

External Program Review
Social Dimensions of Health Graduate Program
School of Public Health and Social Policy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Social Dimensions of Health (SDH) program is comprised of MA, MSc, and PhD degrees and is interdisciplinary. The SDH program resides within the School of Public Health and Social Policy (SPHSP), a unit within the Faculty of Human and Social Development (HSD). The position with one unit is very unique compared to other interdisciplinary programs at the University of Victoria (UVic) since all others reside within a faculty but are not part of a specific unit.

This external review identified that the program is strong and has gained an international reputation due to the high calibre of the faculty affiliated with it, the impactful research, and the exceptional students they attract. The interdisciplinary nature of this program is a strength but has also created some challenges. Learning outcomes appear to be met successfully, but some barriers to the smooth progression through the program were identified. This program would benefit greatly from additional support, as well as from some restructuring to maintain its high calibre reputation.

It is important to understand the context of this review. It was the first review of this program since its creation 13 years ago. The SDH program recently moved into a school that houses another graduate program that was not part of this review. In addition, there has been frequent turnover in administrative assistant support. Furthermore, at the time of this review, most of the senior leadership at UVic was also in transition, and the Faculty of HSD was undergoing an internal strategic planning review.

This context presented challenges for the external review. One of the challenges worth noting is that although there are 4 graduate degrees plus a diploma within the SPHSP, the review committee was asked to review only 3 of these degrees. It would have been helpful to include the Diploma in Public Health and the Master's of Public Health (MPH) as part of the same review, as some of our recommendations may impact that program. Another challenge was associated with the lack of some valuable data, including information on alumni career progression, students' achievements and progress, and other materials that are worth tracking for future reviews.

This external panel met with a gracious group of welcoming students, faculty, administrators, and staff members eager to facilitate our access to information and actively participated in our meetings. From this process, we identified several **key strengths**.

Summary of Key Strengths:

- The SDH program includes a strong group of core and adjunct faculty, with a high level of scholarship and recognition, who are excited about training HQP and passionate about the program.
- The program attracts an impressive group of students who demonstrate a high level of scholarship, evident in the number of prestigious external awards.

- This interdisciplinary program truly walks the talk, with diversity across health, social science and other disciplines, with several faculty bringing Indigenous wisdom and an equity, diversity and inclusivity lenses to the program.

We also identified some challenges and developed a set of key recommendations below.

Summary of Key Recommendations:

1. Clearly identify all components that complement and enrich the SDH program (e.g., health, social science, Indigenous knowledges, etc.) to highlight the breadth and maintain the interdisciplinary focus.
2. Consider the program's location – as it is currently placed inside a unit officially, yet outside functionally – to balance the need for stability and support with the protection of interdisciplinarity.
3. Accelerate the graduate program funding adjustment to reduce the gap (> \$100,000) between actual funding received from FGS by SDH and the expected amount based on program's enrolment.
4. Communicate early and explicitly with incoming students regarding financial support and opportunities to apply for graduate student scholarships. Increase engagement with additional UVic Research Centres to enhance support to students in terms of content expertise and financial support.
5. Consider reducing the number of graduate degrees within the school to protect the MPH as the only course-based option (dropping the thesis option), the MSc as the exclusive thesis option (dropping the MA), and retain the PhD.
6. Redesign the curriculum to differentiate more clearly the Master's and PhD coursework, ladder the courses, and create more support for the comprehensive exam preparation through a specific course or series of optional workshops.
7. Carefully consider the role of Indigenous content within the program and intentionally interweave decolonizing processes and practices through the program to support Indigenous students and better educate the non-Indigenous community.
8. Streamline the process for accessing elective courses to enhance access, significantly reduce the number of signatures required, and implement an electronic approval process. If this is not possible, increasing the administrative assistant role to 1.0 FTE will be imperative to better support this program.
9. Prospectively gather data on student success in the program (e.g., time to completion, awards, publications, etc.) as part of online annual reports by the students to inform future program reviews.
10. Re-evaluate the dual supervisory structure, enhance the orientation for new supervisors and those outside the department, and develop a mechanism to give faculty members credit for supervising interdisciplinary students from outside of their home department.