

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

PART 3: BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

DEMOGRAPHICS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

RATIONALE

In our research and consultations for the project, we were unable to identify sufficient sources of information that would allow an accurate count of the number of graduate students with disabilities nationwide. Data provided by the Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP) enabled an estimation of the year-over-year growth in the number of graduate students with disabilities accessing the federal financial aid system (see Figure 30), and the proportion of the overall graduate student population accessing financial aid who identify as students with disabilities (see Table 1). However, these estimates are limited in that the province of Quebec falls outside the purview of the CSLP's tracking (Quebec uses its own financial aid system). Furthermore, the population of graduate students accessing federal financial aid programs is a small subset of the whole due to the nature of the institutional guaranteed funding packages for these students and the fact that many graduate students are ineligible or become ineligible for the CSLP during their graduate or professional degree.

Additionally, there are province-to-province inconsistencies with respect to tracking of the numbers of students with disabilities in the postsecondary system as a whole, which are magnified when considering graduate students with disabilities only. Nevertheless, while a number of factors lead to decreased confidence in the estimate of the number of students with disabilities in graduate programs, these data represent an important first approximation.

Related to this larger issue is the challenge of understanding the breakdown of students with disabilities across the length and breadth of graduate programming. What is the proportion of PhD students to master's program students? Research-stream to professional-stream? By discipline? The survey data collected as part of the project offer some insight, particularly when benchmarked against the overall population as measured using the 2013 CGPSS data (see Figure 31-33 for details). Again, in the absence of better and more consistent institutional and provincial tracking methods, which can then be synthesized nationally, these data represent a first approximation of the graduate student with disabilities population, taken at a single point in time.

It is important to be able to develop a clearer, more consistent, national demographic framework for students with disabilities in graduate programs, and to be able to monitor the evolution of this framework with time. The data generated from such an effort will better enable institutional, provincial and national policy development with respect to this population of students.

RECOMMENDATION 15: CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH ABOUT EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Recognizing that demographic data on students with disabilities in graduate education across Canada remains sparse, we recommend that coordinated efforts be undertaken at the national and institutional levels to gather relevant demographic information about this population on an ongoing basis. Specifically, we recommend that:

- a. National standards for institutional-level tracking and data aggregation of graduate students with disabilities (best practices: questions, categories, etc.) be established by appropriate nationwide organizations;
- b. Universities with graduate faculties adopt these national standards as a practice guideline for collecting demographic data on their graduate students with disabilities;
- c. These national standards be used as the basis for issuing an annual report on the population demographics of graduate students with disabilities, which may inform policy development at the institutional, provincial and national levels; and
- d. Nationwide organizations working in this space advocate for the inclusion of demographic data on graduate students with disabilities in national tracking efforts by Statistics Canada and the granting Tri-Council agencies (SSHRC, NSERC and CIHR).

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA MANAGEMENT

RATIONALE

Most studies that have looked at issues faced by graduate students with disabilities have either focused on a narrow aspect of the student experience, have taken disability-specific auto-ethnographic or heuristic methods approaches, or have been studies with small sample sizes. Furthermore, no study to date has taken a combined quantitative and qualitative approach to elucidating the issues faced by graduate students with disabilities. The next largest study we are aware of arises out of

the United Kingdom, took a narrative approach to understanding the interface between accommodations and graduate education, and had a sample size of 15 students.

Furthermore, despite the breadth of aspects of graduate education addressed by our study, a major limitation of our work lies in our inability to compare our findings against data available for the general graduate student population. This is a systemic limitation of surveys addressing issues within the students with disabilities population, not limited solely to this research effort. In particular, given the relative paucity of research into the graduate student experience as a whole, it is important to consider how best to integrate disability-associated metrics into the evaluation of the overall graduate student experience in postsecondary education.

We recognize, therefore, that the research that informs this report and its recommendations represents the first-ever quantitative assessment of a large cohort of graduate students with disabilities, both nationally and internationally. Further recognizing the importance of benchmarking this population specifically against the overall graduate student cohort, we undertook an evaluation of additional means by which data on the experiences of graduate students with disabilities could be collected. Working with our project partners, we were successful in advocating for the inclusion of disability-related questions in the next iteration of the Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS) instrument, scheduled for deployment in 2016 (see Recommendation 2a, below). Additional methods for accomplishing this goal were brainstormed by the Taskforce and included in this recommendation as well.

It is worth noting that with the collection of institutional data on graduate students with disabilities, it is implicit in our recommendations that the individual universities and faculties of graduate studies begin to own the understanding and enhancement of the academic and co-curricular experience of these students. To that end, we further recognize the need for the development of and education around standardized analytic rubrics for both institutional and national level use in reviewing these data. Finally, given the potential for student identities to be inferred from such granular analyses, we believe that it is important to evolve consistent national and institutional standards around the management of data in order to protect student privacy and confidentiality.

RECOMMENDATION 16: ESTABLISH DATA COLLECTION METHODS TO RESEARCH THE EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Recognizing that the data gathering efforts documented in this report constitute only the initial step in understanding the student experience of students with disabilities, and further recognizing that establishing benchmarks of comparison against the general graduate student population is important in defining appropriate policy and practice, we recommend that a multi-pronged and ongoing data collection effort, integrated with data

collection for the overall graduate student population where possible, be established by institutions and relevant national organizations. Specifically, we recommend that:

- a. Disability metrics be integrated into the Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS), enabling the collection of data from a larger, more representative student population, as well as the comparison with the general graduate student population nationwide;
- b. Disability demographics and metrics be integrated into the Post-Secondary Information System dataset;
- c. Disability demographics and metrics be integrated into Statistics Canada surveys of recent graduates with master's and doctoral degrees;
- d. Disability demographics and metrics be integrated into institutional graduate student exit surveys;
- e. Institutions adopt practices and standards for interviewing students who withdraw from their programs, in order to understand the impact of disability issues on students' decisions to terminate their programs of study prior to completion, as well as for the purposes of information gathering and policy/practice change; and
- f. Analytic rubrics for these datasets be developed for both the national level (for nationwide organizations intending to utilize the datasets) and the institutional level for participating universities.

RECOMMENDATION 17: PROTECT STUDENT PRIVACY IN THE MANAGEMENT OF DATA

Recognizing that it can be possible to infer student identities from granular responses to disability demographic and metric questions, we recommend that a series of standards and practices be put in place to protect student anonymity and confidentiality in the analysis of large datasets relevant to the student experience of graduate students with disabilities. Specifically, we recommend that:

- a. National standards of best practices to support institutional-level disclosure and treatment of data be developed; and
- b. Institutions adopt these national standards in their analysis and use of data relevant to graduate students with disabilities.

GRADUATE STUDENT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

RATIONALE

Professional development is a core aspect of many programs because of its capacity to enhance students' career preparedness as well as fostering their intellectual and personal growth. Co-curricular and extra-curricular programs are integral to the graduate student experience in several ways. Firstly, they provide students with valuable opportunities to augment their intellectual and practical skills, such as effective communication, analytical thinking, collaboration and problem-solving. Moreover, they allow students to develop a sense of personal and social responsibility in the form of ethical reasoning and behaviour, understanding and respect for human differences, and recognition of the importance of continuous learning. Additionally, this kind of program supports students in learning how to apply skills and knowledge gained in the classroom to real-life, field-specific situations. Graduate students with disabilities may face particular barriers to participation in co-curricular and/or extra-curricular programming and thus require additional personal, financial and/or practical support to be able to take advantage of these opportunities.

Conversations around the role of professional skill development in the context of graduate education are becoming increasingly prevalent. During the course of a graduate program, one can envision several important areas wherein a graduate student may access professional development opportunities:

- a. Formalized graduate student (and postdoctoral) professional and career development programming on campus and online (e.g., mygradskills.ca; myIDP.org);
- b. Involvement in student groups, student associations and student unions;
- c. Professional development obtained through attendance at local, regional, national or international conferences; and
- d. Professional development obtained through mentorship and collaboration with peers and colleagues locally or at other institutions.

Each of these areas offers different challenges for students with disabilities to navigate. For example, facilitators, moderators and organizers of professional and career development programming may be unfamiliar with disability/accessibility considerations and may be unaware of how best to accommodate students with disabilities. A similar challenge will exist for student groups, student associations and student unions. Conference organizers may be unaware of or unfamiliar with disability accommodation practices. Finally, disclosure and stigma considerations may interfere with students reaching out to peers and colleagues for mentorship and guidance.

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), they 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.

RECOMMENDATION 18: REMOVE BARRIERS TO CO- AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR PROGRAMMING IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

Recognizing the growing importance of co-curricular (e.g., professional development) and extra-curricular programs and situations to the overall graduate student experience, we recommend that efforts be undertaken to explore the interface between disability and co/extra-curricular programming. Specifically, we recommend that:

- a. Subsequent research into the student experience of graduate students with disabilities include components evaluating student inclusion and engagement in co- and extra-curricular programming;
- b. Universally Designed co- and extra-curricular environments be implemented, which are multi-faceted, with people being able to take advantage of supports and services which are embedded within the various areas that comprise their programs and lives as graduate students; and
- c. Training and professional development on working with and accommodating students with disabilities be provided to student life professionals, career centre staff, student leaders and other personnel delivering co-curricular programming to graduate students with disabilities.

TRANSITION INTO THE GRADUATE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

RATIONALE

Understanding the crucial differences between the nature of undergraduate and graduate education proved to be essential to the success of graduate students with

disabilities, based on our findings. These differences included: differences in the breadth of learning environments; differences in the nature and depth of interactions with faculty, peers and collaborators; and the multiplicity of roles that a graduate student may be called on to engage in during their program of study (e.g., instructor, mentor, collaborator, learner). These differences impact and are impacted by a student's identified disabilities and accommodation needs in ways that are unpredictable and unknown to the student at the time of their transition out of their undergraduate degree and into graduate school. Students who choose to enter the labour market before returning to graduate school may have a better understanding of some of these nuances, but that is unclear from our data.

As we have highlighted elsewhere in this report, 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 provision – but it is also essential to understand in greater detail students' thought processes, as well as the drivers around 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.

RECOMMENDATION 19: IDENTIFY BEST PRACTICES FOR TRANSITION PLANNING INTO GRADUATE EDUCATION

Recognizing the many significant differences between graduate and undergraduate education, and that students with disabilities may experience challenges navigating the transition into graduate education, we recommend further research to identify best practices for transition planning for students with disabilities intending to pursue graduate education, to enhance supports that can be developed and implemented for students with disabilities intending to pursue graduate studies.

TRANSITION INTO THE LABOUR MARKET

RATIONALE

While students may choose to pursue graduate education due to perceived potential for increased marketability and employability, labour market outcomes remain disparate for students with disabilities compared to the general population, irrespective of field of study and level of education (Smith et al, 2002). Appropriate career and employment transition planning resources have been identified as important for graduate students with disabilities by career educators and student services professionals. Research in this area was beyond the scope of this project, and student and alumni perspectives on navigating the transition into the labour market would be

valuable in developing the appropriate professional development resources for students, career educators and student services professionals. In particular, identifying differences between transitioning into the labour market with an advanced graduate degree and doing so with an undergraduate degree, and identifying the nuances added by considering these issues in the context of disability, will be key to the development and implementation of appropriate resources. We acknowledge the importance of this discussion and recommend that further work be done by the relevant stakeholders to address this issue.

“I think there should be more support provided for work-related disability issues. For example, in Career Services because from the research I have seen, students with learning disabilities (the area I know about) can experience difficulties with transitions to new environments (because they have to establish new accommodations, strategies in a new environment, and because of disability-related issues and discrimination etc).”

RECOMMENDATION 20: IDENTIFY BEST PRACTICES FOR TRANSITION PLANNING INTO THE LABOUR MARKET POST-GRADUATION

Recognizing that a graduate degree is a stepping-stone to a variety of career paths, and that graduate students with disabilities may experience challenges navigating this transition, we recommend further research to identify best practices for career and transition planning for students with disabilities transitioning out of their graduate programs, to enhance labour market outcomes and measures for students with disabilities.

ADMISSIONS

“I did not [disclose in my application] as that would [have] seemed foolish considering I never heard back from any institutions that I did disclose in my application.”

“When I received the email invitation for an interview there was no information included about disability accommodations. I found the information on the school's website and contacted the disability services department. I required interpreters as well as extended time to accommodate the interpreting process.”

“When questioned about inconsistencies within my grades from my undergraduate degree.”

"It was obvious I was deaf by the interpreters. I did not disclose mental health concerns."

"So that I could give myself the best chance at the interview. No use hiding what can't be hidden and I gain no benefit from hiding my hearing."

RATIONALE

While a challenging experience for all students, the admissions process can be particularly daunting for students with disabilities. The student must decide when or if to disclose their disability, ensure the needed accommodations are put in place for the application and interview process, in addition to the stresses all students face. The admissions process can set the tone for the student's graduate career, so ensuring that everything proceeds as smoothly as possible is imperative.

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 best suits their needs. Many students also indicated that the application form was not provided to them 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.

The actual admissions process is not the only barrier that potential students with disabilities can face. They may also encounter attitudinal barriers and associated stigma. Students with disabilities often feel that they have to work harder simply to prove themselves. Due to the nature of their disability and the supports they have been able to access, their grades may not be as high as those of their colleagues, which can set them at a disadvantage, even though they are equally qualified. There may also be lack of understanding by the graduate admissions committee around the disability and the associated accommodations. This can lead to the perception that the student is not as capable as others or that academic integrity may be compromised.

The admissions process is an integral part of the graduate student experience that presents issues for many students with disabilities. The admissions process should be accessible to all.

“Just wanted to put the issue on the table if I need to have accommodation later.”

“To explain I have been endeavoring to improve my study skills despite the disability.”

“Patronizing smile from one. Discomfort from another. The remaining three didn't reveal anything.”

“I raised them when I received my acceptance letters to various schools. I met with each school department & accessibility department to discuss my needs and their ability to meet my needs before the acceptance deadline.”

“My supervisor forced the admissions council to let me in. Others said I did not have the skills because I had a disability.”

RECOMMENDATION 21: BETTER UNDERSTAND BARRIERS IN THE GRADUATE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

Recognizing that the graduate admissions process can pose challenges to students with disabilities attempting to navigate the undergraduate/graduate transition, or who are returning to the graduate environment after some time away from academia, we recommend that further research on the issues and barriers faced by students with disabilities during the recruitment, application, interview and admissions cycle for graduate education be undertaken as part of future initiatives looking at the graduate students with disabilities experience. Additionally, we recommend:

- a. Ensuring that online and print application forms for graduate programs are in an accessible format;
- b. Developing practices and policies within DSOs to support students through the application process, including finding peer mentors to assist potential applicants;
- c. Developing and delivering education materials to sensitize graduate deans, faculty, and administrators to disability issues in order to facilitate applications from students; and
- d. Developing policies to be implemented by graduate deans to welcome students with disabilities and to provide information to them to facilitate the application process.

ONLINE AND REMOTE LEARNING

“I wish there was a way to attend classes remotely to avoid huge transportation time-wasting. I'd love to use technology to have somebody type what is being said remotely to me at home and then I'd speak with a microphone to participate.”

“Difficulty accessing funding from the University because I am in a distance/online program.”

RATIONALE

Online and remote learning can open up graduate education to people for whom it may not otherwise be a possibility. In offering a variety of ways for students to engage, such as via recorded lectures and asynchronous discussion forums, online and remote learning allow students to learn at their own individual pace. In this way, online and remote learning may provide opportunities for students with disabilities in particular to pursue graduate education irrespective of their personal circumstances. With that being said, this new and rapidly burgeoning area carries its own set of benefits and challenges that need to be explored and better understood in relation to graduate students with disabilities.

The role of technology, including online and remote learning, in graduate education is continuously evolving. However, the effects and best practices, in particular with respect to how online and remote learning relates to students with disabilities across different programs of study, has not been studied in depth or widely adopted across institutions.

Online and remote learning can offer many opportunities to those students who are not able to partake in the traditional classroom setting due to disability, and can constitute a valid accommodation approach, if agreed upon by the student, supervisor and the DSO. By using this type of learning, the student is able to conference into class or participate in another way that works for them. By completing learning via online or remote options, it also allows the student to work more to their own pace, without the potential added stress of social interactions.

However, despite the increase in opportunity to offer learning in this way, only Athabasca University has moved substantively in this direction, existing entirely online. Ontario recently announced the creation of Ontario Learn, a portal that carries online courses from all of Ontario's PSE institutions. Similar portals exist in Quebec and some of the other provinces too. Other institutions use online and remote learning on an individual basis, and the potential for its systemic application is often still not well understood.

RECOMMENDATION 22: IDENTIFY BEST PRACTICES FOR ONLINE AND REMOTE LEARNING IN THE GRADUATE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

Recognizing that online and remote learning are increasingly important components of graduate education and can have important roles as creative solutions to student accommodation needs, notwithstanding that some programs have valid rationales to eschew the online and remote experience for their graduate students, we recommend further research to identify student needs and best practices in online and remote learning for students with disabilities pursuing graduate education.