

Report of the External Review Committee for the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria

External members:

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25 May, 2023

Opening Remarks:

We cannot solve complex problems from the same worldview that created them in the first place, as it will continue to perpetuate a disconnect between us and the planet as 'relatives'.¹

Nicole Redvers, Indigenous Scholar, Deninu K'ue First Nation, Western Research Chair and Director of Indigenous Planetary Health at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry at Western University.

Our review of the School of Environmental Studies has provided an opportunity to witness a culture of learning, research, scholarship and community engagement that proactively creates conditions to address complex problems in ways that go beyond the worldviews that created them. The adaptive and forward-looking strengths of the School have been built up over five decades, where students, faculty and community partners have benefitted from a commitment to valuing impact, learning and positive change over efficiency. Future iterations of this strong foundation have the potential to have far-reaching benefits, requiring further and ongoing investment. In our appraisal, the School of Environmental Studies is well-positioned to amplify and expand its impact, so long as this is done in ways that are consistent and coherent with the values and strengths the School has cultivated to date.

Recommendations

- I. Do No Harm. The School of Environmental Studies (SES) is a highly impactful unit, with a special collection of collegial faculty members. The School already exemplifies many of the aspirations of the University: interdisciplinary teaching and research; experiential learning; Indigenous scholarship; community-based research; and teaching and research on Climate and Sustainability. Yet, at the same time, the manner in which the School functions seems to be poorly understood – and poorly communicated – by the University. There may be opportunities to enhance or scale-up the activities of the Unit, but this should be approached cautiously, and without harming factors that have created the foundations for the success of SES to date.
- II. The Unit probably needs 2 or 3 more regular faculty members just to teach its existing classes without over-reliance on sessional instructors in core courses. Assessing the teaching capacity of the School's faculty is complicated by its small size, the high number of dedicated research positions, cross-appointments with other units, and changes to the faculty complement at the time of review. A preliminary assessment of the School's need for faculty positions is provided in **Section 1.5**.
- III. The strengths of the program could be better profiled, communicated and supported. The School's foundation in innovative applied teaching and learning for a range of learning contexts (exemplified by the cross-cutting benefits of the Restoration of Natural Systems program) gives it a strong basis from which to meet urgent societal demand. The unique partnerships, connections and cross-cutting strengths of the School - such as the interdisciplinary strengths of the double-major requirement, the partnership with Continuing Studies for the RNS program, the commitment to community engaged and experiential learning - could all be better profiled. The new certificate program in Transformative Climate Action is an

¹ Redvers, N. (2021). The determinants of planetary health. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5(3), e111–e112. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00008-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00008-5)

excellent example of this opportunity. The School will require additional faculty members and support to ensure its success and to fulfil its potential for future innovations.

- IV. The University should support the School's proposed Environmental Solutions Centre. The purpose of the Centre will be to enhance the School's successes in community-engaged research, teaching and collaboration. Creation of the Centre will require a high-level, community-facing staff support role, who potentially could also assist with the Unit's field schools.
- V. When supporting the School's teaching and outreach efforts through new faculty appointments, these should be made in line with the School's desire to further increase the diversity of its faculty complement while strengthening its teaching capacity.
- VI. Financial support for graduate students in the School needs to be improved. We note that university-wide graduate student funding also needs to be increased. Meanwhile, the School should consider raising the minimum funding level expected for when taking on new graduate students, to be consistent with its values. In parallel, faculty members should budget for more than the historic norms or minimums on grant proposals.
- VII. Next year (2024) will be the 50th anniversary of the Environmental Studies Program (now SES) at UVic. This landmark provides a great opportunity for the School to envision ways to meaningfully celebrate its accomplishments and contributions, with the support of the Faculty and University, possibly in partnership with development and alumni offices. The School has found a range of ways to achieve success through ground-breaking initiatives that universities worldwide are now aspiring to, and which go beyond standard business models of university departments. There is lots to celebrate and learn from and we encourage the University and the Faculty to profile the School's achievements across campus and with partners and collaborators. This could also include a targeted campaign to raise funds to support graduate student scholarships in the School.
- VIII. The 'scholarship of teaching and learning' is a potential and under-realised strength of the SES. The history of educational innovation does not appear to be well researched or documented, despite the timely, valuable and impactful opportunities this has created for learners, which are exemplary in terms of some of UVic's and other university's aspirations as educational institutions. Finding mechanisms to acknowledge support and profile this scholarly contribution as a valued form of research would be advantageous to the School, Faculty and University and could also serve as one of the many foci for celebration in the upcoming 50th anniversary of the School.