Findings from the 2016 Applicant Survey - Implications for Graduate Student Recruitment

Overview
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 in terms of 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 1656 applicants to the SGS who received an offer of admission for September 2016. A total of 907 applicants participated in the survey, 77.7% of whom had accepted the Queen’s offer. The majority of respondents applied to thesis-based Master’s programs (42.3%), followed by course-based Master’s programs (40.4%), then doctoral programs (16.3%). The remainder had applied to Graduate Diploma programs.

A list of the key factors associated with program-related communication and recruitment activities that emerged as important based on survey results is provided. This information provides insight about elements to emphasize and offers guidance to graduate coordinators, graduate faculty, and individuals involved in graduate recruitment in developing evidence-informed recruitment strategies. Remember that each year (early summer) the SGS provides limited financial support for promising recruitment initiatives that are submitted in response to the call.

Characteristics of the respondents

Table 1. Respondent characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
<td>922</td>
<td>907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response rate</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters (thesis)</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters (course/professional)</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Diploma</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other offer besides Queen’s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen or permanent resident</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous degree from Queen’s</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted Queen’s offer</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted Queen’s offer</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
<td>77.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reasons that respondents applied to Queen’s

- The reputation of Queen’s and the program was the primary reason to choose Queen’s.
- The distinct nature of the graduate program is very important to a majority of applicants.
- Information about potential supervisors and the research that could be conducted attracted applicants.
- Some applicants felt that the pursuit of graduate studies would improve their prospects for career advancement.

Information that applicants value and where they seek it

- The program website is the most important source of information for applicants, followed by the School of Graduate Studies website.
- The most important elements of the program website: the How (application process, admission process, funding opportunities), the What (course offerings, faculty research activities), and the Why (description of career opportunities, e.g. through student and alumni profiles).
- Contact with faculty members in the program is important both before and after applying. Interactions through open houses, webinars, etc. were generally described as very positive.

Factors that influence the decision to accept the Queen’s offer

- The top three determinants of an acceptance (in descending order): information included on the website about the program and the Queen’s environment, meeting with a professor, and receiving a timely and detailed financial offer.
- Efforts by the program that indicated that the program really wanted them as a student (e.g. timely communication, updates, follow-up and responsiveness).
- Applicants that felt another university would prepare them better for a career did not accept the Queen’s offer.

Lessons learned about what works

General tips

- Develop messaging that conveys the distinct nature of the program – what’s the value of a Queen’s graduate degree from your program? Convey this information on the website, in communications with applicants, at open-houses, webinars, etc.
- Use existing networks to recruit (e.g. colleagues at other universities, alumni, Queen’s undergraduate programs, current graduate students).
- Engage potential applicants from the time they express interest in your program (host webinars, open-houses, social media campaigns (see below for social media student ambassadors)).
- Share success stories (graduate alumni, current students, faculty) via your website, the SGS website, Queen’s media (Gazette) and social media.
- Identify which social media channel is most appropriate for your target audience and plan regular postings or paid advertisements. Use social media to share interesting news/photos and direct people to your website.
• A personalized strategy for follow-up with applicants works extremely well – it builds the relationship. Have a system in place that ensures quick responses (24 hours), messaging and updates.
• Review your recruitment strategy regularly against benchmarks to determine what works and is most effective.

The Program Website (ensure all content is up to date)
• Applicants want to know why they should become a graduate student at Queen’s, what would it be like (current student testimonials, video), and how they can apply.
• Clearly outline all processes for application and admission, timelines, and important program contacts.
• Provide information about distinctive opportunities for students (e.g. research projects, course offerings, internships/experiential learning, volunteerism, conferences, ...).
• Include information about student life (e.g. graduate student social groups or clubs).
• Profile current students to offer insight about the graduate student experience and being part of the program (narratives, video clips).
• Profile recent graduate alumni to showcase potential career paths.
• Profile faculty members and their research activities (keep the prospective student audience in mind).
• Ensure that information about financial support available is up-to-date and comprehensive.
• Note many resources available to graduate students – convey the vibrancy of the grad community and networking with alum (e.g. SGS Habitat, SGS Ask an Alum Portal, QUIC’s Living in Kingston guide, Athletics and Recreation, Queen’s research pages, etc.). See also the SGS Guide to Central Resources and Services for Students and their Supervisors.
• Link to the Grad Maps (Queen’s Career Services), which are both a recruitment brochure and a guide to help students plan their degrees.
• Supplement the program website with social media. Choose one or two channels (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) and post regularly (at least once a week for Facebook, several times a week for Twitter) about current initiatives, student and faculty activities, student life, etc. Include photos or other visuals in postings.

Webinars
• Host one or two webinars during the recruitment cycle: in the fall to attract potential applicants, in the winter to reach out to those who have applied and/or received an offer.
• Campus visits and open houses can be an effective recruitment tool, but can be costly. Webinars can be an alternative; ensure you have a dynamic panel of presenters (faculty, students).
• Create a personalized departmental follow up with webinar attendees. Ask if they require additional information and/or assistance with the application process.
• Get current students involved: Include them as speakers at webinars. Consider having current graduate students as social media ambassadors to answer applicants’ questions (as webinar follow-up).
• Post the webinar recording on the program website and promote it through social media channels.