Review of the International Optometric Bridging Program (IOBP): Final Report

Submitted to:
The Provost’s Office, University of Waterloo

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Executive summary

A panel consisting of Drs. Bruce Mitchell, Nava Israel and Maurice Yap was formed by the Provost’s Office to conduct an academic review of the International Optometric Bridging Program (IOBP) in compliance to the GUIDELINES FOR REVIEWS OF ONGOING AND NEW ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO.

The panel received the self-study document from the IOBP team some weeks before the two-day visit to the University of Waterloo to meet and hold discussions with major stakeholders. Information requested by the panel was forthcoming and all parties interviewed by the panel spoke candidly and frankly.

The review panel commends:

- the University of Waterloo for supporting federal and state government policy to offer new Canadians and residents the opportunity to prepare themselves to challenge Canadian professional licensing examinations so that they may contribute usefully to Canadian society in a profession in which they have had prior education and training;

- the School of Optometry and Vision Science (the School), in collaboration with the College of Optometrists of Ontario (COO), for taking the initiative and leadership to conduct a bridging program; and,

- the IOBP program team for its dedication to helping students succeed.

General observations of the review panel:

- the IOBP team had conducted a comprehensive self-study for academic review;

- the IOBP initiative started at the COO in response to government policy;

- the COO sought collaboration with the School to run the program;

- the School, in collaboration with the COO, applied for funding to continue the IOBP in or around 2005, with the School as PI;

- the IOBP has evolved throughout the years as a program running alongside the School, but not as an integral part of it;

- the IOBP comprises a short program and a long program;

- the short program started off as a four (4) week program, evolved into an eight (8) week program, and is now being redeveloped into a 10 week program;

- the long program is 48 weeks long, equivalent to two (2) academic years (or 4 terms);
• entry to the long or short program is via a comprehensive screening process comprising a PLA conducted by the Canadian Examiners in Optometry and a clinical skill assessment conducted by the IOBP;

• the teaching staff consists of some of the School’s full-time and part-time Faculty;

• the fees and grants generated by the IOBP are paid into a university account and subject to standard financial governance of the University and to the external audit of the Funder;

• the physical resources required to support the IOBP in its current form are adequate;

• current students and graduates of the IOBP are generally very satisfied with the conduct, the content and the structure of the IOBP programs;

• there is support from regulatory bodies for a bridging program but there are also concerns related to:
  – the PLA process
  – the admission of ophthalmologists to the IOBP
  – whether the short program is able to prepare candidates to the level of current OD graduates

• the professional associations, OAO and CAO, support an advanced standing OD program such as the NECO model, as opposed to a short bridging program which admits ophthalmologists and Canadians returning with Bachelor’s degrees in Optometry;

• the professional associations, OAO in particular, are concerned about market saturation, especially in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which may be one of the main drivers for their concerns as related to the IOBP;

• current OD students have heard the views of the OAO and would prefer dialogue with the School to enable deeper understanding of the IOBP;

• IOBP instructors feel that:
  – program students vary greatly in types and levels of knowledge and skills gaps;
  – the short program provides sufficient preparation for its students but could benefit from some format and content revisions;
  – the long program would benefit from some format and content revisions; and,
  – the program would benefit from increased coordination and involvement of the instructors and faculty members.

• the IOBP leadership has already taken some action in light of concerns from the profession and regulatory bodies, in particular in the admission requirements to the IOBP
Recommendations

The review panel recommends that:

- the IOBP be continued, in support of government policy and community needs, values and aspirations.

- the IOBP be re-branded and fully integrated into the normal operation of the School and subject to the usual oversight and quality assessment policies of the School, Faculty and University, as appropriate.

- the IOBP be updated and validated in light of recent changes in provincial legislation concerning the practice of optometry, in particular, the inclusion of disease management and treatment.

- if it has not done so already, the IOBP team needs to seek clarity from its funding sponsor regarding:
  - whether only new Canadians should qualify for the bridging program (vs. returning Canadians)
  - whether internationally educated ophthalmologists should qualify for the program if their qualifications are found to be substantially equivalent to those of optometrists in Canada (e.g., refractive ophthalmologists)

- the IOBP team seeks urgent clarification from regulatory bodies regarding their entry requirements for sitting their professional licensing examinations so as to enable the School to admit appropriately qualified candidates to the IOBP.

- the IOBP team continues to proactively engage major stakeholders, including but not limited to, funding bodies, regulatory bodies, the profession, alumni and faculty in the formulation of major policies governing the IOBP.
1. Introduction

Consistent with the May 2010 Guidelines for Reviews of Ongoing and New Academic Programs at the University of Waterloo (Guidelines), this review of the International Optometric Bridging Program (IOBP) was conducted by a team of two external and one internal reviewers. The review team included the following members:

- Nava Israel - An internationally educated professional with a PhD in epidemiology and over 25 years of entrepreneurial project management, professional leadership and academic design experience. Dr. Israel is the founder of Fusion Global Education, a company based in Richmond Hill, ON, focusing on the integration of international professionals into the Canadian labour market through the design and development of bridging programs, prior learning assessment and credentialing processes.

- Bruce Mitchell – A long-time faculty member and administrator at the University of Waterloo (UW), and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Dr. Mitchell is Associate Provost, Resources. During June to September 2011, he completed a one-person review of the School of Optometry and Vision Science prior to the School beginning a search for its next Director.

- Maurice Yap - A Chair Professor of Optometry and formerly Head of the School of Optometry at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), Dr. Yap is currently Dean of the Faculty of Health & Social Sciences at PolyU. He has substantial experience in international optometry, program reviews and accreditations as well as professional and institutional governance.

This review aims to meet three major goals:

1. to assist the IOBP to achieve and maintain the highest possible standards of academic excellence,
2. to meet public and stakeholders accountability expectations, and
3. to assess the quality of the IOBP relative to similar programs in Ontario, Canada and internationally.

Prior to the site visit, the panel was sent the following documents:

- a self-study report of the IOBP in compliance with the UW academic review guidelines
- guidelines for the review of the program
- a letter from the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration regarding renewal for the IOBP

The activities taken to achieve the goals of the review included:

1. Review of the Guidelines for the Review of the International Optometric Bridging Program document provided by UW.
2. Review of the *Self Study for Academic Review* report created by the IOBP.

3. A two day site visit at UW (on the 23rd and 24th of April) that included:
   a. interviews with internal and external stakeholders as follows:
      - Canadian Examiners in Optometry (CEO)
      - Ontario Association of Optometrists (OAO)
      - Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO)
      - College of Optometrists of Ontario (COO)
      - Canadian Optometric Regulatory Authorities (CORA)
      - Students and alumni of the IOBP
      - Several OD student class presidents
      - Faculty members from the School of Optometry and Vision Science
      - Members of the Advisory Committee of the IOBP
      - Members of the Admissions Committee of the IOBP
      - Provost & Vice-President (Academic)
      - Dean, Faculty of Science
      - Interim Director, School of Optometry and Vision Science
      - Clinic Director, School of Optometry and Vision Science
      - Program Director, IOBP
      - School Administrator, School of Optometry and Vision Science
      - Former Directors, School of Optometry and Vision Science
      - Former Program Director, IOBP
   b. Site tour of the teaching facilities used for the IOBP.

4. An in-depth reflection and discussion on the current strengths and weaknesses and potential actions to further enhance the quality of the IOBP.

The panel was given to understand that:
- there had not been a prior review of the IOBP
- the IOBP is not a typical academic program and was more similar to a continuing education program
- there have been concerns from external stakeholders regarding the IOBP
- the University expectation is that this review would identify the strengths and weaknesses of the IOBP and recommend the way forward

2. **Principles and Foundations**

The following are principles and foundations upon which this review was based:

- Immigrants arrive in Canada with the promise\(^1\) of being able to practice their profession. It is our role as a society and, by extension, the role of the university, to help make this

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\(^1\) Based on the Federal immigration “point system” that values professions in demand, optometry being one of them.
Internationally educated professionals (IEPs) are legitimate members of Canadian society. Any notion of “us” and “them” is both irrelevant and inappropriate.

IEPs bring a wealth of professional education and experience. However, depth and scope of education and practice may vary around the world, resulting in a range of skills and gaps. Thus, the vast majority of IEPs require bridging, not re-training.

The bridging initiative for internationally educated optometrists is driven by both provincial and federal government policy and funding, supported through the mandate of Fairness Commissioners across provinces, and by the profession at large.

The University of Waterloo is the most appropriate institution to provide a viable and high quality bridging program for English-speaking optometrists in Canada.

3. **Common Challenges encountered by Bridging Programs**

Bridging programs are a recent concept in the educational landscape, both in Canada and around the world. The oldest bridging programs were established not more than 10 years ago, explaining why there is limited literature and guidelines to work from. A bridging program differs greatly from a mainstream college or university program due to the distinctive nature of its learners:

- mature individuals who have already been educated and qualified for their profession in other jurisdictions,
- individuals who come from a myriad of environments, bringing a vast variety of educational levels, and scope and nature of professional practice, resulting in a broad variety of gaps and bridging needs,
- individuals whose first language is neither English nor French,
- individuals who never expected to be denied their professional standing in Canada and therefore resent the requirement for supplementary education, and
- individuals who struggle with multiple adjustment issues (which are often categorized as a major life crisis, comparable to death and divorce) on top of their participation in a bridging program.

All bridging programs, regardless of the profession they serve, face similar challenges and undergo continuous evolution. While, to date, there is no formal documentation of these challenges, they have been extensively discussed in bridging-related conferences and forums,

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2 Definition of bridging in the context of this document: A higher education program specifically designed to assist IEPs with an attained professional training/licensure/experience to achieve the level of education, skills and competencies required for licensure/practice in Canada in the same field of study and in substantially less time than an entry-level student would require.
such as the Bridging Coalition\(^3\). Major attributes of and challenges for bridging programs include:

**Challenges related to partnerships and stakeholders** – Bridging programs need to secure and maintain relationships with key internal and external partners and stakeholders to allow adequate consultation processes and to ensure organizational and profession-wide buy-in. Challenges with partner organizations and/or stakeholders commonly include:

- Stakeholders’ resistance to the unconventional academic structure of a bridging program that often cuts across the curriculum, condenses content, uses newly developed content or uses partner organizations to supplement learning. The following claim is often made by skeptical stakeholders: “Why aren’t bridging students required to take the same level and duration of instruction/education/practical training as our entry-level/day students?” While this common objection may be rooted in a genuine concern for academic rigor and the quality of professional training, it ignores the fact that IEPs do not require the same education entry-level students need as they have already been educated/trained and have practiced in their profession. The misconception of bridging being a re-education/re-training program is a common one.

- Stakeholders’ reliance on anecdotes and rumors about the insufficient professional level and quality of program graduates. This challenge can be attributed to two major drivers:
  - Insufficient communication on/consultation by the bridging program on its policies, standards and processes, leading to stakeholders’ distrust and suspicions. This common challenge can be attributed to the structural nature of bridging programs: very “lean” operating units, commonly understaffed, dealing with a high maintenance group of learners and committed to very tight deadlines and highly structured reporting standards to program funder(s). The typical operational pace of a bridging program greatly exceeds the operational pace of most of its internal and/or external stakeholders. This often results in overworked program staff and in less than optimal consultation processes and/ or inadequate internal and external communications.
  - Reliance on rumors and anecdotes generated by (1) actual encounters with program students in the process of training, while participants are still struggling with their individual bridging voyage and are therefore not at their peak performance, (2) encounters with IEPs who are not the participants of the bridging program but are assumed to be part of that same “group of people”, and (3) second-hand reports by “outraged” colleagues. While it is likely that some of the reported cases are legitimate and that indeed not all IEPs are up to par with Canadian graduated practitioners, at least at the early stages of bridging, once these anecdotes spread, they gain a life of their own and become exaggerated and

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\(^3\) Bridging Coalition - A voluntary group of organization representatives who have come together from a broad range of programs working towards the successful integration of internationally educated professionals (IEPs) in the Canadian economy. Dr Nava Israel is the Founder and Co-Chair of the Bridging Coalition since 2008.
even scandalous. This informal route of communication often feeds into some stakeholders’ perceived xenophobia.

- Stakeholders’ concern about the bridging program saturating the labor market with “foreign” professionals and therefore denying employment opportunities from graduates of Canadian institutions. While being a common allegation encountered by many bridging programs, it is not a legitimate one as it ignores two major considerations:
  - as mentioned in the Principles and Foundations section of this document, the notion of “us” and “them” is both irrelevant and inappropriate as IEPs are legitimate members of Canadian society, and their personal and professional integration is fully supported by Canadian societal values and by provincial and federal government policy and funding; and,
  - although the greater Toronto area (GTA) may be reaching a point of saturation, the IOBP is a bridging program that serves all of Ontario as well as all the other English-speaking provinces in which significant shortages of qualified professionals exist.

Throughout this review process, we have heard and read concerns and claims that have touched all three areas described above to the point where some of the major stakeholders have detached themselves from the program. It is essential for the IOBP to significantly enhance its internal and external consultation and communication process to avoid further deterioration of and to restore its relationships with program stakeholders.

Challenges related to program rigor – Program rigor may be divided into two major components: (1) rigor of program admission and screening process, and (2) rigor of program delivery. Setting admission and eligibility criteria for a bridging program is a complex and delicate process as it aims to be sufficiently rigorous to ensure the inclusion of qualified and exclusion of unqualified individuals, while making the program sufficiently accessible, inclusive and fair to IEPs. This is often a delicate balancing act with the majority of bridging programs tending to err on the lenient side at the outset, where some applicants with gaps more significant than the bridging program is designed to address are given the benefit of the doubt. More often than not, such leniency backfires in two major ways:

- Weaker participants struggle throughout the program, hinder the progression of the stronger participants, and often fail the program at one point or another. This approach of accepting unqualified participants unintentionally sets up such participants for failure which results in the IEP’s loss of precious time and money and, even more so, in the loss of self-confidence and in anger with and resentment against the “unfair system”. Moreover, these participants are more likely to take legal action against the program for failing them.

- The inclusion of unqualified or borderline applicants in a bridging program compromises the trust of internal and external stakeholders in the quality of the program. This may lead to a snowball effect where all program graduates end up being regarded as “low quality”
professionals, sometimes to the point where they are denied employment in their profession and/or registration with the regulatory body.

Most programs end up revising their admission process into a more comprehensive, rigorous and systematic one in which only applicants who have a reasonable chance of succeeding in the program are admitted. Some of the solutions used by these bridging programs to support ineligible applicants include:

- providing the applicant with a learning plan that, upon successful completion, would make them eligible for the following intake (e.g., requiring the completion of several foundational and/or language courses to bring applicants up to par with program level);
- developing modular bridging opportunities (that result in a variety of learning paths and lengths of the program) or binary bridging opportunities (one long and one short program) to serve its applicants’ different bridging needs; and,
- consulting on alternative meaningful career paths.

Another challenge in this category is the tendency of bridging programs to provide excessive participant support throughout the program (e.g., multiple chances to re-write exams, lower passing grade, less rigorous examinations, easier clinical cases, etc.). As in the case of admission criteria, this compassionate approach tends to backfire and yield similar results.

While the intention of the bridging program is to provide applicants every opportunity to succeed, excessive leniency in the admission and the bridging process ends up setting up both the participants and the program for failure.

In this review, we have identified considerable concerns of both internal and external stakeholders related to the level of rigor in the admission process and in the bridging process itself. We are confident that at least some of these concerns have already been addressed by IOBP, and others are in the process of being consulted on and/or resolved. None of the issues identified in this section are unusual for evolving bridging programs and all can be resolved within a short timeframe.

**Challenges related to duration and content of bridging programs** – As described in the introduction to this section, the clients of bridging programs are normally mature individuals who, on one hand, have already been educated in and practiced the profession in other jurisdictions and, on the other hand, have a vast variety of gaps and bridging needs for this specific environment. Bridging needs common to all participants normally include modules/courses on professional language and communication, the local context of practice (e.g., the Canadian healthcare system, jurisprudence) and applied components (e.g., practicum, internship, externship, job placement). However, individual bridging needs may range from nearly none, to foundational areas (e.g., gaps in depth and scope in areas such as anatomy and physiology) through advanced content areas, to applied skills (e.g., use of local equipment and methodologies). Developing a single bridging program that will be everything to everyone is
virtually impossible. Every bridging program is required to make difficult decisions when
designing the curriculum. These decisions are driven by the applicants’ needs, the conditions set
by the program funder⁴, and the resources available to the program (e.g., faculty and instructors,
administrative/organizational policies, physical resources).

One of the most common mistakes by new bridging programs in this regard is underestimating
its applicants’ bridging needs and therefore constructing a bridging program that ends up serving
well its strongest participants but not necessarily its weakest. The challenge stems (1) from the
difficulty to identify specific individual gaps, even through the best of screening processes, (2)
from participants’ language barriers that make learning of content that much more difficult, and
(3) from the difficulty to predict an applicant’s willingness, readiness and aptitude for learning.
In some cases, participants who seem to be marginal and barely make the cut prove to have
exceptional learning and adaptation capabilities that allow them to successfully complete the
program, while some others who start off with a minor gap are unable (or unwilling) to adapt to
the new environment and end up failing. These three major unknowns make it very difficult to
establish the most appropriate level, scope and duration of bridging at the outset. The vast
majority of bridging programs revise the curriculum continuously. The most common form of
bridging program revision includes adding courses, language supports, pre-requisites, practical
placements and time.

While the IOBP has gone through revision cycles, based on the concerns raised during this
review process, it is likely that further examination of bridging needs and program scope is
required.

**Challenges related to program affiliation** – The unique structure and purpose of bridging
programs requires an often unlikely combination of well established structure/rigor and agility,
which raises the question of program affiliation. Since a bridging program is substantially
shorter, uses unconventional learning components and strategies, and must be quick to evolve,
affiliation with a day school and its more rigid processes and slower evolutionary pace can be
challenging. Many bridging programs operate in partnership with Faculties and Schools but are
administratively affiliated with/housed in more agile academic units such as continuing
studies/education.

Based on our understanding, the IOBP was initiated by the COO, is no longer affiliated with it,
but is not yet fully integrated in the School or any other structured unit within the University.
This vague affiliation contributes to internal and external stakeholders’ concerns about IOBP’s
quality assurance processes and legitimacy as an academic program.

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⁴ Most funders of bridging programs (federal and provincial Citizenship and Immigration or HRSDC) require
programs to bridge IEPs within one year. The assumption is that this is the appropriate timeframe to bridge IEPs
and that anything longer would be considered as re-training which should then be funded by the provincial
Ministry of Education.
Despite some of the disadvantages of housing a bridging program within a day school, based on the current situation of the IOBP with its stakeholders and their loss of trust in the program, it would be advisable for the program to be integrated within the School as an additional formal stream, perhaps leading to a university academic award (e.g., a certificate for the short program and a diploma for the long program).

4. Alignment of IOBP with the Standards and Goals of the University of Waterloo

This section discusses the alignment of the IOBP with the University’s mission and Sixth Decade Plan. It also examines the quality of IOBP’s standards, educational goals and learning objectives/outcomes and their appropriateness in allowing students to demonstrate the expected level of achievement.

The IOBP mission statement is in a draft form. It is planned to be discussed and approved at the next meeting of the IOBP Advisory Committee. As drafted, it is well aligned with the university’s mission. Although program objectives were listed in the Self-Study report, they were not integrated in the mission statement. We recommend the IOBP integrate the objectives in its mission statement to be better aligned with the standards of the University.

Although some adjustments and revisions may be required to the program to further enhance its learning experience and efficacy, we conclude that the IOBP is generally well structured to support the acquisition and demonstration of the attributes, knowledge, skills, and ethical values required for entry level practice of optometry in Canada.

The program clearly identifies and uses outcome measures for all its curriculum components. The program evaluates its effectiveness by documenting the extent to which its goals and objectives have been met. Some of the major evaluation tools include success rates in examinations within the program, internship and externship evaluations, student evaluation surveys and CACO scores. The program had several iterations of curriculum and policy revisions based on evaluation outcomes to improve its performance, commensurate with university policy.

Based on the Guidelines for the Review of the IOBP, the IOBP must publish current and reliable information on its performance, including student achievement, as defined by the program. Although this information has been provided to the review team through the Self Study Report, our interviews with internal and external stakeholders indicate that IOBP communication related to student achievements was inconsistent and insufficient to the point where many of the internal and external stakeholders felt the program was hiding information. This view, in turn, yielded rumors and unfounded suspicions related to the low quality of the program and of its graduates. It is strongly recommended that the IOBP develop a process of consistent formal updating of
internal and, potentially, external program stakeholders. The format of this communication should be consistent with University policies.

5. Appropriateness of the IOBP Admission Requirements

When compared with other bridging programs across Canada, the IOBP admission process is one of the most rigorous and appropriately designed, allowing the program to identify the major bridging needs of its applicants. The admission process seems to successfully allocate students into the language, the short and the long bridging programs. While some of the concerns the review team heard from external stakeholders (mainly the College of Optometrists of Ontario) were related to the admission process, none focused on the conditions of admission to the program but rather reflected disagreement with accepting the IOBP screening process as a replacement for the COO’s credentialing process. This particular consideration is beyond the terms of reference for the review team. We feel that this is a decision best made by the COO for its own purposes, and that it in no way reflects on the quality of the IOBP academic admission process.

Other admission-related concerns included the following claims:
- the credentialing process used to be performed by a single person (a retired faculty member). It is our best understanding that this process is currently performed by a third party, using rigorous standards of quality assurance.
- due to compassion, some weak students were admitted despite failing to meet minimum admission criteria

These concerns led to the creation of an IOBP Admissions Committee, which now operates using rigorous policies and standards.

6. Appropriateness of IOBP’s Structure and Curriculum

**Curriculum content:** The optometric bridging program curriculum was originally designed and developed by an assigned faculty member (guided and supervised by the program manager), with the aim to adhere to the School’s content and quality standards that result in learners being able to perform at entry level practice in Canada. While it has since been revised, several issues were identified, based on our conversations with IOBP instructors:

a. Too much content is taught in too short a time in both the short and the long programs. This ultra-intensive format may result in difficulty to assimilate and integrate new knowledge for some of the program students.

b. There is insufficient content coordination among the different sections and courses, to the point where content gaps may occur. Participating instructors felt that a more open and collaborative approach to the curriculum would benefit the program and ensure the achievement of all its intended learning outcomes.
c. Some students have little background in disease and pathology, making it very challenging for them to keep up with the program.

d. Assessment strategies, both for the admission to the program (the clinical assessment) and for the completion are not sufficiently rigorous (e.g., a final exam that includes only 16 multiple-choice questions). Final assessments need to be reviewed to ensure academic rigor.

**Student assessment:** Each student’s achievement of curricular outcomes is monitored throughout the program. However, based on our conversations with IOBP instructors, student assessment is administered once, at the end of each course. This assessment strategy does not allow instructors to adjust teaching to the needs of the class and does not allow students to improve on performance throughout the course. Additionally, IOBP instructors reported they did not mark their exams nor have access to the results for the exams in courses they taught. The review team agrees that this practice does not support ongoing program improvement and is not consistent with the School’s policies and procedures.

**Curriculum evaluation:** The program engages in periodic and systematic curricular evaluations by students through an IOBP student survey designed by the program, vs. the standard course evaluation used within UW programs. While this practice is normal for bridging programs, the review team believes that since outcomes are not normally shared with the School faculty and administrators, program quality assurance may be compromised.

**Content of instruction:** While basic science instruction in the IOBP provides a review of knowledge in physical, biological and behavioral sciences essential for clinical optometric care, based on conversations with internal stakeholders, the review team understands that some IOBP students struggle with content more than others. This problem is a common phenomenon in bridging programs in which students have a variety of experiences and educational backgrounds, and therefore a variety of content gaps. Developing a curriculum that is “everything to everyone” is a particular challenge faced by all bridging programs. It is likely that some of the IOBP students require a more extensive training/education that can be addressed using strategies already identified by the program (developing supplementary content for online delivery) and other strategies as outlined in the recommendations section of this document.

**Clinical instruction and practice:** All required components (i.e., didactic, laboratory, and supervised clinical experience in the examination, diagnosis, treatment, and management of patients) are included in the IOBP in what seems to be sufficient quantity, quality and variety of experiences in the supervised care of patients. It is important to note, however, that the review team received multiple comments and stated concerns from external stakeholders related to the quality and sufficiency of the supervised clinical experience provided to IOBP students in general, and in Program 1 (short program) in particular. These concerns revolve around whether the IOBP students are adequately prepared, didactically and clinically, to manage eye diseases and prescribe medications, at least to the level of UW OD students. These concerns have merit as
progressively more Canadian provinces empower optometrists to prescribe a range of topical therapeutics for eye conditions and it is in the public’s interest that those who are entrusted with prescription rights should be fully competent.

**Clinical competencies:** The program has an established set of clinical competencies for entry level practice and it evaluates student competencies as required by the School.

**Affiliation agreements:** There are written and signed affiliation agreements between the program and its clinical affiliates and externship sites that define the responsibilities of each party related to the educational program for bridging students.

### 7. Appropriateness of the Mode of Delivery and Evaluation Methods

Being a bridging program, IOBP is meant to be committed to bridge its students’ knowledge and skills gap in the most effective manner and in the shortest time possible. The concept of IOBP’s long and short programs creates a system by which IEPs who require minimal bridging are less likely to spend excessive time or engage in redundant studies, while IEPs who require more substantive bridging are more likely to achieve the required level at the end of the long program.

#### 7.1. Short program

Based on our conversations with some of the short program’s graduates and instructors, the structure, content and evaluation methods applied in this program are adequate and sufficient. However, some external stakeholders, such as the College and the professional bodies, are concerned about the insufficiency of an eight-week program in bridging individuals into the Canadian practice environment. In particular, concerns were raised as related to the adequacy of ocular disease and clinical TPA training. As noted in Section 6 of this document, while this issue is being addressed by IOBP, it requires a more thorough planning and implementation process to ensure all the intended learning outcomes will be achieved.

#### 7.2. Long Program

Based on our conversations with some internal and external stakeholders and our review of the program curriculum, the long program is delivered in an intensive format that includes a shortened content version (as compared with the OD program). These two elements are common to bridging programs but may still be challenging to students with greater gaps in foundational knowledge. This challenge can be addressed using one of two main approaches:

a) Providing more time for learners to allow integration of knowledge by extending the period of the didactic component (materials delivered over two academic semesters instead of 16 intensive weeks). This approach will also provide IOBP more time to integrate online modules related to foundational knowledge gaps.
b) Using the combination of existing credentialing and PLA processes to identify foundational knowledge gaps and requiring applicants to complete foundational courses prior to admission to the long program. Access to foundational courses will need to be created by the School, and/or alternative sources of education will need to be identified to applicants.

7.3. Evaluation methods - Several issues were identified related to IOBP evaluation strategies in both of the short and long programs:

   a) Single test per content module – as described in Section 6 of this report, student assessment is administered once at the end of each content module. This assessment strategy does not allow students to improve on performance throughout the module. Additionally, all assessments are delivered in a multiple choice format which is known to be challenging for international professionals not familiar with this testing mode. It is recommended that each of the content modules include at least two assessments, one to be administered mid-way using a different assessment strategy (e.g., presentation, short answers, simulation, oral exam) followed by individual feedback.

   b) Opportunity for re-testing – based on a newly drafted IOBP policy, students will be allowed two re-sits for each examination. Unless this is the common policy for OD students, this approach might compromise the rigor of student assessment. While international professionals may struggle with test format and require more opportunities, re-testing is not the best approach.

   c) Passing grade – it was unclear whether academic standards related to a passing grade are applied in the IOBP. It is critical to ensure that the passing grade for each of the examinations is equivalent to the passing grade required for OD students.

8. Utilization of the Existing Human, Physical and Financial Resources

The governance structure of IOBP clearly assigns authority and responsibility for the formulation and implementation of policies that enables the program to fulfill its mission. Currently, the program is in the process of revisiting policies. These policies will be discussed in the forum of the Advisory Committee. Human, physical and financial resources are managed according to the standards and requirements of the University and the Funder.

The teaching and patient care facilities and equipment are appropriate to fulfill the mission, goals and objectives of the program. The program provides access to a well-maintained library and information facilities, sufficient in size, breadth of holdings, and information technology to support the program’s education and other missions. The library and information services staff are supportive of the needs of the faculty and students of the program.
9. Appropriateness of IOBP’s Self-assessment

It is important to note that this academic review is the first of its kind for the IOBP. While being affiliated with the School and the University, IOBP’s ongoing self assessment process is based on the requirements of the program funder, not on the institutional academic protocol.

During the review panel’s discussion with stakeholders, many issues and concerns were raised about the IOBP. Most of these concerns, however, pertain to the past practices of the program, which have since been revised. The self-assessment document submitted by the IOBP team to this review panel addresses most of these concerns and proposes significant changes in the future operation of the IOBP. The review panel supports the changes proposed by the IOBP team as the panel has, in many instances, come to the same conclusions.

With the benefit of many years of experience running this bridging program, the IOBP team will recognise that optometry is practiced to such varying standards around the world. Consequently, not all foreign optometrists can, realistically, be adequately “bridged” to challenge the licensing examinations, given the limitations imposed by the nature of bridging programs. It may be that further re-training may be necessary, even before admission to the IOBP. This possibility is worthy of consideration as it is not possible to predict which provincial licensing examinations IOBP graduates will attempt and, consequently, the IOBP must prepare students for the most difficult licensing examination it is aware of.

The review panel understands that the short program was originally intended to be more of an orientation than a bridging program for internationally educated optometrists. The intent of the short program was probably appropriate at the time it was designed for a portion of the applicants. The panel recognises that new legislation in some provinces has changed optometry practice substantially, in particular, the right to prescribe medications. Given that inappropriate treatment may bring harm to patients and discredit the profession, greater care must be taken to scrutinise the academic background and experience of individual applicants who would previously qualify for the short program. For instance, the professional privileges of individual applicants in the country they are licensed to practise optometry could be one of the considerations in deciding whether the short program would be the most appropriate.

Future self-study would benefit from making reference to best practices used in other bridging programs for other professions, such as dentistry and pharmacy. The FAQ section of the IOBP webpage comparing the path to practice for internationally educated health professionals is an excellent example.
10. The Effectiveness of the IOBP in Meeting its Goals

The primary purpose of the bridging program is to bridge gaps so that its students will be successful on the Canadian Assessment of Competence in Optometry, a national examination accepted by all provinces. In facilitating this goal, the underlying assumption is that its students have already had an education in optometry and relevant optometric clinical training and experience. It is inevitable that the success of the bridging program is going to be measured in terms of the proportion of students successfully getting licensed to practice optometry in the jurisdiction of their choice. The data show that, in general, IOBP graduates needed more attempts than OD graduates to get through licensing examinations. Many reasons account for this outcome, but the IOBP team needs to continue to find ways to narrow the gap.

Continuing the practice adopted by the COO, the IOBP has previously admitted a number of ophthalmologists. Whether a member of one profession should be entitled to bridge to another profession requires policy direction from the funder and from provincial regulatory bodies. The School and the IOBP have urged the Canadian Optometric Regulatory Authorities to make a decision about the inclusion of ophthalmologists. While, to date, no decision has been made by CORA one way or the other, the acceptance of ophthalmologists to the program has created some tensions with some of the stakeholders.

11. Strengths and Weaknesses of the IOBP

The IOBP has many strengths:

- it is hosted by one of the top universities in North America;
- it has dedicated faculty who “buy in” to the bridging concept as a way to assimilate and empower new Canadians to serve the community;
- it has attracted renewal of government funding;
- its students, past and present, are generally happy with the learning opportunities and will be grateful alumni of UW.

Based on provided written materials and on testimonies provided by internal and external stakeholders, the IOBP has some weaknesses:

- clinical training opportunities and expectations may not be on par with UW-OD students;
- it has admitted some students in the past whose academic and/or professional background might not have been sufficiently strong to benefit from the bridging program;
• it has lost support from some stakeholders;

• it is not main-streamed into the administration and management of the School, resulting in a lack of clarity in quality assurance processes.

The panel is encouraged to note that the current leadership of the IOBP team has taken steps to address these weaknesses.

12. Quality of Faculty (qualifications, research and scholarly record)

The faculty involved in the delivery of the IOBP would normally qualify and many, in fact do, to teach in the OD program. Consequently, there is no concern over the quality of the faculty.

The panel suggests that a more systematic way to engage the faculty of the School to participate in the teaching of the IOBP would be advantageous. Preparing optometry students, albeit foreign-educated, to challenge the licensing examinations, is no less a task than preparing OD students to do the same.

13. Analysis of Information relating to the “Success” of Participants

The IOBP team is well aware of the relevant statistics of the IOBP students and graduates. There is clearly a continuing need for the IOBP as evidenced by the application rates and by graduates finding gainful employment. There is concern about many IOBP graduates tending to stay in and around the Greater Toronto Area, resulting in an even greater imbalance in the urban-rural distribution of optometrists in the country. Where graduates choose to settle, however, is beyond the remit of the IOBP. Nevertheless, the IOBP could explore strategies used by other programs in Canada as well as elsewhere to deal with this issue, such as requiring program participants to accept clinical placements in rural areas. At the very least, it could sensitise its students to the opportunities that exists in other provinces that have a shortage of optometrists.

14. Proposed Initiatives to further Enhance the Quality of the IOBP

The review panel is heartened to note that many of its observations have already been picked up by the current IOBP leadership and steps have been taken to address many of the concerns and issues raised. The panel agrees with the direction taken by the IOBP leadership and urges support from the University.

The panel is confident that the IOBP team is determined to work with all stakeholders to solicit their input through formal channels.
The panel is aware that further refinements have been made to the IOBP since the submission of the Self-Study document in March 2012 and these are available on the IOBP webpage. The panel congratulates the IOBP team for putting detailed information about the IOBP online to improve transparency and efficiency.

Major recommendations for further enhancement of the IOBP program are as follows:

A. Program integration and re-branding

Despite some of the disadvantages of housing a bridging program within a day school, based on the current situation of the IOBP with its stakeholders and their loss of trust in the program, it is highly advisable to integrate the program in the School. This integration will lead to the application of University driven quality assurance processes and to a formal “stamp of approval” that should assure the stakeholders of the program’s rigor and outcomes.

Proposed options for program integration with the School:

- Converting the short IOBP program into a formal certificate program of 5-6 courses delivered over one semester. Qualifying students will include IEPs with minimal bridging needs based on their professional experience outside of Canada and their scores on the language and PLA assessments. This stream may be re-branded/renamed to Certificate in Optometry for International Professionals. The current IOBP short program can be used as the fundament to the certificate with minor modifications including the expansion of the TPA training to 100 hours.

- Converting the long IOBP program into a formal diploma program consisting of 4-5 academic semesters (and therefore equivalent to two academic years), delivered over no more than 18 months\textsuperscript{5}. Qualifying students will include IEOs (and, potentially, internationally educated ophthalmologists) with substantive bridging needs based on their professional experience outside of Canada and their scores on the language and PLA assessments. This stream may be renamed to Diploma in Optometry for International Professionals. The current IOBP long program can be used as the fundament to the diploma program with some modifications including:
  - Revisiting admission process: providing borderline applicants with a learning plan that, upon successful completion, would make them eligible for the following intake (e.g., requiring the completion of several foundational and/or language courses to bring applicants up to par with program level) and/or consulting on alternative meaningful career paths.
  - Establishing a Curriculum Committee consisting of representatives from School faculty. This committee will review and advise on program content, on delivery format and assessment strategies.

\textsuperscript{5} The reason for extending the existing long program from 12 to 18 months is twofold: (1) some of the existing content likely requires expansion, and (2) students will benefit from structured breaks in the program (e.g. reading weeks) to better integrate the mass of new learning.
• Developing supplementary content for online delivery, including foundational content, disease and pathology. This strategy will allow students to close some of their foundational gaps outside classroom time.
• Revisiting the internship and externship components to ensure sufficient hands-on practice in all required areas.

B. Consultation and stakeholder involvement

While the IOBP team continues to proactively attempt to engage major stakeholders (e.g., regulatory bodies, the profession, alumni and faculty) in the formulation of major policies governing the IOBP through a newly assembled Advisory Committee, most of the external stakeholders, COO being one of the central ones, are demonstratively disengaged. We believe that at this point the only strategy that will re-engage stakeholders will be the integration and re-branding of the program, at which point stakeholders need to be included from the stage of inception.

C. Seek clarifications

If it has not done so already, the IOBP team needs to seeks clarity from:
• its funding sponsor regarding:
  – whether only new Canadians should qualify for the bridging program (vs. returning Canadians)
  – whether internationally educated ophthalmologists should qualify for the program if their qualifications are found to be substantially equivalent to those of optometrists in Canada (e.g., refractive ophthalmologists)
• provincial regulatory bodies regarding their entry requirements for sitting their professional licensing examinations so as to enable the School to admit appropriately qualified candidates to the IOBP.

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