



**Graduate
& Postdoctoral
Studies**

Office of the Vice-Provost and Dean
Yeates School of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies

Final Assessment Report (FAR) and Implementation Plan (IP)

Periodic Program Review (PPR)

Graduate Program in Documentary Media (MFA)

Last Updated: October 21, 2025

FINAL ASSESSMENT REPORT

In accordance with the University Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), this final assessment report provides a synthesis of the external evaluation and the internal response and assessments of this graduate program. This report identifies the peer review identified strengths of the program, together with opportunities for program improvement and enhancement, and it sets out and prioritizes the recommendations that have been selected for implementation.

The report also includes an Implementation Plan that identifies who will be responsible for approving the recommendations set out in the final assessment report; who will be responsible for providing any resources entailed by those recommendations; any changes in organization, policy or governance that will be necessary to meet the recommendations and who will be responsible for acting on those recommendations; and timelines for acting on and monitoring the implementation of those recommendations.

Documentary Media (MFA)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The School of Image Arts offers a Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) in Documentary Media. The field involves the history, theory and practice of documentary media forms in photographic, film/video and interactive media applications. Innovative in approach, this studio-based program offers students the possibility of working across media. Exploring a range of nonfiction subject matter, students work toward the Master's Project (MRP), which may take any number of forms. Core academic courses in the history and theory of documentary take place in the first two semesters, establishing a common frame of reference for production courses and the MRP. The School's renown in both film and photography, studio practices have evolved from the tradition of analogue into a digital media environment, yet the School retains its facilities in analogue processes, ensuring the viability of both traditional and innovative

hybrid approaches and practices. Multiplatform, interactive and/or web applications often complement or expand projects produced for the screen, publication and/or exhibition.

The Learning Outcomes in the Master in Fine Arts in Documentary Media Program all point to the student's development, completion, and public presentation of a Master's Project (MRP), which is under the creative control of the student. The MRP is based on a nonfiction idea conceived by the student, which is "workshopped" and developed over time in relation to the core curriculum. Projects are developed and critiqued throughout the two years in the context of production classes, project development seminars, and the Professional Practices in Documentary Seminar. In the context of classes and critiques, students receive formal and ongoing feedback from professors, supervisors, advisors, and peers. After final preparations in the spring course in Year One, students carry out production activities during the 2.5-month summer period. In Year Two, editing and refinement take place in the Master's Project Production courses, culminating in the graduate showcase called the DocNow Festival, where works are presented in public galleries, publications, websites, and/or screenings.

A "Support Paper" accompanies the visual project. An oral defense completes program requirements. The defense of the project takes place before a faculty examination committee composed of the project Supervisor, Secondary Advisor, and the GPD or designated faculty member as Chair, in either June or August.

PEER REVIEW

The graduate program in **Documentary Media (MFA)**, submitted a Self-Study Report to the Yeates School of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies that outlined program descriptions and learning outcomes, an analytical assessment of the program, program data including data from student surveys and the standard data packages. Course outlines and CVs for full-time faculty members were also appended.

The Peer Review Team (PRT) for the Periodic Program Review (PPR) of the graduate program in Documentary Media (MFA) consisted of Catherine Russell, Professor, Film Studies, Concordia University; Darrell Varga, Professor, NSCAD University; and Manfred Becker, Associate Professor, York University.

The PRT site visit was conducted on March 5 and 6, 2025. The visit included interviews with the University and Faculty Administration including the Provost and Vice-President Academic, Faculty Dean, Faculty Associate Dean, Vice-Provost and Dean Yeates School of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies (YSGPS); Associate Dean Programs YSGPS, Graduate Program Director of the Graduate Program, Director Graduate Program Administration, and meetings with Faculty, a group of current students, administration, and support staff.

The PRT report was communicated to the Associate Dean, YSGPS on March 27, 2025, and a response to the report from the graduate program and Faculty Dean was communicated on April 22, 2025. The responses of the Program and the YSGPS were reviewed and approved during the meeting of the Programs and Planning Committee (PPC) on October 2, 2025. This was then approved by YSGPS Council on October 21, 2025.

PROGRAM STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, AND OPPORTUNITIES

The PRT cited several strengths of this graduate program in their report, including its highly qualified and committed faculty, exceptional equipment and facilities, and prime downtown Toronto location with access to cultural and media industries. The program offers a distinctive blend of theory, history, and hands-on practice, supporting a wide range of documentary forms from traditional film to gallery installations and web projects. It encourages a broad, creative understanding of documentary as both an artistic and research practice, fostering innovative approaches that respond to evolving technologies and industry shifts.

Strengths

- The program is staffed by committed faculty who are qualified in their areas of expertise and supplemented with qualified part-time faculty.
- Equipment and facilities are impressive compared to other MFA programs.
- The program is in downtown Toronto with easy access to numerous sectors of the culture industries, including art galleries, film screenings, and ready contact with media professionals.
- The program encourages an understanding of documentary in broad terms, not just as a source of information, but as a creative practice that has informed the entire history of cinema and is especially relevant to engaging with the present.
- The curriculum combines the study of theory and history with hands-on practice, and students can undertake MRPs that take the form of linear film presentation that may be investigative but can also be driven by personal artistic goals, and that may also take the form of gallery installation, web projects and other non- linear forms of creation.
- Faculty working in the program take the position that research in a variety of forms that may include conventional scholarly approaches as well as participant interviews and other forms of knowledge-making are central to documentary- making.

Areas in Need of Improvement

- The program needs at least one additional faculty member who has an established documentary production track record, is well-versed in standard film industry production workflows, and has the ability to take a leadership role as Program Director. We understand that this hire would be through the School of Image Arts, but the hire needs to be dedicated primarily to the Documentary MFA and should be at the rank of Associate or above. We believe that such a hire could help mobilize student recruitment and expect that it could likewise help fulfill EDI initiatives since existing full-time faculty largely do not represent the diversity of the student body.

- Following on the need to hire a new faculty member to bring fresh perspective and leadership, it would improve the diversity of perspective in the program to rotate the teaching of the core required courses among other faculty from within the School of Image Arts. This would likewise expose students to a greater diversity of potential graduate supervisors. There is some urgency to these initiatives since enrollment is in decline and there is evidence of student dissatisfaction along with the problematic reputation of the program in the broader community.
- We understand that in an MFA program the culmination of the student work is the public presentation of the student's major project. We suggest that the program consider eliminating the MRP defence, and reduce the written requirement from the existing model to a five or six-thousand-word artist statement, and the replacement of the second supervisor with an external reader.
- The existing Doc Now festival requires stable funding and could be included as part of class work as the current structure is a problem since it requires a tremendous amount of work not shared equally among students. Participation in Doc Now is presented as a course requirement but it is not; what is required is public presentation of the MRP. These requirements need to be clarified to students. If Doc Now is to be required, then it needs significant support and integration.

Opportunities for Enhancement

- The work of graduate supervision is largely undertaken by a small number of faculty members. Strategies need to be developed to encourage other faculty in Image Arts to be involved with the program. In particular, faculty who have made documentary films need to be assigned some of their teaching in the graduate program on a regular basis.
- The faculty who met with the external reviewers demonstrated strong commitment to the program but there is an ongoing problem of recruiting a Program Director who is committed to long term improvement. We believe that it would be helpful to hire a new faculty member to fill this role and bring a fresh perspective and vision to the program, as noted above. In its current form, the direction and emphasis of the program is heavily influenced by the interests of a small number of faculty, and this may

be at odds with the broader possibilities and directions within the diverse practices of documentary media.

- The program needs to more clearly articulate its identity as it currently appears to be a confusing mix of industry and art. While these need not and should not be exclusive categories, we believe that the program should more clearly foster its identity as a studio-based fine art degree. In this way, the program can better differentiate itself from other digital media programs within The Creative School.

This identity needs to be clear to students entering the program and will influence the kinds of courses on offer.

- The program has accepted students from diverse backgrounds, including those without an undergraduate degree in filmmaking, causing some problems in course offerings being overly focused on introductory skills. This has been identified in the self-study with one approach being a change in recruitment to require incoming students to have the necessary skills. As reviewers we do not disagree with the admittance of students without a background in production but emphasize the need to modify course offerings to better accommodate students with a variety of skills. Rather than incorporate this training within existing courses, there could be a series of dedicated half or full day workshops offered by established professionals currently working in the industry on various technical aspects of production. Students could take a selection of such workshops in order to earn course credit and these could be at the introductory level for those who need it, and at a more advanced level for students with a background in production.. This approach may also alleviate staffing issues as it would not interfere with existing faculty course assignments, and a set of workshops could replace one of the core production courses.. In this way, the existing courses can focus on what students are doing with the technology, rather than concentrate on how to operate the technology.

- The above change in technical training can provide for a destreaming of the film and photography concentrations. Many students come to the program to explore interdisciplinary opportunities, but restrictions of equipment access and course scheduling make this difficult. Bringing these areas together

provides opportunities for seminars to concentrate on issues of concern to all practitioners, such as the role of artificial intelligence in the creative process, questions of reality and its representation in the era of social media, the place of documentary in contemporary art (something that has evolved since the start of the program), questions of ethics, not to mention the opportunity to foster innovative cross-disciplinary final projects that could contribute to the increased profile of the program to potential future students and within the broader cultural sector.

- Image Arts has very good equipment resources but there are limitations on access for students in the documentary program. Students enter the program believing that they have access to the facilities, but this is not always the case. A clear policy needs to be developed and then implemented. Students pay tuition with the understanding of year-round access and this needs to be addressed. If access is determined by technical proficiency (such as for access to various photo labs or use of certain field production equipment), then the proposed workshops (mentioned above) on various equipment could alleviate this issue. Students are told they cannot access any analog filmmaking equipment as this is reserved for undergraduate students. This is unnecessary and contrary to expectations of students entering the program, many of whom arrive in part based on the school's long history of analog film training. We understand that there may be complexities in scheduling, but that there are enough resources to overcome this problem. During our tour of facilities, we observed row-upon row of film cameras on the equipment shelf, editing rooms not in use and the remarkable black and white film lab not, at the time of our visit, processing film stock through its facilities.

- During this review we received complaints about equipment access and the lack of cameras that are specific to documentary production--meaning a camcorder-style appropriate for hand-held filmmaking, and that the current inventory is quite dated. This situation may reflect the emphasis of the undergraduate program on fiction filmmaking and is a reminder that the design and administration of the program needs to be made with the specifics of documentary in mind. We are pleased to report that

equipment housed within EDC has since been made available to the MFA students. The program needs to provide training as well as access to analog equipment to all MFA students who are interested.

- Communication and outreach to existing and prospective students needs improvement. There is a clear disconnect between faculty, administration, and students for example in external funding such as SSHRC graduate student applications resulting in a low success rate.. Administrators claim that the resources and support is available for grant applications, but students find that there is no coordination or support and encouragement for the application process. Students say that this is symptomatic of a broader problem in the program, contributing to a sense of being "abandoned, unsupported, "left in the dark." If students believe this to be the case, it does not matter whether it is true as it results in disengagement and disenchantment; serious effort needs to be made to bridge the gap in communications. This may include the use of town hall style forums for students, the inclusion of the student rep in program meetings, and other forms of direct messaging especially from supervisors directly to students. The loss of a dedicated GPA has compounded the lack of communication.
- There appear to be personality conflicts among faculty and from some staff toward students, as well as a protectionist/gatekeeping attitude toward facilities that needs to be overcome. The idea of broad access and interdisciplinary opportunities needs to be put into practice to conform with the rhetorical claims of the program.

SUMMARY OF PRT RECOMMENDATIONS, GRADUATE PROGRAM, FACULTY DEAN, AND YSGPS RESPONSES, AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

A report on the progress of these initiatives will be provided in the 1 Year Follow-up Report which will be due in one year from the date of Senate approval.

PRT Recommendations	PRT Rationale	Program Response	Proposed Program Action	Program Timeline and Responsibility/Lead	The Creative School Dean Response	YSGPS Response
Recommendation 1: Hire a new full-time faculty member at the Associate level.	A new faculty member with expertise in documentary filmmaking as well as digital media and research-creation urgently needs to be hired to chair the program for a five-year period to provide leadership, expertise, and vision. Hiring should prioritize BIPOC candidates.	The program supports the recommendation to prioritize hiring a full-time faculty member with expertise in documentary film and research-creation, with an emphasis on recruiting a BIPOC candidate. Faculty leadership is urgently needed to stabilize and reorient the program.	Develop a strategic hiring plan for the next 3-5 years, connected to teaching needs at both the undergraduate and graduate level, as well as equity considerations Engage the Dean of the Creative School in a discussion regarding hiring needs and priorities of the program	Strategic hiring plan and proposal to be developed in 2025-26 academic year. Lead: GPD Advocacy to the Dean. Lead: GPD	The faculty dean will consider this request, but all hires are ultimately responsive to funding for positions. This matter will be decided by a conversation between the dean and the provost.	YSGPS recognizes the challenges that arise in the absence of stable program leadership. While faculty resource needs remain under the purview of The Creative School, we support the program’s initiative to develop a strategic hiring plan that considers the needs of both the undergraduate and graduate programs.
Recommendation 2: Provide more flexible access to equipment for students.	Students entering with different levels of experience and skill with media technologies should be accommodated. Students should be able to learn a variety of media technologies, rather than become streamed into film or photography. Students in the program	The program is moving toward de-streaming film and photography, with workshops proposed to accommodate varying skill levels. These workshops could form milestones toward the degree, even if not for credit. As enrollment declines, better access to resources should follow.	Implement de-streaming of film and photography concentrations in both course offerings and production support. Integrate mandatory skills-based workshops for students at varying technical levels, focused on equipment use and media production fundamentals.	Already underway—2025 incoming cohort is being taught as a single class; instructors have been signaled that they are expected to teach across media forms Workshop development—consultation session with students is scheduled for late September;	The faculty dean supports this move towards greater flexibility and the structural changes that must be in place in order to achieve better access.	YSGPS supports the programs efforts to provide access to students with diverse skills and interests. De-streaming the program and incorporating additional workshops to support skill development are important changes that will improve the student learning experience. YSGPS will support the program in developing milestones to recognize student mastery of necessary skills

PRT Recommendations	PRT Rationale	Program Response	Proposed Program Action	Program Timeline and Responsibility/Lead	The Creative School Dean Response	YSGPS Response
	should have more access to equipment year-round.		Advocate for clearer access policies and improved communication around equipment availability, especially analog resources. Explore milestones or co-curricular requirements tied to workshop completion.	workshops for 2025-26 will be determined based on the outcome of that discussion. Lead: GPD. Equipment access policies are under discussion with Chair of IMA and the new facilities & equipment team at the Creative School. A policy is being developed at the faculty level, hopefully ready sometime in the 2025-26 academic year. Lead: Creative School Technology Team		outside of formal coursework requirements.
Recommendation 3: Consider renaming the program and/or giving it a more clear mandate.	The program should identify itself more clearly as a creative program in which audio-visual media and non-fiction research are brought together. “Documentary” should be perceived as a creative problem to be explored in all its iterations.	A strategic conversation is planned for the next academic year regarding renaming and rebranding. The program agrees with the idea of embracing "documentary" as a creative and conceptual question and intends to clarify its identity as a studio-based, interdisciplinary program.	Initiate a strategic planning process in the next academic year focused on rebranding the program. Engage faculty in critical discussion around the continued use of the term “Documentary” and its conceptual positioning.	Priority item for 2025-26but formal program re-structuring, renaming and re-branding will likely take 2-4 years to complete and implement, depending on the outcome of the conversations. Lead: GPD	Changing the program name and emphasis is a shared priority among faculty. Discussion is needed to determine the best reframing	YSGPS recognizes the importance and strategic value of program name and mandate and support the program’s efforts to undertake thoughtful and critical conversations that will orient the program in the intended direction. If and when a new name and/or mandate is established, YSGPS will work collaboratively with the program and The Creative School to ensure all promotional materials

PRT Recommendations	PRT Rationale	Program Response	Proposed Program Action	Program Timeline and Responsibility/Lead	The Creative School Dean Response	YSGPS Response
		Improved promotion of the program and clarity of expectations are underway. Updates to the website and clearer messaging about program strengths and creative potential are a key priority.	Emphasize “documentary as a creative problem” and position the MFA as a studio-based program that fosters experimentation and interdisciplinary practice. Update promotional materials and the program website to better communicate this identity to prospective students.			and program information is updated accordingly.
Recommendation 4: Students should get credit for their work to produce the DocNow screening and exhibition.	A new elective course could enable students to get credit for planning the DocNow year-end screening and exhibition. This course could include learning about curation, exhibition, film festivals, marketing, programming, and distribution of independent cinema, along with exhibition methods appropriate to	Faculty agree with recognizing the labour of DocNow through curriculum. Rather than making it an elective, a mandatory course integrating curatorial and exhibition work is under consideration.	Develop a required course or formal curricular structure tied to DocNow that covers exhibition, programming, curation, and independent media distribution. Ensure equitable workload distribution by integrating planning and execution of DocNow into required coursework.	Discussion in Fall 2025 with implementation linked either to the larger program reform or to a quicker intervention—depending on the outcome of faculty conversations. Lead: GPD	The faculty dean agrees with this cooperative approach and encourages the program to rethink its current course offerings in conjunction with this proposal.	YSGPS supports the work being done to recognize the labour involved in the DocNow screening and exhibition and will support the program’s efforts to modify the current curriculum to incorporate a required course as a way to address this concern. We encourage the program to consider the addition of any required courses in the broader context of the program-level student learning outcomes.

PRT Recommendations	PRT Rationale	Program Response	Proposed Program Action	Program Timeline and Responsibility/Lead	The Creative School Dean Response	YSGPS Response
	digital media and photography.		Recognize DocNow as a core experiential component of the program, not an add-on or unpaid labour requirement.			
Recommendation 5: Rethinking of the final defence.	The secondary supervisor on the MRP should be changed to an examiner who comes in once the project is finalized. The written component of the MRP should be shortened and made into more of an Artist’s Statement in which the student articulates their intentions, their use of media, and the context in which they are situating their work. We reiterate the question of the necessity of the defence.	The program supports revising the MRP process. Faculty are discussing replacing the second supervisor with a second reader, shortening the written component to an artist statement, and possibly removing the defence. If maintained, defences will be scheduled to avoid the summer term.	Replace the second supervisor with a second reader who participates only at the final review stage. Shorten the written component of the MRP to a 5,000–6,000- word artist’s statement focused on creative intent and media context. Explore alternatives to the traditional oral defence, such as a public exhibition review or wrap-up seminar.	Discussion in Fall 2025 with implementation linked either to the larger program reform or to a quicker intervention—depending on the outcome of faculty conversations. Lead: GPD	The faculty dean agrees that the current iteration of the MRP output is onerous for students and faculty supervisors. We support the aim to explore other options that will permit the retention of the MFA degree designation, perhaps in conjunction with other curricular changes, including the proposed DocNow course.	YSGPS supports a reconsideration of the MRP process, given the challenges faced by the program. We encourage the program to ensure that any proposed changes are aligned with the provisions outlined in Policy 170B, Procedures Section 20, which stipulate the requirements for the examination of MRPs. We encourage the program to reach out to YSGPS to discuss any proposed changes to the MRP process, and are happy to work with the program to support the development of processes that meet student learning needs, while also ensuring compliance with existing policy.