

# Report

## External Review of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

### University of Regina

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#### Introduction

Over the past two decades, the role of Faculties/Schools of Graduate Studies have changed significantly at Canadian universities, shifting from a focus on admissions, strict enforcement of rules, and quality assurance toward a focus on student success and student experience, improving the quality of graduate education, providing professional development opportunities for graduate students, and managing conflict between students and supervisors. At the same time, student admissions and registration have shifted from labour-intensive paper-based processes toward on-line processes integrated into institutional student information systems. Overall enrolments in graduate programs have grown, increasing workloads. These relatively rapid shifts in mandate, ways of working and workload have posed challenges for the units responsible for graduate education at many Canadian universities, and the University of Regina is no exception.

This report is based on a two-day site visit to the University of Regina (February 12 & 13, 2018) as well as written comments solicited by the Provost from the campus community after the site visit.

During our visit, and from the self-study report, we learned that the number of graduate students enrolled at the University of Regina has grown substantially (doubling over a 20-year period), and that the number of applications received has almost tripled over the same period. The range of graduate programs offered has also expanded in recent years. We understand that the FGSR has struggled to manage the expanded workload, update its processes and adapt to the changing role and mandate of a unit responsible for graduate education in a rapidly changing environment. This report is intended to provide some contextual information to assist the institution in appropriately structuring the unit, and specific suggestions with respect to ways to improve internal processes and help the unit transition to help the University of Regina fulfil its aspirations in graduate education.

Under the leadership of the Interim Dean, FGSR has over the past 18 months made significant strides toward addressing critical issues of concern. Throughout our visit, we heard from graduate programs, students and administrators that they had witnessed a positive change in the administrative effectiveness, service orientation and clarity of communications from FGSR. The staff were described as “incredibly responsive” “receptive” and “dedicated” by various representatives of line Faculties. It is a significant undertaking to change the culture and functioning of a unit, and the Interim Dean should be congratulated for his leadership under difficult circumstances.

The Unit Reviewers were asked to address a fundamental organizational question about whether FGSR should continue as a Faculty, or be transformed into an Office. We were also asked to comment on whether professional programs should admit Masters level students directly into their Faculty, rather than into FGSR. This report will include three sections. The first addresses the place of graduate education within the University's strategic direction. The second addresses organizational issues, and the third provides recommendations relating to operational issues.

## Graduate Education at the University of Regina

During our site visit, and in the written commentary solicited by the Provost, we observed some uncertainty about the ways in which graduate education fit into the University of Regina's strategic direction as an institution. Like many other similarly situated institutions, URegina seeks to enhance its research profile and productivity, and graduate students – particularly those in thesis or research-focused programs - are an integral part of that effort. As demand for professionally-oriented Masters programs increases, the University of Regina has a role to play in meeting the needs of students in southern Saskatchewan, and in developing programs in areas of particular expertise that draw students to the city. The program offerings of the Johnson Shoyama School are examples of this.

The University's strategic plan identifies several goals relating to graduate education: growth in graduate student numbers, increased success in external scholarship competitions, increasing scholarly publications by graduate students, improving time to completion, and indigenization. The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research should play a central role in pursuing these strategic objectives.

Recommendations:

- A. FGSR should be encouraged to engage in campus-wide consultations in order to develop an institutional plan for graduate education that articulates clear objectives and strategies for achieving those objectives.

## Organizational Issues

The majority of comprehensive and research intensive universities in Canada use some variant of one of the two following models. There are many variations within the models, and in some instances there are hybrid models (for instance, some Masters programs in Business Administration sit outside the Faculty of Graduate Studies). In many cases, Faculties of Graduate Studies also have responsibility for providing services to Post-Doctoral Scholars, and several are named 'Faculty of Graduate and Post-Doctoral Studies', or something similar. In addition to the two models, several institutions with smaller graduate enrolments have adopted alternative arrangements. For example, the University of Northern British Columbia has recently designated its Vice President Research to be responsible for graduate education, leading an Office of Graduate Studies.

### ***Model 1: Graduate Studies Office***

Some Ontario and some Quebec universities have moved to a model of a central Graduate Studies Office, normally led by a Vice Provost. In this model, the students "belong" to the Faculty in which they are studying, and a central office led by a Vice Provost provides some oversight and services to graduate students, and manages external scholarship competitions (notably tri-council). Registrarial services for graduate students under this model are generally provided by the University Registrar.

**Model 2: Graduate Studies Faculty**

The more common model is a Faculty of Graduate Studies led by a Dean (or Vice Provost and Dean). In this model, most or all Masters and Doctoral level students at the institution are registered in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, while graduate programs are housed in the line Faculties.

|   | Model 1: Office   | Model 2: Faculty  |
|---|---|---|
| Academic Leader   | Vice Provost (Graduate Education)   | Dean, or<br>Dean and Vice Provost (Graduate Education)  |
| Student Admissions  | Graduate program, supported by Line Faculty or Registrar  | Faculty of Graduate Studies (often delegated authority to grad programs)  |
| Student Registration  | Registered in Line Faculty  | Registered in Faculty of Graduate Studies   |
| Governance  | Varies; often committee of Associate Deans responsible for Graduate Studies in line Faculties as advisory group | Faculty Council; authority to approve or recommend curriculum and regulations to Senate   |
| Thesis Defenses (regulations, approval of external examiner, resolution of outcome) | Line Faculty  | Faculty of Graduate Studies   |
| Tri-Council and other External Scholarship Competitions                             | Office of Graduate Studies  | Faculty of Graduate Studies   |
| Internal graduate funding   | Line Faculty  | Faculty of Graduate Studies   |
| Institutions  | Guelph; Ottawa; Waterloo; Western, University of Quebec network   | Led by Dean: Victoria, Lethbridge, Saskatchewan, Winnipeg, Brock, Carleton, Lakehead, Nipissing, OCAD, UOIT, WLU, Windsor, Dalhousie, Memorial, Concordia <sup>1</sup> , McGill, Laval<br>Led by Vice Provost & Dean: UBC, SFU, Calgary, Alberta, Manitoba, MacMaster, Queens, Toronto, Trent, York, Montreal |

The first model holds an undeniable appeal, as it appears to offer administrative efficiencies and satisfies the desire of academic leaders to “own” the graduate students being taught in their graduate programs. It does, however, require that the University Registrar’s office be equipped to manage the

<sup>1</sup> Concordia has a School of Graduate Studies which functions effectively as a Faculty of Graduate Studies in most regards.

unique requirements of graduate admissions and registration. These include an appropriate admissions portal and systems capacity to manage admission files within the student information system. It also requires that the line faculties have the administrative capacity to manage graduate admissions decisions (evaluation of transcripts, letters of offer) as well as management of student academic issues including approval of supervisory appointments, approval of external examiners, scheduling of thesis examinations, resolution of failed/inconclusive thesis examinations, investigation and discipline for academic misconduct, student appeals, and resolution of student-supervisor conflict.

Institutions that have opted to move from a Faculty to an Office tend to be medium to larger institutions with graduate populations well over 5000. This reflects the non-trivial administrative requirements for self-governance of graduate programs under such a model.

The typical reporting relationship for the Dean of Graduate Studies is to the Provost, although there are notable instances in which the reporting relationship is to the Vice President Research. In practical terms, the Dean of Graduate Studies should maintain a presence with the Provost (reflecting the linkages between graduate studies and the Registrar, teaching and learning, and curriculum development) and the VPR (reflecting the role of graduate students in the research enterprise).

As we met with representatives of line Faculties during our site visit, we asked the question of whether they felt their Faculty was prepared to take on greater responsibility regarding graduate admissions and student management. The answers varied considerably, but many expressed some concern about adequate staffing, expertise in interpreting international transcripts, and capacity for student management. None expressed an interest in managing student academic misconduct at the graduate level. In light of the considerable variation in administrative capacity in the line Faculties, we view a transition to a fully decentralized model as highly risky at this time. In light of the still-fragile gains in administrative functioning over the past 18 months, a rapid shift to a fully decentralized model is fraught with risk for the institution.

In addition, an argument can be made for the importance of an office that can enforce standards impartially. Many institutions experience a tension between the desire of Faculties offering revenue-generating professional Masters programs to admit students who do not meet the regular admission standards, and the role of the Faculty/School of Graduate Studies in enforcing these standards. While on the one hand it is important to offer flexibility to ensure that graduate programs are accessible to students who are likely to succeed, on the other hand it is important not to lower program standards by admitting large numbers of academically unprepared students. A productive working relationship between a Faculty/School of Graduate Studies and a Faculty offering a professional program can help to balance these competing concerns.

Recommendation:

- B. Maintain the current organizational model, but decentralize authority within the context of that model. Two specific items, to be discussed below, are critical in this regard. First, FGSR should no longer play any role in approving grades for graduate students. Approval of grades should be done in the Faculty offering the course. Second, FGSR should consider delegating authority for admissions to some or all graduate programs. This can be phased in as a pilot project, starting with units that are appropriately resourced to undertake this role

- C. Regardless of the organizational model adopted, it is imperative that there be clear communication with students, faculty members and other units on campus with respect to the role of FGSR relative to the role of graduate programs and line Faculties.

## Operational Issues

### **Admissions**

Control over the admissions process has been central to the mandate and operational focus of FGSR, rooted originally in a belief that tight control of admissions is an effective means of ensuring the rigor and quality of graduate programs. We heard a great deal of frustration relating to the admissions process, particularly with respect to slow turnaround times between application and decision. There has been significant progress in the past year, as the admissions process has moved to an on-line application, but we heard that there are several outstanding systems issues to resolve to make this fully functional. It is essential that FGSR and the office of the Registrar work cooperatively to maximize efficiencies within the student system, and that adequate resources be devoted both to the one-time improvements to systems, and to maintaining sufficient expertise and capacity within FGSR to support front line staff members using the system. A mid-level 'team lead' position with system expertise would accomplish this objective, and would allow FGSR to work to build capacity in graduate programs eager to take ownership of their graduate admissions processes.

There is a strong appetite among some professionally-oriented graduate programs to assume authority for graduate admissions. All graduate programs compete with other institutions to attract outstanding students, and the competition can be particularly intense for programs like the MBA or MPP. For such programs, applicants have an expectation of quick and attentive service that may be difficult to meet in a highly centralized system.

Recommendation:

- D. Rather than ceding FGSR's role in admissions, the Dean of FGSR undertake a pilot project delegating authority to admit to a limited number of graduate programs. Normally, delegated authority to admit allows graduate programs to make offers of admission on behalf of the Dean of Graduate Studies to any applicant who meets the graduate school's admissions criteria. Applicants who do not meet graduate studies minima for GPA or language proficiency require approval from the graduate school. Typically, the graduate school audits admissions at the program level in order to provide feedback to the academic to whom authority has been delegated, and the staff supporting that individual. Where delegated authority has been implemented, it has reduced turnaround times and duplication of effort.

## **Approval of Grades**

We heard concerns from many Faculties relating to the ongoing practice of having the Dean of FGSR approve course grades for graduate students. This is an irritant that serves no purpose in a contemporary comprehensive university

Recommendation:

- E. Authority for approval of grades in graduate-level courses and for graduate students be given to the Dean of the line Faculty offering the course.

## **Staffing and Internal Organization**

The staff of FGSR are a dedicated group who demonstrate admirable commitment to their work. Considering the changes the unit has experienced and the heavy workload, their morale was good. However, gains in staff morale are tenuous and underlying organizational and staffing issues need attention.

Staff expressed concern about the volume of work required of their office, given limited resources. It is difficult to make specific recommendations about staffing levels without detailed understanding of the potential for system fixes to reduce the volume of work in the office, but it was evident that addition of at least one staff member with specific system expertise would increase operational efficiencies and allow the Faculty Administrator to focus on other elements of her role.

The organizational structure of the office is unusual, with several senior staff members reporting directly to the Dean and many front-line staff reporting directly to the Faculty Administrator. It is more typical to have one senior staff person (the Faculty Administrator) reporting directly to the Dean, and the rest of the staff reporting up to that role, normally organized into teams with managers or team leads reporting directly to the senior staff person. All other staff (except for the dean's assistant) typically report to managers or team leads. Associate Deans and the Dean's administrative assistant would, of course, report directly to the Dean.

Recommendation:

- F. Review the staffing model to:
  - a. ensure adequate resources are devoted to admissions and registration (both in the short and long term) and the staff has sufficient systems expertise
  - b. Align reporting relationships to allow the Dean to focus on academic leadership and enable the Faculty Administrator to deliver on operational accountabilities
- G. Be attentive to staff morale and engagement as changes are made

## **Intra-Institutional Relationships**

The traditional role of the FGSR Dean – as an authority figure who controls entry and exit from graduate education – does not fit easily into the contemporary university. Successful Faculties/Schools of Graduate Studies at Canadian universities are those that have developed positive partnerships with line Faculties, and who are seen as supporting the delivery of quality graduate education and adding value to the graduate student experience. Often, a graduate Dean is most effective using moral suasion rather than exercising authority. During our visit, we saw ample evidence that FGSR is moving in this direction. Several recommendations in this report – notably partial delegation of authority to admit, and ceding authority over grades in graduate courses – are intended to help renegotiate the relationship between FGSR and the line Faculties. Beyond this, it is essential that senior FGSR leadership and staff work to nurture positive and productive relationships with key stakeholders on campus, including URI, the Registrar, and the Deans of line Faculties.

## **Graduate Student Funding**

We heard concerns from many faculty members with respect to the level of funding available for graduate students at the University of Regina. We also heard many positive comments about recent changes to the way that funding is distributed, giving greater flexibility to faculties to distribute their allocated funds to students.

With respect to the level of funding, it is difficult to make appropriate institution to institution comparisons. Unlike several other provinces (Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and Alberta), Saskatchewan does not offer a graduate scholarship program. This places a greater burden on post-secondary institutions to provide funding in order to compete with institutions in some other provinces. The budget for scholarship support for graduate students was comparable to that found at other Canadian institutions. However, the budget for Teaching Assistantships (held by FGSR) was substantially lower than would be typical at comprehensive universities.

For a thesis-based Masters student in a SSHRC-eligible discipline at a Canadian university, a competitive funding package would typically be between ten and twenty thousand dollars per year for two years. (It should be noted, however, that many institutions have moved away from thesis-based Masters programs in these disciplines, and might not fund students in course-based programs). Typically, such a package would be comprised partially or entirely of teaching assistantship funding.

For thesis-based Masters students in NSERC or CIHR eligible disciplines, funding packages would be similar, and would normally include substantial funding from a supervisor's grant, in addition to a teaching assistantship or some other form of top-up. We were surprised to hear faculty members express the view that in these disciplines students' funding should come fully from university sources, and that faculty members without research grants should supervise graduate students. It will be important to acquaint faculty members in these disciplines with the prevailing norms and help them to adjust their expectations accordingly. Similarly, we were surprised to hear that unfunded graduate students are regularly admitted to thesis-based programs in engineering. We suggest that careful

consideration be given to the practice of admitting unfunded students to thesis-based programs, and that the directors of graduate programs assign FGSR funds to students, rather than to supervisors.

### **Special Case PhD Program**

The existence of the special case PhD program was not raised as a concern during our visit. While the special case PhD does allow for development of new programs and flexibility for individuals who want to pursue a PhD, students enrolled in special case PhDs do not benefit from the cohort experience offered in a regular PhD program. As requirements must be developed on a case-by-case basis, these are certainly labour intensive undertakings. Finally, the structure and membership of the PhD Committee – being comprised solely of faculty members in programs with PhDs – raised questions for us. We suggest that it would be more appropriate for this committee to consist of faculty members that are or have supervised special case PhD students.

#### Recommendation

- H. We recommend an internal review of outcomes for and governance of the Special Case PhD program.

### **Student Experience**

We noted that no data from the Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey were included in the self-study document, and understand that the University of Regina did not participate in the 2016 survey, which occurs once every three years ([http://www.cags.ca/cgps\\_home.php](http://www.cags.ca/cgps_home.php)). This survey is a useful tool for identifying issues with the graduate student experience. If resources permit, we suggest participating in the 2019 survey.

### Mandate

As noted at the outset of this report, the mandate of Faculties/Schools of Graduate Studies have changed significantly and rapidly over the past decade. In general terms, the focus has shifted away from a focus on quality control and enforcement of rules toward institutional leadership and service provision for graduate students. Below, we list several areas in which the FGSR could provide added value to the campus community. We recognize that the ability to fulfil such a mandate is resource-dependent, and so we are not making formal recommendations.

1. Leadership in graduate education: Graduate education is evolving relatively rapidly, with national and international conversations relating to the form and structure of the thesis, the rise of course-based Master's programs, and career trajectories of graduate students, among other issue. A critical function of the academic leader is to monitor and participate in these conversations, and ensure that they inform local decisions.

2. **Communications:** An important role for a faculty or school of graduate studies is to ensure dissemination of information to graduate students. The information to be disseminated includes both routine administrative information (upcoming registration and scholarship deadlines, for example) as well as messaging about professional development and other opportunities, as well as carefully crafted messages designed to increase student success. The communications function is accomplished through maintenance of the website, as well as regular communications out to students (such as a weekly electronic newsletter aggregating all relevant information). A social media presence can also help to broaden the reach of the messaging.
3. **Indigenization:** Understanding that the University of Regina is committed to indigenization of the institution, FGSR has a particular role to play in providing culturally appropriate supports for students in graduate programs, ensuring that rules governing thesis examinations are compatible with cultural norms, and leading a conversation about indigenization of the graduate student experience.
4. **Professional Development and Student Support:** We understand that FGSR has recently started to provide some community-building and professional development programming, but we heard that there is demand for more extensive offerings, whether provided or coordinated by FGSR. Information about offerings at other Canadian institutions can be found here: [http://profdevprof.cags.ca/documents/Phase1\\_English.FINAL.pdf](http://profdevprof.cags.ca/documents/Phase1_English.FINAL.pdf)
5. **Student advising:** At many institutions, Faculties/Schools of Graduate Studies play an active role in providing advice for graduate students, particularly in thesis-based programs, and in resolving student-supervisor conflict. Given the complexities of the student-supervisor relationship, it is important that graduate students have access to advice and support from a party outside the Faculty where their supervisor holds an appointment. This role is typically taken on by one or more Associate Deans, sometimes supported by a staff member with expertise in student advising. The availability of such advising is particularly important for graduate students who may be intimidated by the university system; indigenous and international students are more likely to fall into this category.
6. **Supervisory development –** During our visit, we heard that the new process for accrediting supervisors has been welcomed by the university community. To build on this success, there is scope for FGSR to cooperate with the unit on campus that provides development opportunities for faculty members relating to teaching to also provide development around graduate supervision. Programming aimed at graduate supervisors can ensure both that supervisors are familiar with institutional expectations around supervision, and also support them in working productively with students within the supervisory relationship.