External Review of the School of Public Health and Social Policy

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<u>External Review Committee</u>

Malcolm Steinberg, Simon Fraser University, Committee Chair
Ellen MacEachen, University of Waterloo
Caetano Dorea, University of Victoria

<u>Executive Summary</u>

This external review combines the reviews of the Public Health and Social Policy (PHSP) unit and the Social Dimensions of Health (SDH) program at the University of Victoria. Guided by University Policy AC1145, the review team was tasked with assessing the unit's performance across teaching, research, service, and resource use, in light of strategic shifts—most notably, the creation of the new Faculty of Health in May 2025. The team was essentially asked to assess what the academic unit is doing right and what could be done better, informed by evidence from the unit's Self-study (prior to the site visit) and the site visit.

Key Strengths
1. Interdisciplinary Excellence: PHSP is recognized for its collaborative and interdisciplinary approach across research and curriculum.
2. Research Leadership: The unit secures substantial funding and hosts Canada Research Chairs and Michael Smith Health Research BC (MSHRBC) award recipients.
3. Decolonization Commitment: PHSP integrates Indigenous knowledge and values throughout its work.
4. Innovative Delivery: The MPH program's fully online format supports accessibility for working professionals.
5. Supportive Staff and Teaching Models: Staff demonstrate strong dedication, and students praise small class sizes and standout courses.

Primary Challenges
1. Faculty Culture and Teaching Equity: In the context of a significant research-centric culture, there is an undervaluation of teaching, with uneven faculty engagement, overreliance on sessional instructors, and inconsistent course quality.
2. Governance in New Faculty: Transitioning into the Faculty of Health requires clarity in leadership and alignment across diverse academic units.
3. Curriculum and Program Coherence: Redundancy, unclear pathways, and low undergraduate enrollment signal the need for curriculum overhaul.
4. Graduate Experience and Support: Students report inconsistent advising, lack of community, and financial instability—particularly acute for PhD and SDH students.
5. Staffing and Centralization: Chronic understaffing strains operations. Centralizing services risks losing unit-specific support effectiveness.
6. AI and Ethical Challenges: Ethical and equitable use of AI and alignment with Indigenous perspectives need clearer institutional guidance.

Recommendations

1. Safeguard PHSP's Mission within the Faculty of Health: Emphasize reconciliation and interdisciplinary collaboration in governance and operations.
2. Cultivate Teaching Culture: Balance teaching and research through participatory processes, teaching policies, and pedagogical leadership.
3. Create Transparent Teaching Policies: Formalize workload expectations to ensure equity and academic integrity, including AI guidance.
4. Support Sessional Instructors: Transition session-heavy roles into stable appointments, improve inclusion, and provide sufficient course prep time.
5. Revamp Curriculum: Streamline and align content, especially in graduate research training, and innovate delivery through modularity, scaffolding and online offerings.
6. Reimagine the Undergraduate Program: Consider a BSc or interdisciplinary BA and explore Bachelor-to-Master's pathways.
7. Bolster Staff Capacity: Address workload issues and ensure sufficient advising and administrative support within PHSP and SDH.
8. Enhance Student Engagement and Wellness: Expand office hours, synchronous options, practicum support, and wellness services.
9. Advance Research Strategy: Improve post-award support and decolonize the ethics approval and oversight process. Consider developing a department-wide bold, interdisciplinary research strategy.
10. Implement Graduate Funding Policy: Ensure minimum funding, expand TA opportunities, and align support with recruitment and equity goals.