



## Exploring Faculty Perspectives on Implementing a Programmatic Approach for University Programs

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### Abstract

*In recent years, there has been a growing shift in higher education towards adopting a programmatic approach to designing and delivering university programs. This approach aims to create a more cohesive and holistic learning experience for students, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various courses and disciplines. While it offers numerous strengths, it is not without its challenges. This article explores the key challenges and strengths of implementing an integrated approach in university programs, shedding light on the transformative potential of this educational model.*

**Keywords:** Programmatic approach, integrated approach, undergraduate programs

### Introduction

The traditional course-centric model of university education has long been the dominant paradigm. It is an organization of courses in a study program characterized by individualism, where each instructor is entrusted alone with preparing and delivering their courses in the best possible way. This occurs in a rather isolated manner, with relative ignorance of the other courses in the program and without significant longitudinal interactions with other instructors and courses throughout the program's duration (Collister, 2007).

However, as the demands of the modern workforce evolve and the need for interdisciplinary skills becomes increasingly apparent, many universities in Canada are reevaluating their pedagogical approaches. An integrated approach, often referred to as a programmatic approach, emphasizes the interconnectedness of courses within a program and encourages collaboration among faculty members to create a more comprehensive educational experience (Prégent et al., 2009). The programmatic approach is a model for organizing and planning learning activities where the program constitutes the main unit of reference. In a way, the programmatic approach proposes a "revolution" or at the very least a major upheaval of individualistic teaching habits. Indeed, in the programmatic approach, the training project offered to students is constantly at the center of concerns and decision-making, unlike the focus on the needs of the individual teacher for "his" courses in the traditional course-centric approach. Thus, with the programmatic approach, the teaching and learning activities are designed as an intentionally

integrated whole around a shared vision. The design of each course, the definition of content, and the selection of teaching and assessment methods are based on this approach. The programs are designed to establish a training path where educational activities lead students to gradually develop the program-level learning outcomes and the complex skills they will need once they graduate (Tardif, 2003).

### The strengths of an integrated approach

One of the primary strengths of an integrated approach is its ability to foster interdisciplinary learning. By breaking down disciplinary silos and encouraging collaboration among departments, students have the opportunity to explore complex, real-world problems that require a multidisciplinary approach. This approach better prepares them for the challenges they will face in their future careers (Brandhorst et al., 2024). Integrated programs often focus on real-world applications of knowledge. This approach helps students see the practical relevance of what they are learning, increasing their motivation and engagement (Kozanitis, 2024). They gain a deeper understanding of how their education can be applied in their future professions. The integrated program approach also provides students with a more cohesive and logical progression of coursework (Prégent et al., 2009). Instead of a disjointed collection of individual courses, students experience a structured curriculum that builds on previous knowledge and skills. This continuity enhances their understanding and retention of subject matter. Also, by tackling complex, multidisciplinary challenges, students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills (McCord M., Houseworth M., Michaelsen L., 2015). They learn to



analyze problems from multiple perspectives and apply creative solutions, essential skills for success in the 21st-century workforce. Finally, an integrated approach encourages faculty collaboration, fostering a culture of teamwork and innovation. Professors from different disciplines work together to design and deliver courses, enriching the learning experience for students and broadening their own perspectives.

### The Challenges of implementing an Integrated Approach:

Despite its various strengths, the integrated approach can also present a few challenges. For instance, implementing an integrated approach can be met with resistance from faculty and administrators accustomed to traditional teaching methods (Sylvestre and Berthiaume, 2013). Overcoming this resistance and securing buy-in for a programmatic shift can be a significant challenge. Designing a cohesive curriculum that integrates multiple disciplines and courses requires careful planning and coordination. Ensuring that all components align with program goals and objectives is essential but can be time-consuming and complex. In addition, measuring the effectiveness of integrated programs can be challenging. Traditional assessment methods may not capture the full scope of student learning, necessitating the development of new assessment tools and strategies. Implementing an integrated approach may require additional resources, including faculty development, technology, and administrative support. Competing resource demands within universities can pose a challenge. Finally, collaborative program design and delivery may increase faculty workload, particularly during the initial transition phase. Balancing teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities can be demanding.

### Purpose of this study

Several undergraduate and some graduate programs in various universities from the Greater Montreal area, Canada, have implemented a programmatic approach, with some doing so for over a decade. Although their willingness to continue applying this approach is indicative of positive outcomes, there have been very few studies that have empirically evaluated the impacts this approach has had on the program, the faculty, and the students. This study aims to explore what faculty members think about the programmatic approach and the way it was implemented in the undergraduate program in which they are involved. Its aim is to provide a rich and comprehensive understanding of faculty members' perspectives on the implementation of an integrated approach for university programs, shedding light on both the challenges and strengths of this educational model.

### Method

A qualitative research approach was employed to gain in-depth insights into faculty members' perspectives on the implementation of an integrated approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of faculty members from various departments and disciplines within two

Montreal region universities. The interviews allowed for open-ended discussions, enabling participants to express their views, experiences, and concerns freely.

### Sample

We selected a diverse group of faculty members who have experience with or have been directly involved in implementing an integrated approach in university programs. We wished to insure representation from different departments, academic ranks, and levels of experience. A total of eight participants took part in the interviews. Four participants were from health programs (three female) and four from engineering programs (all male). All eight participants have between eight and fifteen years of teaching experience and the majority have been involved in the implementation process of the integrated approach. Three participants are currently head of department, while two are currently program directors.

### Data collection

We conducted one-on-one interviews with selected faculty members. All interview, ranging between thirty-five and fifty-five minutes, were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The structure of the interview protocol included open-ended questions that explore faculty perspectives on the strengths, challenges, and outcomes of the integrated approach. The following questions were used as prompts for the participants: - What are your perceptions of the integrated approach in your university program? - How has the integrated approach impacted your teaching and collaboration with colleagues? - What challenges have you encountered during the implementation of the integrated approach? - In your view, what are the key strengths of this educational model? - How do you assess the impact of the integrated approach on student learning and engagement? - What recommendations do you have for improving the implementation of the integrated approach?

### Data analysis

We utilized thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights within the interview transcripts. In order to do so, we accomplished the following steps: - Reviewed and became familiar with the interview transcripts; - Generated initial codes to identify meaningful segments within the data; - Identified overarching themes and subthemes that emerge from the coded data; - Continuously reviewed and refined themes to ensure accuracy and coherence.

### Results and discussion

This section is organized in three main parts. The first part addresses the ingredients for successful implementation of the programmatic approach. The second part covers the constraints and limitations encountered during and after the implementation of the approach. The third part presents the perceived benefits of this approach.

## Ingredients for successful implementation

All the participants broad up how crucial the roles and functions of program directors, program committees, and the staff who support them are for a successful implementation of the integrated program. The program director, through his leadership and vision, ensures the quality of the program. He has a significant say on the learning and teaching activities and thus contributes to achieving the program's strategic expectations. In the context of the programmatic approach, the program director is therefore required to play a major role, along with the program committee, for the creation or revision of the entire program structure. One participant wanted to highlight the importance of the choice of program director. "Indeed, this person, given the responsibilities he carries, must be recognized for his leadership, have the support of his peers, and have relevant experience in the targeted program".

That said, the program director can not by himself alone achieve all the expectations. A second necessary ingredient for a successful implementation is the manifestation of collegiality and collaboration from all the stakeholders towards a common objective. Decisions must be taken in a concerted manner, whether during the creation of a new program or during the periodic review of an existing program. This concerted approach allows faculty and students to benefit from implementation of the programmatic approach. A successful process relies on the contribution of all parties, and particularly the more seasoned professors, as well as lecturers whose experience can clearly contribute to the success of the process.

A third ingredient that was emphasized by most of the participants is the necessity to offer, on a regular basis, spaces for reflection and discussion. Faculty benefit from sharing practices, which become opportunities for educational innovations within the program. Such spaces allow for relevant adaptations of the program on a more continuous basis, and this helps students to recognize the cohesion of the program. The higher frequency of discussions about the program, the easier it is for the program director to prepare and hold an annual educational meeting with the entire faculty and teaching staff, as well as with the representatives of the student association concerned to discuss issues related to the program under his responsibility.

A fourth ingredient that was brought up several times is the substantially valuable contribution of the Teaching Support Services (SSE). Because they have developed expertise with regard to the programmatic approach, the SSE staff are able to support program directors and faculty members in the essential stages of this approach. One participant mentioned that "...we realized that without proper guidance, the whole process would have been extremely difficult to complete properly. [Person's name] was able to foresee various consequences of our decisions and helped us avoid them in time". SSE staff are resources that program directors and faculty alike could and should call upon systematically.

## Constraints and limitations

Despite the valuable help provided by the teaching support services in reducing pitfalls, some difficulties were mentioned by the participants regarding the implementation of the programmatic approach. The main constraint refers to the resources (human, material, and logistical) required for proper implementation. Indeed, most participants noted that insufficient funding for materials, which require recurrent expenses, can limit the implementation of innovative pedagogical strategies, such as project-based learning or laboratory simulations.

Participants noted that program directors do not always benefit from concrete and appropriate support from management staff within the faculties to ensure the quality of programs and support student success. A few participants also mentioned that newly appointed program directors are not always informed of the resources made available to them or do not always have easy access to the history of the evolution of the program for which they are now responsible. This transition from one program director to another often poses communication and documentary challenges. Moreover, program directors who do not have access to relevant and effective tools to support their role, particularly tools allowing the monitoring of individual student progress, as well as the monitoring of student cohorts and their success within courses and program-level learning outcomes. It was also noted that new program directors should have access to formal training supporting their role in promoting program quality, student success, and well-being.

Faculties that participated in this study emphasized the need for teaching to be more valued and for people who invest in it to receive greater recognition. "We invest so much time in planning and conceiving our courses to make them as attractive and interesting as possible for students. This takes time and energy that cannot be put into other areas that seem to receive recognition." Faculty members recommend that the first step to recognition should be offering professional development in university pedagogy. They also suggest that any new faculty member meet and be informed of the objectives of the program and be made aware of their role and responsibility in this regard. Additionally, they believe that part-time teaching staff should be more valued and recognized in their career plans.

### Perceived benefits of the programmatic approach

Several perceived benefits are associated with adopting this approach. First, a programmatic approach ensures that course offerings, content, and learning activities are aligned with the desired program learning outcomes. This alignment helps ensure that students gain the skills and knowledge necessary for success in their chosen fields. It also ensures that the workload for students is distributed evenly over the term, the year, and the entire program, which promotes the gradual development of targeted learning and its integration in increasingly complex situations.

Furthermore, by structuring courses around a set of program-level learning outcomes, the programmatic approach fosters

cohesion within the curriculum. This can lead to a more seamless learning experience for students as they progress through the program and sets the stage for more effective assessment of student learning outcomes. By clearly defining program goals and objectives, faculty members can develop assessment tools that measure student progress more accurately and provide meaningful feedback for improvement.

Adopting a programmatic approach also encourages better-articulated continuous quality improvement and evaluation of the curriculum. By regularly reviewing program outcomes and soliciting feedback from stakeholders, program directors can identify areas for improvement and make adjustments to better meet the needs of students and employers. Indeed, the curriculum is usually designed in collaboration with industry partners to ensure that graduates possess the skills and competencies needed in the workforce. This alignment with industry needs enhances graduates' employability and helps bridge the gap between academia and the professional world, strengthening the relationship between targeted learning and its context of use (professional life, research activities, or civic world).

Overall, the programmatic approach offers numerous benefits for university programs, including improved alignment with learning outcomes, enhanced cohesion, improved assessment, alignment with industry needs, and continuous improvement. By embracing this approach, institutions can better prepare students for success in their academic and professional pursuits.

## Conclusion

The adoption of a programmatic approach for university programs presents both challenges and strengths. While it requires a shift in mindset and significant effort, the benefits it offers in terms of cohesive educational experiences, real-world relevance, and critical thinking skills cannot be overstated. Successful implementations, as demonstrated in the perceptions reported by the participants, showcase the transformative potential of this educational model. A programmatic approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of courses within a program, fostering cohesion and alignment with program-level learning outcomes. This ensures that students develop the skills and knowledge necessary for success in their chosen fields. For a successful programmatic approach and to properly structure courses around program-level learning outcomes, it seems necessary to hold episodic consultations and meetings between actors. Although such meetings can be held, we note that such practices vary on campuses. It seems important to emphasize the need to encourage those involved in program quality (department directors, program directors, faculty, and support staff) are made aware of their role and responsibility in this regard. Two key components for success are concertation and genuine collaboration, which facilitate continuous quality improvement and an optimal learning experience for students.

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