UNDERSTANDING ACCESSIBILITY IN GRADUATE EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN CANADA

Final Report of the National Graduate Experience Taskforce

Empanelled by the National Educational Association of Disabled Students

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction and Rationale

As the number of students with disabilities entering graduate education in Canada continues to increase, disability service providers, financial aid administrators, student life professionals, students themselves, graduate departments, deans and student services directors, and universities as a whole are having to develop new strategies to facilitate their success. This effort is also driven in part by the need to be responsive to new and evolving provincial legislative landscapes in Canada. There is to date a critical lack of research and information about issues faced by graduate students with disabilities; as such, institutions are drafting policy and practice guidelines based on limited, anecdotal and local experience. No significant research on this population has been undertaken within Canada or the United States, and demographic data sets are lacking. In this environment, a number of myths and misperceptions have arisen, which can move policy and practice in potentially inappropriate directions. Therefore, there is a significant need for a detailed understanding, both quantitative and qualitative, of the experiences of students with disabilities in graduate studies.

Approach

To address this knowledge gap, the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) empanelled the National Taskforce on the Experience of Graduate Students with Disabilities, populated with content and subject matter experts drawn from multiple sectors across the Canadian post-secondary landscape. The Taskforce, after consideration of the issues, chose to undertake a multi-pronged approach, including a comprehensive national online survey of graduate students with disabilities; institutional surveys; focus groups of professionals involved in addressing the issues faced by

graduate students with disabilities; key informant interviews with subject matter experts; data mining of extant relevant surveys; and a detailed national and international literature review.

Objectives

Our overall goals were to: (1) review and discuss the academic experience of graduate students with disabilities through exploration of their experiences in the context of the last 20 years' advancement in technology, attitudes, and legislation; (2) develop a "landscape snapshot" of the current system issues faced by graduate students with disabilities; and (3) develop testable and implementable recommendations around the continued improvement of the graduate experience of students with disabilities.

Outcomes

The outcomes of the project focused on the major myths and perceptions surrounding the academic experience of graduate students with disabilities, identified through our research efforts. These included issues surrounding expected vs. actual times to program completion; the disconnect between student training in academic integrity issues and institutional perceptions around the impact of accommodations on academic integrity; the ability to achieve the "necessary competencies" of graduate programs and disciplines; the nature and cost of academic accommodations and undue hardship; the differences between the accommodation requirements of undergraduate and graduate programs of study; and the importance of faculty education in understanding the complexities of the interface between disability issues and graduate education. Major themes included a renewed appreciation for the complexity of the barriers faced by trainees with disabilities within the research enterprise; the critical need for appropriate resources and frameworks that can be implemented at an institutional level to enhance the participation and success of trainees with disabilities; and the national and international context of disability issues within the research enterprise, as well as the importance of ongoing data gathering and advocacy approaches in driving the inclusion, participation and success of postdoctoral scholars

and other trainees in the research enterprise. Finally, also of note was the observation that, while students with disabilities faced complex challenges to their success within graduate education, many issues were at their root matters of the philosophy of graduate education, as informed by the disability context. The project's findings translate into key messages and resources that institutions and research trainees with disabilities may apply to enhance the inclusion, participation and success of this population within the research enterprise.

The findings from this unique first-in-class, multi-stakeholder research effort into the issues and barriers faced by graduate students with disabilities in Canada were used to evolve a series of policy, practice and professional development recommendations with three broad themes: (1) Increasing our knowledge of students with disabilities in graduate education; (2) Leveling the playing field and providing equal opportunities to graduate students with disabilities; and (3) Increasing the effectiveness of academic and co-curricular accommodations in the graduate environment.

Incorporating Reasonable Accommodations

The first set of recommendations ("Incorporating Reasonable Accommodations") refers directly to the aspects of graduate education that students, their supervisors, departments, accommodation specialists, and others associated with their education must be aware of. Specifically, this section defines recommendations surrounding essential requirements of graduate education, accommodation frameworks, disclosure, alternative formats, academic employment and enrolment status. Overarching each of these is the student-supervisor relationship, which is imperative to ensuring student success.

The student-supervisor relationship can have implications for all facets of the graduate experience. Our findings indicate that, while most graduate students with disabilities have solid and functional – even strong – personal and professional relationships with their supervisors, and that their supervisors were for the most part understanding of disability and accommodation issues, there were some scenarios where the student-supervisor relationship had the potential to break down. Situations where disability impacted significantly the student-supervisor relationship included: the

definition and clarification of expectations around productivity and accommodation; student non-disclosure, fear of stigma and the evolution of potential crisis situations; and attitudinal barriers on the part of the supervisor.

Students and their supervisors who have formed high-quality relationships achieved a mutual understanding of expectations around the roles and responsibilities of both the student and the supervisor in the student's graduate program. It is necessary to clarify such expectations since considerable variation across students, disciplines and programs exists pertaining to the roles of supervisor and student. The student-supervisor relationship is negotiated around topics such as: funding; graduate student employment; frequency and nature of meetings; timelines; type, nature and frequency of feedback provided on work; authorship and intellectual property; responsibility for thesis topic development and methodology; and the role of committee members and co-supervisors. Supervisors may also differ in how ideological or opinion differences are handled and communicated to graduate students, which may be a reflection of their own experience of being supervised.

The quality of the student-supervisor relationship declines when expectations are not clear to both supervisor and student, or when they are not mutually agreed upon. When the student has a disability, there is a higher risk of mismatched expectations in the student-supervisor relationship as a result of additional factors that must be negotiated by both student and supervisor. Being able to have open conversations with one's supervisor about disability and need for accommodation greatly increases the opportunity for success and the likelihood of completion, and may enhance the student's overall educational experience.

The project uncovered perceptions (among students) that there is a lack of understanding from faculty and disability service offices (DSOs) in terms of how to provide disability accommodations in graduate education and who is responsible for doing so. Additionally, some felt that the DSOs lacked awareness and/or understanding of the requirements of graduate study. Currently, the accommodations framework in postsecondary education requires that the student understand and identify the accommodations for which they are eligible, as well as request their implementation.

Among DSOs, Faculties of Graduate Studies and other departments, a need for clarity was identified as crucial in terms of understanding respective roles and responsibilities.

Consultations with the disability services, institutional human rights office, and graduate deans' communities as part of the project identified the concept of essential requirements in graduate programs as an emergent challenge in the field. During the course of the research, there appeared to be a disconnect between the students' understanding of essential requirements and supervisors', departments' and DSOs' understanding.

Essential requirements or competencies are discipline- and field-specific. In today's multi-disciplinary culture, it is entirely conceivable that two research-stream students in the same department, working for the same dissertation supervisor, could have significantly different competency requirements. In the context of students with disabilities, accommodation plans must take into account what the student needs to demonstrate unaided in their field. This in turn requires an appropriate understanding of both what the student's accommodation needs are, as well as what the requirements of the discipline are. No one party may be knowledgeable in all areas – indeed, the importance of informed faculty in collaboration with the student and the disability service provider cannot be understated in this context.

Thus, while students with disabilities faced complex challenges to their success within graduate education, in the context of student-supervisor relationships, accommodations and essential requirements, many issues were at their root matters of the philosophy of graduate education, as informed by the disability context.

Leveling the Playing Field

The next section ("Leveling the Playing Field"), is focused on recommendations that will make graduate education more equitable to all. This includes financial aid, disability-related funding, mental health, universal design, student success, and postdoctoral experiences.

The availability of and policies and practices surrounding financial aid funding was found to be of concern to many who participated in this project. Students, financial aid and disability support offices, faculty and university administrations nationwide

struggle in meeting the financial needs of our graduate student population, particularly when the complexities of financial aid in the context of student scholarships, graduate stipends, academic employment and provincial disability support programming are taken into consideration. Indeed, the importance of this issue cannot be understated, as funding and financial aid for graduate students with disabilities was continually raised as a primary issue in determining student success. While many structural issues in the graduate financial aid landscape are common to all students, including students with disabilities, and while structural considerations in this landscape were disparate when master's programming was compared to doctoral and when professional-stream programs were compared to research-stream programs, it is the specific influence of disability and the intersection of disability and accessibility concerns with graduate financial aid that continually confound. Of major concern to many was the lack of disability-related accommodation funding within general funding opportunities. Not being able to access student loan disability-related accommodation funding while drawing on other funding sources was also found to be of concern. While in our research solutions to these problems were evident, none were system-wide and many relied on the commitment and creativity of individuals within specific institutions.

In graduate education, individualized accommodation (also known as personalized accommodation) of students with disabilities is the norm. This approach involves the provision of supports and services based on the abilities and needs of each person. A lack of accommodation can then impact the learning and attainment of students who depend on supports and services to sustain their studies. Moving towards a system of universal design can help to alleviate these concerns and potentially be of benefit to both students and faculty.

Campaigns around accessibility, which have been run by postsecondary campuses and other agencies, have often focused specifically on highlighting the accomplishments of students with disabilities, but do not often place those students in the context of their peers or cohort. While these types of campaigns call significant attention to issues of accessibility and disability, they can sometimes do so by inadvertently projecting a "student as hero" trope. This interpretation can have negative repercussions within the general population and within the disability community at large.

It is, however, worthwhile to note that in the foreseeable future, as students with disabilities continue to be under-represented in many disciplines at the graduate level – indeed, as many students with disabilities are in the position of being "trailblazers" (first in their fields) –it remains important to provide a commentary on these students' successes in order to alleviate or outright eliminate the barriers preventing other students with disabilities from engaging in those disciplines. It is especially important, however, to recognize that the accomplishments of these students ought to be highlighted in the context of, and alongside, those of their peers.

Many graduate students – particularly those contemplating the academic route – will move from their PhDs into roles as postdoctoral scholars. While the postdoctoral training environment in many disciplines shares similarities with that of doctoral education, there are several crucial systemic differences, the most notable of these being the status of the postdoctoral scholar as a non-student trainee. Postdoctoral scholars are retained by individual supervisors and are often paid out of supervisors' grants or from fellowship awards that they succeed in winning. Postdoctoral scholars do not pay tuition and are thus not students and are ineligible to access most, if not all, student services on campus. In the context of disability, these differences become crucial in forming barriers to entry and/or participation in the postdoctorate.

Building Knowledge

The third set of recommendations is aimed at "Building Knowledge" around graduate students with disabilities. Currently, data surrounding graduate students with disabilities is severely lacking, therefore not allowing us to obtain a clear picture of the experience and what is needed. The major part of this section is focused on putting the measures in place to allow this data to be collected and managed properly.

This section also makes recommendations surrounding the transition and admission processes. Throughout our research these were found to be troublesome for many participants, with little known about them. There is a strong need to develop and implement transition planning resource guides for students with disabilities thinking about graduate education – in particular, when thinking about issues relevant to financial aid and accommodation provisions – but it is also essential to understand in

greater detail students' thought processes, as well as the drivers of the transition into graduate education for students with disabilities. This understanding will better inform intentional work that can be undertaken with students with disabilities by career educators and financial aid officers around that transition, as well as assist disability services offices and student groups in providing accommodation and peer support mechanisms to students. Appropriate career and employment transition planning resources were also identified as important for graduate students with disabilities by career educators and student services professionals, though beyond the scope of this project. Many students who participated in the project described facing barriers with the admissions process. In many cases, students with disabilities are not actively recruited, and available accommodations are not clearly defined. This requires that the student seek out what would best suit their needs. Many students also indicated that the application form was not provided in a format that was accessible to them. Students must also decide at which point, if at all, they disclose their disability. This can be especially troublesome when it comes to the interview process, specifically if the student has a visible disability and has not disclosed on the application form or if they require accommodations to be able to complete the interview.

This section also focuses on the professional development opportunities within graduate education and the need for co- and extra-curricular programming. From our consultations, it was clear that student life professionals who might engage in professional development program delivery for graduate students identified as needing additional training and professional development themselves around disability, accessibility and accommodation. It was furthermore evident that students identified accommodation needs around travel and presentation at conferences, as well as integration with peers and colleagues to be of some concern. However, student perspectives and utilization of professional development opportunities were themselves not assessed in our research efforts. Thus, while we can recommend some extant resources (e.g., the *Making Campus Programming Accessible* and *Enhancing Accessibility Guide* resources published by NEADS), these are not fully applicable to the professional development context, and further research needs to be done to understand what avenues of future work might present themselves in this area.

Conclusion

The final section focuses on the next steps to ensure that the work started with this project is sustainable and becomes embedded within the graduate education community. This section calls for collaboration, efforts surrounding sustainability, and the creation of new resources.

The Taskforce's findings and recommendations, when implemented and integrated into the fabric of graduate education, will lead to changes in professional development and continuing education for faculty and service providers; alter the nature of student preparation for graduate education; significantly impact institutional, provincial and national policy and practice; and enhance the potential for success of graduate students with disabilities in their programs of study and chosen careers.