

## External Review of the School of Nursing

April, 2025

### External Review Committee

Craig Phillips, University of Ottawa, Committee Chair

June Anonson, University of Saskatchewan

Mauricio Garcia-Barrera, University of Victoria

### Executive Summary

This external program review for the school of nursing programs occurs at a time when there is major upheaval and tremendous opportunities for change across all levels and sectors of society. Some of these changes are longstanding concerns for nursing as both a profession and a discipline. Many of them are often attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and anticipated to abate at some miraculous time point. Challenges that have become more evident include ongoing public misinformation and anti-evidence-based sentiments permeating society. However, the challenges confronting nursing predate the pandemic and were exacerbated by policy responses implemented to address the initial stages of the pandemic and subsequent economic effects from recovery efforts. Current efforts to reign in healthcare costs and transform healthcare systems are often done without consideration of the perspectives and wealth of knowledge of nurses. Nurses are the largest proportion of healthcare providers globally, are regularly described as the most trusted professionals, and are essential to a well-functioning healthcare system, whether that system is designed to promote health, prevent injury/illness, or treat injury/illness.

The current healthcare challenges confronting UVic and British Columbia are not unique to the university, the province, or Canada. There are systemic challenges confronting nursing and healthcare systems globally that require thoughtful planning, meaningful engagement, and empowered dialogue between Faculty, staff, students, and senior leadership at the university, within the health authorities, and across government to build a context where students can learn entry-level and advanced practice nursing.

The school has exceptional faculty and staff who are dedicated to student success. The students we interacted with conveyed appreciation for their learning opportunities. Overall, most students seem satisfied with their education. However, there were concerns raised by some students about the challenges of managing demanding curriculum with limited opportunities to build community and a sense of belonging within the programs in the School of Nursing and wider UVic community.

The research faculty and scholars at UVic School of Nursing have demonstrated incredible capacity to engage with Indigenous Peoples and other communities to plan, conduct, analyze, report, and disseminate scholarship that is Indigenous led or community driven. However, there is concern that this scholarship is not appreciated and there is limited support to advance these efforts, despite the outward statements about commitments to the TRC (2015) Calls-to-Action and efforts to embody JEDI (justice, equity, diversity and inclusion) principles. These concerns may demonstrate an institution in transition to a more Indigenous or decolonized place or state of being.

Section 1: Development and Future Plans. The school is closing the underperforming NUHI dual degree program while expanding the successful NP program from 15 to 50 annual intake. Strategic priorities align with the University goals through increased enrolment and revenue generation, though rapid expansion has created infrastructure and staffing pressures.

Section 2: Faculty and Staff Complement among pre-tenure faculty. However, workload concerns are pervasive - staff describe work-life balance as "not a thing" and express that demands have increased without proportional staffing increases. Two base-funded faculty lines were lost to budget cuts, creating additional strain. Support for sessional instructors appears inconsistent, with some reporting lack of formal orientation or mentorship infrastructure.

Section 3: Quality and Demand for Programs program which has tripled enrolment. The proposed accelerated BSN program has government support and addresses market needs. However, retention challenges exist in graduate programs, particularly PhD enrolment, partly due to insufficient funding competitiveness. The school maintains strong partnerships with regional health authorities, with graduates often hired before program completion, indicating strong employer confidence.

Section 4: Student Experience and Learning Environment. There is evidence of strong Indigenous health content (mandatory undergraduate course – one of the first in Canada) and social determinants of health. However, students identify gaps in harm reduction education given the toxic drug crisis. Technology integration includes online delivery capabilities but lacks comprehensive simulation facilities and wise and ethical integration and use of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. The transition from theory-heavy to practice-ready education remains challenging, with employers noting graduates need additional clinical confidence building.

Section 5: Student Outcomes. Graduate employment rates appear strong with 99% retention in Island Health's bridge program. However, there are concerns about practice readiness, with employers noting graduates need 6-month mentorship periods. Graduate program completion rates show challenges, particularly in the Indigenous Wellness stream where students face scheduling uncertainty and inadequate support structures.

Section 6: Research Quality. The school is home to Western Canada's only JBI Centre of Excellence and has recruited prestigious chair holders including two CIHR chairs and three Health Research BC Scholars. However, the Associate Director of Research position remains unfilled, limiting research support infrastructure that may impede further research capacity development.

Section 7: Resources and Infrastructure. The school lacks control over classroom scheduling and has no dedicated clinical simulation space, forcing weekend use of student wellness facilities. Island Health has under-utilized simulation labs that could potentially be leveraged through partnership agreements.

Key Challenges Identified: Some students, staff, and faculty concerned about: a sense of common Identity; Indigenous student support and faculty burnout; and a need for decision-making processes requiring greater transparency and faculty involvement.

## **Recommendations**

1. Slow the pace of expansion to facilitate more effective change that is well thought through, evidence informed and integrated within the strategic planning processes of the SON to facilitate evaluation of progress toward achieving growth and addressing the pressing needs of society, the healthcare system, and the peoples who are served by them.
2. Partner with Indigenous leaders within the SON, Faculty, UVic and in communities to ensure that Indigenous students are recruited and retained in the programs.
3. In a spirit of collegial governance and decolonization, share information about new budget models and integrate members of the School in consultations about resource allocations and stewardship of the programs and resources required to deliver them.
4. Fill the vacancy for an Associate Director for Research.
5. Explore the ways in which experiential learning opportunities could be used to help bridge the practice academic gap and inspire interest among undergraduate and graduate students to engage in the School's research activities.
6. Explore strategies for the ethical and wise use of AI technologies across the school, including in curriculum, business operations, pedagogy, and to facilitate more effective communication.
7. In alignment with principles of planetary health, consider the unique challenges confronted by the SON based on its geographical location, the communities it serves across Vancouver Island, across BC, and extending into the High Arctic.
8. Explore the risks and strategies to mitigate political backlash and backlash politics associated with efforts to decolonize, Indigenize, and address concerns related to people seeking their rights related to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Develop plans to address these concerns.
9. Build a culture of collaborative mentorship across all levels of the faculty and between students and their faculty members.