



TO: Digvir Jayas
President and Vice Chancellor

DATE: March 12, 2026

FROM: Lynn Kennedy
Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee

RE: Geography Program Academic Quality Assurance Review

In accordance with the U of L *Academic Quality Assurance Policy and Process*, the Academic Quality Assurance Committee approved the review of the Geography Program at its January 6, 2026, meeting.

The Self Study Committee for this review was comprised of: Kevin McGeough (Program Review Coordinator), Julie Young, Marcus Dostie, Philip Bonnaventure, and Shawn Bubel.

The review produced 4 documents:

1. Self Study Report. Written by the Self Study Committee. Received July 7, 2025.
2. External Review Report. Written by Daniel Shrubsole (University of Western Ontario) and Jean Andrey (University of Waterloo) based on a site visit September 24 to 25, 2025. Received October 14, 2025.
3. Program Response. Written by the Self Study Committee. Received December 1, 2025.
4. Dean's Response. Written by Matt Letts, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science. Received January 1, 2026.
5. Provost's Action plan. Written by Michelle Helstein, Provost and Vice President (Academic). Received January 9, 2026.

Self Study Report

The report highlighted a number of program strengths including:

- The department has a strong research profile, is committed to the philosophy of liberal education, and its members are active participants in institutional governance.
- Institutional leadership is a clear priority of the department as is participation in collegial governance. Similarly, the department has a shared commitment to the Western Division of the Canadian Association of Geographers, with members playing leadership roles in the organization for decades.
- The department's working environment is collegial and covers a diverse range of research interests and teaching competencies. The department is committed to providing the highest quality undergraduate and graduate educational experiences possible, with an emphasis on experiential and field-based learning. Generally, faculty members are regarded by students as approachable and teaching oriented.
- The department has clear strengths in such areas as the biosphere, cryosphere (in mountain and High Arctic environments), climatology, wildfire studies, urban and economic geography, borders and migration, remote sensing and GIS, and community-engaged research. They are directly linked with the Community Bridge Lab and the recently established i4Geo Institute is housed in our department.

The report also noted some challenges experienced by the program:

- There are recognized gaps in both human and physical geography. The ability for the department to offer a "core Geography" curriculum varies dramatically from year to year, given the increased interest in teaching and mentoring in specialized topics.
- The department is undergoing a fundamental transformation due to the high percentage of recent retirements and likelihood of significantly more over the next four to five years. This demographic transition is not out of step with other universities, as the last cohort of "baby boomers" reach retirement age. Given the size of the department relative to the number of retirees, the department will look vastly different by the end of this review period in comparison to the previous review.
- Spatially, the Department of Geography & Environment is housed in two different buildings, a situation which the department is generally happy with. The human geographers, instructors, and archaeologists are housed in University Hall (UHall), while the physical geographers are located in the Alberta Water and Environmental Science Building (AWESB). Facilities and spaces in AWESB, which was completed in 2008, are modern and provide office and research space. The space available for those labs in the AWESB cannot be matched elsewhere, although technical problems with the building (such as periodic flooding when winter temperatures rise and accumulated snow melts) pose problems. Further,, teaching and meeting space is not very good. The situation is the opposite regarding University Hall, which is where the department's GIS lab and "wet" teaching lab are located. It is the oldest building on campus and is showing its age. The department lacks a dedicated seminar-type room suitable for senior-level and graduate courses. Such rooms are available elsewhere in University Hall, but they are in high demand.
- Our university IT support staff has experienced significant cutbacks in recent years and now is no longer able to provide assistance as basic as support for Mac OS and Apple products. Luckily, we have an instructor in the department who fulfills the role of IT as part of his service duties. Given his specialized skills in geomatics, it is unlikely that we could have better outside IT support.
- Administrative support is limited to a single person who is shared with other programs. Consequently, many technical and administrative tasks (e.g., administrative support for graduate programs), fall to faculty and instructors instead.

The report made several recommendations and the program asked for External Reviewer feedback on several areas including:

- It has become apparent during the self-study process that the department requires a program revitalization effort. What program changes are needed and how these changes should be implemented are unclear at this point. It is important for us to identify how our programs line up with others at cognate institutions in Canada.
- It is apparent from the Self Study process that we will also need to engage in a course revitalization exercise, evaluating how individual classes fit into our larger set of programs. It is not clear to the group what criteria we should use to evaluate the role that individual classes play. There are divergent views within the department. There are several issues that we are struggling with in this regard. We also need to evaluate which courses need labs. Much of our lab delivery rests on the shoulders of the three instructors (only two of whom have continuing appointments) and graduate students who have Teaching Assistantship funding. It is not clear how sustainable this is or how resilient our program may be in the face of graduate enrolment declines or workload issues related to our instructors.
- What actions are most effective for growing student enrolments, especially given that we are in a province where geography is not taught as a distinct subject in elementary, middle, or high school? What are enrolment trends in Geography programs elsewhere?
- Generally, does our curriculum adequately address systematic, regional geography, and techniques approaches to the discipline? Do our different Geography degrees provide students with the educational background they need? Do our programs match others?
- Facing the recent retirement of six faculty, and the imminent retirement of more, how will we reimagine our programs going forward and what priorities should there be in hiring replacement faculty?
- What should our Human Geography programs look like going forward?
- What should our Physical Geography programs look like going forward?

External Review Report

The External Review Report praised Geography & Environment as a collegial Department that delivers a range of high quality undergraduate programs. They noted that “In our view, three characteristics are particularly noteworthy and commendable. The first pertains to partnerships. Over time, the Department has developed skill in and demonstrated commitment to working respectfully and creatively with both internal and external partners to deliver on (and expand) high quality undergraduate programs. The second pertains to balance. The Department is strong in both teaching and research (often achieving synergy between them), and its curriculum maintains a balance across the three strands of Geography. The third pertains to the high calibre of faculty and staff.”

The External Report also contained six (6) recommendations for improving the Geography Program:

- We recommend that the Department consciously and explicitly return to its roots and use sustainability concepts to frame its collective goals.
- We recommend that the Department engage in a curriculum planning process that begins by identifying programmatic learning outcomes for each of the degrees that are included in this review.
- We recommend that the Department seize the opportunity to provide leadership in aligning with the values [ULethbridge’s new strategic plan] (especially sustainability) and directions (especially shaping the future) of Iniskin.
- We recommend working with other parts of the University, we recommend that the Department incorporate program-level AI-related learning outcomes in their undergraduate programming.

- In order for Geography & Environment at ULethbridge to continue to thrive, we recommend the dual tactic of monitoring with the intent of continually adjusting, and clearly communicating about the Departments goals and strengths.
- We recommend that the top priority in hiring should be an urban scholar with a quantitative and applied focus to underpin the Urban and Regional Studies and Human Geography programs. Further, we recommend that the Department be provided with a small ongoing increase in operating funding to ensure that physical and computer labs are properly resourced.

Program Response

In their Program Response, the Self Study Committee addressed the recommendations from the External Review Report:

<p>1. We recommend that the Department consciously and explicitly return to its roots and use sustainability concepts to frame its collective goals.</p>	<p>The program area will consider this recommendation. We are not convinced that “our roots” are in sustainability, as this was one of the original departments when the UofL was founded (and sustainability wasn’t yet a key concept in geography), but we see how this might be a useful framework for framing our collective goals.</p>
<p>2. We recommend that the Department engage in a curriculum planning process that begins by identifying programmatic learning outcomes for each of the degrees that are included in this review.</p>	<p>The program area agrees, and we would request funds be made available to facilitate a retreat through which our curriculum can be refreshed as part of a routine reconsideration, with consideration for our changing faculty complement, transformations in the discipline, and the realities of the post-secondary learning environment in Alberta.</p>
<p>3. We recommend that Department seize the opportunity to provide leadership in aligning with the values [ULethbridge’s new strategic plan] (especially sustainability) and directions (especially shaping the future) of Iniskim.</p>	<p>The program area agrees and would state that many of our members have already been participating in leadership roles. Thinking, collectively, about our leadership in this fashion is useful. In terms of “actionable” outcomes from this recommendation, we believe that it could inform our curriculum redesign and could be implemented in some of the external-facing materials related to the department.</p>
<p>4. We recommend working with other parts of the University, we recommend that the Department incorporate program-level AI-related learning outcomes in their undergraduate programming.</p>	<p>The program area agrees that this is a subject worth considering at the departmental level. This is a quickly evolving technological problem, and we believe that given our departmental strengths in remote sensing, GIS, and other computational technologies that use AI in different academic and practical settings, we should be taking a leadership role in this topic on campus. In terms of undergraduate programming, because of the diverse learning outcomes of the sub-fields within our program, we believe that it is more likely that we will be able to facilitate diverse instructor approaches to AI than to come up with a standardized approach as seems to be recommended in the body of the report. We will have a discussion on this.</p>
<p>5. In order for Geography & Environment at ULethbridge to continue to thrive, we recommend the dual tactic of monitoring with the intent of continually adjusting, and clearly communicating about the Departments goals and strengths.</p>	<p>The program area agrees but we feel that the thrust of this recommendation is on the latter section of “communication” in which we will need help from Dean’s Office and other ULeth resources external to the department. In particular, we will need an updated website, and updated banners, and likely this should be done with communications professionals in conversation with our faculty, to make sure that the contemporary approaches to geography and environmental science are captured. The externals suggested to us that we</p>

also develop stories highlighting the work of our faculty and the diverse work settings in which a geography degree can be put to use. Again, this would require help from communications professionals. Finally, although it is not clear from the prose of this specific recommendation, the externals did discuss with us perceived disjuncture between what academic advising is telling students and the realities of the program. Perhaps this is suggested by the recommendation; in any case, those lines of communication seem to need improvement based on the feedback from the site visit.

6. We recommend that the top priority in hiring should be an urban scholar with a quantitative and applied focus to underpin the Urban and Regional Studies and Human Geography programs. Further, we recommend that the Department be provided with a small ongoing increase in operating funding to ensure that physical and computer labs are properly resourced.
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The program area agrees.

Dean's Response

The following is a summary of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science's response to the above documents:

The Dean would like to thank Prof. Jean Andrey (University of Waterloo) and Prof. Dan Shrubsole (Western University) for taking the time to provide a thoughtful review of our Geography, Urban & Regional Studies, Remote Sensing and GIS programs. We were pleased by their positive assessment of the quality of our B.Sc. and B.A. programs, experiential learning opportunities, partnerships, graduate success, student satisfaction and balance of both teaching and research excellence. We agree with their stated concerns around enrolment and appreciate their recommendations with respect to the need for more streamlined programming, the importance of defining learning outcomes, including those related to the rise of artificial intelligence, and the need to reach out to high school students and improve marketing and web presence. We also thank the reviewers for their recommendation to align with institutional Strategic Plan directions related to advancing sustainability, promoting global change solutions and incorporating Indigenous perspectives and world views.

Faculty members teaching in the reviewed programs have extensive expertise in fields as extensive as remote sensing and GIS, biogeography, climate, glaciology, hydrology, urban and economic geography, border studies and the ability to bring this knowledge into the classroom and experiential opportunity was recognized. However, as the faculty and instructor complement has been reduced in the context of the smaller Provincial Operating Grant, there is a need to evaluate how to continue to offer high-quality programs, provide hands-on learning and support student program planning. The Dean's Office, thus, agrees with the external reviewer recommendation that the Department hold a retreat with a view to consider how to revitalize and streamline programs while addressing the recommendations provided by the reviewers to revitalize our programs. For example, there is a need to greatly reduce the number of distinct fourth-year offerings, especially in GIS, remote sensing and computational fields, to ensure the viability and predictability of these courses and to open room to teach courses that attract more Majors, especially if the Department wish is to continue to excel in the delivery of a wide array of B.Sc. and B.A. Programs, including Combined Degree Programs and Concentrations across disciplines.

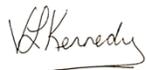
Provost's Action Plan

Consulting the External Reviewer Recommendations, the Program Response, and Dean Matt Letts, the Academic Quality Assurance Committee made the following five (5) recommendations for action which the Program must report on in 1 and 3 years:

1. The Department will hold a retreat to address issues raised in the AQA process including:
 - a. Engaging in a thorough curriculum review of all Geography programs to ensure that the requirements for a major or minor in Geography reflect current resources and faculty strengths.
 - b. The potential of streamlining the program offerings.
 - c. Reconsidering the balance of 1st through 4th year courses.
 - d. Developing clear learning objectives at both the program and course level.
 - e. Articulating clear connections between the program and the University's Strategic Plan.
 - f. Considering working with other faculties and departments to find synergies between courses and programs.
2. The Department should discuss the potential risks and rewards of the use of AI in their courses. All instructors should be encouraged to indicate their policy for the use of AI on course outlines.
3. The Department should work with the Faculty of Arts and Science Dean's Office and University Communications and be active partners in promoting the department in the university, in the community, to industry, and to potential students. Faculty should work with the Department's Administrative support to update and maintain the website.
4. The Department should, when resources become available, prioritize the recruitment of an Urban Studies scholar with a quantitative and applied focus.
5. The Department will work with the Faculty of Arts and Science Dean's Office to improve communication between the department, Academic Advising, and students.

The Academic Quality Assurance Committee is satisfied that the Geography Program academic quality assurance review has followed the U of L's academic quality assurance process appropriately, and acknowledges the successful completion of the review.

Sincerely,



Dr. Lynn Kennedy
Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee
Associate Professor, Department of History and Religion

cc Michelle Helstein, PhD.
Provost & Vice-President (Academic)