Two Year Progress Report for the Department of Philosophy

The Department’s undergraduate and OCGS reports for the augmented review were completed in July 2009. A site visit took place from May 10-12, 2010. The assessors’ report was received in June, and the Department’s response to the report submitted to the Associate Provost for Graduate Studies on July 6, 2010. This material was considered in due course by Senate. This report provides an update on developments since then.

Context:

At the time of the augmented review the Department was in a period of transition, and it continues to be so. The previous 2002 OCGS review had been critical of the structure of the graduate programs, in particular because of their long completion times and the Department’s antecedent failure to consider OCGS advice sufficiently seriously. In response to this OCGS criticism, the graduate programs were completely re-designed in 2003-04. The membership in the department has also changed. The department made no junior hires of permanent faculty between 1972 and 1996, and only one between 1972 and 2000. Starting in 2001, new faculty began to be hired, primarily as replacements for retirements. By 2009 only three faculty members remained who were in the department before 1996. The third major transition is that the undergraduate program was re-designed in preparation for the augmented review, and in light of the changing faculty complement.

The 2010 assessors pronounced that their “overall assessment is extremely favourable.” The structural changes to the graduate programs were found to be “very well conceived, pedagogically excellent, and well liked by the students,” and they found that “an impressive amount of thought has gone into improving the [graduate programs] in recent years.” The dramatic improvement in completion times for graduate students was praised. They described the new undergraduate curriculum as “well designed” and as the result of a careful and consultative process, and praised the “innovative use of technology while maintaining the traditional methodology of lecture/discussions and paper writing.” In particular, they praised the Department’s commitment to enhancing its DE (now EL) offerings, and urged the University to invest the necessary resources in the success of that endeavor.

At the time of the review, the Department had only 10.5 full time faculty members, but the reviewers judged the quality of the faculty as “extremely high,” the level of research accomplishment “impressive,” and they noted the “very high level of commitment to excellence in the management and delivery of the graduate programs.” They praised the “cutting edge work of an inter- or multi-disciplinary nature” in the Department, and the significant service contributions of Department members outside the Department. They note that a department of this size offering the range of programs offered by Philosophy is likely to
be stretched very thin, and comment on the uneven distribution of graduate supervision (a problem they thought might resolve itself as newer faculty gain experience and profile) and of service tasks.

The assessors also made a number of specific recommendations. We will consider the recommendations for the graduate and undergraduate programs in turn.

Graduate recommendations:

1. Since the Department presently has the bare minimum of faculty members to deliver programs of this quality, even given the recent hire and the addition of a Chair in Scientific and Technological Literacy, the hiring that was deferred from 2009-10 should be made within the next two years. We consider this appointment “mission critical” to use UW terminology. The University should also seriously consider creating an additional position in Applied Ethics housed in Philosophy, which would strengthen the graduate program, while addressing important university-wide teaching needs.

Since the report, the Department has been able to replace one faculty member using the mentioned “deferred” position, hiring an Applied Ethicist, while two named chairs, one in Scientific and Technological Literacy and one in Science and Society, have been added to the Department. These named chairs have greatly enhanced an existing research strength in Philosophy of Science. The Applied Ethicist works in areas likely to be of interest in many areas of campus, including Global Health Ethics and Disability Studies. We note that the case for an additional position in Applied Ethics remains as strong as it was when the assessors made it, but with the looming retirement of one of only two historians of philosophy in the Department, the need to replace that expertise is more pressing and more strategically important to the Faculty of Arts.

2. The Department should consider whether to reintroduce Epistemology into the new field names.

The addition of John Turri to the faculty complement has indeed made Epistemology a more important area of research and graduate student education at Waterloo. The Department intends to address the issue of re-naming our fields in light of all the recent personnel changes as part of our current efforts to increase enrolment in the PhD program.

3. Care should be taken that administrative and supervisory duties are equitably distributed in the Department and do not fall excessively to junior and early-to-mid-career faculty members. Those junior or mid-career faculty members who have carried a very high
service load in recent years should be rewarded with an additional ad hoc teaching reduction at some time in the near future. It is important that such steps be taken to ensure the long term academic health of the Department and its programs.

With respect to supervisory loads, the problem of uneven distribution has not disappeared, but it has lessened as some recently hired faculty members have become popular supervisors and committee members. As yet the Department has not decided to implement measures to ensure more even distribution, but will continue to monitor the issue.

The problem of uneven distribution of service duties in the Department is proving harder to address. One complication is that some senior members of the department have not taken on significant internal service roles, such as Associate Chair, because of long-term commitments to leadership roles in programs external to the department---one result of which is that others in the Philosophy Department are carrying an extra load in order to service interdisciplinary programs in which they do not participate. Plausibly the issue is an institutional one, in that other departments involved in those programs do not adequately share the load of administering them. The Department has not yet been able to carry through on the recommendation to provide extra teaching reductions to the junior and mid-career faculty members identified by the assessors as having carried very large service loads to the benefit of the Department and the University. The Department’s teaching budget has simply been too constrained to be able to afford to address this, and the Department will continue to find it difficult to do so without financial assistance from the Faculty or the University.

4. **The Department should create a placement officer, other than the Graduate Officer, and formalize practices to prepare doctoral students for the job market. Information about the Department’s placement record should be included on its web-site.**

As noted in our original response to the assessors in July 2010, it is not clear that assigning the job of Placement Officer to someone besides the Graduate Officer is the best response to the problem identified by the assessors given the difficulty the Department has filling all its service roles. We will implement this recommendation as more newly arrived colleagues become available for significant service tasks. Meanwhile, the Department has become much more systematic about preparing our students for the academic job market. For those nearing completion, we hold practice job talks, practice interviews, and so on. The pro-seminar includes sessions every term addressed to important aspects of professionalization as academics. (As noted in July 2010, we are putting placement information on the web site.)
The Department is now also being much more pro-active about preparing students in our graduate programs for careers outside academia. Our graduates get good jobs, whether or not they have academic careers. We have begun the process of using our alumni as a resource to help us ensure that our graduates know what they need to know to fashion successful careers when they graduate, as well as a source of mentors and connections.

5. The Department should diversify the duties required of teaching assistants, e.g. by introducing tutorial sections or discussion groups in large undergraduate classes. TA duties should be formally agreed between Instructors and TAs at the beginning of each class and codified in a contract.

6. The Department should provide counseling about course design and management for doctoral students appointed as instructors.

The Department reported on its efforts in connection with these recommendations in our July 2010 response. The additional developments since then are that, after a Department vote in support of doing so, we recently signed on to a pilot project for term-by-term contracts between faculty members and TAs that may soon roll out across campus. In Winter 2013 we are experimenting with a “teaching squares” process for improving teaching among faculty, which if it is successful will be extended to graduate students in coming terms. The Department’s Extended Learning Coordinator has also implemented mandatory training sessions for instructors and graders for on-line courses. While it is hard to infer causation, it is worth noting that average student evaluations for graduate students who teach their own courses for the Department have increased significantly since 2010.

7. Steps should be taken to repair the relationship between the UW Department and the Department at St. Jerome’s University. It would be desirable for the main campus department to appoint a senior faculty member as a liaison officer to encourage constructive interaction with colleagues at St. Jerome’s.

In our July 2010 report, we noted that we think the assessors misdiagnose the source of the problems between the Waterloo Department and the St Jerome’s Department. But we agree that it is important to improve the levels of trust across the creek. The Department therefore appointed Dave DeVidi, now the Chair, as the SJU liaison. In 2012, the two Departments cooperated on a very successful celebration of the 50th
Anniversary of the Waterloo Department, among other things bringing in an eminent scholar for a series of public talks.

8. The Department should ensure that it maintains, and if possible increases, the number of graduate-only seminars available to students.

The Department continues to regard this as a worthwhile long term goal. To make it reasonable, we must increase the number of students in the graduate program. This we regard as a more reasonable goal for the next few years, since we now have a more mature department with a few more members than a few years ago. Generating ideas for raising our numbers was the first charge given to the newly appointed Associate Chair, Graduate Studies in July 2012, and the first step, a series of consultations, is underway.

Undergraduate Recommendations:

1. That the University and Department work together to make it possible for regular faculty to teach more upper level undergraduate courses in the core areas of Philosophy, directed both at Philosophy majors and to students in other programs who will benefit from them.

The main development on this front has been the creation of “special topics” courses at the second, third and fourth year levels. This has allowed the Department to experiment with courses that we suspect might meet the description of being of interest to Philosophy students and to many others. The idea is that if they are successful, we will add them as permanent offerings. Many overlap naturally with other fields, including fields in other Faculties, and will make clear that Philosophy offers courses of interest to many. Recent courses have been on topics such as Philosophy and the Environment, Science and Society, Political Protest Movements, and the Philosophical Uses and Abuses of Game Theory. Others that have been suggested and that may be offered in the future include Philosophical Puzzles in Quantum Science, Global Health Ethics, Philosophy of Economics, Experimental Philosophy and Philosophy of Sport.

2. That the Department introduce tutorial sections taught by teaching assistants in large undergraduate classes.

We responded to this in the July 2010 document, as part of the corresponding recommendation for the grad program. In short, there are various constraints, including space, that make implementing the recommendation impractical now, though we agree that for some courses it would be beneficial.
3. That curricular revision continue, with special attention to the needs and interests of Philosophy majors.

   The undergraduate committee is currently considering the question of revisions to the undergraduate curriculum that might increase the number of philosophy majors and joint majors. The committee is considering initiatives undertaken at other institutions, including other U15 Philosophy Departments, and is looking carefully at data about the Waterloo Department’s past recruitment and retention efforts.

4. That the Department should use its expertise to continue to develop its courses on ethics for the X and Business programs, perhaps with the use of DE components, so as to address the different needs of those programs.

5. That the Department should continue its revision of DE courses. To this end it is essential that the appointment of the DE Coordinator be renewed.

   Work continues on both these fronts. The Department remains interested in cooperating with other parts of campus, and has been involved, for instance, in creating Professional Development courses. The Arts Faculty Strategic Plan recommends making the position of DE (now EL) Coordinator permanent, but this has not yet happened.

6. That the Department should continue considering the institution of a Co-op program in Philosophy, although we do not think that this is essential for attracting students to the Philosophy program.

   This idea is currently on the back burner for the Department. Co-op is already available for Philosophy Honours and Majors through the Arts and Business program; and the introduction of a separate co-op program would be administration-intensive for little additional payoff. We are, however, actively pursuing other sorts of experiential learning opportunities for Philosophy students.

7. That steps be taken to resolve the tensions between the main campus Department and the Department at St. Jerome’s in the interests of the educational experiences of the undergraduates of both departments.

   See the response to the corresponding recommendation about the Grad Program.