

Graduate Program Quality Assurance (QA) Review: 2024-25

School of Public Health
University of Alberta

Graduate Program Review

Programs: Master of Arts in Community Engagement; Master of Public Health; Master of Science in Public Health; Doctor of Philosophy in Public Health

Date of Review: January 23, 2025

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Program Strengths
The School of Public Health enjoys a positive reputation, born of its stellar contributions to research and its enduring commitment to community-engagement. It offers robust graduate academic programs in both thesis/dissertation and course-based formats. Faculty are collegial and collaborative within the school, the College of Health Sciences, and across the university. Well-established partnerships in the community support the research, teaching, and engagement missions of the school. The School of Public Health is committed both to their students and to the universal goals of community, health equity, inclusivity, and diversity. These are also fundamental to public health, suggesting the school will remain a beacon regardless of looming challenges to these fundamental human values. The school has demonstrated a remarkable ability to pivot and adapt to a changing funding model, including faculty stepping up and being willing to take on greater teaching responsibilities and consider new enrollment models in expanded and new programs. The school is fortunate at this time to have exceptionally strong, transparent and trusted leadership from an interim dean and the Associate Dean Education, with strong support from faculty. A robust strategic planning exercise is underway that faculty are optimistic about. The School of Public Health has enormous strength and talent in research as evidenced by a large number of funded research chairs, three research centers and high levels of external funding. This high level of research activity creates a rich learning environment for students in the MSc, PhD and MACE-thesis programs, who work directly with faculty engaging in all aspects of the research process. The generation of knowledge to support the practice of public health and related disciplines whose work promotes health is essential for the evolution of public health. It is also a major contributor to the School's reputation. The school is distinguished by its strengths in community-based programming and a commitment to truly engage with the community. This is a major differentiator for this school and a major draw for students. It also positions the school well within the university as a visible contributor to quality of life in the province. The addition of the MACE program and its

associated faculty is a decided strength of the school and a distinguishing feature. The breadth of practicum opportunities and the network of partnerships across the community attracts students, is consistent with the school’s mission, and promotes the visibility of the school. The school enjoys a positive reputation of quality programming and academic rigour among students. It attracts a very diverse student body, including students from outside Canada and enjoys high rates of retention and timely graduation. Students expressed an appreciation for the diverse opportunities available to them and for the experiential learning and practicum opportunities at the national and international level. As noted, students also shared that the school’s commitment to community-engagement and community-engaged research and practice are a significant attractor; this is clearly a differentiator and a decided strength of the school. Students expressed confidence that their programs were rigorous and were ably preparing them for their desired career goals. Both research and course-based program students were optimistic about their futures.
Teaching and Learning Environment
Recommendation: The faculty should carefully consider and monitor the implications of the decision to not pursue CEPH re-accreditation and ensure that their public health curricula continue to meet or exceed the expectations and needs of the field.
School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: The School of Public Health acknowledges the importance of maintaining rigorous standards in public health education, even as we move forward without CEPH re-accreditation. To ensure that our programs continue to meet or exceed field expectations, particularly the Master of Public Health (MPH) program, we will continue to utilize CEPH competencies as a valuable framework while we develop our own set of quality metrics tailored to our institutional goals and public health priorities. These new metrics will serve as tools to evaluate and ensure that MPH competencies are being effectively achieved. Additionally, we are closely monitoring the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) as they work to develop their own public health competencies, and we remain committed to aligning our program with emerging national standards to ensure our graduates are well-equipped to address evolving public health challenges. In May 2025, Interim Dean Johnson is attending a meeting of all Deans and Directors of public health education programs in Canada, where the PHAC competencies will be discussed.
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response: GPS will provide advice and support to SPH on ensuring that the new quality metrics developed meet institutional graduate regulations and standards.
Recommendation: In a challenging and rapidly changing environment, carefully consider opportunities to expand revenue-generating opportunities, the trade-offs they involve, and their alignment with a longer term vision for the school. What unique foci will distinguish U of A SPH in the future? How can you be the best you can be in a few focused areas? Consider carefully some of the following possibilities: • joint degree programs (MPH attached to other related professional degrees) • pathway degrees from undergraduate to graduate degree programs

- a Bachelor of Public Health, building off the success of the BHSc but with a clear focus on public health
- additional interdisciplinary certificates, (graduate and undergraduate) in collaboration with faculty from other colleges on topics of importance to the health of the region

School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: The School of Public Health is actively exploring strategic opportunities to expand our academic offerings in ways that align with our long-term vision while also responding to the evolving needs of students and the public health workforce. One of our key initiatives includes aligning our undergraduate offerings, where possible, with the developing Bachelor of Health Sciences (BHSc) degree in the College of Health Sciences, for which the School has taken an important leadership role in advancing the planning and governance. The proposed BHSc degree will have a concentration in population and public health, which will provide important information in terms of the demand for a potential future undergraduate public health degree. Further, we have envisioned creating a streamlined pathway that allows BHSc students to accelerate into our graduate programs with advanced standing, enhancing both recruitment and retention while fostering a strong foundation in public health early in students' academic journeys.

To further support this growth, we are developing new undergraduate courses that build on areas of existing strength, with a view toward offering embedded certificates in collaboration with other faculties. These interdisciplinary programs are designed to reflect the complexity of public health issues and prepare students to address them from multiple perspectives. Simultaneously, we are diversifying our graduate offerings by developing online graduate certificates, which will increase access, generate revenue, and provide flexible, stackable learning options for working professionals. Through these efforts, the School aims to distinguish itself by being a hub of innovation in public health education, with a focused yet adaptive approach to programming.

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response & Action Plan: We will support this action plan by providing more targeted and focused support and resources to enhance both recruitment and retention of graduate students through the Graduate enrolment, marketing, and recruitment capacity developed recently in GPS, to encourage both U of A students and students from across Canada consider these pathways for graduate studies.

Recommendation: The school should carefully monitor how the growing undergraduate enrollment affects its capacity to offer rigorous graduate programs.

School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: The School of Public Health recognizes the importance of maintaining the quality and rigor of our graduate programs while responding to the growing demand for undergraduate education. As part of our current strategic planning process, we are placing a strong emphasis on two areas: 1) curricular review for the MPH, MSc and PhD programs, and 2) faculty renewal and expanding our teaching capacity. In particular, we are prioritizing the hiring of additional Academic Teaching Staff (ATS) to support the delivery of undergraduate courses without compromising the excellence of our graduate offerings. This approach ensures that our graduate faculty can remain focused on advanced instruction and research, while our undergraduate programs benefit from dedicated, high-quality teaching. By carefully monitoring enrollment trends and proactively adjusting our instructional resources, we are positioning the School to effectively manage growth at both levels and sustain a high standard of academic excellence across all programs.

To further support this, we are planning to more rigorously map the courses and curriculum we have been rapidly developing at the undergraduate level, including courses that would be part of the CHS BHSc concentration in population and public health, with a view to enhancing the learning at the graduate level. This would also facilitate our exploration of a potential pathway from the BHSc to allow accelerated entrance to the MPH.
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response & Action Plan: GPS will provide more granular and detailed program-specific enrolment data to support SPH in this endeavour. We will track and provide data to the School on graduate student-to-faculty ratios within the programs to identify if these are increasing to a point that could potentially affect individualized mentorship and supervision and student experience. We encourage the School to assess its capacity for high-quality graduate supervision and mentorship, considering the impact of faculty workload. This may involve exploring strategies for effective co-supervision or team-based mentorship.
Recommendation: Students were drawn to the breadth of opportunities offered by the school but expressed concern that the requisite coursework for all specializations was not available. Consider ways to streamline (and modernize) advertised specializations in the research degree programs and ensure that curricula align with what is being advertised. Perhaps a model similar to the MPH, where students enter a general masters or doctoral program and then specialize through GEC's or a carefully curated list of pertinent courses that are always available.
School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: The School of Public Health is actively engaged in a strategic planning process that includes a comprehensive review of the MSc and PhD course requirements and specializations. As part of this review, we are considering streamlining and modernizing our research degree specializations to better reflect student needs and ensure consistent course availability. One key idea under discussion is exactly this suggestion, aligning our MSc and PhD programs more closely with the recently revised MPH model, where students could enter under a general program and pursue specialized expertise through graduate embedded certificates (GECs) or a curated list of consistently offered courses. This revised model would provide greater flexibility and ensure that all students have access to meaningful specialization opportunities without being hindered by scheduling/cancellations of low-enrollment course offerings. We are also evaluating whether some low-demand courses should be removed from degree requirements or offered instead as special topics courses to preserve content without overextending resources. These efforts are aimed at maintaining the integrity and appeal of our research degrees while improving the student experience and administrative efficiency.
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response & Action Plan: GPS supports streamlining the graduate programs to enhance the graduate student experience and welcomes the idea of reducing the number of low-enrolment courses to support quality and predictability in graduate course offerings.
Recommendation: Consider whether to continue the commitment to problem-based learning (PBL) in the course-based MPH program if continued expansion of enrollment is required, and in light of limitations on space. Faculty should carefully consider options for delivering a robust MPH program to larger numbers of students, particularly those who

are remote from the campus. One option to consider is modifying the core curriculum so that only parts of it employ a PBL approach. It might be possible to have students organized into smaller groups and have several faculty engaged, each leading a group in a more focused unit of time, for the problem-based learning portion of the curriculum. Senior research faculty could be engaged if the topics being addressed are more closely aligned with their areas of expertise.

School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: The School of Public Health is actively considering innovative ways to enhance the delivery of the MPH program in response to growing enrollment and evolving student needs. One promising approach under discussion is dividing the MPH cohort based on students’ prior work experience, where we are aware of a bimodal distribution of students pursuing this degree. This would allow us to tailor the problem-based learning (PBL) experience to those who would benefit most, particularly students without substantial practical background, while offering alternative learning models to more experienced learners. The reviewers’ suggestion to segment students into smaller PBL groups, each led by faculty members with aligned expertise, is a compelling model that could preserve the value of PBL while expanding cohort size and maintaining educational quality.

Additionally, we are exploring whether expanding the MPH program and maintaining a robust PBL model are mutually sustainable goals. As our undergraduate course offerings grow and generate additional revenue, there may be an opportunity to instead reduce the size of the MPH cohort and intensify its PBL focus, rather than dilute it. At the same time, we are developing plans to transition several courses to online delivery, for domestic and international offerings, a context where PBL is less feasible, requiring us to design alternative instructional approaches that still emphasize critical thinking and applied learning for public health action. Overall, we remain committed to delivering a rigorous and adaptable MPH program that meets the diverse needs of our students and leverages the strengths of our faculty.

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response & Action Plan: Innovative thinking in redesigning how the course-based MPH could be offered to allow for effective, efficient, inclusive, and experientially-focused program delivery will provide opportunities for a broader range of potential applicants to the program and allow for responsible growth.

Student Experience

Recommendation: Enhance communication with graduate students to ensure they are informed about relevant changes in a timely manner.

School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: We acknowledge this feedback as something we were already aware of and concerned about. We recognize that in some cases a perception of limited communication by students has been complicated by the annual turnover of SPH Student Association (SPHSA) Executive and student representatives, particularly for issues with a longer timeline between decision and implementation, such as the decision to not pursue CEPH re-accreditation.

The School of Public Health is committed to strengthening communication with graduate students and ensuring they are kept informed about relevant developments in a timely and transparent manner. In support of this, we have already initiated quarterly meetings between the Associate Dean, Education, the Education Office, and student representatives from

the MPH, MSc, and PhD programs. These meetings are intended to provide a regular forum for two-way dialogue, where students can raise concerns and receive updates on program planning, curriculum changes, and other academic matters. The Dean and President of the SPHSA also meet on a regular (i.e., monthly) basis, but again, annual turnover in the SPHSA president might limit year-to-year communication.

We are taking steps to formalize the roles and responsibilities of student representatives on both the Faculty Council and the Committee for Educational Program Planning (CEPP). These positions have long existed but will now include clearer expectations around communicating with their cohorts. Recognizing that the annual turnover of student representatives can hinder continuity, we are exploring ways to ensure effective knowledge transfer between outgoing and incoming reps, such as an annual orientation session for these student reps on the important School committees. To further support accurate information sharing, a representative from the Education Office will attend monthly student group meetings to provide clarity and help dispel any misinformation. These efforts reflect our ongoing commitment to fostering a responsive and transparent academic environment.

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response & Action Plan: One example approach to ensure effective knowledge sharing and dissemination among new and continuing students on graduate student and education committees is a mentoring model based on junior and senior students serving on committees to bridge any potential informational gaps and experiences in communication and dissemination of updates and information.

Recommendation: Students expressed concerns about the school giving up accreditation, particularly for those students interested in working in other countries, having a degree from an accredited school does provide an indicator of quality. The school should consider encouraging students to sit for the Certified in Public Health (CPH) exam. This certification was developed with the express purpose of professionalizing the field, increasing its credibility and status, and encouraging life-long learning and continuing professional development. The exam assesses foundational knowledge and competencies and certification has been earned by persons engaged in public health all over the world.

School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: The School of Public Health acknowledges the concerns some students have expressed regarding the decision not to pursue CEPH re-accreditation. Prior to this decision, the School engaged in extensive consultations with students to communicate the intent and gather input. Unfortunately, due to the one-year turnover in student representative positions on the Faculty Council and the Committee for Educational Program Planning (CEPP), there are gaps in awareness. To address this, the school is taking steps to formalize student representative roles and improve continuity and communication, as outlined in our broader student engagement initiatives.

An internal survey conducted at the time of the decision (October 2023) revealed that a majority (60%) of students, particularly those in research degree programs, were not concerned about the move away from CEPH accreditation. The school remains committed to upholding high standards of academic quality and enhancing student communication moving forward.

We recognize that CEPH accreditation is required for students to be eligible to write the Certified in Public Health (CPH) exam. As such, we want to ensure students are aware that after Fall 2025, graduates will no longer be eligible to take the CPH exam through our program. We will continue to explore ways to support students in pursuing professional development and certification opportunities, and ensure they are well-informed about how program changes may impact their career pathways. Importantly, we will also highlight in

communications that there are actually relatively few Canadian programs that are accredited by CEPH, including larger schools at UBC and U of Toronto.

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response & Action Plan: We recognize the importance of student consultation as well as effective communication of substantial changes that may affect students and acknowledge the important work by SPH in providing professional and career development and certification opportunities.

Faculty and Supervision

Recommendation: It is critical for the school to have the opportunity to recruit assistant and associate professors to strengthen or enhance research and curriculum foci in the school.

School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: The School of Public Health fully agrees that faculty renewal is essential to strengthening our research and teaching capacity, as well as ensuring long-term program sustainability. We recognize the current maldistribution of professors in the School, with 20 full, 6 associate and 2 assistant professors, and therefore the importance of recruiting assistant and associate professors who can bring fresh perspectives, expand our areas of expertise, and contribute meaningfully to both curriculum development and research excellence. Faculty renewal is a strategic priority for the School as we plan for the future.

The current fiscal environment has limited our ability to recruit new tenure-track faculty in the immediate term. However, with the implementation of the new budget model—which places greater value on undergraduate teaching and innovative graduate programming—we anticipate improved financial flexibility. As our undergraduate initiatives grow and new graduate offerings are launched, we expect to generate the necessary resources to begin a focused and deliberate faculty renewal process. This will position the school to enhance our academic profile, improve student-faculty ratios, and ensure that our programs continue to evolve in alignment with emerging public health challenges.

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response & Action Plan: The school’s program innovation strategies will ensure financial sustainability and pave the way for faculty renewal.

Recommendation: Recognize the challenges that junior faculty face in the rapidly evolving environment, and develop approaches to support them - they are critical to the school’s future.

School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: The School of Public Health fully acknowledges the challenges junior faculty face in today’s rapidly evolving academic and public health landscape and agrees that supporting them is essential to the School’s long-term success. In response, the Vice Dean has already launched an initiative to ensure that each new faculty member is assigned a dedicated mentor upon recruitment, fostering professional growth and easing the transition into their roles. Furthermore, we have designated specific funding to assist junior faculty in recruiting students to support their research, recognizing that building a strong team early is key to establishing successful academic careers.

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response & Action Plan: GPS acknowledges the importance of this mentorship approach and offers supervision and mentorship opportunities for new faculty members through the Graduate Student Supervision Development Training program, as well as workshop series on new and emerging areas such as generative AI.

Recommendation: The school should expand the numbers of teaching-stream faculty (ATS and FSO) necessary to support the course-based MPH and the growing undergraduate portfolio.

School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: We agree and have already begun this within the past two years, with the recruitment of the first 2 ATS hired in the School to support the MPH and undergraduate courses. As noted above, we have highlighted this as a key imperative within our developing strategic plan.

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response: GPS supports this action plan.

Recommendation: Protecting faculty time to do what only they can do - research, teaching, community-engagement around issues of public health importance - will be important in this new environment that asks faculty to take on more responsibility. Administrative tasks may detract from their ability to do this work and should be managed by skilled administrative staff. Consider revisiting the ‘partial positions’ within the college?

School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: The School of Public Health recognizes the importance of protecting faculty time to focus on research, teaching, and community engagement—core activities that are essential to our mission. Over the past two years, we have successfully standardized teaching assignments across faculty, ensuring a more equitable distribution of workload while being mindful of individual expertise. We believe the proposed streamlining of the MSc and PhD degree programs (i.e., consolidating to general admission) will also reduce administrative workload, as was achieved with the similar approach to the MPH two years ago. We are also taking steps to formally engage adjunct faculty in course delivery, allowing us to draw on their specialized knowledge while reducing teaching demands on core faculty. These efforts, alongside the continued support of skilled administrative staff, are aimed at creating an environment where faculty can focus on the high-impact work only they can do.

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response & Action Plan: While we recognize the challenge of administrative staff shortage, the SPH proposed improvements and creative solutions will reduce the administrative workload for faculty.

Resources

Recommendation: Consider alternative models to meet the requirement for mandatory funding of PhD students so that the most talented candidates can be recruited and so that faculty’s research programs can be supported and sustained. We suggest the school provide funds for junior faculty to support at least one PhD student; consider creating a pool to

which everyone contributes and from which the best candidates are selected for admission; develop a matching program so that faculty who simply do not have the ability to secure sufficient external funding to fully support a doctoral student can have the dollars they can contribute matched by the school.

School of Public Health Response & Action Plan: The School of Public Health is aware of the disproportionate pressure placed on junior faculty to meet the minimum stipend requirements for PhD students and acknowledges that this can hinder both faculty development and student recruitment. In response, SPH has implemented a support mechanism that sets aside dedicated funds to help junior faculty recruit PhD students without requiring them to contribute 50% of the funding to match School-provided support. This initiative is intended to ensure that new faculty can build productive research programs and attract talented graduate students early in their careers. In addition, the School has established targeted scholarships specifically for students joining the programs of junior faculty, further reducing financial barriers to recruitment. We are also open to expanding our internal matching program to support faculty who are unable to fully fund doctoral students through external grants. As budgetary restrictions lessen, these options become increasingly available. These efforts aim to ensure that faculty are supported in growing their research teams and that the School remains competitive in attracting outstanding doctoral students who contribute to the advancement of public health scholarship.

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS) Response & Action Plan: The minimum guaranteed funding for PhD students initiative aims to ensure equal opportunity for both students and faculty. It provides support in the form of bridge funding and a data dashboard facility to support achievement of this institutional standard. GPS is available for consultation to ensure knowledge and experience from various faculties are shared to support and implement this standard.

Additional Comments from the review committee

The university should leverage having a school of public health. Public Health provides a focus on the entire community and the population with an orientation toward prevention, quality of life, and health equity. Public Health in practice works at the level of the system, with myriad governmental, private and nonprofit entities and with disciplines of all types. Within the University, public health can be a connector and a catalyst of new ideas and new capacities to respond to societal challenges. This could inform the overall research enterprise, curricula across programs, and community-based partnerships to address persistent and emerging health problems.

Additional Notes from the School of Public Health and GPS

School of Public Health: The School of Public Health agrees that public health plays a unique and vital role within the University of Alberta. Public health's population-level focus and emphasis on prevention, equity, and systemic thinking position the School to be a catalyst for interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation. Recently, SPH approved a new framework for the formal approval of public-facing statements and activities, empowering faculty and students to engage more openly and proactively in societal dialogue. This initiative reinforces our commitment to being a visible and engaged part of the university and broader community, and it aligns with the idea that public health can help shape how the institution responds to major societal challenges.

The rapid growth of SPH's undergraduate course offerings is further evidence of our relevance and reach. These courses have not only introduced thousands of undergraduate students to public health concepts but have also served as a pipeline into our graduate programs—several students who take our undergraduate offerings go on to apply to the MPH, MSc, or PhD programs. This growing interest demonstrates that SPH is contributing to the university's strategic goals by enhancing student recruitment, retention, and academic diversity.

SPH also contributes significantly to the University of Alberta's strengths in advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our faculty's research and teaching address numerous SDGs, including good health and well-being, safe water and sanitation, reduced inequalities, and sustainable cities and communities. Aligning more explicitly with the SDGs may offer a strong avenue for further integration of SPH into institutional planning and messaging. We believe that by highlighting how public health advances these global priorities, we can elevate both the visibility and impact of the School within the university and beyond.

Additionally, SPH's leadership in developing innovative graduate education has positioned us to be a key partner in the creation of online graduate certificates across campus. These programs are built to be flexible, accessible, and interdisciplinary—features that are increasingly valued in today's educational environment. We are also proud to be a central contributor to the forthcoming Bachelor of Health Sciences (BHSc) degree, which will provide another platform for SPH to deliver foundational public health education and foster interfaculty collaboration. We believe the successful implementation of the BHSc with a concentration in population and public health will further amplify our profile, as will strategic collaborative undergraduate embedded certificates (e.g., public health engineering), which we believe would coincidentally enhance career opportunities for graduates of other faculty's programs.

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (GPS): The SPH action plans will provide opportunities for further program innovation, partnership, and community impact. GPS is committed to supporting SPH's proposed actions to enhance student and faculty experience as well as to offer high-quality graduate programs.