

Executive summary

Overall, the reviewers were very impressed with the Department of Geography. It has one of the largest undergraduate and graduate programs in Geography in Canada. The undergraduate program is outstanding, with healthy enrolments and high retention rates. A strong emphasis on experiential and community learning has contributed to a very positive student experience. The Department is also recognized for excellence in research and is one of only five Geography programs across the country that are listed in the top 200 QS University rankings. Research productivity is high and a diverse range of fields are covered that align remarkably closely with the University's Research Plan. While the Department has experienced a high turnover of personnel in recent years, faculty and staff are united in a shared commitment to excellence in teaching and research. The timing of this academic review coincides with a need for the Department to articulate its strengths and priorities, in order to enhance its visibility and reputation further. The reviewers have the following suggestions and recommendations in response to the self-study and to conversations with the Chair, faculty, staff and students during their two-day site visit.

1. The reviewers were very impressed with the undergraduate program; the dedication of strong teaching faculty and lab resources at the introductory level is clearly working well. This should continue along with the current emphasis on experiential and community learning. A curriculum review currently underway has proposed several sensible changes which should enhance program appeal and facilitate movement through the program. Some suggestions for further reflection are offered, such as the development of learning outcomes for newly proposed 'pathways' and attention to course names to enhance the appeal and visibility of the program. The proposal for a joint Climate Science degree with SEOS seems solid; however overlaps and interactions with adjacent programs need to be carefully managed. A major challenge for this outstanding program will be identifying ways to sustain the quality of the student experience in the context of reduced faculty teaching loads.
2. The reviewers were somewhat disappointed by the graduate program but pleased to learn of plans for its overhaul. Particular attention should be paid to enhancing graduate student engagement (e.g. support for a graduate student society) and to the development of protocols and procedures for monitoring student progress, proposal approval, etc. With respect to funding, the reviewers fully support the Department's desire to focus on attracting higher quality students. They also urge the Department to avail themselves of multi-year funding packages and to explore the option of requiring funding commitments from supervisors.
3. The reviewers were impressed with the productivity and quality of research but strongly recommend the development of a transparent, department level strategic planning process that would articulate the research plans/vision of each cluster within the Department. They endorse the enhancement of the Human Geography program and greater integration of the Community Mapping Collaboratory.
4. The reviewers urge the Department to develop a proposal to reduce teaching loads with careful attention to the impact this would have for their course offerings and the overall quality of their teaching programs.
5. Finally, the reviewers suggest that a strategic planning process, which would articulate a clear, agreed upon department narrative, could assist in clarifying distinctions from other programs, such as Environmental Studies with whom greater dialogue is encouraged. The process could include a community and outreach plan that would increase the visibility of the Department within UVic and beyond.