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 1681 applicants to the SGS who received an offer of admission for September 2015. The survey has been shortened and modified from the 2014 version in order to focus on more key determinants and encourage a higher rate of participation. The response rate was 54.8% and the majority of respondents applied to thesis-based Master’s programs (42.1%), followed by course-based Master’s programs (39%), then doctoral programs (18%). 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 (71.4%) primarily accessing program-specific websites (45.6%) and the SGS website (28.8%)
- 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
- The decision to accept the Queen’s offer is mainly influenced by web-based research, followed by personal meetings (with faculty or students), and receiving a financial offer from Queen’s
- Direct, personal communication (email, phone, or skype) 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. This includes procedural information such as application process and deadlines, but also clear indicators of what the program has to offer to prospective students. Include information about ongoing research and highlight how graduate training will prepare students for employment opportunities, i.e. identifying possible career paths and showcasing past graduates, since a perceived advantage in career-related training was the most frequently stated reason for accepting an offer at another institution and declining an offer from Queen’s. Also include information on available funding. While funding was not identified as main determinant for the decision to apply, it is rated as important factor, in particular by thesis-based programs.
- 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, etc.)
- 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 10th and 31st of 2015. All applicants who were offered admission were invited to participate; three $100 gift cards were awarded to three respondents selected randomly immediately after the survey closing date. A total of 922 applicants participated in the survey, 71.2% of whom had accepted the Queen’s offer. The results are presented below under three main headings. Comparison data from the 2014 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. Of respondents who accepted the Queen’s offer 40.3% had more than one offer to pursue graduate studies (60% of all respondents). These findings are generally similar to those from the 2014 survey though the percentage holding a previous Queen’s degree is higher in 2015 than in 2014. The data are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response rate</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters (thesis)</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters (course/professional)</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Diploma</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other offer besides Queen’s</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen or permanent resident</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous degree from Queen’s</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted Queen’s offer</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The most frequently stated career intentions that respondents aspired to upon completion of their degree were: Continue with further graduate studies (23.7%), pursue an academic career (20.2%), pursue a career in government/public service (18.5%), and pursue a career in business or industry (15.7%). This aligns with the top reasons to pursue graduate studies: Forty-four percent of respondents indicated improving their prospects or employment/career advancement as reason, while 24% applied to graduate school as a step towards working in a university setting as professor or researcher. This career aspiration is most popular with applicants for a doctoral program (53.9%). Ten percent of respondents stated the development of transferable skills as the objective for pursuing graduate studies.

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 unique learning and research opportunities and to address other aspects about the environment and community that are important to potential students.

Forty-four percent of respondents stated that Queen’s strong reputation was the main reason for applying, followed by the desire to work with a specific professor (23.8%) and specific research they could do in the Queen’s program (15.9%). Working with a specific professor was a particularly dominant choice for those who applied to thesis-based programs (36.2%). The availability of funding is rarely the main determinant in the decision to apply, though it does play a role in the overall decision along with other factors. Only 4.9% of respondents who applied for thesis-based programs (Master’s and PhD) chose this as their main reason to apply (within the doctoral group this was even lower at 3%).

When respondents were asked to identify the most important influence on their decision to apply to a Queen’s graduate program, 38.6% named the research reputation, followed by teaching quality (32.8%), and the student experience (20.4%).

The uniqueness of the graduate program relative to offerings at other universities were ranked as key by a majority of the respondents (52.1% rated this as ‘very important’). The selection of courses in the program played a similarly important role, with 54.6% rating this as very important (36.7% chose ‘somewhat important’). The majority of respondents ranked opportunities for experiential learning in the form of internships and practica as either very important (46.6%) or somewhat important (28.9%). However, examining the data by subgroup showed, not surprisingly, that it was highest among those interested in course-based Master’s programs and those applying to pursue a graduate diploma program. Sixty percent of respondents in this subgroup ranked this as very important, compared to 38.2% of respondents applying to doctoral programs. This is similarly reflected when respondents were asked to rank the importance of specific career opportunities that the graduate program would prepare them for. Overall, 65.7% of respondents ranked this as very important, with the percentage being significantly higher with course-based Master’s programs (75.6%) versus doctoral programs (57.6%).

Figure 1 summarizes the findings which are comparable to the 2014 results. Please note that the 2014 Likert scale included “Neutral” as option, which was eliminated in 2015. The 2015 findings for subgroups for course-based
programs (Master’s and Graduate Diploma) versus thesis-based programs (Master’s and PhD) are shown in Figure 2 (below).

**Figure 1.** Relative ranking (in %) of the importance of specific program related factors. 
VI = Very important; SI = somewhat important; N = not at all important; NA = not applicable

**Figure 2.** Relative ranking (in %) of the importance of specific program related factors by subgroup in 2015. 
VI = Very important; SI = somewhat important; N = not at all important; NA = not applicable
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. The majority of respondents (74%) stated that quality of research supervision was very important for their decision to apply. The proportion is higher (89.4%) among respondents seeking admission to a thesis-based Master’s or a PhD program as might be expected. The availability of funding, while not the driving factor in respondents’ decision to apply, is rated by 84.2% as very or somewhat important. This is percentage is even higher (92.3%) for thesis-based programs (Master’s and PhD).

**Figure 3.** Relative ranking (in %) of the importance of specific program related factors.

VI = Very important; SI = somewhat important; N = not at all important; NA = not applicable
Figure 4. Relative ranking (in %) of the importance of specific program related factors by subgroup in 2015. VI = Very important; SI = somewhat important; N = not at all important; NA = not applicable

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 76.5% 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, 45.6% ranked it as the preferred medium with the School of Graduate Studies’ ranking second with 28.8%.
Respondents were asked to choose the three most important elements of the program website. The following are those elements divided by subgroup:

**Thesis-based programs (Master’s and PhD):**
- Research interests and activities of professors
- Admission requirements
- How to apply

**Course-based programs (Master’s and Graduate Diploma)**
- Admission requirements
- Details on course offerings
- Descriptions of career opportunities after graduation

In addition to these website components, all groups ranked the structure and milestones of the graduate program as an important element of the program website.

Respondents attribute little importance to print materials and social media (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs) in their decision to apply to Queen’s. When asked to identify a personal contact with the most influence in their decision to apply, 43.8% of respondents chose a faculty member/professor in the program, followed by a family member or friend (22.6%), and Queen’s alumni (12.7%).

Eight percent of respondents attended recruitment fairs though it is not known how many followed up by contacting programs of interest. Twenty percent of respondents participated in some form of recruitment event or activity such as an information session, open house or meetings with faculty or staff. Of those who attended such functions, 93.4% were either very satisfied or satisfied with the event.

Most respondents communicated with representatives of the program of interest. The majority of both the applicants who accepted the Queen’s offer (51.1%) and of those who declined the offer (55.7%) had telephone/skype or email communications with a supervisor or members of the research group they hoped to join. Face-to-face meetings with faculty and current graduate students were a more common means of communication for those who accepted (29.8%) than those who declined (14.8%).

**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 68.2% of those respondents who received multiple offers indicating that communication from the Queen’s graduate program was better than from other institutions to which they had applied. Eighty-eight of those respondents who accepted the Queen’s offer stated that they felt that the department offering admission really wanted them as graduate student.

Respondents who accepted the Queen’s offer were asked to identify the three most important factors for their decision to accept. The ranking was as follows:

- Researching the graduate program (e.g. through the program website)
- Meeting with a professor
- Receiving the financial offer from Queen’s
Visiting Queen’s and talking to a current student in the program were also ranked as important. These answers reflect the need for a targeted communication strategy, which includes both online and in-person communications.

Of respondents who declined the Queen’s offer, 7.8% decided not to pursue graduate studies at all. The three most frequently selected universities that those who declined a Queen’s offer chose to attend were the University of Toronto (26.6%), McMaster University (6.6%) and the University of British Columbia (5.9%). Respondents who declined the Queen’s offer were also asked select their main reasons not to pursue graduate studies at Queen’s. Many of these respondents stated that they believe graduate programs at other universities would prepare them better for a career (45.7%). They also stated that Queen’s wasn’t their first choice (29.3%), and that they were offered a more attractive financial package at another university (28.9%)

Of those respondents who accepted the Queen’s offer, 70.3% indicated that the amount of the financial offer made by the Queen’s program was either much better, slightly better or about the same as other financial offers they received. Of those who declined the Queen’s offer, 53% stated that the offer made by Queen’s was much better, slightly better, or about the same. When asked to compare the clarity of how the funding package was formed (i.e. the sources of funding), 80.5% of those who accepted and 75.4% of those who declined stated that the Queen’s offer was much better, slightly better, or about the same; though as illustrated in Figure 5, most who declined the Queen’s offer rated the clarity of the funding package as ‘about the same’ as their other offer(s). Among those who declined and those who accepted the Queen’s offer, most were satisfied with the timing of when they received the financial offer from Queen’s (73.9% and 77.3%, respectively).

**Figure 5.** Relative comparison (in %) of the amount, components and distribution of financial offer with respect to offers from other universities

SL/ML = slightly lower/much lower; S = same; MB/SB = much better, slightly better
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. This includes procedural information such as application process and deadlines, but also clear indicators of what the program has to offer to prospective students. Include information about ongoing research and highlight how graduate training will prepare students for employment opportunities, i.e. identifying possible career paths and showcasing past graduates, since a perceived advantage in career-related training was the most frequently stated reason for accepting an offer at another institution and declining an offer from Queen’s. Also include information on available funding. While funding was not identified as main determinant for the decision to apply, it is rated as important factor, in particular by thesis-based programs.
- 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, etc.)
- 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.