



SGS Humanities Working Group

Context for Working Group Recommendations

Summer 2024



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Context for Working Group Recommendations

Introduction

Over the past several years, the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) at the University of Toronto has made a concerted effort to understand graduate student experiences through the administration of student surveys and the collection of qualitative data. Currently, SGS runs two major surveys: the Graduate Student Experience in the Research University (gradSERU) survey, and the Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS), both of which are conducted every three years.

Together, these surveys provide valuable data related to graduate student perspectives on topics such as reasons for selecting U of T, general and program-specific satisfaction, supervision and mentorship, research and teaching experiences, professional development, campus climate, social activities, health and wellness, financial support, and obstacles to completion of their degrees. Data from these surveys can reveal areas where there are opportunities to improve the experiences of students in our graduate programs. The data gleaned from these surveys also helps U of T assess student experience in relation to leading research universities across the globe (i.e., gradSERU) and with peer institutions within Canada (i.e., CGPSS).

In the Fall of 2022, SGS struck the Humanities Working Group – composed of graduate students, chairs/deans or associate deans, faculty, and administrators¹ – to review humanities student experience data, discuss current issues, share best practices, identify areas where there are opportunities to improve, and suggest practical measures graduate leaders, faculty, and students can take to help foster positive change within and across humanities graduate units. The scale of U of T graduate studies, combined with its high level of decentralization, mean that we have a highly diverse ecosystem of program structures, practices, and cultures. While the regular quality assurance processes serve graduate units well by providing in-depth reviews of programs relative to their past performance and their comparators at other institutions, there are fewer opportunities for programs at U of T to learn from one another about novel and interesting interventions a cognate might have developed to address a particular student need. As such, the working group convened for six meetings over the course of the 2022-2023 academic year to engage in dialogue of this nature.

It must be noted that altering the graduate funding structure was not in the purview of this working group. Nonetheless, the serious financial challenges faced by graduate students were discussed repeatedly and at length throughout working group meetings. It is recognized that graduate funding remains a significant issue for all academic divisions at the university and requires urgent attention by all stakeholders (i.e., government, academic leaders, graduate units)

¹ See Appendix A for a list of working group members.

Key Areas of Focus and Associated Challenges

The working group identified three main areas of focus for its recommendations: building a sense of community, furthering professionalization, and fostering timely student progress. While the working group recognizes the tremendous diversity that exists across humanities programs – in program size, nature and extent of interdisciplinary collaboration, research methodologies, and discipline-specific norms, etc. – it was felt that these three areas are particularly in need of focused attention at this juncture.

Building a sense of community

From a broad perspective, the humanities have a predominant culture of independent scholarship, which fosters the development of valuable research and professional competencies, including a nuanced understanding of the existing literature, techniques for data collection and archival work, critical thinking and analysis, single author publishing, and organizational skills. This culture of independence impacts on the structure and expectations of the research and learning environment within each department and is often reflected in supervisory practices and social norms of the program. In general, SGS data suggests that levels of engagement and research collaboration between supervisors and students, frequency of social activities organized within supervisor or research groups, and support for writing (e.g., publications, presentations) are key areas that students feel could be improved across the humanities.² The current approaches to each of these aspects may influence humanities students' perceptions of quality of academic advising, and may contribute to the reported feelings of isolation, loneliness, and anxiety, as well as frustration with graduate supervision practices. Evidently, more opportunities for students to interact and collaborate with their supervisors and research groups across the graduate life cycle may be beneficial for their academic and social well-being.

To address these concerns, the working group felt that U of T has an opportunity to play a leadership role in developing creative strategies to transform prevailing social norms common across humanities disciplines. To disrupt these norms, strategies should focus on empowering more responsive student-supervisor relationships that are tailored to the needs and program stage of each student, generating opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration across the university and beyond, reframing the value of team-based or multi-author publishing, and offering additional events or activities to strengthen the sense of community within research cohorts. It is anticipated that improvements in these areas will enhance mental well-being, build upon the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills acquired in each program, and foster a more fulfilling graduate student experience.

Professionalization

In terms of professional development, humanities students report a higher level of interest in employment in higher education institutions compared to students in other SGS divisions and have traditionally sought tenure track roles in this sector; therefore, a strong emphasis has been placed on professional skills development that aligns with this career trajectory. Efforts to prepare graduate students for roles in academia have proven to be effective, with graduates from humanities programs recording the highest success rates of landing employment in tenure-stream positions across all U of T graduates.

² SGS Dashboards: Student Experience Data

However, the number of opportunities for tenure track roles across the higher education sector are currently in decline, which has created a highly competitive employment market wherein these roles are increasingly difficult to obtain. In fact, recent U of T career outcomes data demonstrates only 53.2% of the humanities graduates working in the higher education sector attained tenure track jobs³, and in many cases, these roles were not attained until several years after graduation. Although the number of available tenure track roles and competitiveness in the market differ across humanities disciplines, the general trend suggests it is more important than ever to increase awareness of the diverse career trajectories possible for humanities graduate students, help students identify and communicate their extensive skillset and knowledge expertise, provide strategic mentorship, and create opportunities to further develop and refine professional competencies relevant to roles within and outside of academia.

To strengthen the professional development portfolio for humanities graduate students, it is critical for central administrative offices (e.g., SGS, Career Centre) and graduate units to enhance collaboration and coordination related to professional development to ensure students are exposed to a comprehensive and cohesive curriculum. In addition to the benefits for students, ensuring a collaborative and coordinated approach may also alleviate some of the burden placed upon individual supervisors for navigating professional development opportunities, facilitating networking, and providing career advice for roles that may be beyond their scope of experience, and instead, allow them to focus on encouraging academic progress, building a sense of community amongst their research mentees, and cultivating an enriching learning experience.

Fostering student progress

It is often observed the humanities have extended time to degree completion rates. While the average amount of time to degree completion is program-specific, the general trend suggests humanities doctoral students often take seven or more years to complete their studies.⁴ The tendency to have extended time to completion rates is influenced by the significant teaching, research, and writing responsibilities embraced by humanities graduate students, which provide valuable training, skill development, and experience relevant to future roles, such as course instruction and administration, seminar facilitation, project management, research techniques, and communication skills. The workload expected of humanities graduate students may be further increased depending on their program requirements (e.g., off-campus or international research, curricular requirements), size of the program (e.g., if there are more undergraduate students, the teaching load may increase), and the student's position within the graduate life cycle (e.g., latter stages might require more time dedicated to teaching/research assistantships). Outside of program expectations, the level and duration of financial support offered may lead students to take on additional paid opportunities across the university (e.g., work study positions, research assistantships) that may impede academic progress. Further, the current employment market for positions in higher education can serve as a deterrent to completion, with students requesting doctoral program extensions to maintain health coverage, prepare job applications, gain more professional experience, and consider next career steps while earning income via teaching or research.

Despite the professional value of these learning and development opportunities, the workload expectations can be arduous at times, and may contribute to mental health challenges and serve as obstacles to degree completion. Therefore, to ensure timely, high-quality academic progress, it is important for each aspect of graduate programming to be paired with explicit learning objectives to assist with the prioritization of program requirements, professional development activities, and extracurricular responsibilities, while ensuring a continued focus on the successful completion of program milestones

³ SGS Dashboards: Career Outcomes Data

⁴ SGS Dashboards: Student Progress Data

across the graduate life cycle (e.g., comprehensive exams, research, dissertation writing). Further, it is important for humanities programs to consider developing creative incentives to lower time to completion and develop strategies to support students through to the next phase of their careers. For instance, it is imperative to explore potential tangible supports for PhD students that may be instituted in the latter stages of the degree that assist students in building and maintaining momentum to effectively reach the final milestones of their degrees (e.g., interdisciplinary writing groups, writing workshops, refining program extension criteria, financial awards). Similarly, academic leaders and central administrative offices must consider developing strategies or incentives to help PhD students in the latter phase of their degrees prepare for and successfully transition into career roles following graduation, including financial supports (e.g., postdoctoral opportunities), assistance with networking, career coaching or mentorship, resume writing and interview practice, among others.

Finally, if it is deemed imperative for scholarly development and completion of curricular requirements that students commit seven or more years for their studies, serious consideration must be given to funding them to completion of their degrees to alleviate some of the financial pressures placed upon them, particularly in the latter years of study.

In sum, there are several areas where graduate leaders across the humanities may focus their attention for future initiatives and activities designed to address some of the challenges reported by students and create more positive, fulfilling graduate student experiences.

The Humanities Working Group: Observations, Recommendations, and Companion Mechanisms

Given the large, decentralized nature of the university, one of the most significant outcomes of the Humanities Working Group was the reinforcement of positive and productive connections between academic leaders across multiple humanities disciplines. While the specific challenges confronting each administrator may be unique to their department, the collaborative nature of the working group was helpful in reviewing current issues, sharing innovative practices and resources, seeking alignment where possible, and discussing approaches to enhance graduate student experiences. Looking forward to implementation of the recommendations, it is suggested that the interdisciplinary network of support established through the working group remains active, expands to include other humanities disciplines, and continues to serve as a platform for sharing progress, collaborating on initiatives, and fostering further momentum for positive change.

Informed by the SGS student experience data and robust discussions, the working group developed recommendations and identified companion mechanisms for implementation in all three of the aforementioned areas. The companion mechanisms outline helpful and targeted strategies to address the recommendations and evolve practices in each of these areas. As the recommendations were drafted, the working group recognized the importance of being attentive to the different phases of the graduate life cycle, as the nature of each phase can magnify or relieve some of the challenges experienced by graduate students.

In addition, it is important to situate the recommendations and companion mechanisms in a post-pandemic context. The pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for graduate research and education, including significant obstacles to students' academic progress (e.g., research interruptions, inability to travel or conduct field work, abandoned research projects), lack of in-person contact for teaching, learning, and research, changing career prospects or pathways, and a substantially increased

need to support the health and well-being of students, faculty, and staff. The implications of these challenges will continue to be felt well into the future.

To respond to the issues generated by the pandemic, the university community learned new ways to leverage technology to support graduate learning, maintain connections, foster interdisciplinary work, innovate research practices, and ensure students could continue to successfully reach graduate program milestones (e.g., pivoting research projects, conducting online Final Oral Exams). These learnings will influence the direction of graduate research and education moving forward and thus, should inform the implementation of these recommendations.

The working group also acknowledges that many graduate units have attempted to facilitate some activities or initiatives post-pandemic to address each of these areas (i.e., building community, professionalization, fostering student progress) in their respective departments with varying degrees of success; the working group recognizes these efforts and encourages graduate leaders, faculty, and students to continue to work together to generate new ideas and refine activities or initiatives to better address the challenges confronted in their graduate units. A certain amount of trial and error should be expected.

Although the number of recommendations may seem daunting, **they should be viewed as a compilation of possible strategies that graduate units or departments may select from to address various aspects of student experience; in this regard, some recommendations will work better for certain units or departments than others. The working group encourages graduate leaders, faculty members, and students to collectively identify the needs of their program/unit, select the recommendations from the list that would best serve these needs, and develop a plan for implementation.**

As part of the process of assessing program needs, graduate units should identify their peer institution comparators, review the academic program and student experience offerings at these institutions, and select recommendations that might enhance competitiveness with those programs. In addition, it is imperative to examine the unique needs and challenges of equity-deserving groups and ensure recommendations are selected and implemented in a way that enhances equity, diversity, and inclusion. Further, the selection of recommendations and implementation plans should be considered a shared responsibility and opportunity for collaboration across and between graduate leaders, individual faculty members, and students in a given graduate unit. It is only through meaningful collaboration that these recommendations and subsequent outcomes will be effective and sustainable.

Finally, in consultation with the wider humanities community, faculty and graduate students alike underscored the need to create measures to encourage accountability, to monitor and share progress, and to evaluate the effectiveness of recommendations implemented within and across graduate units. By engaging in ongoing evaluation, it is possible to ascertain the potential impacts of each activity and initiative on graduate student experiences in the humanities and ensure successful initiatives are recognized, supported, appropriately resourced, and built upon over time.

Appendix A: SGS Humanities Working Group Membership

- Prof. Joshua Barker, Dean, SGS (Chair)
- Prof. Vina Goghari, Vice-Dean, Research and Program Innovation, SGS
- Prof. Kelly Lyons, Acting Vice-Dean, Research and Program Innovation, SGS (*January-June 2023*)
- Prof. Kate Holland, Associate Chair, Graduate, Dept. of Slavic Languages & Literatures
- Prof. Edward Jones-Imhotep, Director, Institute for the History & Philosophy of Science & Technology
- Prof. Alison Keith, Director, Jackman Humanities Institute
- Mary Maschio, Graduate Student, Centre for Medieval Studies
- Evan Moritz, Graduate Student, Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies
- Prof. Naomi Morgenstern, Chair, Dept. of English
- Prof. Jennifer Nagel, Professor, Dept. of Philosophy
- Prof. Juvenal Ndayiragije, Chair, Dept. of Language Studies
- Prof. Jeff Packman, Associate Dean, Graduate Education, Faculty of Music
- Prof. J. Barton Scott, Director, Graduate Studies, Dept. of Religion
- Prof. Alison Smith, Chair, Dept. of History