

A Quality Assurance Framework for
Graduate Education at the
University of Alberta

Report of the FGSR Council
Working Group on Quality Measures

May 2013

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Embracing the Provost's call for action to be taken to improve the quality of graduate studies at the University of Alberta, a Working Group on Quality Measures for Graduate Programs was established by the Council of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR Council) at its meeting of 21 November, 2012.

The terms of reference and membership of the Working Group were approved by the FGSR Council, and can be found in Appendix 2.

The Working Group met monthly starting in January 2013, with the Dean, FGSR, as the chair. Reference works and other literature on quality management in higher education was reviewed by the committee. As discussions progressed, it became clear to the members of the group that a broad framework for quality assurance in graduate education was a necessary prerequisite to any list of specific quality measures. As a result, this document was developed with the aim of laying out the guiding principles by which graduate programs, primarily through a close and continuous collaboration between the professors and the graduate students, can set up quality assurance processes that help them improve the quality of the educational experience they offer.

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1. Introduction

The assessment of quality in graduate education is critical not only to the success of graduate students but also to the future of research and creative activity both inside and outside academia. The fundamental commitment of graduate programs to achieve the best outcome for each individual student informs quality assessment. Through ongoing and transparent quality assessment, stakeholders in graduate programs are able to monitor the progress on improving the quality of the graduate education being offered.

Quality assessment for graduate programs is distinct from strategic planning. Strategic planning seeks to define the means by which a graduate program intends to accomplish its goals. In contrast, quality assessment is aimed at monitoring the degree of progress towards the goals of the graduate program that will lead to the delivery of the best possible graduate education. Quality assessment is envisioned as a regular and ongoing part of managing graduate programs, and the results of quality assessment should be used to inform strategic planning.

This document was developed bearing in mind the need to protect the freedom to develop and pursue independent and original research and creative activity at the University.

2. Institutional Principles

1. The primary objective of quality assessment is the continuous improvement in the quality of the educational experience being offered by the graduate programs.
2. Quality assessment should be informed by the fundamental commitment of graduate programs to achieve the best outcome for the individual student.
3. Quality assessment is only effective when faculty, in close consultation with students as the fundamental stakeholders, play the primary role in designing or refining assessment procedures.
4. Quality assessment processes should have clearly defined objectives, measures, and evaluation procedures. The intended uses of the results should be made clear to all relevant stakeholders.
5. Regular review processes should be used to sustain and advance quality in graduate education using benchmarks derived from comparable programs at peer institutions.

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6. An additional key benefit of quality assessment is to inform internal and external stakeholders of the quality and the relevance of the educational experience. Sharing the goals and outcomes of assessment with all relevant stakeholders, including the public, helps ensure that assessment efforts are understood and valued.

Graduate Program Goals

1. Program goals are a statement of the mission of the graduate program and what it wants to deliver. The goals of the program must be developed to facilitate the best possible outcomes for the graduate students in the program.
2. Program goals are dependent on the nature of the program in an essential way. Research-oriented programs, programs focused on creative and artistic work, programs aimed at training professionals, etc., may have different sets of goals.
3. Program goals must be chosen and reviewed with explicit awareness of the ways in which the discipline and the career context for its graduates are evolving.
4. The goals for externally-accredited graduate programs must be developed in the light of their accreditation requirements.
5. The statement of program goals must be accompanied by a statement of what is required to accomplish those goals.

3. Quality Indicators

The overarching program goals should be broken down into various elements that can be monitored individually. Quality indicators are chosen to allow the graduate programs to monitor the degree of progress towards each of the elements of the goals.

A useful quality indicator

1. is specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely;
2. has a clearly-defined and explicit benchmark to which it can be compared, and wherever possible makes use of information about comparable programs at peer institutions;
3. can be measured over time in order to establish a trend.

If this document is adopted by the FGSR Council in principle, resources for identifying relevant quality indicators will be developed and made available through the FGSR website.

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Appendix 1

An Example of Goals, Elements, and Quality Indicators in a thesis-based (MSc, PhD) program in an NSERC area.

- 1) (Goal 1) Produce graduates who are prepared for success in their chosen careers
 - a. (Element of goal) Student satisfaction is high
 - i. (Quality indicator) One year after graduation, student satisfaction with their UAlberta grad degree exceeds a target value
 - b. (Element of goal) Professional/complementary skills are developed
 - i. (QI) The fraction of students completing professional skills development through FGSR or the Graduate Research Symposium exceeds a target value
 - c. (Element of goal) Students are placed in desirable positions
 - i. (QI) One year after graduation, student satisfaction with their current position exceeds a target value
- 2) Provide a high quality training environment for graduate students
 - a. Student financial support levels allow concentration on studies
 - i. The fraction of students with internal/external support (net of tuition) above a minimum value (adjusted for inflation) exceeds a target value
 - b. Faculty members are of high quality
 - i. NSERC grant funding is competitive compared to our peer institutions
 - ii. Citation rates on journal papers is competitive with peer Canadian institutions
 - c. Access to excellent facilities is provided
 - i. Student survey of satisfaction with facilities exceeds a target value
 - d. Students work on problems relevant to industry and society
 - i. The fraction of students receiving support from industry/foundation/government-department grants exceeds a target value
 - e. Students are publishing research outcomes in peer-reviewed journals
 - i. Publication rates in indexed journals is competitive with our peer Canadian institutions
- 3) Be a destination of choice for high quality prospective graduate students
 - a. Students offered admission choose to accept it
 - i. Conversion rates exceed a target value (must be cognizant of economic factors)
 - b. Proportion of students from leading undergraduate schools is high

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- i. Fraction of students from Top 200 schools exceeds a target value (need to select a list)
 - c. Number of students with prestigious scholarships is high
 - i. Number of students with NSERC scholarships is competitive with peer institutions
- 4) Provide effective and efficient administration of graduate programs
 - a. Admission decisions are made and communicated quickly
 - i. Average time between application and admission is less than a target value
 - b. Students complete their programs in a timely manner
 - i. Average time to completion is less than a target value
 - ii. Average time to withdrawal (or PhD to MSc change of category) is less than a target value

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Appendix 2.

The Working Group on Quality Measures for Graduate Programs (WGQM) will draft an appropriate list of quality measures and standards of performance for graduate programs, with a view to making a recommendation to FGSR Council for its consideration in February 2013. The Working Group may wish to consider proposing one list of quality measures, several lists, or a menu with options, taking into account differences within disciplines. FGSR Council, as the main governance body of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research under the Post-Secondary Learning Act (PSLA), will decide whether to adopt the recommendations or to ask for more work to be done by the Working Group.

The Working Group on Quality Measures for Graduate Programs will be chaired by FGSR Dean Mazi Shirvani. As approved by the FGSR Council, the composition of the Working Group on Quality Measures for Graduate Programs will be as follows:

- **3 GSA elected officials**
Ashlyn Bernier (GSA President)
Nathan Andrews (GSA VP Academic)
Brent Epperson (GSA VP Labour)
- **2 graduate students who are members-at-large of the FGSR Council**
John Meston (PhD Educational Policy Studies)
Farnaz Mani (PhD Chemical and Materials Engineering)
- **2 graduate coordinators who work in the Humanities**
Corinne Harol (English and Film Studies)
Anne Commons (East Asian Studies)
- **2 graduate coordinators who work in the Social Sciences**
Gordon Gow (Faculty of Extension)
David Deephouse (Business PhD Program)
- **1 graduate coordinator who works in the Fine Arts**
Robert Shannon (Drama)
- **2 graduate coordinators who work in the Sciences**
Arturo Sanchez-Azofeifa (Earth and Atmos. Sciences, and Associate Dean, Faculty of Science)
Todd Lowary (Chemistry)
- **2 graduate coordinators who work in Engineering**
Peter Schiavone (Mechanical Engineering)
Steven Dew (Electrical and Computer Engineering, and Associate Dean, Faculty of Engineering)
- **2 graduate coordinators who work in the Basic Health Sciences**
Deborah Burshtyn (Medical Microbiology and Immunology)
Elena Posse de Chaves (Pharmacology)
- **2 graduate coordinators who work in the Clinical Health Sciences**
Sujata Persad (Pediatrics)
Andrew Shaw (Oncology)
- **2 “member-at-large” graduate coordinators**
Stewart Peterson (Physical Education and Recreation)
Anna Kirova (Elementary Education)
- **1 FGSR Associate Dean**
Paul Melancon