Executive Summary

An applicant survey has been conducted by the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) annually since 2010. The objective is to characterize those applicants who receive offers by determining the reasons they applied to Queen’s University and a particular program of study, and to identify key factors in their decision-making regarding the offer.

This survey was sent to 1661 applicants to the SGS who received an offer of admission for September 2014. The response rate was 30.4% and the majority of respondents applied to course-based Master’s programs (41%), followed by thesis-based Master’s programs (38.2%), then doctoral programs (19.4%). The remainder had applied to Graduate diploma programs. Where the findings were consistent regardless of the program type (project/thesis-based) or level (diploma, Master’s, doctoral), the subgroups were combined, otherwise the distinctions between subgroups are noted.

The main findings are:

- Most applicants based their decision to apply to Queen’s on their own web-based research (58%) primarily accessing program-specific websites and SGS sites
- Academic factors including the alignment of the program and research with applicants’ interests, and the program’s reputation play a large role in the decision to apply to a program
- Direct, personal communication (email) is highly valued. Applicants appreciate clarity in the offer made (e.g. funding package) and like to feel “wanted”

The principal recommendations that emerge from the survey results that warrant consideration by programs and departments as they work to deepen their applicant pools and attract excellent graduate students are as follows:

- Ensure that graduate program web-content is current and relevant to prospective students (include information about ongoing research, how graduate training will prepare them for employment opportunities (identifying possible career paths and showcasing past graduates is helpful), funding opportunities, and application deadlines).
- Programs should identify the unique features and opportunities associated with their programs (e.g. experiential learning/internships, interdisciplinary course offerings, special awards/scholarships, opportunities for accelerated route to PhD studies,...)
- Provide opportunities for applicants to engage with prospective supervisors, graduate students, and graduate alumni. Campus visits are very effective though consideration could also be given to hosting webinars targeting prospective applicants and/or those who have applied as a cost-effective means of connecting with future graduate students.
- Communicate regularly with applicants and provide funding details as early as possible upon acceptance.
**Overview**

This report summarizes applicant information gathered through an online survey conducted between July and September of 2014. All applicants who were offered admission were invited to participate; one $200 and three $100 gift cards were awarded to four respondents selected randomly 4 weeks after the survey closing date. A total of 506 applicants participated in the survey and the results are presented below under three main headings. Comparison data from the 2013 applicant survey are provided when available.

The findings are intended to inform graduate coordinators, graduate faculty and individuals involved in graduate recruitment about factors that draw applicants to Queen’s and are influential in their decision-making. In addition, information about where applicants go to find out about graduate studies and what information they find particularly useful and relevant is discussed. As programs engage in active recruitment, the information provided herein may offer guidance in developing their strategy.

**Characteristics of the respondents**

The respondents primarily were interested in Master’s level programs, were domestic and new to Queen’s (i.e. no previous Queen’s degree). At the time of the survey, the majority of respondents had at least one other offer to consider in addition to the one from Queen’s. These findings are generally similar to those from the 2013 survey though the percentage holding a previous Queen’s degree is lower in 2014 than 2013. The data are summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>%Female*</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>%Female*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response rate</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters (thesis)</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters (course/project)</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>60.1%</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>58.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Diploma</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other offer besides Queen’s</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen or permanent resident</td>
<td>81.5%</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous degree from Queen’s</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentage of subgroup

The top three stated career paths that respondents intended to pursue upon completion of their degree were: to find a job related to their field of study (39%), pursue an academic career (23%), and to pursue further graduate study (19%). Developing transferrable skills to enable working in various careers was noted by 13% of respondents. It follows that a useful recruitment strategy might be to inform prospective applicants about job opportunities suited to those with an advanced degree in the discipline of study and to provide examples of career paths followed by past graduates with mention of how the skills acquired in their graduate training helped land the position. Applicants may also be interested in knowing whether the program offers an accelerated route to PhD study or if promotion is an option.
Why Apply to Queen’s?

Of interest was to understand the importance of certain factors in motivating and influencing prospective graduate students to apply to Queen’s. This information can guide programs to best promote their programs, and research opportunities and to address other aspects about the environment and community that are important to potential students.

In terms of program-related factors, 83% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that an excellent reputation was important. The uniqueness of the program relative to offerings elsewhere and recognition as a leader in the concentration area were ranked as key by respondents. Agreement that the quality of internship and practicum opportunities played an important role in the decision to apply was moderate overall (35%). However, examining the data by subgroup showed that it was highest among those interested in course-based Master’s programs (47%) and lowest in those applying to doctoral programs (24%). Figure 1 summarizes the findings which are comparable to the 2013 results.

**Figure 1.** Relative agreement (in %) about the importance of specific program related factors. * See text subgroup analysis.

SA = Strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree
The quality of the research environment in general, research facilities (e.g. laboratories, libraries) and record of research accomplishments in particular were important to respondents. Sixty-three percent of respondents agreed that the desire to work with a particular professor was an important factor in deciding to apply; the proportion is higher (79%) among respondents seeking admission to a thesis-based Master’s or a PhD program as might be expected. The existence of an overall excellent research environment is a factor that 77% of respondents agree or strongly agree is important. Refer to Figure 2 for a summary of the findings.

Figure 2. Relative agreement (in %) about the importance of research related factors (supervisory and environment)
SA = Strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree

How do applicants learn about our graduate programs and what information is important?

Applicants generally conduct their own research into the programs of study and the universities that interest them. There is a very high demand for well qualified students to enter graduate studies so it is imperative that materials and information are easily accessible to prospective applicants and that it is relevant, up to date, and engaging. Knowing where applicants go to learn about our programs and the kind of information they seek is valuable for programs to ensure that they are meeting the needs of our potential students.
Websites continue to be the main source of information with 84% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the department/program website was most important in providing them with graduate program information and was valuable in their decision to submit an application. Indeed 51% ranked it as the preferred medium. Sixty-four percent of respondents identified the School of Graduate Studies’ website as an important source of information and 20% as the preferred source. The content that was considered important by at least 80% of respondents in a given applicant group (i.e. course-based Master’s, thesis-based Master’s, PhD or all groups) include:

- Deadlines for applications (all groups)
- How to apply (all groups)
- Funding options (thesis-based Master’s and PhD groups only)
- Research interests and activities of professors (thesis-based Master’s and PhD groups only)

Respondents attribute little importance to print materials and social media (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs) in their decision to apply to Queen’s. They do however value information sent to them via email in response to a request made. Personal contacts including family, friends, and current Queen’s students were not particularly influential in respondents’ decision to apply.

Just over 8% of respondents attended recruitment fairs though it is not known how many followed up by contacting programs of interest. Half (50%) of respondents participated in some form of recruitment event or activity such as an information session, open house or meetings with faculty or staff.

Most respondents communicated with representatives of the program of interest. The majority (62%) had telephone or email communications with a supervisor or members of the research group they hoped to join and 70% indicated that they met with a prospective supervisor and/or research group member. Of these, 92% were satisfied or very satisfied with this opportunity.

**What factors influence decision-making?**

It is well established that communication with prospective graduate students and staying connected with applicants to whom offers have been made is a critical component in their decision-making. In general, respondents reported satisfaction with communications from the program, with 85% indicating that they felt that the department offering admission really wanted them as graduate student.

Campus visits are a strategy used by many programs to convert letters of offer to acceptances. Over 34% of respondents identified that visiting Queen’s, meeting with prospective supervisors and others associated with the program was the point at which they seriously considered Queen’s. The funding package is also a key determinant in their decision-making. Seventy-one percent indicated that the financial offer met their expectations and of those respondents who had received multiple offers, 65% indicated that the financial offer from Queen’s was the same or more favourable than other offers in terms of the amount offered, which is similar to what was reported in 2013 (66%). With respect to the distribution of funding by source (scholarship, teaching, research assistantship and other support), respondents rated the Queen’s package as the same or more favourable than other offers (72%). See Figure 3 for a summary. A substantial number of respondents (24%) however, felt that the timing of the financial offer did not leave them with enough time to give it full consideration before having to make a decision. This reinforces the imperative to inform prospective students of the funding they can expect and the sources on funding as early as possible.
**Guidance for departments/programs**

The information provided by the respondents is helpful in identifying those factors that influence their decision to apply to Queen’s and how they respond to an offer made. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are provided for departments and programs to consider as part of their recruitment strategy to deepen their applicant pools and attract excellent graduate students.

- Ensure that graduate program web-content is current and relevant to prospective students (include information about ongoing research, how graduate training will prepare them for employment opportunities, i.e. identifying possible career paths and showcasing past graduates is helpful, funding opportunities, and application deadlines).
- Programs should identify the unique features and opportunities associated with their programs (e.g. experiential learning/internships, interdisciplinary course offerings, special awards/scholarships, opportunities for accelerated route to PhD studies,...)
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