

External Review of the Medieval Studies Program

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Review Committee

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Executive Summary

The interdisciplinary Medieval Studies (MEDI) program at the University of Victoria deserves to be recognized for its remarkable contributions to the students enrolled in the program, the instructors who teach its courses and lead its other programs, and the broader community both in Victoria and beyond. Since being established in 1987-88, the program has developed a strong reputation, and it is especially known for the impact of its annual conference.

While there are several other programs in Canada that allow students to study the medieval period from an interdisciplinary perspective, the MEDI Program at the University of Victoria is one of the few programs in Canada to offer undergraduates the opportunity to pursue a Major and an honours option. Instruction in the program is provided by 21 regular faculty members and one sessional instructor drawn from departments across several faculties. The size of this program is therefore comparable to the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Ohio State (a much bigger school with 65,000 students) and surpasses the size of most other medieval programs in Canada—not just those at comprehensive or primarily undergraduate institutions but also U15 institutions. Moreover, the program's offerings, its outreach, and its scholarly standards are of the highest quality.

The Medieval studies program offers an impressive array of courses. These include offerings in Byzantium, Hebrew & Arabic literature, late imperial China, medieval musicology, Islamic art & archaeology, Japanese theatre. These types of courses are usually considered to be the domain of “niche” programs at much larger universities, but the MEDI program has identified a strength and a need in teaching the Global Middle Ages, and its course offerings so far reflect that aim. The members of the program recognize this is an area where more work remains to be done, and they also recognize a need to introduce courses that align with the University's attempt to foster respect and Reconciliation.

Although it is primarily designed to deliver undergraduate instruction, the MEDI program does much more than that. It already functions in part like a Centre for Medieval Studies by undertaking extensive outreach to the city and environs through its annual conference. It provides a sense of community for the scholars involved in the program as well as medieval enthusiasts—including many alumni—in the Victoria region. It also provides a range of remarkable opportunities for students to learn by doing research and presenting their findings outside of the classroom (especially with annual undergraduate conference).

The University and Faculty of Humanities responded to two of the key recommendations of the previous external review by resolving the issue with EETs returning to the department and including the director in meetings of the Dean of Humanities and the Faculty's department chairs. The program has been able to maintain stable course offerings and enrolments in the face of considerable budgetary pressure since the last external review thanks to the sustained efforts of those who see its value. We hope that the University and Faculty of Humanities will take this opportunity to enhance the program and ensure its continued success by responding to some of the additional recommendations made by the external

review in 2012 and reiterated in this report. These recommendations address the following concerns: the risk and uncertainty caused by not appointing a permanent faculty member dedicated to teaching in Medieval Studies; the insufficient remuneration for the director; and the inadequacy of the program's budget for some of its administrative needs and enhanced outreach.

Operational Recommendations

- **The University of Victoria and the Faculty of Humanities should recognize the program's unique status and its high quality.** This program stands out among Canadian programs for its strength, breadth, and reputation. We hope this report will help provide the Faculty and the University with the opportunity to recognize the program in several ways. The most important of these would be to ensure that it receives the support it needs to fund its core programs, especially the courses it offers and its annual conference. The Faculty and University must play a key role here because this unit does not have the autonomy over hiring or resource allocation of a department. Some small investments in this program will ensure that it can continue to make efficient use of existing resources to offer a unique program that is a credit to the Faculty of Humanities and the University
- **The Faculty of Humanities should appoint at least one person in a Teaching Stream position to ensure that the program can offer its core courses.** Those involved in the program at every level have identified the need to convert the continuing sessional position associated with the program into an Assistant Teaching Professor Position. The previous review made this recommendation, and we make it again here. This appointment will allow the program to meet an immediate need and to maintain its integrity over time. We also recommend that the dean should work with the director to consider hiring someone who could help consolidate the program's strengths in teaching the Global Middle Ages while also diversifying the offerings in another department. This could help meet goals identified by the program and the University of Victoria Employment Equity Plan.
- **The Faculty of Humanities should ensure that there are adequate resources to ensure that the director's workload is sustainable.** The director of Medieval Studies has all the program-related duties of a department chair. (S)he must also find professors willing to teach in the program (this often involves substantial negotiations with department chairs), advise all the program's students, and organize an annual, public-facing conference attended by thousands of people from the city of Victoria and beyond. Until 2007, the director habitually received two course releases to shoulder the burden of this enormous workload. Now the director receives only one course release, which means that there is little incentive to take on such an onerous position. The Faculty of Humanities needs to ensure that there are resources available to ensure that the director's release time is commensurate with the role and that a director chosen from outside the Faculty could expect the same release time. This will make the position more attractive and ensure that it can build on its strengths.
- **The program should offer Melanie Hibi assistance with her workload.** Ms. Hibi's ability to juggle three interdisciplinary programs and a Humanities program and do an excellent job with all four is nothing short of miraculous. However, it seems clear that additional support would be immensely helpful. For example, a work-study student assigned to maintain a robust social media presence, keep the website updated with the various events put on by the program, and to assist with the program's recruitment efforts would go a long way towards making the program more visible and creating a stronger sense of community for the students. Such a position would relieve Ms. Hibi of some of the work while offering valuable educational experience for the student who takes on the job. Hiring a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow to help oversee the mapping project or the annual conference would also ease Ms. Hibi's burden while supporting students and recent graduates by providing them with excellent opportunities to develop professional skills.
- **All those involved in the program—the program director, the faculty members who teach in the program, their department chairs, and the relevant Deans—need to seek opportunities for clearer channels of communication.** Establishing and maintaining clearer channels of communication will

take time, and this is one reason that the director needs to have more time available. Improved communication will make the process of appointing instructors easier because it will help everyone to understand how the departments and the program benefit from each other. Improved communication may also help more Deans, Department Chairs, and Faculty members to see themselves as stakeholders in the program and allow everyone involved in the program to see where their interests might be aligned strategically while department autonomy can be maintained. It may allow both departments who are currently actively involved (e.g., English) and less actively involved (e.g., History) to imagine new ways in which they might contribute to and benefit from the program.

Program Recommendations

- **MEDI 100 and 200 should count as “eligible courses” for the Medieval Studies students.** Both students and faculty questioned why these courses did not count for the Medieval Studies students who had taken them. MEDI 100 and 200 should not be made “required courses” -- we recognize that doing so would discourage students from joining the program after their first year. However, it would make sense to find a way to count these courses towards the minor / major / honors program for students who have already taken them. There is no rationale for excluding such rigorous medieval courses from the program, and not counting them suggests to the students that these courses are not up to snuff.
- **The learning objectives should be updated to include globalization and Indigenization.** The curriculum must also reflect greater globalization. This aspiration is very much reflected in the annual conferences, but not in the courses themselves.
- **The combined English honors and Medieval Studies minor should be dismantled.** This is a “boutique” program from a bygone era. Students are not enrolling in it, and its very existence might mislead students into believing that they cannot minor in Medieval Studies without also completing an honors degree in English. The Medieval Studies program would be better off putting its energies into marketing minors more broadly to students in honors programs across the university. In the experience of both external reviewers, if students are sent a letter of invitation to join the minor after having taken a couple of courses towards it, they are likely to do so.
- Medieval Studies should build on the strengths of the program by incorporating graduate students working on medieval subjects across the university. Doing so would be doubly beneficial: graduate students could function as mentors for undergraduates, helping to ease the burden of advising from the shoulders of the director. In return, the program could help the graduate students build a community of medieval scholars. This might be facilitated by transforming the program into a research centre of sorts. The program already acts as a centre at the undergraduate level, in terms of its extensive programming and research opportunities. If the program were to evolve into a centre, it might be easier to convince alumni to donate to Medieval Studies.