

Academic Program Review Report, March 2019

Department of Economics, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Victoria

Prepared by the Academic Program Review Committee:

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Executive Summary

The Academic Program Review Committee (APRC) met with many members of the Department of Economics on March 14th & 15th, 2019, having received the documentation provided¹ in advance. Following the Terms of Reference, this report aims to be “constructively critical,” identifying strengths to be protected and enhanced, weaknesses requiring attention, and new opportunities. We also consider what can be done to use resources more efficiently and effectively, and “where new resources, if available, would represent a strategic investment to allow the Academic Unit to grow with quality”².

The Department of Economics is a highly successful unit in terms of undergraduate education, graduate education, research productivity and service to the University of Victoria and the community. The Department is very collegial, administrative staff give outstanding support and faculty members were very positive about departmental administration³. No members of the Department expressed concerns regarding equity, diversity and inclusion - the Department’s Equity Committee has been in operation for over twenty years, having been established in 1998.⁴ With 27 full time faculty, the Department has significantly fewer faculty members than Economics departments at Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia, but is similar in size with respect to student enrolments. The Department has 8000+ undergraduate students (800+ Equivalent Enrolments Taught, or EETs) per year and approximately 50 graduate students (full-time equivalent, or FTEs) per year.⁵ Economics is among the three largest departments in the Faculty of Social Sciences.

This committee has identified two major concerns: [1] the stress on undergraduate teaching created by the growth of international student enrolment and [2] the inadequacy of support for the PhD program. We suggest that a “gains-sharing” approach could address both issues.

[1] The undergraduate training provided by the Department is good. Faculty in the Department are clearly highly motivated and want to deliver a top quality undergraduate and graduate education, but the recent increase in the number of undergraduate Economics students has created challenges. Today’s students have, in general, many more needs than in the past, and the impacts of these needs on faculty time are accentuated by the increasing proportion of the student body for whom English is a second language. The Department experienced rapid growth in undergraduate student numbers due to a surge in international student enrolment. EETs have since levelled off at 15-20 percent over the target of 700.

¹ See Appendix 1 for Schedule and list of documents provided.

² University of Victoria, *Procedures for Academic Program Reviews*, pages 9-10.

³ Having done external reviews at economics departments that are split by internal feuding, the committee notes that the value of internal harmony should not be under-estimated.

⁴ University of Victoria, *Economics—Report for 2019*, Enhanced Planning Report, page 37 of 48.

⁵ University of Victoria, Student EETs and FTEs, *Economics—Report for 2019*, Enhanced Planning Report, page 21 of 48.

However, the average student-to-faculty ratio for 2011/12-2017/18 is the highest in the Social Sciences, and one of the highest across the University.⁶ A priority for the Department is to ensure that the expansion of student enrolments is not at the cost of an erosion in the quality of students' learning experience.

[2] The Economics PhD program is relatively new, less than 20 years old, and after a strong start has enrolled very few students in recent years. Although the stated policy of the University of Victoria is to support expansion of post graduate education, senior administration has been unwilling to grant teaching course credit for small PhD classes (i.e. less than 5 enrolment) and also unwilling to fund large PhD entering classes. If the PhD program is to achieve its potential, greater concrete support is essential.

The APRC believes that this would be a good time to invest in the Department, particularly in terms of increasing faculty numbers and teaching assistants. More resources to support teaching are also warranted, including administrative staff services and equipment and software for student computer labs. One avenue for the administration to support the Department is to share some of the extra revenue received from the expansion of Economics undergraduate international student enrolments. New resources allocated to the Department should aim to strengthen the Department, in terms of research and teaching. Some resources should be directed to hire new faculty, and the APRC recommends the Department develop a strategic plan for research and teaching to determine the Department's direction for the future. This plan should include a strategy for hiring over the next few years including how it would compete to hire into CRC positions that become available. An increase in faculty numbers should have a positive impact on scholarship by providing researchers with more time (by reducing faculty time spent on marking and other related teaching duties, by spreading the Department administrative responsibilities across more faculty members, etc.).

The APRC also recognizes the importance of maintaining the undergraduate and graduate programs' strengths. Particular strengths of the undergraduate programs include a choice for students of BA and BSc degree programs; and the Honours program, which gives students a first-rate preparation for graduate studies. The Department's undergraduate programs include a required course, *Writing for Economists*, which may be especially helpful for international students. Strengths of the Masters and PhD programs include the Department's excellent research expertise in environmental, climate and resource economics and in the applied economics of labour, gender and indigenous issues. These research areas align with the University of Victoria's areas of research strength, and the Department's CRC Chair works in environmental and resource issues. The Department's expertise in other applied economics areas is also noteworthy. A particular asset for the Masters program is the well-established Co-op program. Finally, the Department has a strong alumni network, which is helpful for student placement and for alumni-supported scholarships.

⁶ University of Victoria, *Economics — Report for 2019*, Enhanced Planning Report, page 24 of 48. Also see Figure 8, *Framing Document*, page 46.