

Impact of Program Review in Canadian Post-secondary Education: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

Using a qualitative case study research design, this study examined the phenomenon of program review at a mid-sized vocational college in British Columbia, Canada, and the experiences of five department leaders and program coordinators engaging in program review. The study sought to answer the following questions: What is the experience of faculty and program coordinators leading the program review process? Is the program review meaningful? Is the program review manageable? Can a program review process be both meaningful and manageable? Are the meaningfulness and manageability of program review in conflict with one another? Participants recognized the potential impact of program review in terms of creating space for analytic and critical reflection to interrogate the influence of reviews on institutional strategic planning, advocacy for departmental and institutional resources, and assessment of program viability within the broader academic mission of the institution. However, complex power dynamics at play within program review *for improvement* versus *for accountability* were highlighted as a point of tension and resistance that prevents the realization of the ideals of program review.

Keywords: Program review, quality assurance, post-secondary education, strategic planning, faculty agency

Impact of Program Review in Post-Secondary Education

Program review¹ is an integral aspect of quality assurance in post-secondary education, yet much of the published literature is opinion-based or conceptually driven, focusing on theoretical guidelines and frameworks (McGowan, 2019; Skolnik, 2016). Even though program review is embedded in provincial guidelines and educational policies as the gold standard for ensuring the quality of degrees in Canada (Hoare et al., 2024), minimal empirical research has been conducted to evidence the impact of program review on strategic planning (at both the program and institutional level) nor has empirical research interrogated the tensions that exist between administrators, faculty members, and regulators about the purpose of reviews and the potential to bring these partners into dialogue about the appropriateness and accessibility of educational programming.

Program review and quality assurance processes in general have the potential for broad-reaching implications, such as “providing an outlet for questions that tackle the very future of higher education and higher education institutions” (Vettori, 2018, p. 86). Yet, as Hoare et al. (2022) there persists dissat-

¹ To ensure the ongoing currency of programs, post-secondary institutions in Canada must engage in the periodic academic review of programs (normally once every five to seven years), including a self-study undertaken by faculty members and administrators and an assessment conducted by a panel of external disciplinary experts. Program review has been referred to by various names in Canada, including academic program review, curricular review, periodic program review, program assessment, and quality review.

isfaction with the lack of integration of program review findings into other planning processes, such as budgeting, assessment and strategic planning. As a result, the notion of program review action plans “collecting dust on the shelf” is so ubiquitous that the concept is normalized as an expected outcome. The purpose of this paper is to describe a conceptual model whereby teams of faculty members receive education and training from quality assurance practitioners and educational developers, access to institutional resources, opportunities for cross-departmental collaborations and collective advocacy to increase the capacity of faculty members to implement improvement goals resulting from program reviews. Design/methodology/approach The authors theorize that a professional learning community is a meaningful approach to program review and present a conceptual model – the Academic Program Review Learning Community (PRLC) described, there is ongoing discontent with the ability of these processes to impact institutional planning. This can be exacerbated by misalignment with planning and review cycles and a disjunction of data collection for planning and review purposes. These disconnects can be overcome by engaging administrators and faculty members in a variety of educational quality processes (Groen, 2017) and linking program review to budgeting and planning to contribute to “fair and transparent institutional processes” (Davison et al., 2009, p. 44). While it is widely accepted that program reviews should be integrated with institutional planning, this is not always reflected in the experience of participating faculty members (Barak, 2007; Coombs, 2017).

Institutional Impact

While program review is already considered a best (and even expected) practice for ensuring quality, institutions are seeking to make the process more robust “by qualifying guidelines and instructions about the process in order to use results for more strategic purposes, such as demonstrating impact” (McGowan, 2019, p. 53). However, questions persist as to whether program review can be both manageable and meaningful, whether the time and effort are justified (Neufeldt et al., 2023), and the extent to which program review actually leads to improvements in student outcomes and experiences (Senter et al., 2020).

Scholars have noted a disconnect between program review findings and institutional planning (Conrad & Wilson, 1985; Coombs, 2017) despite having been discussed as a potential source of strong institutional data many decades ago (Mets, 1995). The impact of program review as a potential source of data for institutional planning was taken up again by Bresciani (2010), who advocated for institutions to systematically and strategically gather learning outcomes assessment data to inform strategic planning. More recently, Jayachandran et al. (2019) attempted to address this gap by identifying practical measures for program reviews that could be used for institutional decision-making processes, and Hoare et al. (2024) later detailed an approach for analyzing external program reviews to inform educational planning. However, these examples are theoretically driven, and their impact has not been empirically tested.

Faculty Impact

Notably, existing research on faculty members’ experiences of program review – the primary constituent group responsible for program review – is sparse (Mussawy & Rossman, 2018; Senter et al., 2020). Opinion papers have noted a lack of clarity about either the purpose of quality assurance or the ways in which these processes can foster faculty members’ commitment to quality (Groen, 2017), or that faculty members may perceive quality assurance as a “bureaucratic process that impedes their activities” (Vettori, 2018, p. 85), or “another hoop to jump through” (De Valenzuela et al., 2005, p. 2244). In their study of sociology departments and program review, Senter et al. (2020) found that faculty believed most of the time was spent creating extensive program review reports, rather than directly enhancing the student experience, which they argued constituted a misuse of valuable resources.

Considering that research has demonstrated the vital role of faculty in both the assessment of student achievement of learning outcomes and the use of assessment data to inform curricula and program development as well as improvements in teaching and learning practices (Ebersole, 2009; Lindauer & Coward, 2021; Weiner, 2009), it behooves educational administrators to ensure that program review processes are both manageable and meaningful for faculty members. As Openo et al. (2017) noted, “a QA [quality assurance] report is not the end result of an assurance process. It is the beginning of a change process that is intended to lead to improvement in the student learning experience” (p. i).

An overarching theme within the program review literature is the importance of collaboration between departments and administration (Harlan, 2012; Lock et al., 2018; Senter et al., 2020). Robert J. Barak and Barbara E. Breier suggested incorporating a regular assessment of the entire program review system into the review schedule in order to ensure that the system itself is as efficient and effective as the programs under review. Barak and Breier's seminal book on the goals and processes of program review has widely influenced the standards for reviews; however, their proposed "meta-review" has not yet become a regular element in most higher education institutions. Results from a meta-review undertaken at a small and private liberal arts college demonstrate the utility of such an institutional-level assessment. The results reveal that the quality--and even the purpose--of program review can shift over time, and that review policies and guidelines need to be revised regularly to remain current with emerging external expectations and changing financial environments. (Contains 5 tables, 4 figures, and 3 footnotes.. This typically involves pan-institutional offices of institutional research, quality assurance, and centres of teaching and learning, as well as the department under review. A handful of conceptual models have been proposed for collaborative and appreciative approaches to program review across various levels of leadership (Hoare et al., 2024; Groen, 2017; Lock et al., 2018), yet only a small number have been empirically tested.

Harlan (2012), implementing a concept first introduced by Barak and Breier (1990), conducted a case study at a small, private, liberal arts college in the United States of America of a meta-review (review of the review process) with the intent to "review, realign, and reenergize the program review system at the critical transfer from the first [review] cycle to the second" (p. 743). Harlan found that while program review had an overall beneficial impact (e.g., the review process provided time and space for department discussions and major curricular revisions based on external validation), there were barriers to success in the post-review stage of the process, in particular that follow-up after the review was often "spotty" (p. 748). Notably, Harlan also found that "momentum often dissipates after the site visit, and by the time the external report arrives, it receives little attention" (p. 750). Harlan concluded that collaboration between the administration of academic departments is required to enable administrators to allocate adequate funding towards both program review and resulting improvements, and faculty to focus on areas such as curriculum that they most closely control. Similarly, Lock et al. (2018), in a reflective case study, explored their own involvement in program review at three levels of leadership (associate dean, course coordinator, curriculum development specialist) and found that successful review requires personnel at various levels and commitment, and that, to maintain engagement, "it is important to talk about expectations, time commitment, and responsibility so that people can establish manageable and acceptable workloads" (p. 127).

Administrators and faculty members often hold differing views about the quality and purpose of post-secondary education (e.g., primacy of, *for revenue generation* or as *a service to the public*), allocation of institutional resources, and administrative and faculty roles within a collegial governance framework (Hoare, 2024). Moreover, Canadian post-secondary institutions face a myriad of pressing challenges, such as declining government investment in post-secondary education, increased regulatory requirements, and an emphasis on labour market outcomes. These challenges occur alongside the need for educational institutions to interrogate their role in perpetuating colonial practices of truth-finding and knowledge-creation (Mourad, 2017). With its multiple spaces for collaborative reflection, program review can serve as the catalyst for bringing administrators and faculty members together to critically evaluate educational programming at this pivotal moment.

Much of the existing scholarship on program review in higher education focuses on process and structure, as opposed to institutional impact. In response to the lack of existing scholarship, grounded in critically reflective and dialogic practice, this paper shares findings from a study that sought to explore faculty members' experiences leading departments through the process of program review at a publicly funded college in British Columbia, Canada, and analyzed the responses for both the manageability and meaningfulness of program review. Several recommendations for changes to educational and administrative policies and processes are offered.

Methodology

The research explored the phenomenon of program review at a mid-sized vocational college in British Columbia, Canada, and the experiences of department leaders and program coordinators engaging in program review. The study was guided by one overarching research question and four interrelated issues:

1. What is the experience of faculty and program coordinators leading the program review process?
 - a. Is program review meaningful?
 - b. Is program review manageable?
 - c. Can a program review process be both meaningful and manageable?
 - d. Are the meaningfulness and manageability of program review in conflict with one another?

Institutional Context

In British Columbia (BC), the responsibility for ensuring that legislated quality assurance standards for higher education are upheld sits with an independent advisory board, the Degree Quality Assessment Board (DQAB), which operates under the BC Ministry of Post Secondary Education and Future Skills, establishes the requirements for program review in the province, such as a cyclical review period typically occurring once every seven years, including a self-study undertaken by faculty members and an assessment conducted by a panel of external disciplinary experts. DQAB further requires that program assessment examine the continuing appropriateness and accessibility of program structure (e.g., admission requirements, method of delivery, curriculum), as well as the quality of the teaching and learning environment and student outcomes.

The study took place at a mid-sized publicly funded vocational institution situated in the downtown core of an urban centre. The college offers approximately 50 programs, from bachelor's degrees to micro-credentials, with over 90% of programming at the certificate and diploma level, and includes academic, professional, technical, and artistic programming as well as continuing studies and adult basic education. Program review is centrally administered through the Office of the Vice President Academic, and the process is detailed within educational policy. Program review usually takes one year to complete; however, the duration may vary based on departmental capacity and the size of the program. The timelines for program reviews are built around the fiscal year, so that action plans can be prepared before the funds are dispersed. Program review is comprised of four steps: a departmental self-study, an external review, a summary report, and an action plan for implementing recommended changes.

The process is led by a program review steering committee, which is chaired by an instructional associate from the Teaching and Learning Centre, and includes the dean of the School, the department leader, and a representative from the Office of Institutional Research. Other members vary by department size and may include faculty members or instructors, support staff, and other administrators as appropriate. The external review panel is recommended by the steering committee and selected by the Vice President Academic; the panel generally includes a combination of three academics, community members, industry or employers with expertise in the field.

Researcher's Positionality

The study was undertaken as part of a Master of Education thesis research project. The principal investigator was both an emerging quality assurance scholar and a member of the college at which the study took place. At the college, the principal investigator worked with program coordinators in a dozen program areas, supporting and guiding them in developing, implementing, and evaluating courses and programs. As an insider, the researcher was close to the interpretations that participants gave to their reality. This insider or emic perspective is often viewed as "closer to practice" (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2016, p. 116) and seen as appropriate for educational research. The principal investigator's knowledge and experience leading program review processes in post-secondary education can also be viewed within qualitative research paradigms as an asset that increases the dependability and credibility of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021), given the interpretive nature of qualitative research. Additionally, scholars like Jarrell and Kirby (2024) have noted the key role played by quality managers in leading, evaluating, and influencing quality assurance processes in post-secondary education; however, their voices are noticeably underrepresented in the literature.

Qualitative Case Study

A qualitative case study methodology was used to explore the stories of five department leaders and

program coordinators who participated in program review between 2018 and 2023. In exploring the experiences and individual perceptions of faculty members, the study sought to derive meaning and uncover assumptions underlying the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of program review, focusing on agency, power dynamics, and social structures within the context of a vocational college. As the program review process at City College [pseudonym] can be viewed as a bounded system, the analysis of the experiences of a college faculty leading program reviews aligns with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) definition of a case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 3).

Participants

Twenty-five current or former faculty members and program coordinators were invited to participate in the study, each of whom had been a department leader or program coordinator at the time of program review between 2018 and 2023. Of that number, five agreed to participate in the study. The five participants represented a diversity of gender identities, places of origin, years of experience, and racial ethnicities. Additionally, the participants represented a variety of program areas and departments, including trades, university transfer, professional development, and adult basic education. Department leaders are defined as elected faculty members within their areas of expertise, and program coordinators are administrators in continuing education and professional development. Table 1 introduces the study participants; note that pseudonyms are used in place of names to protect participants' anonymity.

Table 1

Summary of Participant and Programs

Participant	Department	Description
Jamie	University transfer and academic upgrading	A department leader in an academic upgrading and university transfer department. Jamie collaborated with Kira and a third department leader in their program review, which involved three separate departments and approximately seven overlapping programs, including associate degrees and entry pathway programs. Jamie's department has approximately 30 full and part-time faculty members.
Kira	University transfer and academic upgrading	A department leader in an academic upgrading and university transfer department. Both Jamie and Kira's programs struggle with understanding exactly how many students they serve, as many students in their departments declare a major when they enrol at the college and then shift focus without declaring this to the institution. Kira's department has approximately 10 full and part-time faculty members.
Px007	Continuing education and professional development	A program coordinator in the continuing education and professional development department. Px007 participated as a department leader in two program reviews, both in part-time evening/weekend career-development certificate-level programs aimed at working professionals or those wanting to get into a new career path. The continuing education and professional development department is revenue-generating and offers both non-credit courses and short programs, and credentialed certificates and diplomas, which are subject to the same quality assurance measures as programs in the other departments at the college.

Participant	Department	Description
Seth	Literacy and adult education	A department leader of a developmental program that offers tuition-free upgrading in basic math, computer, and literacy skills for adults. Seth's department has approximately a dozen faculty members. Over the past decade, funding to the programs has suffered a significant loss, both at the federal and provincial levels, which resulted in many layoffs.
Shane	Specialized trades program	A department leader of a very small, specialized trades training program. Shane's department runs one certificate program with fewer than 40 students per year, and fewer than two full-time faculty members, including Shane as department leader. The niche program that Shane runs is very small, limited by space constraints within highly specialized lab classrooms.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analysed following Creswell's (2017) steps for qualitative data analysis: preparing and organizing data, exploring and coding, and building descriptions and themes. An inductive approach to data analysis was implemented; that is, rather than using pre-established codes, they were identified during data analysis. In preparing and organizing, the interview and focus group data were transcribed directly, with notation following an abbreviated version of the Jefferson system as described by Sullivan (2012), who explained that some discursive markers are useful guides to the emotional register "for the purposes of examining subjectivity and emotion" (p. 69). It has been proposed that a dialogic approach to qualitative data analysis is best understood through narratives (Sunday et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2012), which offers the reader the opportunity to develop understandings of how participants in a study perceive their situation in the context in which they are experienced (Whedbee, 2009). When analyzing this study's data, this approach was adopted to emphasize the voices of participants and stay true to their experiences.

Exploration and coding of the data were emergent, using key moments and sound bites (Sullivan, 2012), or short, concise, and impactful excerpts or quotes extracted from interviews and focus groups, to develop codes and seek patterns and applied a mix of direct interpretation and categorical aggregation. Guided by Stake's (1995) analytical approach for instrumental case study, the experiences of each participant were carefully examined, and converging experiences were presented under the same category. First, key moments and sound bites were highlighted, then, as patterns emerged, categories and subcategories were created and assigned to key moments. The analysis resulted in four themes and 18 subthemes (Table 2).

Table 2
Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	# of Key Moments
Purpose and impact	Critical and analytic reflection	13
	Influence on institutional strategic planning	11
	Engagement and feedback	16
	Program improvements	20
	Advocacy for resources	9
	Assess program impact and feasibility	4
	Equity Impact, Indigenization, and Decolonization	8

Theme	Subtheme	# of Key Moments
Project Structure and Process		45
	Training, support, and coordination	17
	Resources and supports	10
	Data	14
	Leadership and oversight	4
	Reputation of Program Review	3
Time and Workload		27
	Timeframe	14
	Release time	15
Power and Relation Dynamics		23
	Faculty consensus and commitment	9
	Agency	15

Note. The count is not an indication of importance or significance. Additionally, the majority of the participant comments that were identified as key moments related to multiple themes and subthemes.

Findings

The participants' narratives were categorized into four themes: purpose and impact, project structure and process, time and workload, and power and relational dynamics. It is not within the scope of this paper to describe each theme in depth; rather, this paper focuses on "purpose and impact" and "power relations and dynamics." As noted in the introduction to this paper, much of the existing scholarship on program review in post-secondary education focuses on process and structure; hence, this paper shifts attention to the *impact* of program review as evidenced through the participants' stories. Many of the stories involved the purpose and impact of program review in terms of creating space for analytic and critical reflection, interrogating the influence of reviews on institutional strategic planning, advocating for departmental and institutional resources, and assessing program viability within the broader academic mission of the institution.

Critical and Analytic Reflection

Participants described program review as a reflective activity that affords department leaders the opportunity to step outside of daily operations and teaching to evaluate the program from different vantage points and through new lenses. Some participants found that they made new discoveries about their programs, and others were able to validate assumptions that they had made or inherited. Some participants used the program review as an opportunity to reflect on and document the history of the program where no record previously existed.

Several participants spoke of the unique opportunity to take a step back and away from daily business and engage in active reflection, as Jamie stated, "It's very easy to get really bogged down in the details and the admin work of the job, and so it was really valuable to step back and look at the big picture of what are we doing. What are we trying to do?" Shane shared a similar sentiment:

It's quite enjoyable, I mean, knowing I have a better picture of... not only our program, but also... our program within the college. And because we're such an old program, lots of this stuff is not really up to... not as detailed as what required by today's standard.

The reflective nature of the review expanded participants' holistic understanding of their programs. Seth illuminated that they "have more tools for thinking analytically and reflectively about the different aspects of our department." Additionally, participants spoke of the opportunity to consider the programs through different lenses, both critically and analytically, in a way that they had not done prior to the

review, as Px007 described:

... certainly, it was an opportunity to introspect and to... look at the program through different lenses, through different perspectives, from instructors, from students, from externals. [There] was data that I was exposed to during the running of the programs but when you compile all of that, when you dissect it, when you have analyzed it, it gives you...a different style of thinking about the program. Here are some of the strengths of this program, and here are some gaps that we need to address.

The participants highlighted the value in learning to consider operational aspects of a program alongside curriculum and pedagogy, and in carrying that knowledge forward, as Seth went on to describe:

It was my first time going through something like a program review, so it was useful for me just to learn process-wise how that works and I think that I carry those sort of structures in my mind now as I go forward working in the department... it's common to kind of zero in on... curriculum and instruction and I hardly ever think about money stuff for example and so something like a program review really forces you to think about all the different components of your department almost as equals, in a way.

Some participants reflected on the value of looking at the historical aspects of their programs and departments. As Seth outlined, they enjoyed the opportunity to go back to the roots of the program:

I really liked digging through some of the historical records that were in my office ... 40 years worth of... typewritten documents, and, I never get time to go through what's sitting on all around me, which is like an archive for our department... and I only really just skimmed the surface because I didn't really have time to do a deep dive into everything that was in there. But ... being able to go through, old documents and learn about how we used to do things compared to how we do things now and understanding ... some of the roots behind why we do what we do.

For Shane, there was great value in creating a historical record of their program, given that none existed, and in making updates to the program while honouring the history, as they outlined:

[One] thing about the review is that I [found out] a record of the program... evolving, how it evolved. Our program is ... almost as old as City College, like, 47 years. And luckily... I learned under the original program leader who started the program 47 years ago. So, I know the whole... history. And when we do review, we find out the school doesn't have much record... we kind of fill out the plan, like storyteller... So now we have a record of like how the program evolved... Because back then, the target student. You know, that it's different than, you know over the years, it is changing, the student, you know... it's different. But I was surprised that the school didn't have a record. Right?

Researcher: [So you] took this opportunity to create a historical record,

Shane: Yeah and luckily the person, [the] two of us, have been around, so ...we know the whole history.

Influence on Institutional Strategic Plans

The participants spoke of the action planning phase as one of the most fulfilling and fun aspects of the process, and one of the most frustrating. Program review has the potential to influence institution-wide strategic planning, or to at least inform department-level strategic plans; however, this was not always the story that participants told. In some instances, there were institutional plans that simply did not take the findings of the program reviews into account, and in other instances, carefully-crafted recommendations that participants brought forward were neither accepted nor denied, but simply ignored. This lack of responsiveness left some participants with a sense of alienation and a desire for connection to institutional

priorities and initiatives.

A significant proportion of participants conveyed a disconnect between the recommendation and action plans in their program reviews and the plans developed and implemented in the institution at large. Seth detailed this dynamic and a feeling that “there is a plan to do something drastically different with [the department], and I am curious how much of that is based on the review.” They predicted by saying, “I bet none of it is based on the review; whatever they have in mind... well, then what’s the point?”

Similarly, during a focus group, Kira and Jamie discussed the experience of having recommendations and action plans ignored:

Jamie: I don’t think we got a no, it was just... shouting into the void.

Kira: Yeah it wasn’t even ...“no, we can’t do that” it was,“ohh, that’s nice”...at best... as an entire report.

Jamie: It existed... (inaudible)

Kira: I think I would have loved it if they said OK, so we can’t do the facilities thing that you asked for, but we’re going to add it to the campus plan and then you know, 5 to 8 years out, maybe we’ll think about it... that would have been more than what we got.

Jamie: Yes, some feedback from above... other than... oh, great job, that’s nice... but, no meaningful... yeah, we really like this one. This one is, I’m sorry no, we’re never going to get an improvement in your marketing... meaningful feedback, would have made it feel like there was a point... to some of this.

Kira: Meaningful connection to other campus initiatives or college initiatives would have been huge.

Kira suggested having “better parameters around what was likely to be a feasible recommendation” that could have some connection to an institutional plan, or “another reason to do project #36 on our strategic plan... I didn’t see that connection.”

Participants lamented the lack of mechanisms to evaluate the implementation of action items over time. As Px007 explained, an evaluation cycle might “make it worthwhile to have it on the record and for the college to come back and evaluate. Here is the program review. What are some of the barriers or challenges you faced in achieving your action plan items?” In this way, Px007 went on to convey, departments may be able to address what action items they were not able to achieve, “so that gets captured in. And then if 10 different programs at the college have that, and they’re all saying marketing, marketing, marketing, then we know... that needs to get more attention or more funding at the college.”

Making recommendations and action plans was described as one of the most important aspects of program review, yet participants noted their frustration with what they perceived as a disconnect between the program review and action planning process and institutional strategic planning.

Advocacy for Resources

Program review can provide a unique opportunity to access institutional resources. Participants characterized the review and action plan as both an opportunity to identify issues and bring them forward, and a tool with which to advocate for resources to address those issues. Yet, they also highlighted challenges in accessing and requesting resources, such as a lack of clarity around curriculum development funding applications and parameters. During a focus group, Seth and Px007 discussed the value of having the action plan as a reference to make desperately required facilities upgrades for the benefit of students:

Seth: I think the most useful part of it was being able to point to it and say “give us money because our report said this.” So, for example, there was end-of-fiscal money that [the dean] let us know that existed. And so one of our recommendations was we needed laptops dedi-

cated to be loaned out to our students. And so, we used our recommendations to ask for end-of-fiscal money and we got it. We got a bank of 10 laptops. So that was pretty awesome, and I'm going to try again... when capital requests are due next time around, I'll ask for tables and chairs that are nicer and don't have nails sticking into people's butts or that kind of thing. I'm going to go for it... It's like kind of a utilitarian, just way to get, other resources.

Researcher: And... who benefits from that utilitarian...

Seth: I think that students do for sure. Yeah.

Px007: Yeah, something similar happened to my program review as well. The first one that I led was IT [information technology] and we were running a lab that had not seen any computer upgrades since 2004 or 5.

Px007: Something like that... and this is an IT program.

Px007: So as Seth said, right, we got that as a recommendation to upgrade the labs to a more modern lab that students can use, and now you can point out, well, here is the recommendation. So here is the funding that is linked to that directly.

The majority of participants discussed challenges in accessing resources to make changes, particularly in applying for adjudicated curriculum development funds. Jamie, Shane, Px007, and Kira presented two separate and interconnected issues around curriculum development funding. First, although the program review timelines were set to align with curriculum development proposals, the proposals themselves were perceived as under-supported in time and guidance. Second, the program changes that were recommended through the review did not fit easily into the curriculum development (CD) proposal framework, as Kira noted,

...and I think for us too, one of the areas where perhaps some support and information was missing was around the parameters for CD funding, because so much of our action items were not directly around improving a particular course or set of courses or even a Program Curriculum Guide. It was more around other elements of program quality and... we were able to get enough support to see how it fits... in an application... because we had [a] kind of lack of... follow through and, frankly, support and information and transparency from Admin. It felt very bizarre.

Participants suggested that a benefit of program review was a chance to advocate for resources more effectively than in their daily operations, yet they described frustration around how these requests were handled.

Assessment of Program Impact and Feasibility

Participants raised the concept of program review as a surveillance tool, or a mechanism by which to assess program impact and feasibility. In addressing impact and sustainability, participants discussed accountability to what and for whom? Seth lamented,

...because my program has been shrunk quite drastically over the past 10 years, I think there just tends to be a lot of... paranoia or might not even be paranoia... might actually be... legit suspicion about does the college want us to stay around? So I think a lot of faculty were uncertain about, is program review a euphemism for... an evaluation of whether or not we're worthy of continuing to exist... I think that that sort of cast, or it had a big impact over the rest of the experience of the program review.

Seth went on to question program review as an accountability tool but questioned who the process should

be for:

...the idea behind the process is really crucial and it's a part of the accountability too, and, I think... our main accountability should be to our students but I think our accountability was definitely... trying to make ourselves look acceptable to administration, and it would be really cool if we could really focus a lot less on what does admin want, what does government want, and really focus on... what do students want, and put most of the resources around that. I think that would completely change the process.

There was some discussion about program review in the larger, sectoral context, which Kira acknowledged as a broader and higher-level accountability exercise:

...some of the value of this work is checkboxes for ministry reporting, that we can say “these programs have gone through this review this recently and it was this deep”. And so it's check-boxing for that reason that's a higher, much higher-level ask for money and a much higher-level “look, we're doing a good job.”

The majority of participants agreed that one of the purposes of program review is to demonstrate accountability, whether that be to students, the institution, or the government.

While it is not within the scope of this paper to reflect on the absence of reciprocity in the participants' stories—with the discussions of accountability noted as one-way, as opposed to a shared responsibility—it should be noted that some of the most emotionally charged accounts that participants shared were around agency and time, for themselves as department leaders, and for the faculty members involved. This was primarily raised in stories involving setting timelines that worked for the department and individuals, flexibility around criteria, metrics, and methods, and the ability to implement recommendations. A common sentiment was that the recommendations that were made were outside the locus of control of individual departments or faculties, suggesting a gap in collegial governance where faculty play a primary role in the academic activities of a post-secondary institution, including the management and governance of academic programs, and the formulation of educational policies and procedures for the functioning of the institution (Eastman et al., 2022).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore faculty members' experiences of quality assurance processes, particularly formalized program review, a policy-driven review process in British Columbia, Canada. In keeping with a critical lens, the analysis focused on agency, power dynamics, and uncovering underlying assumptions that may be impeding the impact of program review for institutional planning.

Agency, Power Dynamics, and Impact

Participants recognized the potential for program review to influence institutional strategic plans, but did not necessarily experience the process as such. Participants enjoyed creating recommendations and action plans, but did not universally experience agency in the planning process. While scholars agree that program review has the potential to be meaningfully connected with strategic planning (Barak, 2007; Coombs, 2017; Hoare et al., 2024; Vettori, 2018), as Hoare et al. (2022) highlighted, “there persists discontent with its capacity to impact institutional planning” (p. 402). Program review can be meaningful, but disconnection between this process and institutional planning and initiatives can undermine its impact for faculty members.

Participants additionally found program review to be a tool to bring forward issues that had been known for some time and to advocate for resources to address those issues. Challenges in advocating for resources included under-supported transitions from the review process to the implementation of recommended changes, and recommendations that did not fit neatly within curriculum development funding frameworks. Participants described being able to exercise agency to create some program improvements while observing a disconnect between review findings and institutional planning and resource mechanisms; this disconnect resulted in a sense of alienation between faculty and the institution. While there is

widespread acknowledgement that program review processes should be linked with resource allocation (Davison et al., 2009; Kleniewski, 2003), endorsement from administrators is critical if this is to be the case (Senter et al., 2020).

Some participants described program review as a mechanism through which programs are assessed for impact on student outcomes, as well as financial feasibility. They questioned whether the centrally impacted or interested parties of accountability within the review were students, faculty, administrators, or policymakers. The power dynamics at play within program review *for improvement* versus *for accountability* were highlighted as a point of tension and resistance for faculty. The academic literature suggests a growing trend towards accountability in the United States of America and Canada (Kelchen, 2018; McGowan, 2019). While this accountability is often towards funders, government ministries, or provincial or state boards and tied to performance-based funding (Barak, 2007), review processes should start with student needs and, ideally, faculty members should see program review as part of their academic responsibility to their students. Davison and colleagues (2009) summed this conflict up neatly: “Neither faculty nor staff is best motivated by statutory regulations and threats of external accountability, but rather by the desire to see students succeed” (p. 9). Program review can be meaningful, but it is not always experienced as such, particularly when perceived as an accountability measure for which students are not the beneficiaries of the accountability.

Recommendations

Much can be learned from the participants’ stories about strengthening the linkage between program reviews and institutional planning, and thereby increasing the impact of reviews. Based on the research findings, several recommendations are proposed for improving educational policies and processes related to program review (Table 3).

Table 3

Recommendations for Increasing Impact at the Institutional Level

Recommendation	Research Finding
Create explicit connections between program review and institutional planning	Program review can be meaningful, but disconnection between this process and institutional planning and initiatives undermines the meaning for faculty members.
Ensure that program review is framed as a reflective activity	Program review can be a tool for advocating for resources and may be more meaningful if focused primarily on program improvements.
Hold students as centrally impacted parties when addressing accountability	Program review can be meaningful, but it may not be when perceived as an accountability measure, particularly if faculty members do not see students as beneficiaries of the accountability.
Distinguish between aspirational recommendations and achievable action plans	Program review is a meaningful process but can result in action plans that are neither meaningful nor manageable.
Encourage departmental ownership over the aspects of review processes and outcomes for which they can exert influence	The leadership and oversight of program review processes impacts and should consider both the manageability and meaningfulness. Program review can be most meaningful when departments have agency in determining criteria, methods, and timelines

To support the implementation of these recommendations, program reviews should be considered as collective activities and incorporate collaborative efforts across levels of the institution. This could be achieved through program review learning communities (Hoare et al., 2022) that bring together a range of institutional supports, as well as create opportunities for cross-disciplinary insights.

Conclusion

While this study sought to fill the gap in the existing scholarship on program review by bringing to light faculty members' stories of leading departments through the process of program review, it is not without its limitations, and the findings should be considered within the context of a publicly funded college in British Columbia, Canada—a province that details policies and guidelines pertaining to program review, while providing some latitude to institutions in terms of the tools and measures used to assess program quality.

The small number of study participants allowed for a rich, in-depth examination of participants' experiences; however, the sample was not representative of all the departments within the institution, and thus, the meanings and implications that could be drawn are somewhat restricted. A mixed-method study reaching across jurisdictions could reach a vastly larger cross-institutional and cross-jurisdictional participant pool and could explore not only department leaders' experiences, but also other parties involved in program review, including quality assurance practitioners, faculty members, students, and administrators.

There is much potential for further research. While listening to the interview and focus group recordings, the principal researcher noted significant changes in the participants' pitch, tone, and intensity and recognized a range of perceived emotions such as frustration, annoyance, and excitement that emerged when the participants discussed program review. Future research should incorporate affective discourse analysis to investigate the emotional toll that faculty experience when engaging in program review. If faculty incur an emotional tax when engaging in program review, educational policy and program review processes may need to be revised to accommodate this. Affective discourse analysis could be coupled with a critical policy analysis that explores the policy and decision-making aspects of program review. A document analysis could include templates and institutional policies, as well as provincial policies related to program review. Since much of the existing research is policy research, a study that explores both participants' experiences and social actors that influence policy creation and implementation could draw out rich and nuanced meaning.

Program review has the potential to be critically reflective and transformative. When bridges are constructed across all levels of the institution, they can have an impact at the institutional level. Further studies are suggested, with the hope that research conducted will both enhance understanding of quality assurance in Canadian post-secondary education and challenge existing structures and mechanisms that, for too long, have been perceived with skepticism, cynicism, and fatigue.

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