Accessibility and Graduate Education: Understanding the Character of Graduate Students with Disabilities
An Overview of the Work of the National Graduate Experience Taskforce

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• Taskforce and Graduate Project website:
Statement of Need

• There is a significant need to better understand the overall experiences of disabled students in graduate studies

• Currently, there is a critical lack of information in this area
  – Need to understand the “student experience tapestry”
  – Need to catalogue institutional leading practices
Project Goals

• To examine the experiences of, and barriers faced by, graduate students with disabilities across Canada

• To develop a discussion paper outlining the current system issues for graduate students with disabilities

• To produce information and develop strategies to facilitate the success of students with disabilities in graduate programs

• To develop recommendations for the continued improvement of graduate experience for students with disabilities, that can be translated into policy at an institutional, provincial, or national level

• Long term: To develop “tool-based” approaches for students, faculty and institutions to use in addressing issues faced by graduate students with disabilities
Current Landscape

• Established, new and evolving legislative frameworks
  – *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*
  – *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*
  – *Provincial Human Rights Codes*
  – *AODA* and associated standards (in particular, Customer Service; Information and Communication; Employment)
  – *AMA (2014)*
  – Accessibility legislation in Nova Scotia (pending)

• Increasing numbers of students with disabilities entering graduate education

• Evolving needs
  – Mental health
  – Developmental disabilities

• Institution-specific policy and best practice frameworks

• No available data on issues, barriers and experiences
  – Extant studies limited in scope (small numbers; heuristic methods; local/regional)
Available Demographic Data

• ~65 universities with graduate programs (CAGS membership)

• 1,030 graduate students with disabilities receiving federal financial aid (CSLP data, current through 2012-2013)
  – ~5% of the overall graduate population receiving federal financial aid

• Lack of accurate reporting on numbers of graduate students with disabilities registered with disability services providers nationwide
  – Ontario has the best tracking data nationally
  – Demographic not captured in reporting to provincial ministries
Research Methodology

KEY FINDINGS

NATIONAL GRADUATE EXPERIENCE SURVEY

REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC AND GREY LITERATURE

SERVICE PROVIDER, PROFESSIONAL, FACULTY PERSPECTIVES (SURVEYS, FOCUS GROUPS)

DATA MINING (OTHER SURVEYS, POLICIES/PRACTICES)
Project Outputs

- Taskforce Deliberations
- Research Approaches
- Discussion Papers
- Data Synthesis
- Final Report
- Recommendation Framework
- Resources
Discussion Papers

- Essential Requirements (Published online on CAGS website)
- Disclosure in Graduate Education (in press, CACUSS Communique)
  - Student tipsheet (published, CACEE Career Options)
- Student Financial Aid Landscape
- Disability and the Student-Supervisor Relationship
- Academic Employment and Accommodation
- Mental Health in Graduate Education
- Universal Design Principles in Graduate Education
Case Study: Funding and Accommodation

In Development
Access to Financial Aid

- TA/GA/RA: 15% (THESIS), 48% (NO THESIS)
- Savings: 7% (THESIS), 49% (NO THESIS)
- Work: 18% (THESIS), 42% (NO THESIS)
- Government loan: 23% (THESIS), 43% (NO THESIS)
- Family: 3% (THESIS), 28% (NO THESIS)
- Grad stipend: 3% (THESIS), 25% (NO THESIS)
- Bank loan: 19% (THESIS), 18% (NO THESIS)
- Other: 7% (THESIS), 14% (NO THESIS)
- Private loan: 3% (THESIS), 6% (NO THESIS)
Access to Tri-Council Scholarships

- THESIS: 19%
- NO THESIS: 8%

External TriCouncil Scholarship

NO THESIS

THESIS

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 45% 50%
Access to External Scholarships

- **THESIS**: 16%
- **NO THESIS**: 10%

External Private or Government Scholarship
Access to Disability Funding

- Barriers in applying for funding: 37% (NO THESIS), 35% (THESIS)
- Disability related funding from institution: 16% (NO THESIS), 14% (THESIS)
- Internal disability related scholarship: 2% (NO THESIS), 4% (THESIS)
Reason for lack of access to financial aid for disability-related accommodations?

- Unavailable in the area where I live
- Unable to secure awards/bursaries
- Unaware of available resources
- Not eligible for bursary programs
- No government program to fund access
- Too costly for personal purchase

NEADS Fall 2012
Financial barriers’ effect on educational pursuits

% of respondents who answered YES

- Master's
- PhD
- Professional

- Part-time/leave
- Not to pursue further studies
- Different institution
- Cheaper program
Breadth of Accommodation Needs

- require accommodations to prepare for publication:
  - Thesis: 19%
  - No Thesis: 9%

- require accommodations to present at conferences:
  - Thesis: 10%
  - No Thesis: 5%

- require accommodations from institution to write thesis:
  - Thesis: 36%
  - No Thesis: 20%

- require accommodations for presentations:
  - Thesis: 18%
  - No Thesis: 9%
Funding Landscape for Graduate Students with Disabilities

• Significant differences in funding profile for doctoral vs. master’s students with disabilities
  – Doctoral students more likely to receive funding through external and internal scholarships, stipends and academic employment
  – Master’s students more likely to receive funding through loan and family/self contributions

• 37% of students with disabilities in graduate school receive government loans and are eligible for disability grants through the CSLP
  – 27% of doctoral students
  – 41% of master’s students

• Institutional student financial aid mechanisms are often reliant on student eligibility for federal/provincial financial aid
Funding Landscape for Graduate Students with Disabilities

• As students progress through their graduate degrees, they will potentially lose eligibility for provincial/federal financial aid programs
  – Concomitant loss of eligibility for institutional assistance
  – Progressive reduction in ability to fund accommodations

• Students on external scholarships are often not eligible for federal/provincial financial aid programs and the linked disability grants
  – Scholarships/fellowships have no provision for associated academic accommodations expenditures
  – Inadvertent penalty for student success?
Intersectionalities

- Graduate Stipend
- Provincial Disability Assistance
- Time in PSE
- External Scholarships
- Disability-Related Leaves
- Financial Aid Landscape
- Graduate vs. Undergrad
- Accommodation Needs
- Research vs. Professional Programs

National Graduate Experience Taskforce

NEADS
National Educational Association of Disabled Students
Association nationale des étudiants handicapés au niveau postsecondaire
Case Study: Time to Completion

In Development
Time to Completion Statistics

• Students were asked:
  – What is the EXPECTED time to completion based on information provided by the Department/School?
  – What was their program start date?
  – What was their (projected) program end date?

• Data from NEADS’ National Graduate Student Experience Survey
Time To Completion – Absolute # Extra Months

- Master’s
  - 1 yr: ~8
  - 2 yr: ~4
  - 3 yr: ~2

- Doctoral
  - 4 yr: ~8
  - 5 yr: ~8
  - 6 yr: ~1
Time To Completion – Relative to Expected Program Completion

- 1yr: Master’s (1.6)
- 2yr: Master’s (1.5)
- 3yr: Master’s (1.2)
- 4yr: Master’s (1.1)
- 5yr: Doctoral (1.1)
- 6yr: Doctoral (1.0)
Synthesis

In Development
“Gaps” in Graduate Experience for Students with Disabilities

• Relative time to completion is highest for professional-stream Master’s students and lowest for PhD students.

• Although students with disabilities report overall good working relationships with their supervisors, room for improvement around essential requirements and accommodation management remain.

• Professional-stream students report better relationships with department and faculty, which are more respectful of disability and accommodation, than those of research stream students - BUT are more likely to attribute a bad relationship to disability-related issues.
• Professional-stream students fund their graduate studies differently than research-stream students, but this is a reflection of the structural differences between those types of programs.

• Research accommodations identified as a gap by students with disabilities in research-stream programs – DSOs are less likely to be reported to be helpful with research accommodations than course accommodations, and less likely to be helpful compared to professional-stream students.
  – DSOs and faculty are less likely to collaborate on accommodations for students in research-stream programs.
  – Accommodations are more likely to come from different sources than the DSO for students in research-stream programs.

• Graduate students with disabilities are likely to modify or develop their own accommodation.
  – Students in research-stream programs report accommodation needs across the breadth of their program requirements.
Four Domains of the Student-Supervisor Relationship

Graduate Student with Disability

- Student Discloses Accommodation Need
  - Positive Supervisor Engagement
  - Lack of Clarity Around Expectations
- Student Does Not Disclose Accommodation Need
  - Student Self-Accommodation Successful
  - Acute/Crisis Situation Evolves
  - No Supervisor Engagement
  - Negative Supervisor Engagement

National Graduate Experience Taskforce
Four Domains of the Student-DSO Relationship

GRADUATE STUDENT WITH DISABILITY

STUDENT DISCLOSES ACCOMMODATION NEED

RESEARCH AND COURSEWORK ACCOMMODATIONS

STUDENT TRIES TO SELF-ACCOMMODATE IN RESEARCH SETTING

STUDENT DOES NOT DISCLOSE ACCOMMODATION NEED

COURSEWORK ACCOMMODATIONS ONLY

STUDENT SELF-ACCOMMODATION SUCCESSFUL

ACUTE/CRISIS SITUATION EVOLVES
Position Statement: Accessibility of Graduate Education

In Development
Reactive vs. Proactive Approaches

• Reactive = individualized accommodation
  – Issues must be identified prior to evolving a solution
  – Delay between identification and implementation

• Proactive = Universal design approach
  – Potential systemic issues are identified in the context of an accessible and inclusive graduate environment
  – Actions taken to reduce or remove barriers at the environmental level
  – Students with disabilities may not identify with issues in this context due to removal of barriers
Guiding Principles for Accessible Graduate Education Environment

• Flexible and dynamic environment

• Continually evolves to meet the changing needs of students and their programs

• Fosters positive attitudes and relationships among students, faculty and staff

• Does not contravene the academic or professional rigor of a graduate program, discipline or university

• Encompasses research, teaching and fieldwork, as well as campus-based instruction
The accessible graduate environment...

• ...Doesn’t yet exist!
  – “Making it up as we go along”

• Opportunity for faculty to develop their own solutions and adapt them to their particular student’s needs

• Need to be flexible, solution oriented and creative in designing an appropriate graduate thesis project and environment
Recommendation Framework

- Higher education policy makers
- Graduate deans
- Provincial/federal agencies

- Disability service providers, graduate administrators, and other relevant practitioners

- NEADS, students, graduate administrators, graduate faculty
Effort vs. Impact

- LOW effort
  - LOW impact
- HIGH effort
  - HIGH impact
- LOW effort
  - LOW impact
- HIGH effort
  - LOW impact
Recommendation Principles

• Recommendations must be SMART
  – Especially actionable

• Recommendations must be smart
  – Chosen intelligently, for high impact

• Recommendations must be implementable
  – Resources and supports in place

• Recommendations must be directed
  – Aimed at the right target audience
Taskforce Recommendations

Building knowledge

Incorporating reasonable accommodations

Leveling the playing field
Recommendation Themes

• Evolved from data/findings to date and from Taskforce discussions:
  – Demographics and Data Collection
  – Funding Models
  – Accommodation Models
  – Standards
  – Exceptionality
  – Collaboration
  – Professional Development
  – Student Preparedness
List of Recommendations

• Data Gathering
  – Demographics, data collection, data management, data sharing

• Funding and Financial Aid
  – Financial aid landscape, grants and fellowships, accessibility of application processes and information

• Student-Supervisor Relationship & Essential Requirements

• Disclosure and Accommodation
  – Disclosure, accommodation framework, part-time status, leaves and remote residency, alternative formats

• Breadth of the Graduate Experience
  – Online learning, academic employment, admissions, career transitions

• Mental health

• Universal design

• Sustainability & future directions
The Need for Collaboration

GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

DISABILITY SERVICE PROVIDERS

GRADUATE SUPERVISORS

GRADUATE SSDs, DEANS, ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS
Overall Conclusions

• Issues faced by graduate students with disabilities in Canadian postsecondary education are complex and multi-faceted
  – Disability-specific considerations (disclosure, accommodation)
  – Systems issues influenced by disability (student-supervisor relationships, employment)

• Perceptual disconnects can exist among students, faculty and service providers as to the “real” issues

• Student expectation vs. reality – importance of the systemic differences between undergraduate and graduate education

• Community ownership of the project outcomes is required in order to move toward a universally accessible graduate environment
Axioms

• Graduate education is not “one size fits all”

• Graduate programs are dynamic and evolve in the lifetime of a student’s path to degree

• Disability issues in graduate education require collaboration – information/accommodation compartmentalization is inefficient

• Graduate education requires the participation of the student
Equal Opportunity vs. Equal Outcome

Equality = SAMENESS
Equality is about SAMENESS, it promotes fairness and justice by giving everyone the same thing.

Equity = FAIRNESS
EQUITY is about FAIRNESS, it’s about making sure people get access to the same opportunities.

BUT it can only work IF everyone starts from the SAME place, in this example equality only works if everyone is the same height.

Sometimes our differences and/or history, can create barriers to participation, so we must FIRST ensure EQUITY before we can enjoy equality.