Western UNIVERSITY · CANADA

Geography and Environment
Final Assessment Report & Implementation Plan
August 2026

Faculty / Affiliated University College	Faculty of Social Science	
Degrees Offered	Master of Arts (MA), Master of Science (MSc), Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	
Date of Last Review	2017-2018	
Fields of Study	Environment Development and Health Geographic Information Science Physical Geography Urban Studies	
External Reviewers	Dr. Philip Kelly Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change York University	Dr. Melissa Lafreniere Department of Geography and Planning Queen's University
Internal Reviewers	Dr. Nica Borradaile, Associate Dean, Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry	Cherin Chung, PhD Candidate, French Member of SUPR-G
Date of Site Visit	March 12-13, 2026	
Date Review Report Received	April 9, 2026	
Date Program/Faculty Response Received	Program Response: May 1, 2026 Faculty Response: May 6, 2026	
Evaluation	Good Quality	
Approval Dates	SUPR-G: September 21, 2026 ACA: October 6, 2026 Senate (for information): October 23, 2026	
Year of Next Review	2033-2034	
Progress Report	June 2029	

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 Graduate Geography and Environment 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 Subcommittee on Program Review - Graduate (SUPR-G) and the Senate Committee on Academic Curriculum and Awards (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 cyclical review process that is made public; all other documents are confidential to the Graduate Geography and Environment Program, the Faculty of Social Science, the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (SGPS) and SUPR-G.

Executive Summary

Offering degrees since 1946, the Geography and Environment graduate program is research-focused with a vision and aspiration to excel at multi-disciplinary science. The program participates in several collaborative specializations, namely: Environment and Sustainability (MA, MSc, PhD), Hazards, Risks and Resilience (MSc, PhD), Migration and Ethnic Relations (MA, PhD), and Planetary Science and Exploration (MSc, PhD). The thesis-based 2-year MA and MSc programs are designed to provide students with the education and skills required to examine human-environment relationships from geographical perspectives. The PhD program is designed with the same foundation as the MA and MSc degrees, while developing the skills needed to independently conceptualize, design, and implement research for the generation and dissemination of

original knowledge and methodologies. In 2023-2024, total enrolment was 16 for the MA program, 18 for the MSc program, and 46 for the PhD program.

The self-study was informed by a curriculum mapping exercise as well as focus groups with graduate students and a dedicated alumni survey. In addition, a 2024 review of the department's Comprehensive Examination process, consisting of interviews with current and former graduate students across all fields, was also considered.

The external reviewers shared a positive assessment of the Geography and Environment Graduate program. They offer eight recommendations with considerations for further enhancement.

Strengths and Innovative Features Identified by the Program

- Graduate students have a strong track record of external scholarships, including Vanier, Trudeau, CGS and OCS at the Masters and Doctoral level, with 15 recipients in 2025.
- All students are required to take 9998 Debates in Geographic Thought to ensure students have a better understanding and appreciation of Geography as a discipline.
- The PhD features a distinctive comprehensive examination model that is integrated with the dissertation proposal, combining assessment with meaningful progress toward the student's research and contributing to comparatively timely completion.
- The annual fall cohort community building retreat for all new graduate students.
- Experiential learning opportunities through internships and research partnerships across private, NGO and government sectors largely funded by MITACS.
- Professional development workshops and events are offered through the year such as; 'Preparing a Scholarship Application', and 'Field Work Preparation'.
- Students and alumni share strong perceptions of degree value, substantial employment or further-study outcomes, and development of skills such as critical thinking, project management, interdisciplinary collaboration, networking, and EDI awareness.

Concerns and Areas of Improvement Identified and Discussed by the Program

- Despite the important research and contributions to solving current societal problems, graduate student enrolment has declined by 19% since 2017.
    - Projected declining enrolment expected due to reductions in funding for graduate students in Western budgets.
- Given the limited enrolment and resources, the program needs to rationalize graduate course offerings, reconsider fields of study in relation to faculty expertise, and adjust programming.

- Students identified differences in funding packages, supervisor-supported funding, summer support, tuition deductions, and scholarship adjustments, creating uncertainty and uneven access to resources.
- Expanding experiential learning opportunities available to students beyond those funded by MITACS.
- Career development, job readiness, networking, and connections with employers or industry could be further enhanced.
- PhD candidates pursuing academic careers would benefit from more structured opportunities to teach courses or course components and build a teaching dossier.

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 in-person over two days with the:

- Vice-Provost, Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies
- Associate Vice-Provost, Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies
- Vice-Provost, Academic Planning, Policy & Faculty
- Director of Academic Quality and Enhancement
- Administrative Coordinator, School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
- Western LibrariesTeam Members
- Dean, Faculty of Social Science
- Associate Dean Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, Faculty of Social Science
- Department Chair
- Graduate Chair
- Graduate Affairs Committee Members
- Program Faculty Members
- Graduate Program Staff
- Graduate Students
- Geograd Society Members

Following the site visit, the external reviewers submitted a comprehensive report of their findings which was sent to the Program and Decanal Office 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 FAR. The FAR is collated and submitted 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 the program has an "*enviable record of achievement, including: moving forward goals of EDID and Indigenization; faculty research excellence in terms of publications, research grants and reputation/recognition; student success in timely program completion, scholarships, publications and post-graduation trajectories; a caring, engaged, and extremely competent staff complement; and a culture of collegiality."*

Strengths of the Program:

- Impressive record of research output by both faculty and graduate students. Current faculty publication records attest to this success, as do major research grants, research chairs, graduate scholarships and alumni trajectories.
- Significant progress in advancing equity, diversity, inclusion, decolonization, and Indigenous-focused scholarship.
- Community engagement locally and internationally with strong collaborations in Africa and Latin America.
- A robust and comprehensive PhD Comprehensive Exam that appears to prepare doctoral students for successful and timely completion.
- Laboratory facilities that are well established in both the physical and social science areas of the discipline.
- Collegial culture that supports community, inclusion, and productive working relationships.

Prospective Areas of Improvement for the Program to Consider

- Plan strategically for eventual faculty renewal in established areas of research strength that need to be preserved.
- Graduate admissions numbers should be considered in relation to their effects on research capacity, program culture, and the maintenance of program excellence.
- In the absence of sufficient TA and PhD teaching opportunities for all students in the programs, the Department should find other types of work (e.g., research assistants, or internships) to ensure that all students are able to meet the learning outcomes.
- Consider how the learning outcomes might be revised to provide a clear distinction between the program requirements or nature of the research that are expected for an MA versus an MSc.
- Promote the program in more systemic ways – to increasingly recruit beyond Western undergraduate students.

Summary of the Reviewers' Recommendations and Program/Faculty Responses

The following are the reviewers' recommendations in the order listed by the external reviewers.

Reviewers' Recommendation	Program/Faculty Response
Recommendation #1: Develop more extensive opportunities for professional (i.e., non-academic) networking and preparation among students who are contemplating diverse pathways after competing their graduate degrees. Creative solutions might include a speaker series that pairs academics and practitioners.	**Program:** The department is introducing a new Professional Graduate Seminar Course for all first year/ incoming students. This course has a component which will focus on non-academic career opportunities. Re-introduce our Speaker Series to include: both academic and non-academic speakers. The department would host two events per term - typically one academic and one non-academic. **Faculty:** We are pleased to see the program's plans to develop a professional graduate seminar that includes a discussion of non-academic career opportunities, as well as the program's plans to revitalize its speaker series.
Recommendation #2: Conduct marketing and outreach in order to expand the applicant pool for the program. This will enable the program to consider all applicants on an equal footing, ensure the highest possible quality of applications, and enhance the programs general visibility and reputation.	**Program:** In 2024, in collaboration with the SGPS, the program developed a comprehensive Communication Plan. The purpose of this plan was to reach a wider applicant pool by advertising and promoting the program and faculty complement, as well as research opportunities. This was put on hold in 2025 due to budgetary uncertainty. Going forward, the department will revisit this Communication Plan and ensure implementation. **Faculty:** The proposed communication plan to be implemented by the graduate affairs committee is an excellent idea that the decanal team is pleased to support.
Recommendation #3: Strongly recommend that the administrative staff position dedicated fully to the graduate program be sustained going forward as the position serves as the key contact for students who are joining the graduate community and navigating the program.	**Program:** Due to the upcoming retirement of the current Graduate Administrator, the position has been advertised and will be filled. **Faculty:** The decanal team is pleased to have been able to support the recruitment of a new graduate program assistant for the Geography and Environment program. It is anticipated that a number of well-qualified candidates will apply for the position.

Recommendation #4: Ensure support and integration for recently hired Indigenous faculty members, including: a clear workload agreement that recognizes the added service and administrative roles undertaken by Indigenous faculty, especially when cross-appointed; the provision of meaningful and flexible funding to facilitate community engagement and relationship building; and, the integration of Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum to avoid a 'silo-ization' in which Indigenous research exists solely in its own separate research cluster.	**Program:** We are incredibly excited to be a leading centre for Indigenous Geographies in Canada, and we recognize our responsibility to meaningfully integrate and support the research and efforts of this growing cluster — not only in words, but in structure, resources, and recognition. Three of the four Indigenous faculty became jointly-appointed July 2024, so this year will only be the second year that these faculty members' workloads will be determined with the Director of Indigenous Studies. A priority in this process will be ensuring equitable workloads that explicitly recognize the added service and administrative roles undertaken by Indigenous faculty in joint-appointment roles. To support this, the Department will continue a timely annual review of each Indigenous faculty member's responsibilities across Geography & Environment and the Indigenous Studies Program, ensuring that commitments across both units, the broader university, and affiliated communities remain equitable and sustainable. On the question of funding for community engagement and relationship building, we recognize that the current departmental budget is insufficient to meet this need, and that internal grants and individual external funding applications alone place an undue burden on Indigenous faculty. The Department also recognizes that Indigenous scholars frequently bring non-linear and non-traditional academic pathways to their roles, which includes time spent as practitioners or in extended community-based learning of traditional knowledge. While this represents a significant and often undervalued asset, such trajectories can present real challenges to establishing a research funding profile. The Department further recognizes the additional costs routinely associated with community engagement and relationship-building that are central to Indigenous research methodologies. As a more sustainable path forward, the Department commits to providing mentorship opportunities for Indigenous faculty at all career stages, and to actively advocate for dedicated internal research funding. The Chair will continue to advocate through the departmental budget and institutional channels to this end. The Department already has compelling evidence that meaningful integration is possible and working. The Department also acknowledges the broader challenge of incorporating Indigenous perspectives within a discipline historically grounded in Western epistemologies. While each of our existing clusters, Physical Geography, GIS, and Urban Geography, engages with BIPOC communities and equity concerns, they remain largely rooted in Western knowledge frameworks. Each cluster will be encouraged to meaningfully integrate Indigenous theoretical perspectives into their sub-disciplinary work, directly addressing reviewer concerns about siloing effects. Critically, the Department is committed to supporting this process in ways that

	do not generate additional labour for Indigenous faculty members. At the same time, the Department affirms its ongoing commitment to the Indigenous Geographies cluster as a distinct and vital sub-discipline within Geography and Environmental Studies — recognizing that integration across clusters must complement, not replace, dedicated space for Indigenous scholarship. **Faculty:** Those of us in the dean's office are keenly aware of the key role that Geography and Environment plays in fostering Indigenous geography, which has had incredibly beneficial downstream effects on Indigenous graduate education in our Faculty. Indeed, Geography and Environment has done much to cultivate talented junior Indigenous scholars and scientists. Their success in this regard is the result of hard work and dedication, and we recognize how important it is to support the work of Indigenous faculty members to prevent burnout. We support the program's plans to support key faculty members and monitor workload issues and will engage in ongoing consultation with both Geography and Environment and Indigenous Studies to ensure that this vital intellectual resource is protected and nurtured.
Recommendation #5: Recommend that one-year Master's degree be rolled out with caution. The new and tighter list of course offerings (designed for the two-year program) limits the possibilities for a one-year coursework-heavy program. The possibility of losing research intensity - as students undertake less rigorous projects and faculty are diverted away from supporting two-year students - is a real cost and would have implications for reputation, research output and faculty retention. If a one-year Master's is to go ahead, we would recommend exploring a focused skills-based program, for example addressing GIS applications across a range of urban, health and environmental issues.	**Program:** The program held further discussion at the faculty's monthly council meeting regarding the proposed one-year course-based master's program and conducted an electronic vote to determine whether to proceed or pause the initiative. A majority of faculty members voted to move forward. Implementation will take place in two phases. In Phase 1, the program will launch a general one-year course-based program. In line with the reviewers' recommendations, the program will admit only a small cohort in the initial stages. Enrolment may be increased over time, as appropriate. Students admitted to the one-year master's program will not be guaranteed funding; therefore, we do not anticipate any reallocation of resources from the existing two-year thesis-based program. Careful oversight of program growth will allow the program to ensure that resources are not diverted from the research mission. In Phase 2, the program will pursue the development of specialized streams in key areas of geography and environment (e.g., GIS, urban, physical, and health geography). This phase will focus on building a skills-based program. No timeline has been established for Phase 2, as it will require additional resources and careful planning.

	Faculty: The decanal office is pleased that the program is interested in developing a one-year MA and is confident that it can do so without compromising the integrity of Geography and Environment's research excellence. Decanal staff will be available to support the institutional processes needed to launch this program.
Recommendation #6: Explore further collaborative opportunities with the Library in relation to their strong expertise and resources in GIS.	**Program:** The program will invite the library GIS contact to come to the department to host occasional workshops on available library resources and advise on how the department can better utilize these resources. **Faculty:** Plans to bolster the use of library GIS resources are appropriate as are the individuals that will oversee this work.
Recommendation #7: Work towards a budget allocation that would allow senior PhD students to teach undergraduate courses - at least one or two per year. More broadly (and recognizing that this too is out of the Department's hands) we recommend that sudden changes in graduate admission levels should be avoided in order to enable careful management of the impact of any reductions on research programs, reputation and teaching capacity.	**Program:** Budget constraints, as well as union rules, make it nearly impossible at present to offer upper PhD students' opportunities to instruct undergraduate courses. However, the program will provide alternate teaching experiences, such as guest lectures in undergraduate courses, in-person instructional opportunities through labs and tutorials and other such opportunities. The program will ensure graduate students know how to highlight these activities as teaching experiences in their CVs. The program will continue to advocate to maintain graduate numbers at the level necessary to advance research and teaching goals. Currently, budget constraints have resulted in a reduced graduate student intake. The program is working to ensure that the reduction in graduate students and TAs does not impact undergraduate programs. **Faculty:** The program is correct that both budgetary and collective agreement issues constrain programs' capacities to hire graduate students to teach. The dean's office staff support the proposed means of providing teaching experience through other mechanisms.

Recommendation #8: Distinguish between expectations for the MSc and MA degrees by communicating dedicated program elements and/ or learning outcomes.	**Program:** In conjunction with the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the program will schedule a departmental Faculty Retreat to come up with a distinct set of Program Learning Outcomes for the MA and MSc degrees. **Faculty:** The decanal office supports the plans to hold a retreat to discuss the differentiation of the MA and MSc programs in Geography and Environment.

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 are responsible for enacting and monitoring the actions noted in Implementation Plan. Recommendation #3 does not appear in the Implementation Plan as it has already been actioned, as per the program and faculty response above.

Recommendation	Proposed Action and Follow-up	Responsibility	Timeline
Recommendation #1: Develop more extensive opportunities for professional (i.e., non-academic) networking and preparation.	• Introduce a Professional Graduate Seminar Course for all first year/ incoming students. • Re-establish a Speaker Series Committee, which will host two events per term, with both academic and non-academic speakers.	Department Chair; Graduate Chair;	By January 2027
Recommendation #2: Conduct marketing and outreach to expand the applicant pool for the program.	• Revisit the communication actions that were put on hold due to budgetary constraints including social media advertising, Geography-related listservs, virtual open houses, email campaigns, and website updates to include current funded research opportunities.	Graduate Chair; Graduate Affairs Committee	By September 2027
Recommendation #4: Ensure support and integration for recently hired Indigenous faculty members.	• Work with all relevant institutional groups to ensure equitable workloads that explicitly recognize the added service and administrative roles undertaken by Indigenous faculty in joint-appointment roles. ○ Continue a timely annual review of each Indigenous faculty member's responsibilities across Geography and Environment and the Indigenous Studies Program, ensuring that commitments across both units, the broader university, and affiliated communities remain equitable and sustainable. • Provide mentorship opportunities for Indigenous faculty at all career stages, and to actively advocate for dedicated internal	Department Chair; Director of Indigenous Studies; Decanal Office	By January 2027

	research funding through the departmental budget and institutional channels.		
Recommendation #5: Roll out a one-year Masters degree with caution.	• Implement the roll out of a new Masters degree in two phases. Phase 1: launch of a general 1-year course-based program with a small cohort. Program growth to be carefully overseen. Phase 2: development of specialized streams in key areas of geography and environment.	Graduate Chair; Graduate Affairs Committee	By September 2027 (for Phase 1)
Recommendation #6: Explore further collaborative opportunities with the Library in relation to their strong expertise and resources in GIS.	• Invite the library to host workshops on available resources and advise on how these resources can be better utilized. • Continue to collaborate with the library on the planning of GIS Day and include library representatives at the Annual Incoming Graduate Student Orientation.	Graduate Chair	By January 2027
Recommendation #7: Work towards a budget allocation that would allow senior PhD students to teach undergraduate courses.	• Provide alternative teaching experiences, such as guest lectures in undergraduate courses, and labs and tutorials. • Support students with how to highlight these activities as teaching experiences in their CVs.	Department Chair; Graduate Chair	By September 2027
Recommendation #8: Distinguish between expectations for the MSc and MA degrees by communicating dedicated program elements and/ or learning outcomes.	• Schedule a departmental faculty retreat to craft a distinct set of program learning outcomes for the MA and MSc degrees.	Department Chair; Graduate Chair; Graduate Affairs Committee	By September 2027