

May 2014

Report to GSEC by the Time to Completion Task Force

MEMBERSHIP

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In light of already mentioned arguments about family and debt, the fact that one of the best indicators of success in the academic job market is timely completion of the PhD, and the need to treat the PhD as professional training, we recommend that doctoral programs be four and no more than five years.

(Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas, McGill University 2013, 19-20)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MANDATE

The Time-to-Completion Task Force (TF) was established by the Graduate Studies Executive Council (GSEC) in May, 2013 following the revision of two policies related to timely degree completions: *Time Limits for Completion of Programs* and *Extension of Time Limits*. The TF was charged with advising GSEC on issues that influence graduate student degree completion rates. The TF's broader goal was "to identify and investigate barriers and to develop and mobilize mutually beneficial solutions to support and enhance graduate student academic, professional and personal successes at Queen's."

PARAMETERS

TF members were selected by the co-chairs to ensure a good balance between students and faculty as well as a broad disciplinary representation. In addition, the TF had members with expertise in student mental health, equity and the experience of international students. The TF met eight times between December 2013 and April 2014, seeking practical ways to facilitate progress toward timely degree completions that are: cognizant of disciplinary differences, consistent with academic quality, cognizant of the many factors that affect graduate student completion times, in compliance with Queen's practices of educational equity and the Ontario Human Rights Act, and based on wide consultation with graduate students, graduate supervisors, graduate coordinators, graduate program assistants, and other groups on campus that work with graduate students.

The TF recognized that teaching assistant and teaching fellow duties are covered under the collective agreement. Departments should be cognizant of the hours required for teaching by graduate students, which may affect degree progress during terms in which TA/TF duties are assigned. The TF realized that certain project-specific issues, such as equipment malfunctions, may cause barriers to timely completion for students; however, this report does not address these extenuating circumstances. The TF also recognized that personal and family concerns are important for timely completion and acknowledge the work of Queen's Health, Counseling and Disability Services, including Embedded Counsellors and the Cross-Cultural Counsellor. The Society for Graduate and Professional Student (SGPS) Student Advisors also provides valuable support to graduate students and recommendations to SGS as they work to complete their degrees. The TF notes that the SGPS delivers emergency funds to graduate and professional students on campus and that the Registrar's Office and the School of Graduate Studies also provide emergency funds on a case-by-case basis to students.

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Members of the TF reviewed and discussed the following documents:

- Queen's and U15 comparator data on completion times for Master's and Ph.D. students
- 2012 Time-to-Completion Ph.D. Student Survey conducted by the SGS
- The SGPS T2C Report
- SGS Graduate Supervision Handbook
- Materials used by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and the SGS *Learning the Ropes* and *Focus on Graduate Supervision* training sessions for supervisors
- Materials used by SGS for annual training of graduate coordinators on their roles and responsibilities
- Materials used by SGS at orientation sessions for graduate students
- Annual progress report forms posted on the SGS website
- Documents outlining *Expanding Horizons* workshops provided by the SGS and its partners
- SGS websites and websites from comparator universities
- Manuals for the Graduate Councils and Graduate Committees
- Departmental handbooks for selected departments
- *PhD Degree Completion in Canadian Universities* by Frank J. Elgar (Graduate Students Association of Canada 2003)
- *PhD Completion and Attrition: Policies and Practices to Promote Student Success* by Sowell, Robert S., Bell, Nathan E., and Shelia Nataraj Kirby (the Council of Graduate Studies 2010)
- *White Paper on the Future of the PhD in the Humanities* by Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas, McGill University (2013)
- *The Completion of Graduate Studies in Canadian Universities: Report and Recommendations* by the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (2003)

OTHER ACTIVITIES

The questionnaire in Appendix 1 was circulated to 15 Graduate Coordinators (or Graduate Committee Chairs) from selected programs with large graduate student enrolments. Fifteen replies were received. In addition, members of the TF met with the following groups to seek information and advice:

- Graduate Student Life Advisory Group
- SGS Information Exchange meetings with Graduate Assistants
- SGPS Council and Academic Affairs Standing Committee (AASC)
- General Research Ethics Board (GREB) and Health Sciences Research Ethics Board (HSREB)
- Senate Educational Equity Committee (SEEC)
- Health Counselling and Disability Services

- SGPS Advisors
- Ban Righ Centre

WHAT WE LEARNED

1. Survey results indicate that graduate students are motivated to complete their degrees in a timely fashion; however, many students experience a variety of barriers that inhibit timely completion, including financial challenges, unsatisfactory supervisory relationships and personal life events.
2. Individual departments and schools have recently instituted the following changes that are aimed at supporting graduate students in timely degree completion. These changes include:
 - Instituting fixed dates for comprehensive examinations, moving proposal defense dates ahead so that they occur earlier in Ph.D. programs, and revising comprehensive examinations so that they better align with the thesis proposal stage;
 - Reducing the number of courses required to complete Ph.D. and Master's programs, and developing graduate courses where students develop their thesis proposals;
 - Reducing workload in graduate courses with exceptionally high demands;
 - Creating a symposium where students present their research proposals because preparation for the symposium leads to enhanced interaction between students and their supervisors;
 - Instituting strict dates for completing projects and other deliverables in graduate courses;
 - Revising departmental guidelines about the length of thesis documents so that students will prepare shorter theses;
 - Preparing new or improved on-line handbooks to provide information to graduate students about expectations, typical timelines and available resources. Particularly good handbooks have been prepared by Kinesiology, Computing, Economics, English, and Mining;
 - Instituting professional development workshops aimed at improving time management skills and providing training for new teaching fellows aimed at reducing the time required to teach a new course.
3. On average, women and international students tend to complete their degrees slightly faster than men and domestic students in comparable programs.
4. Financial hardship is one of the most important factors affecting graduate student quality of life, which has a direct impact on timely completion. The minimum funding level is \$18000 per year for PhD students. Tuition and fees are \$14,391 for international PhD students and \$7,483 for domestic PhD students. The leaves very little money to cover the cost of living for students who do not have additional resources.

http://www.queensu.ca/registrar/currentstudents/fees/Tuition_2014_2015_GRAD_Intl.pdf

http://www.queensu.ca/registrar/currentstudents/fees/Tuition_2014_2015_GRAD_Domestic.pdf

5. Graduate coordinators and counselors from HCDS and the SGPS Student Advisor Program indicate that some categories of graduate students face additional challenges in completing their degrees in a timely fashion. These students include:
 - Students with families;
 - International students, especially those with English as a second language;
 - Student who require field work to complete their degrees;
 - Students whose funding packages have come to an end;
 - Full-time students who work as teaching fellows or part-time students who work at full-time jobs;
 - Students with health considerations;
 - Student with disabilities;
 - Students with unsupportive or absentee supervisors;
 - Students with supervisors who do not provide timely feedback.
6. The graduate student/supervisor relationship has an important influence on timely completion. Breakdown and/or ineffectiveness in the student/supervisor relationship is extremely difficult for the student when it occurs and can seriously affect student wellbeing and completion times. Long turn-around times when receiving feedback from supervisors is an important contributor to long completion times.
7. Emergency funding and bursaries are available from the SGPS and the Registrar's Office for graduate students in financial need. The SGS also offers funds in extenuating circumstances. Many requests are made to these programs; however, these programs only provide limited funds.
8. Graduate coordinators and graduate assistants provide important advice and support to graduate students as they work to complete their degrees. Eleven out of the fifteen departments surveyed provide teaching relief to their graduate coordinators so that they can develop new initiatives and provide better assistance to students and supervisors and effective tracking of student progress. Graduate coordinators believe that reduced teaching loads help them to have more time and energy to perform their roles effectively.
9. Graduate coordinators and graduate assistants believe that annual reports are a good idea in theory. However, in many departments more attention needs to be paid to compliance and follow-up to ensure that benefits to students are obtained. Supervisors should actually discuss the annual reports with their students. Better follow-up is also required to make sure that comprehensive/proposal exams are held at specified times. There is a difference

between setting rules and ensuring that rules are followed. When responsibility for following rules about annual reports, scheduling of supervisory committee meetings and scheduling of comprehensive examinations is left to individual supervisors or students, significant delays can occur. Many departments require better mechanisms for ensuring that their existing rules aimed at supporting timely completion are followed. Programs that have more frequent supervisory committee meetings and more scheduling, tracking and follow-up by Graduate assistants and graduate coordinators tend to have shorter completion times.

10. Departments/programs where PhD students routinely work as teaching fellows tend to have long completion times compared to departments where students teach only rarely.
11. In some departments, it is common for supervisors to provide RA support to PhD students who require longer than four years to complete their degrees. These programs tend to have shorter completion times because “timely completion is related to maintaining funding – not being forced to look for other sources of income.”
12. Departments that provide formal mentoring to new faculty members, including mentorship with regard to graduate supervision, tend to have shorter completion times.
13. The SGS is working with Career Services to organize the first ever Career Week for graduate students in October 2014 with a focus on encouraging students as they complete their degrees and transition from graduate school to employment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are made in five categories below. Recommendations that the TF considered most important for supporting timely completion are identified in bold.

1. SUPERVISION

- Department Heads should discuss completion times during annual reviews with faculty, in an effort to identify and resolve problems;
- **Graduate Coordinators should host, at a minimum, one annual thesis completion meeting with all thesis-based Master’ s candidates in December or January of year two to advise students on timelines and expectations for completing their degrees. A similar completion meeting should be held annually with PhD students in years three and beyond;**
- **The SGS should institute a new award for excellent graduate coordinators (one/year).** Faculty or departmental-level awards for graduate supervision or teaching of graduate courses should also be encouraged;

- The SGS and the Centre for Teaching and Learning should increase their efforts to advertise training sessions for graduate supervisors.

2. *PROGRAM STRUCTURE*

- Departments with automatic fifth year extensions should consider mechanisms for funding students in year five;
- **Departments should have an accessible and comprehensive handbook available on the departmental website that describes as a minimum: timelines, degree requirements, supervisory committees, annual reports, assessment milestones, expectations for publications, thesis proposal/comprehensive exams, and thesis defense. The handbook should provide links to the SGS Resources webpage, including the Guidelines for Effective Graduate Supervision, Handbook for International Graduate Students, regulations and policies, and a link to the SGPS Student Advisor Program, and should be updated annually;**
- **The SGS should develop a checklist for departmental handbooks and should provide an annual QGA bonus for departments with satisfactory and up-to-date handbooks;**
- The SGS should encourage more departments to promote qualified students directly from the Master's to the PhD;
- The SGS should encourage Graduate Councils to share best practices among departments concerning supervisory committees and how they support students in completing their degrees;
- **The SGS should encourage more departments to develop new graduate courses or restructure existing courses wherein students prepare draft thesis proposals as part of the requirements.**

3. *FUNDING*

- **The SGS should advocate to governing bodies on campus for a tuition fee reduction for students who have received an extension because too many students struggle for a long period time to complete their degrees after their funding has run out;**
- **The SGS should review the University minimum funding level of \$18,000 per PhD student;**
- The SGS should seek assistance from Advancement for graduate student bursary support for international graduate students and students with families;
- The SGS should advocate for additional ITA funds;
- The SGS and Advancement should increase efforts to obtain more emergency funding for graduate students;
- The SGS should continue to provide bridge or emergency funding for students switching supervisors;
- The SGS should encourage departments to provide a greater portion of the QGA funding during summer months to spread funding packages for graduate students more evenly during the year;

4. ADMINISTRATIVE

- The SGS should discuss progress toward reducing completion and related initiatives at annual meetings with Department Heads and Graduate Coordinators;
- **The SGS should pilot the use of the Graduate Student Progress Module (one of the graduate professional skills online modules developed by the Ontario Consortium of Research Intensive Universities) in support of improving the annual progress report processes and methods for tracking graduate student progress towards degree completion. The SGS should investigate best practices for use of PhD supervisory committees in support of student progress. This new tool may make departmental scheduling and follow-up on comprehensive exams and defences easier;**
- PhD advisory committees should be required to meet annually with students and must meet with those who are seeking an extension in year four or beyond;
- The SGS should encourage Graduate Councils to include a regular agenda item called “recent initiatives in supporting graduate students” so that best practices will spread; these best practices could include graduate research days and professional development initiatives, mentoring of new faculty members and among graduate students;
- **The SGS should offer an additional bootcamp in December or June;**
- The SGS should identify one or more pleasant rooms where multiple students can work quietly on their theses year-round;
- The SGS should develop strategies to assist students in identifying and successfully applying for funding sources outside of Tri-Council and OGS scholarships;
- The SGS should post frequently asked questions on their website about “good standing,” extensions procedures and what to do if a supervisor is not supportive of granting an extension, going on and returning from inactive status, and seeking help from Graduate Coordinators, SGPS Advisors, and the HCDS Embedded Counsellors. The SGS should make available a Word version of the annual progress template so that departments can easily customize it. The SGS should also add additional resources to the tab on the SGS website for faculty/staff, including information about accommodating students with disabilities;
- The SGS should review web materials under the resources for Degree Completion tab;
- The description of the Graduate Coordinator role on the SGS website should point to the Graduate Supervision Handbook.
- **The SGS should work with the Graduate Student Life Advisory Group to update available cost of living information for diverse categories of graduate students;**
- In addition to the existing exit surveys for students who complete their degrees, the SGS should survey student who withdraw;

- The SGS should work with the SGPS to organize more social and wellness activities for graduate students, particular attention should be paid to encouraging international students and families to take part;
- Departments and graduate students should consider where students are in their program when assigning and accepting TA/TF duties.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

SGPS Time-to-Completion Report

<http://www.sgps.ca/downloads/t2c-report.pdf>

SGS Time-to-Completion Summary

http://queensu.ca/sgs/sites/webpublish.queensu.ca.sgswww/files/files/Faculty-GradForums/sdo2TTC-Presentation-Spring-Forum-2013_05_06.pdf

APPENDIX

Questions for Graduate Coordinators in Selected Departments

1. As Graduate Coordinator (or Associate Dean in a school), do you receive any relief from teaching or do you teach a full load? Is the Graduate Assistant in your department or school devoted almost entirely to supporting graduate programs and graduate students or does he or she have significant other responsibilities?
2. Does your program have a handbook for graduate students that provides them with information about the various rules and expectations that are pertinent to completing their degrees? If so, is it posted on your departmental website so that students and supervisors can easily access this information? An example handbook that contains a lot of information is the Doctoral Student Handbook from Kinesiology and Health Studies, which is posted at <http://www.queensu.ca/skhs/graduate/current-students/doctoral-student-handbook>. They also have a Master's Student Handbook.
3. Do many students in your graduate programs require ethics approvals to perform their research? If so, which ethics approval process at Queen's do they usually follow? Also, does your department have any ethics pre-approval step? Do you think that delays in obtaining ethics approvals contribute to delays in thesis completion for many of your students?
4. Do you think that the Annual Report that is now required for all Ph.D. students is helping students in your program toward timely completion? Does the supervisor or the supervisory committee meet with each student to discuss the reports? Does anyone follow up if the student doesn't bother to complete the Annual Report? Suggestions concerning how to improve the annual report process or form would be welcome.
5. How are the dates for comprehensive exams set in your department or school? Does anyone follow up if a comprehensive exam is not held by a particular time?
6. How do Ph.D. supervisory committees work in your department or school? Do they meet with the students at regular scheduled intervals? Does anyone follow up to schedule meetings if the supervisor or student fails to do so?

7. Do graduate students in your department often take on responsibility for teaching a course (e.g., as a teaching fellow)?
8. Tell us about the funding policies for graduate students (especially Ph.D. students) in your department or school. How is this information communicated to students? Is it common to provide funding for Ph.D. students who are in year 5 of the program? If so, where does this money come from?
9. In your role as graduate coordinator, have you been called on in the past year to help address an issue involving a problematic relationship between a graduate student and his or her supervisor? What was your role in helping to address this problem? Does your department provide mentoring or training aimed at improving graduate student supervision?
10. Has your department instituted any initiatives within the past two years that might reduce average completion times (e.g., changing course requirements, changing the timing or expectations for the comprehensive exams)? If so, please tell us about what has changed.
11. Approximately what fraction of the current Ph.D. students in your department were promoted directly from the Master's? Is it common for students to be promoted, or do nearly all of your Ph.D. students complete a Master's degree before starting the Ph.D?
12. Is there any particular part of the grad student population that seems to experience more difficulties in achieving timely completion?
13. Do you have any suggestions for changes that could help more graduate students complete their degrees in a timely fashion?