

“Schedule H” Provincial Program Reviews: What You Need to Know

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*Jason Haslam, Noreen Kamal and Katja Fennell
Dalhousie Faculty Members*

The DFA is deeply concerned about current Provincial Government overreach, especially in relation to Schedule H of the [bilateral funding agreement between Dalhousie and the Provincial Government](#), and we want to ensure that all DFA members are aware of the issues involved. Schedule H requires provincially mandated Program Reviews across Dalhousie University that jeopardize our academic mission, and potentially the very existence of many of our necessary and vital programs.

Executive Summary of Conclusions

The province’s and Dalhousie management’s approach to these reviews is anathema to the basic functions, goals, and benefits of higher education. In short:

- These reviews are not evidenced-based.
- There is no objective, arms-length, expert analysis in the process.
- Senate’s vital—and mandated—role in program reviews has been at best minimized, and at worst ignored.
 - Without direct Senate oversight throughout the process, there is significant concern that program assessments will be seen as—and indeed will be—illegitimate.
- This approach is politically and ideologically based and not objective.
- Such an approach should be resisted, not enabled.

Discussion

The [bilateral funding agreement between Dalhousie and the Provincial Government](#) includes several conditions that the university must meet in order to receive the full funding offered, commonly referred to as “holdbacks,” which are detailed in various “schedules” of the agreement. One such holdback is detailed in “Schedule H,” which mandates “Academic Program Review” of all programs at Dalhousie (the other universities in the province have similar mandates). If Dalhousie does not do these, the province will withhold approximately \$6 million in funding.

In the normal course of events, of course, Dalhousie performs Faculty Reviews of Academic Programs for quality assurance purposes, following specific Senate policy that mandates “evidence based” analyses that are also overseen by external, arms-length experts in the field. Such reviews ensure Dalhousie’s programs meet academic standards, ensuring our students’ success and maintaining Dalhousie’s standing.

These provincially mandated reviews, however, especially as they are being managed at Dalhousie, sidestep such evidenced-based, expert review. Both the purpose of and process for these provincially mandated reviews raise concerns for faculty members and their units.

Purpose of Provincially Mandated Program Reviews

- Schedule H describes the purpose as follows: “Academic programming will be reviewed and evaluated for the purpose of modernizing, revitalizing, and rationalizing the programs of the University.” There are several areas of concern here. In a presentation to Deans Council and the Associate-Deans-Academic Council (ADAC), the terms “modernizing,” “revitalizing,” and “rationalizing” were defined (all emphasis from the original presentation):
 - Modernizing: “Programs **ripe for changes** that are focused on **updating or enhancing curriculum, embedding contemporary pedagogy, and integrating technology** to enhance student learning outcomes.” These programs where “Enrolment [is] likely steady or increasing” and “Grads are employable/connection to labour market less of an issue.”
 - Revitalization: “Programs that may need enhancements to **improve their enrolment outcomes, graduation outcomes and/or labour market attachment outcomes** for students.” These are programs that have “Low enrolment but can change to improve,” and where “Enrolment [is] waning or grads less employable,” and where “Improvement [is] required but related to post-graduate outcomes.”

- Rationalization: “Programs for reduction or discontinuation due to low labour market demand, low program enrolment, high program delivery costs, or misalignment with institutional priorities. Programs may also be rationalized if modernization and revitalization efforts over the past 5-10 years have been unsuccessful, allowing the institution to create space for new opportunities.”

Process for Provincial Program Reviews

- At Dalhousie, these programs are being managed by Dr. Leslie Philmore, in her role as AVP Academic, and reviews are being carried out primarily by Deans and their Associate Deans Academic (ADAs).
 - Details of the way in which Deans and ADAs will assess their Faculties’ programs, and how they will be assigned to the three categories above, are at best opaque. We do know, however, that there seems to be varying practices between Faculties. Some Deans and ADAs are consulting with Chairs, some reportedly consulting more widely, and some merely requesting data on enrollments and presumably sorting programs themselves.
 - Other universities in the province—notably St. Mary’s—have struck a separate subcommittee of Senate, in keeping with general practice and policies, including at Dalhousie, which relegate program reviews to Senate oversight.

Concerns

- The purpose and process for these extraordinary reviews are several and should be of concern to the entire campus community. Among them are:
 - **Lack of Senate involvement and oversight**
 - Senate is the body responsible for program reviews in large part because Senate can take a “bird’s-eye view” of programming, recognizing the interconnectedness of programs, for example, as well as how our programs relate to others in the city, province, country, and beyond.
 - As importantly, Senate can ensure an equity of approach and process, to avoid the arbitrary exercise of Decanal or other control over how programs are assessed.

- Any changes that affect the academic mission must go through senate. The Program Reviews will have significant impact on the academic mission, so it *must* go through senate.
- **Pre-defined outcomes**
 - Tied to the point above, by asserting that all programs must be categorized into these three categories, and by tying those categories primarily to market outcomes, these reviews are pre-determining that some programs will be “rationalized,” meaning cancelled, for reasons outside of those covered by Senate policy.
- **Lack of understanding of University education**
 - **Interconnectedness of programs:** tying program viability primarily to “market outcomes” misrecognizes that many programs serve multiple functions on and beyond campus. Foundational science programs provide the foundation for applied programs; Arts and Social Science programs provide both humanities and writing requirements for accredited programs.
 - **Curiosity-driven research *drives* the market:** as we have seen repeatedly, foundational “curiosity-driven” research can develop new methods and new approaches to areas of concern that may, in fact, transform markets in ways that can’t be predicted. New research is often spun-off into new companies that then hires local employees. The conduct of research often requires that students and NS residents are hired. Furthermore, researchers at Dalhousie work closely with companies and other organizations to meet their needs and improve outcomes. All of this has not been considered with these Program Reviews.
- **Institutional autonomy**
 - Under provincial law, universities are autonomous bodies. In the Dalhousie Act, the Board is given the power to oversee the financial concerns of the university, while academic matters are regulated by Senate. There is no provision under which the provincial government has the legal right to interfere with the functions of the latter.
 - Schedule H should never have been agreed to because it fundamentally violates Dalhousie’s autonomy as an institution of higher learning. We recognize that the province

essentially used its financial contributions to Dalhousie to blackmail the administration into agreeing to this arrangement; all the more reason to refuse it, however.

- As [David Robinson, Executive Director of CAUT has said](#) about the Nova Scotia government's moves against university autonomy, "Universities need to have autonomy from government to ensure that decisions they make are based on educational priorities, not political diktat."

- **Methodological Issues with the Program Reviews**

- The concept of market need is perhaps even more problematic. The implied focus on preparing students for perceived labour market shortages today ignores the fact that it is inherently difficult to anticipate real shortages of tomorrow. No university, and for that matter no government agency, can reliably predict how economic conditions will turn out within six months, not to mention within two to three or more years, but any changes mandated could well exist long past those periods. Aiming to educate students for narrowly defined tasks that may not be needed in a few years risks squandering human skills and the potential of future generations. In addition, the concept of "low market need" is in itself unclear and without nuance.

- **Questionable Value of These Reviews:**

- The notion that the value of a university program should be measured by its costs and immediate commercial needs is antithetical to the purpose of universities and does not serve the long-term needs of our students or our communities. A university is not, and should never be, a business expected to operate for profit and address a narrowly defined market need.
- Universities provide services to society at large. First and foremost, they are educating future generations to face societal challenges ahead. They also serve other purposes including cutting-edge research vital for sound policy and economic development in the Province and beyond.
- The need for engaged and informed citizens goes well beyond any specific, short-term market need.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the province's and Dalhousie-management's approach to these reviews is anathema to the basic functions, goals, and benefits of higher education. In short:

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