

External Review of Human Dimensions of Climate Change

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Review Committee Authors

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The Human Dimensions of Climate Change (HDCC) program is a highly innovative program that was well ahead of its time when first developed. The insight of the founders to recognize the need to complement scientific understanding of climate change (CC) with the social and governance capacity to make necessary behavioural and structural changes within and across societies should be recognized and celebrated. The time for this program is now, with increased attention on CC adaptation and mitigation and an intense interest from youth who are no longer satisfied with scientific understanding and illusory targets, but want to see meaningful action implemented across all sectors. As the self-study document articulates:

HDCC helps its students to investigate why human societies face this climate emergency, despite long-established evidence, plausible natural- scientific theorization, and mounting scientific certainty about the causes and the risks. It helps students to investigate what human societies are passing through, and will pass through, in the face of that emergency; and it examines what can be done (and how), both to mitigate those features in the future, and to adapt in the face of now-unavoidable levels of their intensification. In all these areas, HDCC therefore develops essential skills so that its students can participate fully in our societies' reckoning with these challenges (1).

Despite the confluence of factors that have led to the currency of the program, HDCC has struggled to realize its full potential to meet this moment. The original decisions made over a decade ago to help found and situate the program within the university have proven to be liabilities under the shifting dynamics of program requirements (on students and faculty members) and enrollment-based budgeting. The program exists "in between" the demands of other regular units and degree programs. This is a common characteristic of interdisciplinary programs everywhere. While this positioning helps to launch such programs within complex and competitive disciplinary space, it burdens such units with the constant demands of networking, promotion, collaboration, and leaning on the passions of individuals and colleagues for program delivery and governance, absent the resources and established oversight structures of other departments. A common outcome of this structure is an ebb and flow dynamic to program momentum, energy, and stability. It is clear that HDCC has been in an ebb state for a number of years, challenged to translate high-level lower division interest into upper-division course enrolments, program completion, program governance consistency, and effective communications and promotion. Participants at all levels of the external review process recognize that the time is right for a period of reflection (facilitated by the external review process) and an investment of energy and resources into the program to address program challenges in order to realize the potential of the program to respond to the times – and the strategic priorities of the university.

A strong rationale for the timed investment in the HDCC program includes its contributions to realizing the strategic priorities of the university and the Faculty of Social Science (SOSC). At the University level, HDCC fits well within the following priorities:

- Priority #5, to Promote Sustainable Futures, specifically strategy 5.4 “Ensure that students have opportunities to engage with issues, principles and practices that support social and environmental sustainability, and to develop the knowledge and ethical orientation to contribute to a just, socially responsible and sustainable future.”
- Priority #3, to Intensify Dynamic Learning, specifically strategy 3.1, “Extend UVic’s expertise and leadership in experiential learning so that every student has the opportunity to engage in, and be recognized for, research, work-integrated, community-engaged or other forms of experiential learning.”
- Priority #6: to Engage Locally and Globally, specifically strategy 6.2, “Develop and support initiatives, including student mobility and research partnerships in priority countries and regions; experiential and community-based learning and research; intercultural curricula; and other programs to enhance local and global awareness and connections.”

We would also like to highlight the interdisciplinary leanings of Priority 1, Cultivate an Extraordinary Academic Environment, which speaks to the importance of collaboration in pursuit of a shared enterprise. Each of these priorities and strategies are made more attainable and richer with the successful operation of the HDCC program. It is also clear that the HDCC program contributes to realizing the goals of SOSC, concerning a focus on experiential learning, reconciliation, and global citizenship.

Finally, the HDCC program has tremendous potential to be a networking agent and contributor to the rich ecosystem of climate change expertise and programming at UVic. The university has a long and well-established reputation for climate change research, which is matched by institutional structures and programming, such as the new BSc in Climate Science, the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions, and a number of research Chair positions that will ensure the dynamic production of climate change education, research and engagement at the university for years to come.

Following a period of administrative change, including the restructuring of interdisciplinary programs, administrative leadership turn-over, and the pandemic, it is a suitable time to invest in the program to see that its potential can be realized for the next phase of its operation. Student interest and demand is strong. The subject matter is timely. The opportunity to network within and external to the university is strong. And, the need for interdisciplinary understanding to tackle the complexity of climate change is absolute. We offer the following series of recommendations to stimulate discussions within the HDCC program and between HDCC and faculty- and university-level administration in the hopes that a somewhat dormant institutional asset can thrive.

Our recommendations are framed by a series of review parameters and institutional realities that we realize will shape the future direction of the program. First, we recognize that the university faces budgetary limitations, norms, and competing institutional priorities. Second, we realize that the HDCC program must prove itself with enrollment levels and consistency of operations to be a viable and contributing entity within SOSC. And third, while recognizing the first two parameters, we also realize that the individuals and groups that run and participate in interdisciplinary programs and other such centres absorb administrative externalities that are necessary to reach beyond program equilibrium to ensure program vitality and future strategic relevance. Revitalizing the HDCC program will take considerable effort and energy. We hope the discussions on how to revive HDCC finds balance within these realities and constraints.