

Advice on Identifying Bottlenecks and Coping with Cyclical Program Review Delays

- How have others handled or coped with delays – either because of resource issues, structural limitations, or coinciding with busy academic periods?
- How best to handle bottlenecks?

NOTE: The Quality Council also has [Guidance on Timelines for Cyclical Program Reviews](#).

Why is it important to aim for a timely CPR?

Significant delays in the process make the review less meaningful for the program and important opportunities for improvement may be lost. For example, significant delays between the approval of the self-study and the site visit will mean that the external reviewers are considering and commenting on outdated data, as well as that the elements of self-reflection and comments on areas that are deemed as needing improvement and / or deemed to be strengths may no longer be current.

Delays between the site visit and the approval of the FAR/IP can also mean that the implementation of critical recommendations may not happen with the appropriate level of urgency. And delays in the submission of FARs/IPs to the Quality Council may mean that systemic process issues, as identified by the Quality Council, may go unchecked, leading to increased and possibly repetitive interactions with the Quality Council. Finally, a protracted timeline increases the probability of staff turnover both at the program and the Faculty level, making the process more difficult to keep track of and engage with.

What are other universities doing?

- Several universities have moved to a seven-year CPR schedule. This provides flexibility for a small delay, where deemed appropriate by your offices, but still meets the Quality Assurance Framework's requirement that all programs be reviewed at least once every eight years.
- Similarly, others launch the CPR in the seventh year, with the option for programs to request a deferment to the eighth year.
- A number of universities have told the Quality Council and/or the auditors that they have reviewed the CPR Schedule to better balance the distribution of reviews. It is hoped that this realignment of reviews will, in turn, ensure a more even distribution of workloads as well as better engage all Faculties continuously throughout the schedule and avoid some years with a high number of reviews while others had little to none.
- One university that was experiencing some significant delays asked those programs with delayed CPRs to review their previous Final Assessment Report and Implementation Plan and to provide an update on the latter to bridge the gap between the last CPR and the re-scheduled next one.

- This same university also hired temporary support for the QA Office to help deal with the bottlenecks created by delayed CPRs during the pandemic.

Observations from the first cycle of audits

- Several audits commended the oversight function provided by the respective QA Offices, ensuring regular reminders of next steps occurred, as well as providing expert and timely advice along the way.
- The auditors at one cyclical audit were told repeatedly by representatives of the academic units that they received very good support from the Center for Teaching and Learning (particularly with respect to developing language to describe learning outcomes), and the Offices of Institutional Research and Planning and Equity and Human Rights, in terms of supplying timely, useful data required to fill in parts of the review templates. In addition, the units reported receiving helpful advice and assistance from the School of Graduate Studies.
- One university was commended for informing its programs 18 months before the due date of the self-study, giving the programs sufficient time to learn about the process and to complete the self-study.
- A number of audits identified that the oversight function of the respective QA offices, with consistent and clear flow of communications to others, was a significant factor in ensuring timely review processes.
- A suggestion to include the date of the last and next review on the CPR schedule to assist universities in monitoring compliance with the eight-year cycle was also made to a number of universities.
- A recommendation to ensure that all internal responses to external reviewers' reports are complete, that they are undertaken within the timeframe specified in the IQAP, and that communication and approvals related to procedural delays are documented and dated was made in another audit.

Some other general advice

- If you have not done so already, consider investigating how long, on average, it is taking to complete the cyclical reviews of your undergraduate and graduate programs
- Identify reasons for any bottlenecks and / or delays
 - Are there any identifiable trends to these delays?
 - Are there consistent bottlenecks within a QA process?
- Ensure that any lessons learned, such as major roadblocks that delay a quality assurance activity, are captured and used to improve future processes.
- Implement measures to reduce delays
- As mentioned above and in handout 1, consider developing either required or target timelines for the key stages of the CPR process. This will help those conducting a CPR to ensure that each IQAP-required step is met, as well to help keep all program reviews on track and following a similar timeline.

- The responses to the questionnaire on the impact of the pandemic on QA activities provided the following examples of what universities were and are doing to respond to delays, where they exist:
 - No unit is granted a delay of more than one-year;
 - Again, several universities shifted to a 7-year review cycle;
 - For those where a delay was granted and that operate on an 8-year schedule, the next CPR is required to be within 7 years (i.e., 8-years from the “scheduled” review) so that the program remains on track. (NOTE: The Quality Council has also previously commented that this is their expectation for any delayed CPRs);
 - Partner with expert colleagues in Teaching and Learning Centre to help manage the workload; and
 - There is the possibility that more reviews than normal will need to go through governance. The university is monitoring the flow institutionally and have agreed to work with its governance colleagues so that, should it be necessary, they can have an additional 'report on reviews' meeting, to avoid bringing forward too many reviews than can reasonably be considered in a single meeting.
- As mentioned in other handouts, look at whether there is an opportunity to develop a timeline for key CPR steps and due dates that also seeks to avoid the busiest times of the academic year.
- The first cyclical audit of one university found that the deep knowledge of the processes and the QA Manager’s willingness to assist and monitor the units’ progress along the way ensured timely and successful completion of self-studies and program proposals. In addition, this person was found to be an important link between the various academic administrative offices and the academic units during the review processes.