Final Review of the Intern Competencies Review System (ICRS)™

Independent Consultant's Report on Findings by

Daniel Zanth

Prepared for

ARIDO

Association of Registered Interior Designers of Ontario

August 28, 2023

Author's Profile and Acknowledgement of Potential Biases

Author's Profile

Daniel Zanth, an independent consultant with over two decades of experience in adult learning, accreditation, and competency assessment, is the author of this report. He has worked with numerous organizations to design, develop, and implement competency assessments within professional credentialing programs.

Daniel has maintained a long-standing association with ARIDO, including co-chairing the Alternative Pathways Task Force in 2014. He authored a report recommending a shift to competency-based assessment, along with the adoption of fair access principles. Daniel led the development of both the Intern Competencies Review System (ICRS)™ and the Interior Design Experience Requirement (IDER)™. Currently, he is leading the development of ARIDO's Canadian Alternative, which will serve as a new option to satisfy the final qualifications requirement to be completed in the registration path.

Acknowledgement of Potential Biases

With over two decades in the professional credentialing field, Daniel is well-versed in designing, developing, and implementing competency assessments within professional credentialing programs. He acknowledges the potential for biases, such as confirmation bias, ownership bias, authority bias, and status quo bias, which may stem from his longstanding involvement in the field. To mitigate these biases and ensure objectivity, Daniel:

- Seeks diverse feedback and consults multiple sources of information to counter confirmation bias.
- Regularly evaluates his assumptions and decisions to minimize ownership bias and attachment to pre-existing ideas.
- Remains open to new ideas, approaches, and perspectives, and actively challenges his preconceptions.
- Transparently documents his decision-making process and rationale.

Daniel continuously engages in professional development to stay informed of the latest trends and best practices in the field. He is committed to fairness, rigor, and transparency, ensuring his reviews and recommendations are evidence-based and unbiased. As the lead consultant for the ICRS and co-author of its white paper and maintenance plan, Daniel strives to uphold the highest standards of integrity and professionalism.

Recommendations for Report Dissemination

Daniel is committed to presenting an unbiased and balanced analysis. He will submit this report directly to the ARIDO Board of Management, and recommends that the report be made fully accessible to the public.

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Letter to the President and Executive Director of ARIDO

Dear President Sabrina Carinci and Executive Director Sharon Portelli of ARIDO,

I am writing to let you know that I have completed the final review of the Intern Competencies Review System (ICRS)™. As the consultant selected by ARIDO for the development of the Canadian Alternative—a new option for satisfying the final registration requirement—I have been reviewing ARIDO's existing assessment systems to ensure they align with this initiative.

Each assessment system is at a different stage: the ICRS is concluding its field testing with a final review, the IDER is undergoing its first progress review during field testing, and the Canadian Alternative is in a preliminary review at the beginning of its development. Due to their unique characteristics, I am submitting each review report separately.

Please find enclosed the final review of the ICRS, launched in 2016 for field testing. This system enables those without a CIDA-accredited education to demonstrate their competencies gained through education or work experience to begin working under supervision in the field of interior design in Ontario. Based on feedback from all ICRS users, I recommend concluding the field testing phase and fully rolling out the ICRS.

I want to express my gratitude to the ARIDO Board of Management for entrusting me with this review, and to the staff for their support and consistent delivery of key information. I also wish to recognize the system users who generously shared their ICRS experiences in one-on-one interviews. Their valuable input reflects ARIDO's commitment to ongoing improvement.

Please note that any critiques in this report are not intended to cast ARIDO in a negative light. These observations, provided at the conclusion of the field testing phase, aim to highlight areas where additional resources are needed to support the full roll-out of the ICRS. They are also intended to help ARIDO prepare for its growing role in assessing qualifications, aligning with fair access principles and future obligations under the Direction Regulation Model with the Ontario Association of Architects (OAA).

While I value the contribution of many individuals to this review, the opinions expressed in it are solely mine. My hope is that ARIDO will find this report beneficial in its ongoing efforts to promote fair and equitable access to the interior design profession in Ontario. I also recommend periodic reviews every three to five years to ensure the validity and reliability of qualifications assessment tools and to maintain a fair path into the profession.

Best regards,

Daniel Zanth

August 28, 2023

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report details a final review of the field testing for the Intern Competencies Review System (ICRS)™, a competencies framework developed by ARIDO and launched in 2016 to assess that individuals possess the minimum competencies, comparable to those attained in the completion of a CIDA-accredited education program, to begin working under supervision in the field of interior design in Ontario.

From July 2017, the minimum education requirement for intern membership became a CIDA-accredited degree. The ICRS ensures a reliable and fair way for individuals who have not completed a CIDA-accredited education program to prove they have the competencies to satisfy ARIDO's education requirement.

This review assesses the real-world performance of this new system during its field testing, gathering feedback from all system users.

Objective

The objective is to evaluate the initial setup and performance of the ICRS, identify any issues that may impact its ongoing relevance, and suggest enhancements or tools for further support. The overarching goal is to prepare the ICRS for a full-scale rollout after putting plans in place to address the identified issues.

Methodology

The review employs a mixed-methods approach—surveys, interviews, and group discussions — to examine the ICRS's initial implementation. It focuses on two main areas: practical application in real-world setting ('Field Testing') and its adherence to fair access duties ('Fair Practices').

Findings & Insight

This review collects feedback and insights from various user groups: applicants, reviewers, educators, system developers, and staff. It identifies the system's overall strengths and areas for improvement.

The ICRS application process and resources were generally well-received by applicants and reviewers. However, areas for improvement became apparent, including enhancing website usability, clarifying instructions and materials, and providing enhanced support.

Several solutions were suggested: video walk-throughs to guide users through the process, regular information sessions, and personalized support. Such support would be particularly beneficial for newcomers to Canada or individuals unfamiliar with online applications. Moreover, system developers recommended incorporating testimonials or advice from previous applicants into information sessions, which could contribute to a more relatable and humanized user experience.

Executive Summary

Discussion

The discussion section evaluates ARIDO's operations, highlighting areas such as fair access, continuous improvement, bias awareness, resource allocation, and user satisfaction. Emphasis is also given to the significance of humanizing the user experience, accessibility, and considering EDI mandates along with future legislative obligations.

Recommendations

Eight key recommendations have been developed to enhance the functionality, usability, and fairness of the ICRS. These recommendations have been made based on a consideration of all user feedback and experiences, and in line with the ICRS maintenance plan (2016) and initial review (2019).

These recommendations aim to improve the user experience, streamline the application process, increase the system's efficiency, and reinforce commitment to fair access, thus enhancing the overall effectiveness of ICRS.

Conclusion

The extensive review of the Intern Competencies Review System (ICRS)™ has provided valuable insights into its effectiveness, user satisfaction, and areas needing refinement. With overall high satisfaction among users and continuous improvements in efficiency, the ICRS is well-positioned to transition from its field testing phase to full-scale operation.

The eight recommendations presented for improving the ICRS underscore the crucial role of user feedback, bias awareness, and continuous improvement in enhancing the ICRS system. Each recommendation is targeted towards enhancing website usability, improving bias mitigation procedures, strengthening feedback mechanisms, making information more accessible, and adding a human touch to the application process. The allocation of additional resources and the review of third-party accountability have also been highlighted as critical aspects for attention. Additionally, it's recommended to solidify the progress made by formally concluding field testing, publishing the findings, and scheduling regular future reviews. The implementation of these recommendations will align the ICRS more closely with the expectations of fair access legislation, thereby enhancing the user experience and creating a more effective, user-friendly, and inclusive qualifications system.

Review and Approach

This review examines the initial implementation and effectiveness of the ICRS by using a variety of methods. I've gathered feedback from different stakeholders through surveys, interviews, and group discussions. The aim is to uncover areas requiring improvement, reinforce confidence in the system, and offer recommendations to ensure its continued relevance as it progresses from field testing to regular operation.

It should also be noted that the field testing phase allowed other provincial stakeholders to become more involved with the ICRS. Applicants from Manitoba and New Brunswick were included in the survey group and one-on-one interviews that provided feedback for this review.

Activities undertaken for the review

The review took place between January 20, 2023, and June 20, 2023. The activities carried out during this period included:

- Reviewing historical ICRS data, covering the entire field testing phase.
- Audit of a selected sample of applicant files, including records and tracking of application submissions, communications, outcomes, and decision rationales and reports.
- Evaluating the applicant resources and materials with the assistance of ARIDO staff.
- Conducting anonymous feedback surveys for applicants, reviewers, and educators.
- One-on-one video calls with applicants and reviewers to discuss their experiences.
- Group discussion with the ICRS System Developers to share insights and confirm future improvement strategies.
- Reviewing received email feedback.
- Observing ARIDO's annual Educator's Conference on June 6, 2023.

Methodology

The methodology for this review was designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ICRS's effectiveness in meeting its intended purpose. I used a variety of research methods, including anonymous surveys, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, and group discussions, to get in-depth insights from every user group, such as applicants, reviewers, system developers, and staff.

Surveys, consisting of both open-ended and closed-ended questions were distributed to all system users. These questions were designed to assess user satisfaction, the helpfulness of resources and tools, and the clearness of information provided by the ICRS. Closed-ended questions generated quantitative data about user interactions with the ICRS, while open-ended questions provided qualitative insights into experiences and suggestions beyond the scope of closed-ended inquiries.

Review and Approach

Supplementing the survey data, one-on-one interviews offered respondents the opportunity to share detailed experiences and explore specific themes. The semi-structured format of these interviews allowed for flexibility in discussing unanticipated yet relevant topics.

Engaging with various stakeholders through group discussions enhanced my understanding of shared experiences and group dynamics. These collaborative sessions facilitated dynamic exchanges and in-depth exploration of feedback, assisting me in proposing potential forward-moving strategies.

The use of a mixed-methods approach provided a thorough understanding of the ICRS's effectiveness, enhancing the review's credibility and reliability.

Scope

This review centers on assessing the effectiveness of the ICRS during its field testing phase, identifying potential improvements, and evaluating adherence to fair access principles.

Included

- Evaluation of the ICRS's field testing and maintenance actions.
- Review of the system's alignment with the general duties of fair access, including aspects of transparency, objectivity, impartiality, and fairness.

Not Included

- Evaluation of the validity of the current CIDA-accreditation requirement.
- Reviewing the criteria for other professional interior design credentials.
- Examination of pan-Canadian implementation efforts and initiatives.
- Assessment of the French language translation and system implementation.
- Formal compliance review in relation to fair access legislation.

The defined scope ensures a comprehensive evaluation of the ICRS's performance and effectiveness, positioning us to ascertain its readiness to conclude the field testing phase and transition into full operation.

ARIDO's Structure, Capacity & Staffing Requirements

Current Structure

The organization's streamlined structure enables efficient use of resources, with a single staff member effectively managing the ICRS along with other duties. This centralization ensures consistency in applicant engagement and timely response to reviews, fostering equitable treatment and a highly organized schedule of reviews.

Capacity Analysis

At present, the organization is encountering capacity limitations. The staff member who manages the ICRS also provides support to applicants and reviewers to make sure that services are delivered in a timely manner. If applicant volumes increase, the existing staffing level would become insufficient, potentially leading to operational bottlenecks and negatively affecting service quality and timeliness.

Staffing Requirements

To improve service effectiveness, ARIDO will require additional staffing. The recommendations in this report, along with proposed tools like video walk-throughs and regular webinar Q&A sessions, necessitate increased staffing and dedicated budget allocations. These efforts will improve the overall applicant experience. Additionally, ARIDO's commitment to ongoing development of the online application platform calls for a specific budget allocation. With these dedicated financial resources, the platform can receive prioritized, consistent improvements to meet accessibility standards and ensure high usability

Addressing Organizational Bias

The organization diligently mitigates potential bias in managing the ICRS to ensure fairness and transparency. Staff focuses on equitable treatment and clear guidance for all applicants, without influencing outcomes. Reviewers maintain objectivity, balancing empathy with impartiality, to assess applicants based on established criteria. This meticulous approach mitigates bias, fostering an ICRS experience of fairness and opportunity for all applicants.

Expanding Resources

Strategically expanding resources, both human and financial, is essential for maintaining the organization's effectiveness, managing growth, and fostering continuous improvements to the ICRS platform. It will also be crucial to balance the existing staff member's workload to ensure consistent, high-quality service delivery across all their areas of responsibility. This is particularly important for maintaining active, effective support for both applicants and reviewers, which is a critical part of ensuring the overall timely delivery of services.

Review Criteria

The ICRS includes components such as an online application, assessment tools, application processes, decision-making procedures, user support tools, and a competencies framework. The review was centered on two main areas: its practical application in real-world scenarios, referred to as 'Field Testing,' and its adherence to 'Fair Practices' in fulfilling fair access duties.

The **Field Testing** section evaluates user experiences during the field testing phase, taking into account their overall satisfaction, the system's effectiveness, and the clearness of system components for ease of navigation and understanding. The analysis begins with a revisit of the findings and recommendations from the ICRS Initial Review (May 2019) and examines the progress made based on these recommendations to date.

The **Fair Practices** section evaluates how well the system aligns with Ontario's fair access legislation. While ARIDO is not currently subject to specific legislative obligations regarding fair access in Ontario, this review proactively evaluates the alignment of ICRS with potential future legislative obligations. This includes reviewing the system's transparency in its operations and decision-making processes, confirming that procedures and criteria are objective, and assessing the impartial treatment of all users. The system's responsiveness, consistency, and practices for handling appeals and addressing concerns are also evaluated to ensure handling is done in an equitable and fair manner.

These criteria ensures a thorough review of the assessment system, confirming its effectiveness, user-friendliness, and alignment with the expectations of fair access legislation, which will apply to ARIDO upon the full implementation of the Direct Regulation Model in collaboration with the Ontario Association of Architects (OAA).

Review Criteria

Criteria:

The specific criteria for assessing the system's performance are as follows:

Field Testing: Focuses on the user experience during the field testing phase and includes:

- **ICRS Initial Review from May 2019**
  Initial review of decision auditing & reporting, technical capacity, feedback and maintenance actions, and support.

- **Overall Satisfaction**
  Measure the overall user satisfaction with the system.

- **Helpfulness of Resources and Tools**
  Evaluate the system's effectiveness.

- **Clear Information**
  Assess the clarity of instructions, guidelines, and other system components.

Fair Practices: Focuses on the system's alignment with the general duties of fair practices as outlined in fair access legislation, covering:

- **Transparency**
  Evaluate the system's openness in its operations and decision-making processes.

- **Objectivity**
  Assess whether the system's procedures and criteria are unbiased and based on factual and observable information.

- **Impartiality**
  Determine if the system treats all users equally without favoritism or discrimination.

- **Fairness**
  Check if the system's practices are just, equitable, and balanced, particularly in how it handles appeals and complaints.

Findings & Insights — Background

In the April 2016 white paper for the ICRS (page 19), it was noted that that ARIDO needs to address and document four key areas by the end of field testing:

1. **Evidence Evaluation**
   Be more lenient when rating the appropriateness of submitted evidence. If unsure, lean towards a positive rating first and then discuss whether the evidence is acceptable.
2. **Sample Collection**
   Collect examples of good, acceptable evidence and share these samples with future reviewers and applicants to provide a better understanding of what's expected.
3. **Reviewer Feedback**
   Keep track of and gather feedback from reviewers about any unexpected issues that arise.
4. **System Review**
   Regularly assess the system and make necessary adjustments based on informed decisions.

In 2019, I conducted an initial review of the ICRS implementation and wrote a report **ICRS Initial Maintenance Review** from May 2019 that examined progress in those four key areas and noted a number of improvement areas.

My first step in this review of the ICRS implementation was to evaluate the status of maintenance actions and improvements proposed during the **ICRS Initial Maintenance Review** from May 2019. Early in 2023, I conducted a series of staff interviews and reviewed current materials, documents, software, and procedures to gauge the progress in these key areas. Understanding this progress is critical because it informs the method required for gathering appropriate feedback and information to determine the readiness of the ICRS to conclude field testing.

Historical data provided by ARIDO staff, covering the period from April 20, 2016 to January 20, 2023, were reviewed at the outset of my review. These are summarized below to provide background information about the field testing period:

- ARIDO receives an average of 175 information requests annually about the ICRS.
- On average, 19 individuals enrol in the ICRS each year, leading to a total of 119 enrolments from 2017 to 2023.
- Among the enrollees, 52 were domestic applicants and 64 were internationally-educated.
- 31 applicants have had their enrolments expire.
- The average completion time for those who submit an application for review is 10 months.
- Of those who submitted an application, 70 received a 'Competencies Fully Met' decision.
- A total of 5 applicants received a 'Competencies Not Met' decision, including 4 internationally-educated applicants.
- All 3 applicants who received a 'Competencies Partially Met' decision successfully re-submitted an application after addressing competency gaps, resulting in a 100% completion rate for this group.

Findings & Insights — Progress Update on ICRS Initial Review

Progress Update on ICRS Initial Review

A review of the **ICRS Initial Review** from May 2019 shows the following progress:

Interventions - Status: In Progress

- An interactive questionnaire has been developed to help guide applicants on their journey to becoming an interior designer, providing them with links to relevant ICRS information.
- A video walk-through and orientation is currently planned for development later in fall 2023.
- Information sessions are set to begin in fall 2023.
- A resource list is provided to applicants on application.
- An explanation of re-assessment to address gaps is provided in applicant materials on enrolment.
- ICRS applicants do not have access to practice advisory resources for professional guidance.

Replacing Website Software - Status: Completed

- The initial ICRS website, used for pilot and field testing, was replaced in 2020 and the application has been integrated to a sustainable solution within ARIDO's registration database.
- Although the status is marked as "Completed", additional feedback from applicants, reviewers, and staff has highlighted several areas for enhancing the tools and functionalities of the website.

Gathering Feedback - Status: Ongoing

- Technical issues with the initial survey software prevented the distribution of feedback surveys to applicants upon their application submission, resulting in no applicant feedback being gathered.
- Staff have been trained on the cloud survey engine used during this review and have started using the software to administered the applicant post-application feedback survey.
- Regular check-ins to gather feedback and examples for training discussion have not been established. However, the first semi-annual reviewers meeting took place on June 14, 2023 and concrete follow-up actions were identified.
- Feedback from stakeholders across Canada is gathered as all users, regardless of their location, were invited to participate in feedback surveys and individual interviews during this review.

Training for Reviewers - Status: Ongoing

- Examples of types of submissions and evidence have been requested from reviewers, and are being gathered for discussion.
- Targeted training that focuses on providing constructive feedback is being prioritized.
- Additional potential reviewers are being recruited and trained.

The 'Ongoing' status is used for areas like feedback collection and reviewer training. ARIDO understands that these processes must keep evolving to adapt to new feedback and emerging challenges. This ongoing effort helps ensure that the ICRS remains adaptable, responsive, and continuously improving.

Findings & Insights — The Current State of Field Testing

The Current State of Field Testing

This review collected data directly from system users between January 20, 2023 and June 30, 2023. The study collected data from a variety of sources, including:

- All 72 ICRS applicants who submitted an application from January 20, 2016 to January 20, 2023, were invited to take part in an anonymous online survey, with a response rate of 31% (22 respondents). Note: individuals whose enrollments expired were also invited.
- Three semi-structured interviews with voluntary ICRS applicants were conducted over 20 -30 minute video calls.
- All three active reviewers responded to an online reviewers' survey, 30 minute video calls, and participated in a group discussion with other reviewers.
- Three ICRS system developers joined into a group discussion to review the summarized applicant survey results and discuss the direction for potential system and process improvements.
- Conducted staff interviews using both semi-structured and open-ended formats.

The surveys, interviews, and group discussions provided a comprehensive overview of the experiences of ICRS users. The diverse research techniques employed enabled the collection of both quantitative insights from surveys and qualitative perspectives from interviews and group discussions. These findings are presented in subsequent subsections, starting with the survey results, followed by insights from the individual and group interviews, and concluding with a comprehensive data analysis.

I conducted anonymous online surveys with both applicants and reviewers, focusing on three primary parts of the ICRS implementation:

- Overall Satisfaction
- Helpfulness of Resources and Tools
- Clearness of Information

The survey employed 5-point scales ranging from 'very satisfied' to 'very dissatisfied', 'very helpful' to 'very unhelpful', and 'very clear' to 'very unclear'. These scales were used to gauge participants' levels of satisfaction, helpfulness, and clearness of information. The survey also included an open-comment field for each section and overall for the survey, and the written responses have been summarized in the findings.

Furthermore, to gain deeper insights into user experiences, I arranged semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with three applicants and three reviewers. These in-depth discussions, facilitated by targeted questions, helped shed light on the user experience and identified potential avenues for improvement.

The sections of the report that follow explore the feedback gathered by each user group and present my findings and insights.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Applicants

Survey Responses

Overall Satisfaction

- **Application Process**: 45% of respondents reported being very satisfied, 36% satisfied, 9% neutral, and 9% dissatisfied.
- **Website Usefulness**: 32% of respondents reported being very satisfied, 36% satisfied, 14% neutral, 14% dissatisfied, and 5% very dissatisfied.
- **Access to Help**: 45% of respondents reported being very satisfied, 41% satisfied, and 14% dissatisfied.
- **Written Feedback Highlights**:
  Six respondents provided written feedback that mostly emphasized the helpful and responsive nature of the staff, despite encountering some challenges:
  - One respondent was unaware of the one-year application deadline. They also had issues uploading attachments on the website, but staff support resolved it.
  - One respondent found the process required a lot of effort and they received minimal help. They felt frustrated and considered not proceeding.
  - One respondent suggested improving the website to make it clearer and more understandable for newcomers to the country. They also recommended faster access to live personnel or one-on-one onboarding for personalized guidance.

Helpfulness of Resources and Tools

- **Applicant Guide**: 41% of respondents found it very helpful, 36% helpful, 18% neutral, and 5% unhelpful.
- **Reference Materials**: 36% of respondents found them very helpful, 32% helpful, 18% neutral, and 14% unhelpful.
- **Instructions**: 36% of respondents found them very helpful, 36% helpful, 14% neutral, 9% unhelpful, and 5% very unhelpful.
- **Written Feedback Highlights**:
  Six respondents provided written feedback with some suggesting that the application process could be improved with clearer instructions and more comprehensive reference materials.
  - One respondent didn't recall receiving reference materials, instructions, or an applicant guide and expressed a desire for more guidance throughout the process.
  - Another respondent found the application process unclear, leading to wasted time and effort in creating their own approach to documenting competencies. They also felt a lack of feedback during the process.
  - One respondent thought there are too many areas that overlap, but did not specify which areas they were referring to.
  - Another respondent suggested that resources could be improved by including descriptive examples of how to write evidence statements and specific guidance about qualifying work experience. This would help applicants to understand the standards more effectively and to meet them more easily.
  - One respondent reported no issues and expressed that they had a great experience.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Applicants

Clearness of Information

- **Competency Areas**: 41% of respondents found information very clear, 41% clear, 9% neutral, and 9% unclear.
- **Competencies**: 32% of respondents found information very clear, 36% clear, 18% neutral, 9% unclear, and 5% very unclear.
- **Direct and Indirect Evidences**: 27% of respondents found information very clear, 41% clear, 9% neutral, 18% unclear, and 5% very unclear.
- **Written Feedback Highlights**:
  Five respondents provided written feedback, recommending improvements to the clarity of instructions and the website. They also expressed gratitude for the prompt and helpful responses from staff, despite the following challenges:
  - Two respondents perceived overlap between competencies, but did not specify which areas they were referring to.
  - One respondent indicated that they had to reach out to clarify several times and didn't feel the responses made things clearer.

Additional Comments

In the survey's final section, ten respondents provided feedback on improving the application process, from which several key themes emerged:

- **Need for Clearer Instruction**
  Three respondents expressed a need for more guidance, clearer instructions, and examples of evidences. These respondents seemed uncertain about the adequacy of their submissions and requested more descriptive examples to help understand how their submissions should look.

- **Overlap and Streamlining**
  Two respondents perceived overlap or repetition in competencies, but did not specify which areas they were referring to. These respondents expressed a desire to remove repetitive elements and make the overall process more efficient. One respondent suggested having a single project that covers all competences rather than multiple smaller documents, or having an in-person component.

- **Desire for Personal Guidance**
  Three respondents suggested the assignment of a personal guide or having one-to-one meetings, emphasizing the need for personalized guidance. They believe this could assist in understanding the process better and that an in-person examination could offer more insights into an applicant's skills.

- **Positive Feedback**
  Two expressed satisfaction with the speed of processing time, support from staff, and the overall pathway to ARIDO membership. They appreciated the current ICRS process and found it beneficial for demonstrating their interior design experience and knowledge.

- **Website Improvement**
  One respondent suggested enhancements to the website to make it more user-friendly, especially for newcomers to the country. The respondent also advocated for faster access to live support and personalized onboarding, considering applicants' unique education and experience.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Applicants

One-on-one Interviews

Three applicants volunteered to participate in a 20-minute one-on-one interview, providing additional feedback about their experiences with ICRS. These semi-structured interviews employed verbal probing techniques, allowing participants to freely share their experiences with the ICRS. Probing for additional information and using follow-up questions encouraged participants to elaborate on their responses. The overwhelming consensus was a perception of the ICRS as a fair pathway to meeting educational requirements. Interviewees highlighted the empathetic and responsive nature of ARIDO staff, affirming their positive impression of the organization. Despite experiencing technical issues, all acknowledged the ICRS as a fair way to demonstrate competencies and appreciated its cost-effectiveness. However, they proposed improvements in the following areas:

- **Technical Aspects and Website Usability**
  Applicants faced technical issues with the website, extending the time taken to complete the application. The process of blocking out private information in evidence uploads was described as tedious.

- **Staff Support and Communication**
  - While staff were accessible, some interviewees found that the clarity of clarifications provided could be improved.
  - The staff's responsiveness and support were commended, particularly in challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Clearer Instructions and Expectations**
  - Some applicants found instructions and expectations unclear, leading them to overthink or submit more evidence than necessary.
  - More specific examples tied to each competency were suggested to better understand what is expected.
  - Targeted examples for different audiences might help manage expectations.
  - Applicants unfamiliar with Canadian practices or online applications could benefit from additional guidance and clearer instructions.

- **Additional Support**
  - Video walk-throughs or regular information sessions were proposed to assist applicants better navigate the process.
  - For applicants from different international interior design practices, it was suggested that clearer instructions or recommendations for further study before applying could be beneficial.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Applicants

Summary of Findings

- A majority of respondents (18 or 82%) were satisfied with the application process.
- Over two-thirds of respondents (15 or 68%) expressed satisfaction with the website.
- Most respondents (19 or 86%) expressed satisfaction with their ability to access help.
- More than three-quarters of respondents (17 or 77%) found the Applicant Guide helpful.
- Over two-thirds of respondents (15 or 68%) found the Reference Materials helpful.
- Nearly three-quarters of respondents (16 or 73%) found the instructions helpful.
- Information about Competency Areas was clear to most respondents (18 or 82%).
- Over two-thirds of respondents (15 or 68%) found both the information about Competencies and Direct and Indirect Evidences to be clear.

Key Insights

The feedback from applicants provided valuable insights into their experience with the ICRS application process. Here are the key areas of satisfaction and improvement highlighted by the respondents:

- **Satisfaction & Areas for Improvement**
  A majority were satisfied with the application process, access to help, and the website. However, issues with website usability emerged, suggesting room for enhancement.
- **Support**
  While most respondents could effectively access help and commended ARIDO staff's responsiveness, some interviewees suggested improving the quality of explanations provided by staff, especially related to acceptable evidences.
- **Guidance**
  Despite resources like the Applicant Guide, Reference Materials, and Instructions being considered helpful by most, there were requests for clearer and more specific instructions, particularly from those unfamiliar with Canadian practices or online applications.
- **Clear Information**
  While most respondents found the provided information clear, a third expressed some lack of clearness regarding Competencies and Direct and Indirect Evidence, suggesting a need for more specific examples.
- **Enhanced Support**
  Interviewees suggested video walk-throughs, information sessions, and personalized guidance, especially for newcomers to Canada, those unfamiliar with online applications, or from different international interior design practices. Clearer instructions and study recommendations before applying or to address competency gaps areas before applying were also suggested.
- **Areas for Enhancement**
  Aspects with lower satisfaction rates, such as the website's usefulness and clearness in Competencies and Direct and Indirect Evidences, could be the focal point for future enhancements to boost user satisfaction and understanding.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Reviewers

Survey Responses

Overall Satisfaction

- **Application Review Process**: 67% of respondents reported being very satisfied, 33% satisfied.
- **Re-assessment Review Process**: 67% of respondents reported being very satisfied, 33% satisfied.
- **Review Website Usefulness**: 100% of respondents reported being very satisfied.
- **Access to Help**: 67% of respondents reported being very satisfied, 33% satisfied.

Helpfulness of Resources and Tools

- **Reviewer Guide**: 67% of respondents found it very helpful, 33% helpful.
- **Reference Materials**: 67% of respondents found them very helpful, 33% helpful.
- **Training Sessions & Instructions**: 100% of respondents found them very helpful.

Clearness of Information

- **Competency Areas**: 67% of respondents found information very clear, 33% clear.
- **Competencies**: 33% of respondents found information very clear, 67% clear.
- **Direct and Indirect Evidences**: 67% of respondents found information very clear, 33% clear.
- **Written Feedback Highlights**
  Two respondents to our recent survey provided written feedback, affirming that the system appears to be functioning well overall. They acknowledged the evolution and streamlining of the review process. However, they also pointed out challenges, particularly the time-consuming nature of reviewing complex or unclear applicant submissions. The respondents proposed the following improvements:
  - **Clarify the standards for evidence**
    The respondents suggested a need for more detailed explanations for the evaluation of certain types of evidence. They suggested that providing more definitive examples could enhance the review process.
  - **Improve guidance for applicants**
    The respondents noted that clearer guidance could be provided to applicants regarding the presentation and clarity of their evidence. They also suggested that addressing the grey areas by providing additional explanations of what is acceptable would not only aid reviewers, but also help applicants understand the standards and expectations better.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Reviewers

One-on-one Interviews

All three active reviewers were invited to participate in a 30-minute one-on-one video call. The interviews were semi-structured, using verbal probing, covering their overall experience as reviewer, review process and prioritizing aspects types of applications, approach for providing constructive feedback, reviewer training and info sessions, and suggestions to improve the application process. Overall, reviewers express empathy and appreciation for applicants from diverse backgrounds and experiences. They suggest improvements in guidance and support for applicants, as well as ongoing discussions among reviewers to ensure a fair and consistent review process. The main feedback points are as follows:

- **Process has Improved**
  The process has improved over the past few years, with clearer expectations regarding evidence to prove competencies.

- **Emphasizing Empathy and Fairness**
  Reviewers emphasize the importance of empathy and fairness in the application review process.

- **Balanced Reviews**
  Reviewers call for a balanced approach in evaluating the range of evidence submitted by applicants. They strive to ensure competencies demonstrated are comparable to those found in CIDA-accredited programs while ensuring fairness across different sources of evidence.

- **Applicant Challenges**
  Applicants often provide only one type of evidence and may struggle with understanding what is being asked.

- **Addressing Gaps in Competencies**
  When there are gaps in meeting competencies, reviewers try to provide specific and clear reasons for applicants to address.

- **Regular Reviewer Discussions**
  Reviewers agree with having regular sessions to discuss examples of acceptable evidence and the system.

- **Need for Clearer Instructions**
  Reviewers highlight the need for clearer instructions for applicants, particularly in identifying types of acceptable evidence to demonstrate specific competencies.

- **ICRS as a Fair Way to Prove Competencies**
  Reviewers find ICRS to be a fair way to prove competencies but suggest improvements in instructions for certain competencies.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Reviewers

Reviewer Information Check-in Call Group Discussion

On June 14th, an online check-in group discussion with reviewers was held to discuss feedback survey results and the direction of proposed ICRS improvements. The conversation focused on several key areas that came up in the survey and one-on-one interviews:

- **Evaluating Evidence**
  Reviewers emphasized the need for careful consideration when comparing submissions to the level of CIDA interior design programs. It is important to balance the evidence from various sources.

- **Feedback for Competency Gaps**
  A challenge discussed was the difficulty of providing constructive feedback for competency gaps or unclear submissions.

- **Clearer Instructions for Applicants**
  Reviewers expressed the need for more precise application instructions, specifically about evidence submission and the applicant's role in team projects. This clarity will help reviewers understand the applicant's contribution to the work.

- **New Resources for Applicants**
  The meeting touched on upcoming resources such as an applicant guide, revised application instructions, and information sessions. These resources should emphasize the importance of applicants clearly explaining their role and contributions in the evidence they submit. Applicants should be directed to the appropriate sections to elaborate on their roles, such as in their introduction and the evidence statements for each competency.

- **Reviewer Resources and Engagement**
  The reviewers showed commitment and willingness to provide input to upgraded reviewer training materials and Reviewer Guide updates. They also agreed to gather examples of acceptable evidences to discuss with reviewers, and for use in new reviewer training, to provide a better understanding of what's expected.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Reviewers

Summary of Findings

- Reviewers expressed a high level of satisfaction with the application review process, the re-assessment review process, the usefulness of the review website, and the quality of help available.
- Reviewers also found the reviewer guide, reference materials, and training sessions very helpful. However, there's room for improvement in providing clearer explanations for the types of acceptable evidence, more precise application instructions, and better guidance for applicants regarding evidence submission.
- In the one-on-one interviews, reviewers stressed the importance of empathy, fairness, and a balanced evaluation of evidence. They acknowledged the improvements made over the years but still suggested further enhancements, including more instructions, evidence examples, and clearer expectations for each competency.
- During the group discussion, reviewers expressed their willingness to contribute to the creation of upgraded training materials and updates to the Reviewer Guide.

Key Insights

- **Satisfaction Levels**
  Reviewers express high satisfaction with the review process, website usefulness, and support available, testifying to a well-implemented system.
- **Value of Resources**
  Resources such as reviewer guides, reference materials, and training sessions are highly valued, indicating their effectiveness in supporting the review process.
- **Applicant Guidance**
  The necessity for improved guidance for applicants, especially in evidence submission and role identification, indicates a need for clearer communication.
- **Core Values in the Review Process**
  The highlighted importance of empathy, fairness, and balanced evaluation underscores the core values guiding the review process.
- **Reviewer Engagement**
  Reviewers' commitment to contributing to training materials and guide updates reflects active engagement in the ongoing improvement of the system.
- **Benefit of Regular Discussions**
  Regular sessions for discussing acceptable evidence and system specifics are seen as beneficial, pointing to the need for ongoing dialog.
- **Ongoing Improvements**
  Reviewers find the ICRS to be a fair system for evaluating competencies. However, they suggest that the instructions and explanations of what constitutes acceptable evidence be improved in order to continually improve the process.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Development Group

On April 27, 2023, a 60-minute group discussion was hosted with the three original ICRS development group members. The discussion was held to review survey feedback and discuss the direction for system improvements.

The following suggestions were agreed upon:

- **Clearly document the reviewer decision tracking and auditing protocol.**
  This will help to ensure that the reviewer decision-making process is transparent and accountable.

- **Use plain language throughout the system and in applicant instructions, taking into account multiple learning styles and neurodiversity.**
  This will make the system more accessible to a wider range of users, including those with different learning styles and neurodiversities. The AODA guide for user accessibility can be used as a resource when reviewing ways to improve the use of plain language.

- **Involve applicants who have gone through the ICRS process in information sessions or roundtable discussions.**
  This will help to humanize the experience and demonstrate the feasibility of completing the application process.

These suggestions are all important steps that can be taken to improve the ICRS system. By clearly documenting the reviewer decision-making process, using plain language, and involving applicants in the process, the ICRS can become more accessible and user-friendly for everyone.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Staff

From January to June 2023, I engaged with the ICRS staff in multiple structured and informal discussions. Throughout these interactions, I observed a consistent pattern of engagement with applicants, characterized by uniform and prompt responses to all procedures. Some challenges were encountered due to specific system constraints, but the staff nevertheless maintained an organized approach. They prioritized tasks that required immediate attention, reflecting a targeted focus on addressing urgent and an overall effort to enhance the applicant experience.

Key Insights

- **Staff Engagement and Efficiency**
  The ICRS staff consistently engages with applicants, resulting in a uniform and timely response. Their proactive involvement led to the development of a streamlined Applicant Guide, showcasing their dedication to enhancing the applicant experience.

- **Capacity Limitations**
  The current staffing levels and reliance on manual procedures and tracking of workflow may face challenges when scaling to accommodate increasing application volumes. This situation could potentially lead to operational bottlenecks, affecting service quality and timeliness. Additionally, the lack of automation in systems necessitates many manual tasks that are challenging to track within the workflow, which may strain the balance of existing staff workload, leading to potential issues in continuing to manage the process efficiently.

- **Need for Resources**
  Additional staffing and budgeting resources will be required to implement recommendations, develop proposed tools, provide high-quality support, and improve the application website.

- **Managing Bias**
  Staff are conscious of potential bias and strive to ensure fairness and transparency in all processes, balancing personalization with impartiality.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Educators

Quality Assurance Framework in Ontario

Interior design education programs in Ontario are subject to a multifaceted quality assurance framework. Provincial standards are overseen by bodies like the Post-secondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) and The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, consolidated within the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), reflecting the specific regulations and guidelines subject to provincial jurisdiction. Institutions must also develop an Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), outlining protocols for all aspects of quality assurance.

ARIDO's Requirement and CIDA Accreditation

ARIDO's education requirement is based on completion of an education program accredited by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA), an independent accrediting organization for setting standards and evaluating interior design higher education programs in the United States and internationally. ARIDO developed the ICRS as an alternative way to meet the education requirement for those who haven't completed CIDA-accredited education.

While almost all provincial institutions have adopted CIDA accreditation due to ARIDO's requirement, this has led to challenges.

Challenges in Accreditation Alignment

The tension between provincially mandated standards and the ARIDO-mandated CIDA accreditation has created challenges for educational institutions. Being subject to these additional, and possibly misaligned, standards can lead to barriers in the differing accreditation processes.

ICRS Review and Engagement Process

During the ICRS final review, ARIDO initiated dialogues with educators to explore the barriers related to accreditation and its potential impacts on students. Feedback was collected through emails, group discussions at ARIDO's Annual Educator Conference, and an anonymous post-conference survey.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Educators

Summary of Findings

- **Support for ICRS**
  Two individuals expressed support for keeping the ICRS pathway, highlighting its importance for students at institutions working towards CIDA accreditation and graduates from non-CIDA accredited programs.

- **Challenging Accreditation Process**
  Some educators perceive the CIDA accreditation process as having value but also being laborious and resource-intensive, taking away valuable time from student engagement. Follow-up accreditation is seen as costly and burdensome. There are notable challenges in meeting both the CIDA standards and the provincial quality assurance standards as they differ in terms of purpose, approach, instructor qualifications requirements, and local context and relevance.

- **Cultural Relevance**
  There's a perception that CIDA standards don't sufficiently reflect Canadian cultural and educational norms and the accreditation process is seen as subjective, favoring US norms.

- **Prescriptive Standards**
  Many see the CIDA standards as being overly prescriptive and skills-focused. This approach is seen as more aligned with college programs, leaving a perceived gap in addressing the educational and intellectual development needs of university programs.

- **Faculty Qualification Requirements**
  Institutions are struggling with CIDA's Faculty Qualification Requirements, particularly Standard 2 (parts b and c), which requires earning a degree in interior design and passing the NCIDQ exams. The scarcity of individuals meeting these requirements is a concern and they seek guidance on faculty recruitment and showing openness to considering those with relevant industry experience, even if they do not meet all exact qualifications.

- **Teaching Eligibility in Ontario for Registered Members**
  A potential issue was flagged concerning the eligibility to teach in CIDA-accredited programs in Ontario for those who qualify to practice through ARIDO's qualification assessments (ICRS, IDER, and Canadian Alternative) without having completed the NCIDQ exams.

- **Desire for Input**
  Institutions seek to have input into CIDA standards and the accreditation process and are keen to understand how ARIDO can help facilitate this.

Findings & Insights — Field Testing with Educators

Key Insights

- **Cost versus Benefit**
  The cost-effectiveness of CIDA accreditation is questioned due to the high fees and time investment, indicating a need for balance between accreditation requirements and institutions' resources. The time investment also raised concerns about conflicting efforts to satisfy different the necessity of this CIDA accreditation, as institutions in Ontario are already subject to quality assurance processes to meet provincial government quality standards, as well as institutional level quality assurance processes.

- **Cultural Considerations**
  Perceptions of CIDA standards and accreditation process as US-centric highlight a need for better representation of Canadian cultural and educational norms.

- **Challenges Meeting Faculty Qualifications**
  The noted struggle with CIDA's Faculty Qualification Requirements suggests that flexibility may be needed in the qualifications, especially considering industry experience.

- **Clarification on Teaching Eligibility**
  The question raised about the teaching eligibility of Registered Interior Designers who qualify through ARIDO's assessments, without having completed the NCIDQ exams, underscores the need for greater clarity and potential flexibility in the requirements for teaching position within Ontario's CIDA-accredited programs.

- **Call for Collaboration**
  The expressed desire of institutions to contribute to the CIDA standards and accreditation process underscores a perceived disconnect between these standards and Canadian programs. This sentiment indicates a compelling need to establish a collaborative and communicative relationship among CIDA, ARIDO, and the institutions. This relationship should aim to ensure that the standards are directly applicable and relevant to the programs these institutions offer and are relevant to the Ontario context.

Findings & Insights — Fair Practices

Although ARIDO is not currently bound by specific fair access legislation in Ontario, this section proactively assesses the ICRS's alignment with such legislation, anticipating potential future obligations. This review covers:

- the system's transparency in operations and decision-making
- objectivity in procedures and criteria
- impartiality towards all users

The system's responsiveness, consistency, and appeal handling practices are also assessed for fairness. These criteria offer a thorough assessment of the system's effectiveness, ease of use, and alignment with fair access legislation expectations, which ARIDO will be subject to upon full implementation of the Direct Regulation Model with the Ontario Association of Architects (OAA).

The four principles of fair access defined by the Office of the Fairness Commissioner in Ontario (OFC) are transparency, objectivity, impartiality, and fairness. These principles also correspond with professional certification standards, which were considered during the development of the ICRS. As a result, the ICRS's alignment with both the OFC principles and professional certification standards is of particular relevance. For ease of reference, the supporting materials contains a cross-reference chart titled "Best Practices for ICRS Maintenance," initially part of the ICRS maintenance plan (page 23), which matches the OFC four principles with relevant professional certification and assessment standards like ISO/IEC 17024:2012, AERA/APA/NCME Standards, and NCCA Standards.

In this review, I have also used the OFC's self-assessment guidelines, as described in their report titled “Conducting Entry-to-Practice Reviews: Guide for Ontario's Regulatory Bodies” February 2015 (page 6), to frame the key issues under consideration:

- Are the registration practices transparent, objective, impartial, and fair?
- Are registration requirements necessary and relevant?
- Is the decision-making process timely and efficient?
- Are the fees reasonable?
- What changes need to be implemented?

These key issues guide my observations and findings. Although the OFC principles align with terminology and concepts in professional certification standards, I've not detailed the standards here to be succinct. This part of the review is also not intended as a standards compliance review and should not be considered as such. However, the appendix's cross-reference chart will assist those interested in linking OFC principles with international standards.

Findings & Insights — Fair Practices (Transparency)

Transparency

The interpretation that follows is directly quoted from the official website of the Office of the Fairness Commissioner (OFC) in Ontario:

> *The rules and guidelines that regulators apply need to be clear so that applicants understand the steps that they need to take to submit a complete application and how their application are processed. Transparency also means that the registration process must be straightforward and that applicants have direct access to information, which is easily understood, complete and accurate, and will help them to reach the goal they seek.*

Findings

- **Providing Information**
  ARIDO provides detailed information about the application process and criteria on their website, enrolment form, and emails, but could improve transparency by consolidating all necessary information into a single, comprehensive, and easy-to-read applicant guide and/or webpage.

- **Updating the Applicant Guide**
  Staff commendably took initiative to update the original applicant guide in sync with the integration of the application website into the membership database. However, the current guide lacks some necessary information and needs a plain language review for clarity. Expected to be released in 2023, staff have committed to harmonizing the guide with the guide used for the experience requirement (IDER), ensuring a consistent approach throughout ARIDO's registration process.

- **Maintaining Communication**
  Staff maintain excellent communication, promptly responding to applicants' inquiries and providing necessary reference materials.

- **Providing Updates**
  Staff provide consistent updates about application status and send reminders for expiring enrolments, demonstrating their commitment to keeping applicants informed about the process.

- **Constructive Feedback**
  When applications are unsuccessful, reviewers provide constructive feedback and comprehensive explanations, demonstrating empathy and fairness in discussing competency gaps. Staff further show empathy in detailing the reassessment process and outlining next steps. As previously noted in this review, all 3 applicants who received a 'Competencies Partially Met' decision successfully re-submitted their applications after addressing these gaps, resulting in a 100% completion rate for this group.

Findings & Insights — Fair Practices (Objectivity)

Objectivity

The interpretation that follows is directly quoted from the official website of the Office of the Fairness Commissioner (OFC) in Ontario:

> *It is important that the training, tools, criteria and procedures that regulators employ in their registration processes are designed to enhance the consistency of decision-making as between applicants, regardless of the individual making the decision, when it is made and the particular context. The OFC works with regulators to help ensure that their decision-making systems remain valid, reliable and relevant in measuring and assessing the qualifications of applicants.*

Findings

- **Standardized Review Process**
  ARIDO upholds fairness by using a standardized process to assess all applications, effectively avoiding bias or favoritism.

- **Evidence-Based Review**
  Reviewers conduct thorough assessments based on the ICRS competencies framework and evidence guidelines, focusing on competencies gained from education and experience. They have also suggested providing more detailed instructions to help applicants enhance their submissions by clearly defining their roles in producing specific evidence.

- **Defined Update Process**
  Led by the Executive Director, ARIDO follows a well-defined protocol to anticipate and address changes in practice competencies, ensuring alignment with industry standards. The detailed process to update the competency system is outlined in the ICRS maintenance plan (page 22), available in this review's appendix.

- **Reviewer Training**
  While initial training has been provided for reviewers, ARIDO acknowledges the need for regular check-ins to foster continuous improvement. Reviewers are actively engaged and committed to updating the reviewer guide and other training materials. Moreover, they are compiling examples of acceptable evidence to maintain consistency in reviews.

- **Consistency of Review Decisions**
  Staff followed the defined procedure for monitoring of the system with respects to agreement rate in decisions during the initial implementation. ARIDO used three reviewers per application until decisions agreement was confirmed at 89.47%. After transitioning down to one reviewer per application, ARIDO maintain a protocol of sending unsuccessful applications to a second reviewer to independently review the application.

Findings & Insights — Fair Practices (Impartiality)

Impartiality

The interpretation that follows is directly quoted from the official website of the Office of the Fairness Commissioner (OFC) in Ontario:

> *The decisions made by regulators must be free of bias which, if present, may produce subjective or tainted assessments or decisions. The regulator must identify all sources of bias and take appropriate steps to address them. Sources of bias might include a conflict of interest, preconceived notions, or limited understanding of issues related to diversity and equality, as identified under the Human Rights Code. Regulators must put strategies in place to ensure impartiality. These might include training policies that address conflict of interest,procedures to follow if bias is suspected, and/or a group deliberation or consensus process for making decisions in appropriate circumstances.*

Findings

- **Conflicts of Interest**
  Reviewers are informed and understand their right to recuse themselves from an application review. This means if they feel their impartiality might be compromised due to a potential conflict of interest, they can opt out of assessing that specific application to maintain fairness and integrity in the review process.

- **Preventing Discrimination and Bias**
  ARIDO has set firm rules in place to stop any kind of unfair treatment or bias during the review process. They do this by having clear guidelines for reviews and ensuring all reviewers are well-trained to judge based only on the applicant's qualifications. Regular checks are carried out to make sure these rules are always being followed, ensuring that every applicant is treated fairly.

- **Anonymity in the Review Process**
  ARIDO follows procedures designed to maintain anonymity in application reviews. Applicants are asked to omit any identifying information in their evidence submissions, ensuring their identities remain unknown to the reviewers.

- **Diversity Among Reviewers**
  ARIDO emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout its organization, including the reviewer pool. Although the number of reviewers during field testing has been small, they represented diverse backgrounds. ARIDO is committed to recruiting reviewers from various backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences to mitigate the potential influence of unconscious bias in the assessment process.

Findings & Insights — Fair Practices (Fairness)

Fairness

The interpretation that follows is directly quoted from the official website of the Office of the Fairness Commissioner (OFC) in Ontario:

> *Fairness must sit at the heart of the registration process for individuals who wish to join a profession or compulsory trade. Fairness takes a number of dimensions and is not always amenable to precise definition. At its core, it means that a regulator must identify the steps necessary, and the documentation required, for a candidate to complete the registration process. The assessment must be rational and above board, and not place unnecessary and ill-conceived obstacles in the way of success. Everyone must have the same prospects irrespective of their country of origin or background. The process must be expedient. And there must be a chance for an arms-length review if the individual disagrees with a decision. Those running the processes must embrace their responsibilities with a spirit of purpose, wisdom and empathy.*

Findings

- **Commitment to Fair Access**
  ARIDO demonstrates a commitment in all that it does to ensure the process provides all applicants an equal opportunity to demonstrate their competencies.
- **Timely Decisions**
  Staff ensure that applications are sent for review promptly and that decisions are communicated within a reasonable time, aiming for a turnaround time within two weeks. This observation was validated during an audit of a representative sample of applications from each year of the field testing.
- **Internal Review and Appeals Process**
  ARIDO performs an internal review of all unsuccessful applications, using another independent reviewer to confirm the decision. They also offer a paid appeals process, allowing applicants to challenge decisions they think are unfair or inaccurate.
- **Fair Application Fees**
  ARIDO uses a reasonable cost-recovery model and this helps keep application fees down. During interviews applicants indicated that they felt fees were fair and not posing a barrier.
- **Lack of Accommodations Policy**
  Although staff are experienced and aware of how to handle accommodations requests, they haven't received any so far and ARIDO does not have a formal Accommodations Policy.
- **Sufficient Time to Complete Application**
  ARIDO allows applicants a one-year window to access the application website to upload evidence and write explanations to support submissions.

Findings & Insights — Fair Practices (Insights)

Insights

- **Disconnect in Qualifying Education Programs**
  While ARIDO recognizes quality education programs within Ontario, it does not consider completion of these programs as fulfilling the education requirement for intern membership. Instead, ARIDO effectively endorses the completion of CIDA-accredited programs, creating a disconnect for ARIDO-recognized educational institutions that must secure and sustain a CIDA accreditation, even though ARIDO itself does not officially recognize the accreditation.

- **Lack of Accountability for Third Parties**
  Despite mandating CIDA accreditation for its education programs, ARIDO has limited influence over these standards or the ability to ensure their relevance to the Ontario context. This lack of input may pose potential challenges in aligning CIDA's standards with the specific requirements and conditions of interior design education in Ontario.

- **Unintended Systemic Barriers**
  Uniform standards, while aiming for consistency, may unintentionally restrict diversity within professions. For example, CIDA's requirement for faculty to pass the NCIDQ exams may exclude diverse and otherwise qualified teachers. Such a requirement should be scrutinized for potential barriers, and a broader range of qualifications, as determined by ARIDO, should be considered. It's essential to understand that in Ontario, ARIDO--not CIDA--has the authority to define what the requirements are and who qualifies as an interior designer. As such, educational institutions must be engaged in discussions concerning expectations relevant to the practice of interior design in the province. Additionally, mandatory provincial standards for faculty qualifications may differ from CIDA's, creating challenges for educational institutions in managing their faculty recruitment and teaching assignments.

Strengths & Areas for Improvement

This section summarizes the findings & insights across all groups and represents user experiences with the ICRS. This summary highlights both strengths and potential areas for improvement, serving as a crucial foundation for the discussion and recommendations that follow.

Strengths

- **Overall Satisfaction**
  Both applicants and reviewers have relatively high satisfaction rates with the ICRS, however,there's room for improvement, especially in terms of website functionality and support.
- **Helpfulness of Resources and Tools**
  Overall, the data suggests that the provided resources and tools are effective. Guides, materials, and instructions are generally deemed useful, though some applicants seek further guidance and clarity.
- **Clear Information**
  Applicants found the information about Competency Areas to be relatively clear, while reviewers found the information about Competency Areas, Competencies, and Direct and Indirect Evidences to be highly clear.
- **Efficiency & Improvement**
  Reviewers commend process efficiency and ongoing enhancements. Applicants recommend personalized support and a dedicated point person to elevate user experience.
- **Culture of Continuous Improvement**
  Staff and reviewers express a strong willingness for continuous improvement through ongoing education, regular training, and taking applicant feedback into account to enhance the overall applicant experience.
- **Reviewer Satisfaction and Engagement**
  Reviewers expressed high satisfaction levels with the review process, website usefulness, and available support. They showed a willingness to contribute to the creation of updated training materials and the Reviewer Guide.
- **Staff Engagement and Limitations**
  ICRS staff showed consistent engagement with applicants and prioritized tasks efficiently. However, the potential for operational bottlenecks due to increasing applicant volumes and limited resources was identified as a potential issue as the number of applicants increases.
- **Awareness of Bias**
  Staff demonstrated awareness of potential bias and strive to ensure fairness and transparency, balancing personalization with impartiality.
- **Core Values in the Review Process**
  The highlighted importance of empathy, fairness, and balanced reviews underscores the core values guiding the review process.

Strengths & Areas for Improvement

Areas for Improvement

- **Clear Information**
  Improving user experience hinges on improving the clearness of information, especially regarding Competencies and Direct and Indirect Evidences. System developers suggest using more plain language to ensure all parts of the system are understandable, offering clear application instructions, and providing specific guidelines about acceptable evidence.

- **Website Usability**
  The website could be made more user-friendly by improving the navigation, providing more clear instructions, providing easy access or links to all reference materials, and making it easier to submit evidence.

- **Improved Transparency around Internal Review and Appeals**
  To enhance transparency around decision-making, the system developers recommend sharing the procedures used for tracking and auditing decisions, specifically to explain internal review and appeals processes.

- **Enhanced Support Suggestions**
  Interviewees proposed implementing video walk-throughs, regular information sessions, and personalized guidance, especially beneficial for newcomers to Canada or those unfamiliar with online applications. The system developers recommend involving previous applicants in information sessions for a more humanizing experience.

- **Support and Guidance**
  While the Applicant Guide, Reference Materials, and Instructions were found to be helpful, feedback suggested a need for more specific instructions, especially for those unfamiliar with Canadian practices or online applications.

- **Newcomer Support**
  Suggestions for personalized guidance and a dedicated support person point towards a potential need for improved newcomer support.

- **Staffing and Resource Needs**
  ARIDO relies on a single staff member for all ICRS tasks and this presents a potential risk to service quality and timeliness, particularly with increasing applicant numbers. In addition, the implementation of recommended improvements and enhancements requires additional resources, highlighting the need for increased staff and budget allocation.

Discussion

Since 2014, I've served as an independent consultant for ARIDO, tasked with ensuring fair access across their operations. During this time, I've conducted organizational self-assessments with full access to all necessary resources and personnel. I've consistently worked in an open and supportive environment, free of obstacles or interference. Consequently, the findings in this report and previous engagements accurately reflect my professional observations and analyses of ARIDO's needs and practices.

In this discussion section, I value the experiences of all system users, from newcomers to seasoned reviewers and staff, as well as system developers. Each interaction provides vital insights for system improvement. In my analysis, I've considered the experiences of all users and will identify key areas for potential modifications. These proposed changes, grounded in real-world usage, are intended to benefit all users.

After this discussion, I will present practical recommendations for ARIDO's next steps, based on insights derived from user experiences.

Voluntary Self-Assessment and Fair Access Focus

ARIDO's commitment to fair access fosters an environment that encourages feedback and acts to eliminate professional barriers. Although ARIDO is not currently subject to fair access legislative obligations, it proactively prepares for the upcoming Direct Regulation Model with the Ontario Association of Architects (OAA), which will bring formal obligations. The thorough monitoring of ICRS during field testing, provides real-world insights that can boost ARIDO's confidence that the system is functioning as intended. Importantly, ARIDO's willingness to learn from user experiences and review the system prior to developing a new assessment for its final qualifications step underscores its dedication to incorporating learned lessons into its practices. This further shows its commitment to not perpetuate or create barriers, underscoring an unwavering commitment to fair access.

Promoting a Culture of Continuous Improvement

The staff and reviewers have shown a genuine and strong willingness to continuously improve during this review. They're eager to build on the positive progress made so far, with a focus on continually refining user guides, providing regular training sessions for reviewers, hosting regular check-ins, and integrating feedback to enhance the applicant experience. This shared ambition aims to create a profession that is free from barriers to entry. The staff, with their strong competency assessment background, have been exceptional in their support of the system and its applicants.

Awareness of Bias

The reviewers and staff have shown an understanding of potential bias and actively work towards maintaining fairness and transparency. They skillfully balance personalization with impartiality. Their interactions clearly indicate a sensitivity towards their critical role and a commitment to uphold an unbiased process. Their efforts have fostered a culture of integrity and trust, reinforcing the organization's core values.

Discussion

Staffing and Resource Allocation

The recommendations section of this report will underscore several potential enhancements, most of which require additional staffing and resources to be effective and sustainable. Presently, ICRS staff have recognized the system's resource needs and are familiar with the support strategies suggested in the ICRS white paper. Implementation, however, has been held back by constraints on time and resources.

ARIDO can be assured of the current staff's capability to lead these enhancements effectively. However, a reassessment of resource allocation is vital. To put it simply, while the staff have the skills to spearhead the improvements, they need full support and additional resources from ARIDO to be successful.

It's important to note the risk associated with current staffing and resource constraints: the ICRS is dependent on a single staff member for all administrative, support, quality management, and technical tasks. This set-up presents a risk given the increasing applicant volume and the staff's other responsibilities outside of ICRS. Such a scenario may lead to operational delays and a potentially unfair distribution of workload. Moreover, the implementation of recommendations, including the development of new tools, and upgrades to user support and the ICRS application website will likely stretch beyond the capacity of the current staff. As such, it is necessary to increase staffing and budget resources to uphold fairness and manage these risks effectively.

Factors Affecting Overall Satisfaction and Clearness of Information

The difference in satisfaction levels between applicants and reviewers, especially concerning website usefulness, warranted further scrutiny during one-on-one interviews. Reviewers' tasks, namely viewing applications and assigning value, differ from those of applicants, who need to understand competency information, consider supporting evidence, write an evidence statement, and upload files.

In 2020, the ICRS website was integrated into ARIDO's membership database, improving the experience for reviewers. However, this transition seemed to limit applicants' access to certain information and links, leading to a perceived disconnect between competencies and the types of acceptable evidence. This could potentially cause confusion about the most suitable evidences to attach in support of demonstrating competencies.

The original application website, a learning content management system (LCMS) customized for ARIDO's pilot testing phase and initial implementation, was tailored to provide easy access to application steps and reference materials but was not intended for large-scale use. To enhance stability and efficiency in management, a move to an integrated application within the membership database was necessary. However, this transition altered the appearance of the application, reducing the visibility of the evidence lists tied to individual competencies. This change may impact the process of evidence-gathering and reflection for the applicant.

Discussion

Despite the transition providing a stable environment with necessary information for applicants, there was no user testing during requirements setting and functionality build-out phase. As a result, the software vendor added the functionality and necessary information into an online application form, but the experience of completing the application from the user perspective was not fully considered.

Staff are aware of the existing technical issues and have begun to compile a list of functionalities to be improved for an enhanced user experience. This requires programming and vendor engagement, along with user input to ensure that information and tools become more accessible from within the application.

I believe that a project to enhancing the online application needs to be prioritized and resourced to ensure a better user experience and to help address the issues regarding unclear information identified by users.

Making Information More Accessible

Despite staff efforts to update and disseminate necessary information, the abundance of separate documents and attachments can be overwhelming for applicants. As a result, crucial details may be hard to locate within the application process. Staff have recognized this issue and started developing a comprehensive, easy-to-reference Applicant Guide, similar to the guide created for the Interior Design Experience Requirement (IDER). This initiative aims to consolidate all relevant information, present it in plain language, and ensure consistency with ARIDO's standard communications.

The new guide will aim to clearly explain the review system, roles and responsibilities of the parties involved, and the types of acceptable evidence per competency. It also aims to humanize the application process, separating information relevant to diverse applicants such as those internationally-trained, career transitioners, or seasoned professionals. The guide, along with informative sessions and walk-through videos, will help make the application process more accessible and relevant.

Contrary to any misconceptions, ARIDO provides all necessary information. The focus now should be to make this information easily accessible throughout the application process, enabling applicants to understand the system and confidently submit their evidence. The one-on-one interviews also made it clearer that additional considerations should be made to better understand internationally trained applicants who may be unfamiliar with Canadian practices or online applications.

Discussion

Humanize the Experience

Feedback highlighted the need for enhanced support, with applicants often seeking detailed answers on competencies and the types of evidence required to substantiate their applications. These requests, often beyond the scope of administrative staff, expose a support gap. This situation reveals the need for a more specialized approach, focusing on making individuals with interior design practice knowledge more accessible to clarify both the competencies required and the specific types of evidence needed to substantiate applications, rather than relying on administrative staff to provide content-related clarification or general direction.

During discussions with system developers, the idea of involving past applicants in information sessions emerged. This proposition serves as an innovative means to bridge the support gap, as these individuals have firsthand experience with the process and can share how they approached it given their own unique education and work backgrounds. Importantly, their contribution would not be to offer advice or content but to discuss their experience and approach, providing a relatable perspective for new applicants. This concept resonated with feedback from applicant interviews, underscoring a demand for a more personalized, human-centric experience. The inclusion of past applicants not only enhances the support system but also cultivates a sense of community and shared understanding among applicants, humanizing the experience.

Discussion Point about Educator Feedback

The insights derived from Educator feedback, particularly those that contributed to a deeper understanding under the Fair Practices review criteria — including topics such as Disconnect in Qualifying Education Programs, Lack of Accountability for Third Parties, and Unintended Systemic Barriers — warrant further discussion and thorough review by ARIDO. These findings are crucially intertwined with the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) mandate guiding ARIDO's initiatives. They hold direct relevance to fair access principles and anticipate future legislative obligations and accountability that ARIDO will face upon fully implementing the Direct Regulation model with the Ontario Association of Architects (OAA).

Recommendations

Taking into account feedback from all ICRS users and considering their experiences, a comprehensive list of recommendations has been developed to improve the application process, enhance the user experience, and ultimately, improve the efficacy of the system. In addition, a strong emphasis on the principle of fair access has been incorporated to ensure the platform keeps focused on providing a fair and equitable qualifications path.

These recommendations span diverse aspects such as website enhancement, enhanced support services, user feedback surveys, and training. Each is geared towards streamlining the process, improving the system's efficiency and intuitiveness, and providing a more user-friendly experience for both applicants and reviewers. The recommendations also took into consideration, and are consistent, with the ICRS maintenance plan (2016) and initial review (2019).

- **Recommendation 1: Enhance ICRS Application Website Functionality and Usability**
  - Enhance the application website for increased user-friendliness, easier uploading and replacing of attachments, simpler navigation, clearer instructions, and easier access to information and help.
  - Prioritize and prepare a list of critical functionality requirements.
  - Establish user feedback groups to get input from applicants and reviewers.

- **Recommendation 2: Strengthen Bias Awareness and Mitigation**
  - Continue to prioritize training on unconscious bias for all staff members, reviewers, and anyone involved in the decision-making process to ensure fairness and transparency in all aspects of ARIDO's operations.
  - Encourage staff and reviewers to periodically self-reflect on their own potential biases, reinforcing the importance of impartiality in their roles.
  - Create a procedure for individuals to report instances where they feel bias may have influenced decisions, allowing for increased transparency and opportunities for learning and improvement.
  - Regularly review and refine these trainings and procedures to ensure they are effectively promoting an unbiased and fair environment.

- **Recommendation 3: Continue to Improve by Gathering Feedback**
  - Foster ongoing improvement and refinement of ICRS processes and resources, guided by user feedback.
  - Automate the sending of a feedback survey link to applicants upon submission of an application.
  - Organize ongoing training sessions for reviewers, focusing on the specific topics they identify.

Recommendations

- **Recommendation 4: Make Information More Accessible**
  - Develop detailed instructions and easy links to explanations that highlight acceptable types of evidence.
  - Design a new Applicant Guide and Reviewer Guide that focus on explaining the system in plain language.
  - Enhance the visibility of provided information, particularly around competencies and evidence, within the online application.

- **Recommendation 5: Expand Staffing and Allocate Additional Resources**
  - Review staffing needs and allocate additional resources as necessary.
  - Dedicate a budget for the ICRS application website improvements.
  - Appoint a project team to effectively implement the recommended improvements to the ICRS process.

- **Recommendation 6: Humanize the Application Experience**
  - Develop a video walk-through to introduce potential applicants to the ICRS.
  - Conduct regular online information sessions for potential applicants.
  - Set up a system of personalized orientation for applicants upon intake, potentially assigning a dedicated point person.
  - Boost access to support resources for newcomers potentially facing cultural barriers.

- **Recommendation 7: Enhance Accountability and Review the CIDA-Accreditation Requirement**
  - Assume active responsibility to enhance ARIDO's accountability for all third parties it relies on, such as CIDA and educational institutions.
  - Critically review identified issues related to these parties and formulate strategies to address them.

- **Recommendation 8: Formally Conclude Field Testing**
  - Request the ARIDO Board of Management to review this findings report, discuss the insights and recommendations, and formally approve the transition from the field testing phase to the full implementation of the ICRS.
  - Make this findings report in its entirety for stakeholders to review, ensuring transparency and accountability.
  - Form an independent advisory group to meet annually to discuss emerging issues and identify future competencies to consider for potential inclusion in ICRS.
  - Plan and conduct a Periodic Review of the ICRS within five years to assess its effectiveness and make any necessary adjustments.

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Supporting Materials

Feedback Survey Data for Applicants & Reviewers

Intern Competencies Review System (ICRS)™ - Update Process Overview

Best Practices for ICRS Maintenance

Feedback Survey Data for Applicants & Reviewers

Chart 1.1 - Satisfaction - APPLICATION PROCESS

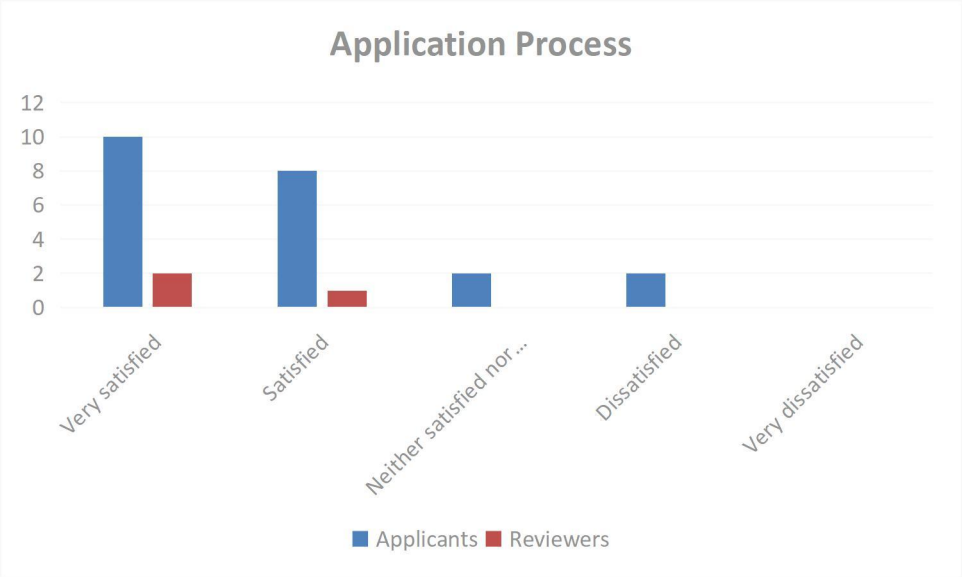


Chart 1.2 - Satisfaction - WEBSITE USEFULNESS

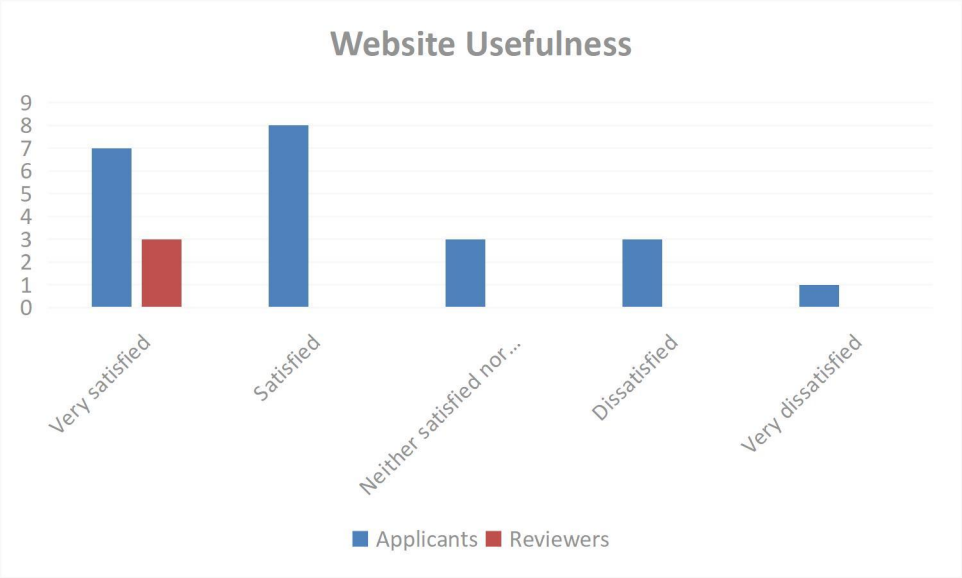


Chart 1.3 - Satisfaction - ACCESS TO HELP

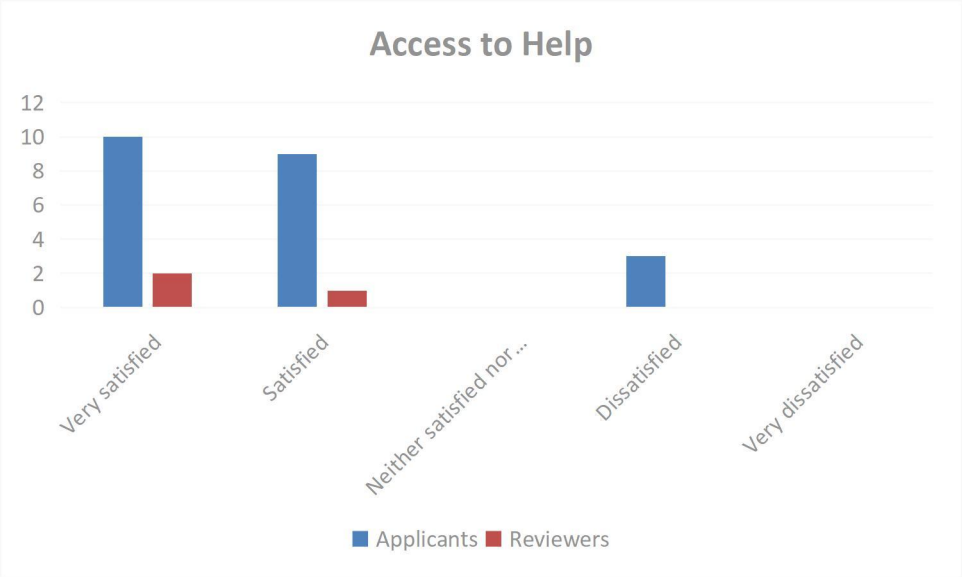
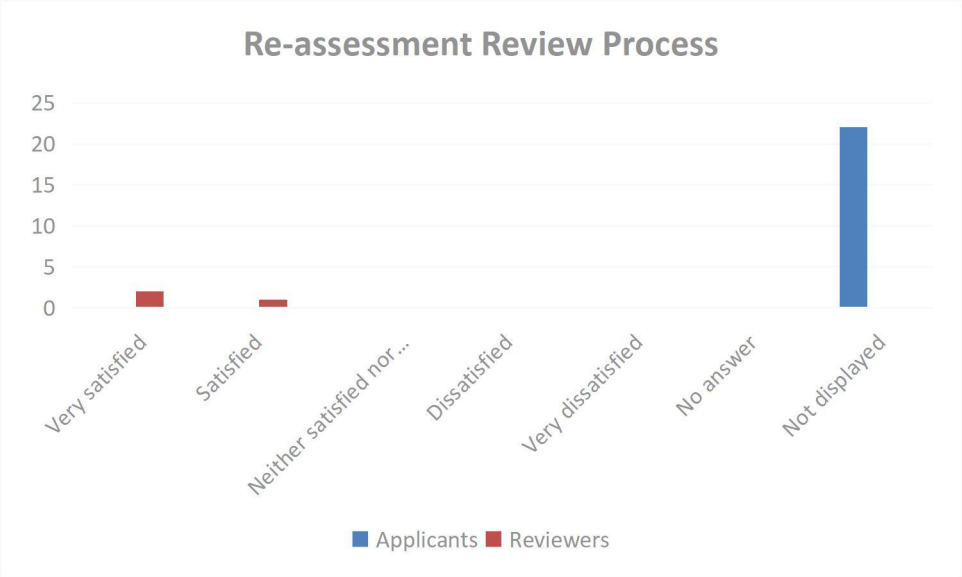


Chart 1.4 - Satisfaction - RE-ASSESSMENT REVIEW PROCESS



Feedback Survey Data for Applicants & Reviewers

Chart 2.1 - Helpfulness of Resources and Materials - USER GUIDE

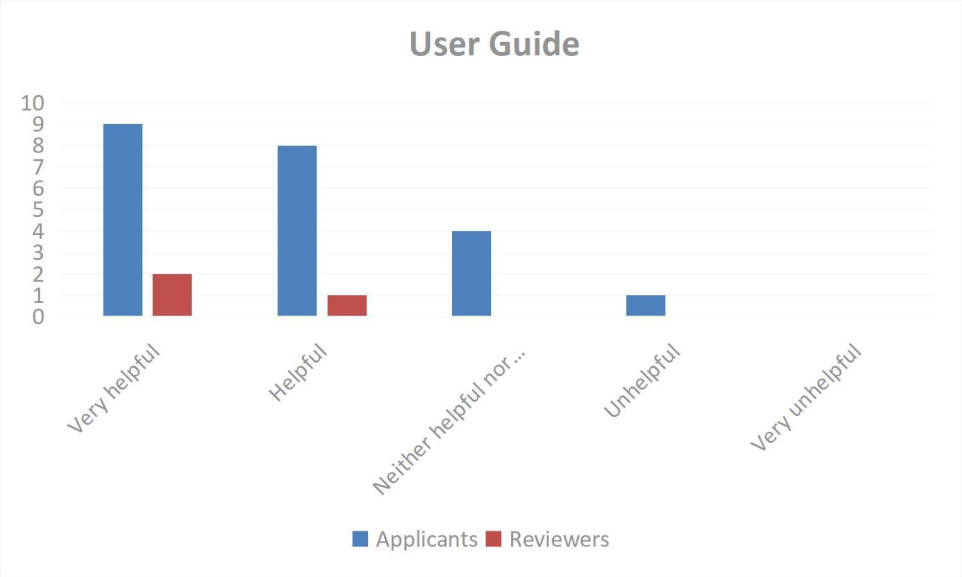


Chart 2.2 - Helpfulness of Resources and Materials - REFERENCE MATERIALS

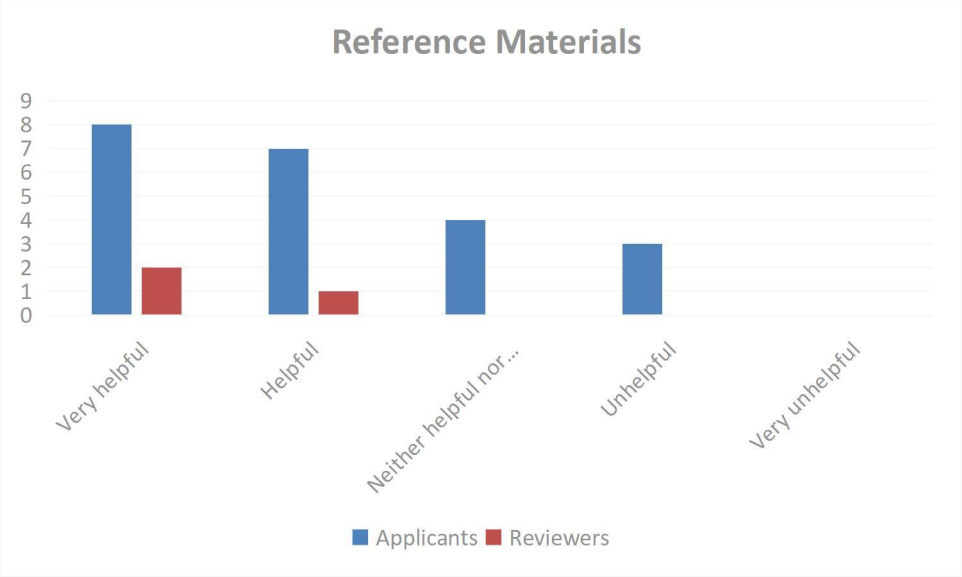


Chart 2.3 - Helpfulness of Resources and Materials - INSTRUCTIONS

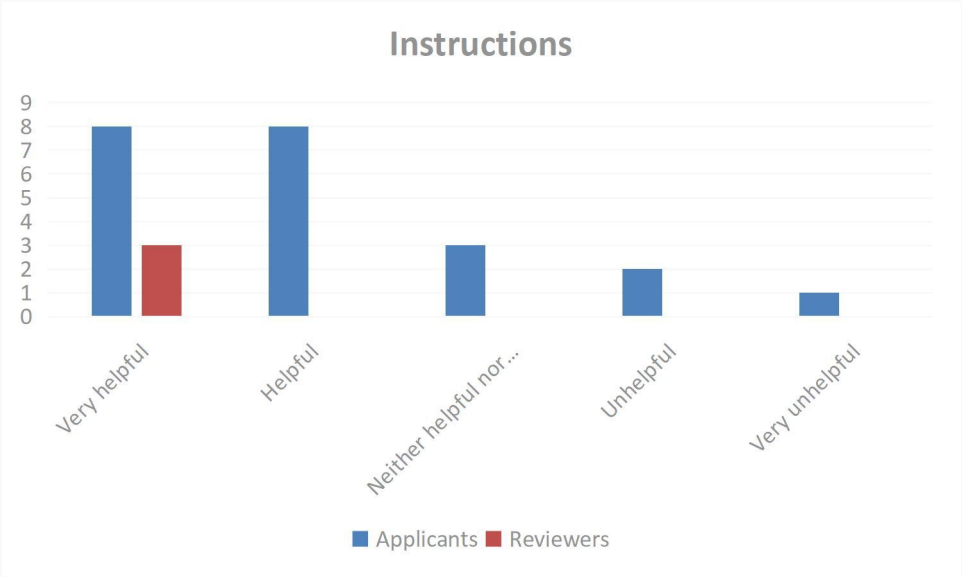


Chart 3.1 - Clear Information - COMPETENCY AREAS

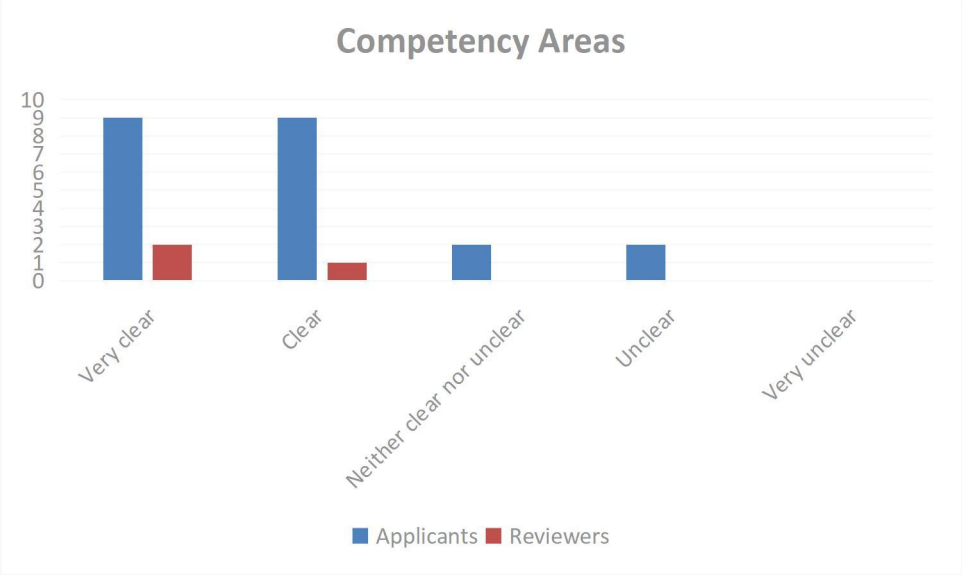


Chart 3.2 - Clear Information - COMPETENCIES

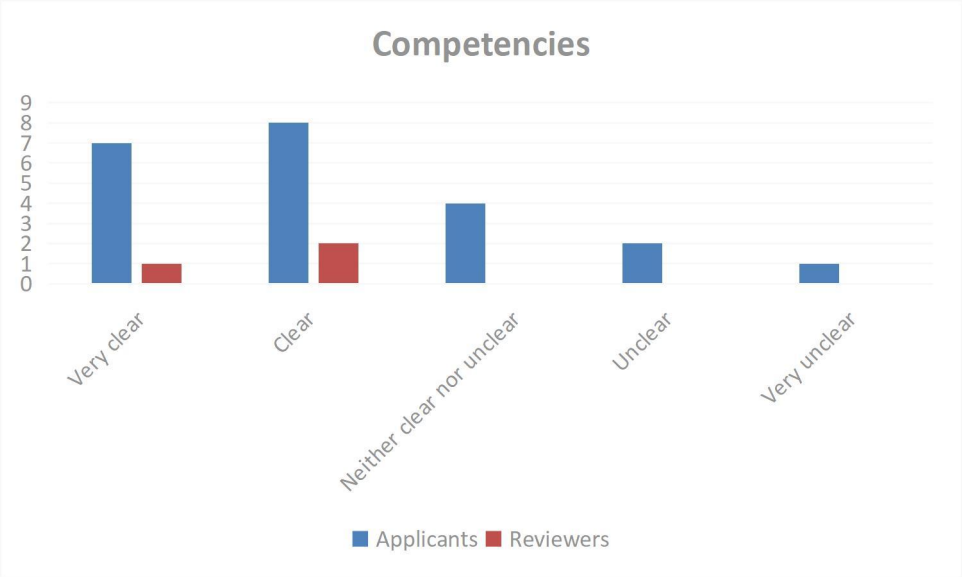
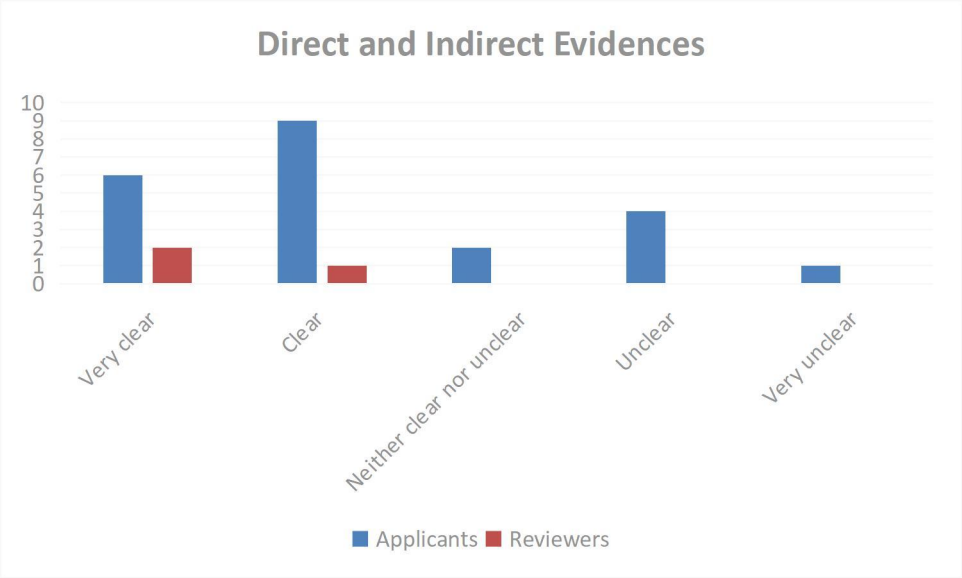
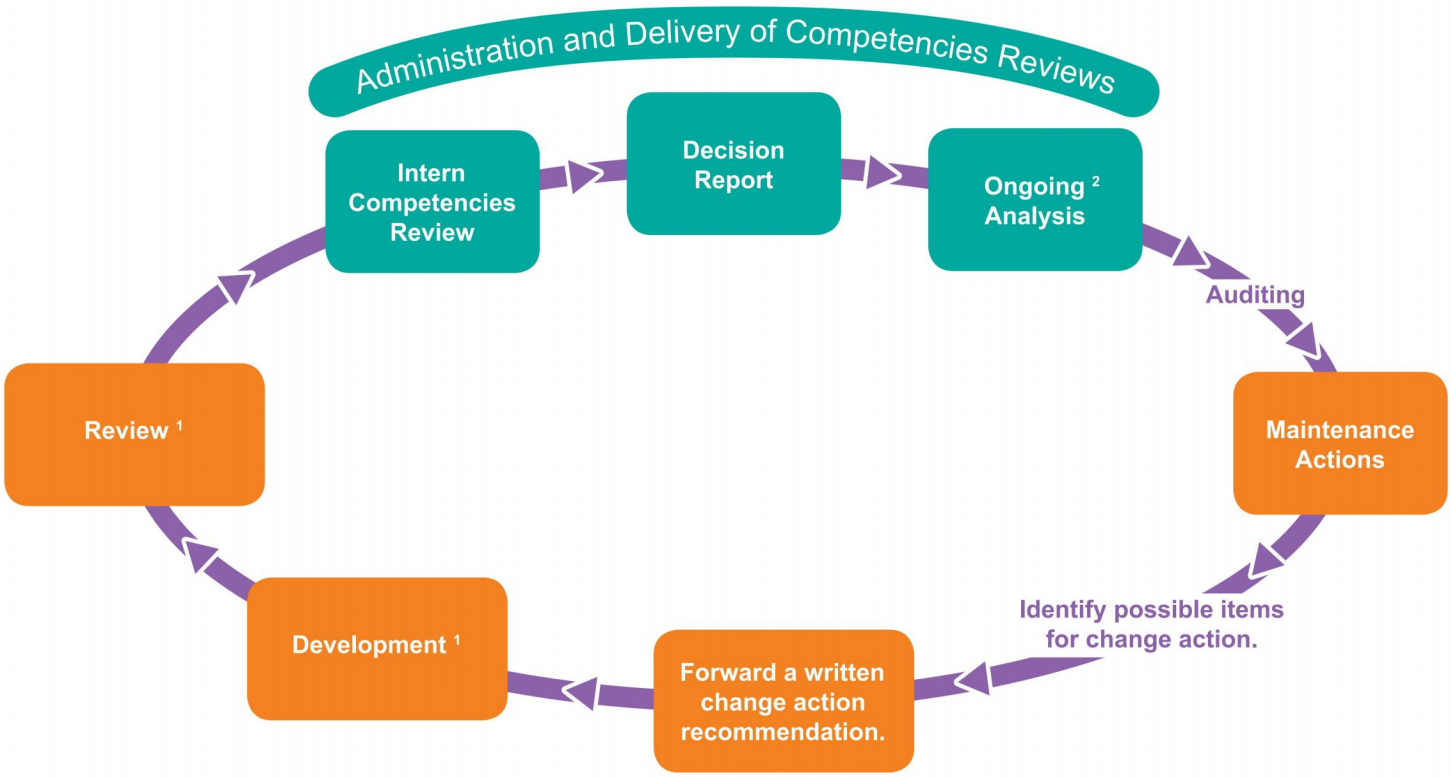


Chart 3.3 - Clear Information - DIRECT AND INDIRECT EVIDENCES



Intern Competencies Review System (ICRS)™ — Update Process Overview



Notes:

[1] Committees develop, review, and approve recommended changes using a fair representation of Interior Designers. Final sign-off is provided by the Registrar.

[2] 'Ongoing Analysis' can be performed internally to monitor level of agreement in decisions, pass rate, and identify applicant gap areas, however, it is recommended that an independent third party/consultant do an annual formal analysis to confirm the reliability of data being used in analysis of the effectiveness of the ICRS.

Purpose: To provide a chart that cross-references professional certification standards with Ontario's Office of the Fairness Commissioner's Founding Principles & Fair Access Legislation.

OFC Founding Principles	Transparency			Objectivity	Impartiality	Fairness		
FARPACTA Fair Access to Regulated Professions (2013)	Information *(Part III, Section 7)*	Information on appeal rights *(Part III, Section 9, 4)*	Documentation of qualifications *(Part III, Section 10, 1)*	Fair assessment of qualifications *(Part III, Section 10, 2)*	Training *(Part III, Section 11)*	Timely decisions, responses and reasons *(Part III, Section 8)*	Internal review or appeal *(Part III, Section 9)*	Access to records *(Part III, Section 12)*
AERA/NCME/APA Standards for educational and psychological testing (2014)	Part II - Fairness in Testing 8. The Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers	Part II - Fairness in Testing 8. The Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers (8.13)	Part II - Fairness in Testing 8. The Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers	Part I - Test construction, evaluation, and documentation- 1. Validity 2. Reliability... 3. Test Development... Part III – Testing Applications 14. Testing in Employment and Credentialing	Part I - Test construction, evaluation, and documentation 3.23 3.24 6. Supporting documentation for Tests (6.7)	Part I - Test construction, evaluation, and documentation 5. Test Administration, Scoring, and Reporting (5.10) Part III - Testing Applications 11. The Responsibilities of Test Users (11.6)	Part II - Fairness in Testing 8. The Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers (8.13)	Part I – Test construction, evaluation, and documentation 5. Test Administration, Scoring, and Reporting Part II - Fairness in Testing 8. The Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers (8.5)
ISO/ECE 17024; 2012 Conformity assessment - General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons (2012)	6 Certification process 6.1 Application 6.1.1 ...current detailed description	4.2 Organizational structure 4.2.6 The certification body shall define policies and procedures for the resolution of Appeals...	6 Certification process 6.1 Application 6.1.2 ...scope of the desired certification	4.3 Development and maintenance of a certification scheme	4.2 Organizational structure 4.22 ...have a documented structure which safeguards impartiality... 5.2 Requirements for examiners	6.3 Decision on certification	4.2 Organizational structure 4.2.6 The certification body shall define policies and procedures for the resolution of Appeals...	4.6 Records
NCCA Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs (2016)	Standard 6: Information for Candidates Standard 7: Program Policies	Standard 6: Information for Candidates Standard 7: Program Policies	Standard 6: Information for Candidates Standard 15: Examination Specifications	Standard 16: Examination Development Standard 17: Standard Setting Standard 20: Reliability	Standard 18: Examination Administration Standard 19: Scoring and Score Reporting Standard 23: Quality Assurance	Standard 19: Scoring and Score Reporting	Standard 7: Program Policies	Standard 9: Records Retention and Management Policies

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