommendation #4: Revise the PROSEM to afford greater flexibility in the timing when students participate in particular sessions. Consider including MA students in sessions pertaining to non-academic topics.	Continued revision of PROSEM. • Align with the MRP student research practicum.	Chair Graduate Chair Graduate Committee	By September 2024
Recommendation #5: Rethink the timing and content of the Sociological Research Practicum Milestone.	Continued review of the content and timing of Sociological Research Practicum Milestone.	Chair Graduate Chair Graduate Committee	By September 2024
Recommendation #6: Make explicit the department's explanation of how MA and PhD students without a background in theory, statistics and/or methods are brought up to speed.	• Propose options regarding the preparation of students without the background in statistical analysis prior to program commencement. o Discuss at an upcoming retreat. o Adjust curriculum for the next academic year.	Chair Graduate Chair Graduate Committee	By September 2024

Other Opportunities for Program Improvement and Enhancement

- Consider funding for a fifth year to allow students greater flexibility with the timing of courses, particularly elective courses.