

The Faculty's Response to the 2011 External Review of the Faculty of Graduate Studies

An external review of the UBC Faculty of Graduate Studies was conducted in November 2011 by Drs. Fred Hall, Karen DePauw, and Carolyn Watters. We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the reviewers for their very thoughtful and comprehensive report, and to all those who participated in the consultation process. The review came at a time of intentional reflection by the university on fundamental questions of the role, structure, and functions of the Faculty, and it provided an extremely valuable contribution to this process. Over the past year, an *ad hoc* committee was convened by the Provost to consider some of the larger issues raised by the review, and extensive consultations on these and other issues were carried out as part of and further to that process. The results of these will be incorporated in this report.

Overview

We concur with the overall recommendation that the University “maintain a strong central unit responsible for graduate matters”, and this was unequivocally affirmed by the university community through the consultative process carried out this past year. Our strength, we believe, should continue to come from effective and service-oriented operations, principled and collaborative oversight of quality, and unflagging advocacy for and leadership towards a continued enhancement of graduation education at UBC. We agree with all the major recommendations, and have already made progress in addressing some of them. Detailed responses are outlined below.

R1: Graduate issues should be represented within the Provost's executive level.

R1.1 The title of the leader should include Vice-Provost Graduate (VPG)

R1.2 The portfolio should include all graduate programs (including interdisciplinary and professional) and postdoctoral fellows.

We agree. The Provost plans to incorporate the recommended portfolio breadth and employ the dual title of Dean and Vice-Provost Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for the permanent leadership position.

R1.3 The VPG should foster an effective working collaboration with the Vice-President Students

We agree that such a relationship is necessary, and that there are “opportunities for convergence and complementarity of services” within the portfolios. We are cognizant that highly collaborative and mutually informed relationships have been more prevalent at operational levels than at the executive level, but understand that both require development to do our best for graduate students. This is true not only with the VP-Students portfolio, but with the many university units affecting graduate student administration and life. There are no straightforward approaches to ensuring graduate student needs are reflected in the university's communications and services, and no simple way to delineate responsibilities that don't fall clearly within a single portfolio. We are committed, however, to those ends, and will continue to develop effective working relationships and to explore possible structural mechanisms to improve communication and early collaboration in strategic decision-making.

R1.4 The VPG should take an active role in international graduate education, especially international student matters.

This is another area of overlapping jurisdictions, and we agree that a close alliance with the office of the VP-Research & International is essential for managing mutual interests such as international partnerships and scholarship schemes, international graduate student recruitment, student mobility considerations, and the overall continued efforts of UBC to be a global education and research leader. We are currently involved in many activities that support international graduate student success at UBC, but there is much more that can be done collaboratively to provide a truly outstanding experience for these valued students.

R1.5. The VPG should enhance relationships with the graduate student community.

We fully agree that the Dean's office should be in close and continuing contact with the graduate student community, and we have worked to establish and maintain these relationships. The Dean and GSS president and vice-president meet regularly, members of the Dean's office periodically present at GSS council meetings, and we have held occasional joint GSS/Dean's office executive meetings over the last several years. This past year, we held a lunch/feedback session for engineering graduate students, and plan to continue that practice with other student groups. Constant interaction with graduate students occurs through the GPS program and our online forum. We were also pleased to invite the GSS president to present at Graduate Council this past year. It is good to be reminded of the importance of these connections, and we will continue to explore ways to ensure they are maintained.

R2. The structure and role of the Graduate Council should be revised.

R2.1 The core quality and policy functions should remain with this body and be enhanced.

R2.2. The membership of a Graduate Council structure should be redefined.

After considering several models, the *ad hoc* committee concurred with the recommendation that the size of Graduate Council be reduced to enhance its effectiveness. It should be converted to a truly deliberative body charged with recommending strategic approaches to improving graduate education and should play a formal role in quality assurance. We view this mandate as beyond those of the current Policy and Scholarships Committees, which serve a valuable function, and have not eliminated these bodies.

With regards to the specific review suggestions that items for discussion include the international application fee, we agree that it is high in relation to peer institutions, and have frozen it for the past and current year. As it funds a significant portion of operations in both the Dean's office and graduate programs, a reduction in the fee would unfortunately have an impact on service provision. We therefore have no plans to reduce it unless another revenue stream can be found. We don't believe the development of shadow application systems noted by the reviewers relates solely to the international fee, nor do we believe they would be eliminated with a \$25-\$50 reduction in fees.

R2.3. The VPG should work closely with this Council to articulate a plan for the future of graduate programs and enrollments at the University based on disciplinary capacity and objectives aligned with the vision and strategic plan of the University.

We are pleased that this issue, highlighted in our self-study, was affirmed by the reviewers. Discussions on the subject have begun with deans, department heads, and the graduate community, and we agree that it would be a very worthwhile subject for the new Graduate Council to address in some depth. Ultimately, the formulation of any strategic plans will require coordination with the central administration.

R2.4. The central graduate unit must develop policies that support and celebrate the wide diversity of graduate programs at UBC.

We agree that this is important, and purposefully include representation of all disciplinary Faculties on the Academic Policy Committee. Nonetheless, it is quite possible that some policies and/or procedures may not be wholly appropriate for some program types or disciplines. We are systematically meeting with disciplinary and program groups, and take this into consideration as we engage in discussion. An example of an alteration we have made in response to a disciplinary concern is the creation of a distinct type of leave for creative/professional purposes. We have also taken seriously the specific concerns raised by the reviewers about the manuscript-based thesis guidelines, and have since brought these to the Policy Committee for modification. New guidelines have been passed that no longer raise the possible necessity of some re-writing of manuscripts that constitute part of the thesis.

R2.5. Active advocacy for practical needs of graduate students (housing, child care, financial support) is required.

We agree and have supported efforts to address these issues at every opportunity. We anticipate that the vice-provostial position of the permanent leader may open up further opportunities to advocate for graduate student and postdoctoral fellow needs.

R2.6. The central unit should take a stronger role in quality assurance, especially program reviews.

As also expressed in our self-study, we strongly concur with the recommendation to improve periodic review processes. While we believe the current assessment criteria are appropriate, the processes are inconsistently followed by units undergoing review. The *ad hoc* committee has recommended a stronger role for the new Graduate Council in these reviews, including participation of members on review teams, and we anticipate much improved rigour in program assessment with these changes.

R2.7. The VPG should have clear authority to deal with problem issues arising in graduate education and programs.

We agree, and plan to bring the issue to the new Graduate Council. Although the authority is not necessarily lacking under current policy, the processes to exercise the authority in an equitable and transparent manner have never been clearly articulated.

R3. The office that supports the VPG and central graduate functions should be redefined.

R3.1 The number of associate deans should be reduced and the proportion of time each spends in the office should be increased to at least 50%.

We reflected on this at some length, and ultimately disagreed with the concerns raised by the reviewers and their overall recommendation. Regarding the first concern (“a fragmentation of responsibilities”), the Associate Deans work together very well and have portfolios that are logically delineated; we have no evidence to suggest the responsibilities are inappropriately fragmented. Further, we don’t feel there is evidence to support the second concern, that individuals are not present in the office when needed. It is extremely rare that the unscheduled physical presence of an Associate Dean is necessary, and they are invariably easily contacted by email or phone. A 50% time commitment, as suggested by the reviewers, would still not ensure their physical presence at all times. Perhaps more importantly, we feel there is significant value in the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds enabled by the existing number of Associate Deans (we currently have representation of the humanities, laboratory sciences, theoretical sciences, applied sciences, and medicine). We also worry that a position with a 50% commitment

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requirement would be less likely to attract faculty members, particularly those with active research careers, than would one with a 30% commitment.

Given the upcoming addition of vice-provostial responsibilities to the decanal position, there may need to be additional academic support in the office, and a reconfiguration and/or expansion of some associate dean portfolios may be advisable once the permanent dean is appointed.

R3.2. The central graduate unit should enhance its reputation as the place where problems are solved rather than being seen as the barrier or as the place where problems are created.

We agree completely, and believe (and have heard from others) that we have made great strides in this area over the past few years. It should be noted, however, that the relationship of the dean's office with programs is necessarily complex, and cannot simply be one of support and acceptance without at times having a "gate-keeping" quality. During our conversations this year with the graduate community, we heard repeatedly that programs appreciate a central unit's role in ensuring quality and deciding difficult cases, and often rely on our "back-up" when they need to make these decisions. There is no question that there are those who sometimes disagree with our decisions, but we believe that is inevitable given the nature of the relationship. Also inevitably, our decisions may not always be the best, and we hopefully learn from these. In all our activities, we strive for collaborativity, understanding, fairness, consistency, and wisdom, and a right balance between "policing" and support; these values were all highly affirmed during our consultations.

It is quite possible that some of the concerns expressed by those consulted in the review were based more on historical perceptions than present-day realities. This is not to dismiss them, as we should always be attentive to the possibility of veering into the territory of hindrance rather than help, but we don't have a sense from current program staff and advisors that there are inherent imbalances in the way we currently interact with them. We have also begun keeping better data on our decision-making (e.g., admissions exceptions, doctoral exam decisions, extensions, appeals) and provide and discuss the information with disciplinary deans and associate deans on an annual or sometimes more frequent basis. No concerns about these decisions have been expressed in these discussions.

R3.3. Those functions of the central office that add direct value to the graduate enterprise at UBC should be clearly identified.

This was a major focus of discussion during the consultation process. Our current roles in student administration, awards management, quality assurance, student support, advocacy, and program support were affirmed, and we were unable to identify any major current functions that were seen as redundant or unnecessary other than the secondary review of decisions on standard admissions discussed below. The personal relationships that exist between those in graduate programs and the dean's office, enabling pertinent and contextualized advice and support by Graduate Studies, was noted by many as being particularly important to maintain.

We are very pleased with the reviewers' affirmation of the value of the Graduate Pathways to Success program (also noted nationally) and supervisor development offerings, and their recommendation that they stay within Graduate Studies. We also agree that staff development could be enhanced, and can easily conceive of other valuable support services. As the reviewers note, however, it is challenging to plan for increased services unless other activities are reduced (or additional funding is provided). We anticipate that once systems and processing changes are in place to relieve some of the staff workload (see below), we will indeed have opportunities to enhance service and support.

R3.4. The VPG and office should identify a ‘stop doing list’ for historic FoGS activities.

This is a good reminder to periodically re-think what we do, and we have been generating such a list. It includes a number of informational requests to programs that add little value, and the much larger area of verifying admissibility for all requests for admission (see next recommendation).

R3.5. The VPG and office should develop a process to delegate over time specific functions, as might be appropriate, to other units.

The specific recommendation that we consider the delegation of responsibility for admissions to graduate programs, for applicants meeting university requirements, was a major focus of the *ad hoc* committee and consultations. There was general agreement that this is a worthwhile goal, and it is being incorporated into a business process review to plan for the development of a fully online application and admissions management system and the identification of appropriate central locations for processing functions.

We have considered delegating the operationalization of other functions to other units, however we have no wish to download administrative tasks on programs or other units unless there is a benefit to the program or students and there are appropriate systems in place to ease the administrative burden. As systems are developed, we will keep this consideration in mind.

R3.6. The VPG and office should retain the communication lead on graduate education matters.

We agree. There are tensions within the university between the value of “one-stop shopping” for all students and all student needs, and that of directed, relevant communication about matters that concern only graduate students. We will continue to provide graduate students with relevant and timely information, and work also to ensure that the communication coordinated centrally is accurate and relevant as much as possible for graduate students.

R3.7. The VPG and office should provide one window access to all graduate scholarships and bursaries.

We agree that any confusion about financial support is not in the best interests of students or staff, and support the recommendation to advertise all graduate awards on one site. We are planning to do just that, by providing more information on our website regarding need-based funding opportunities and open awards (those awards open to both undergraduate and graduate students), rather than simply directing graduate students to the Enrolment Services funding website. The Graduate Awards team will also explore with Enrolment Services the possibility of Graduate Studies assuming management of all graduate prizes.

The expected implementation of electronic fund transfer (direct deposit of funds to the student’s bank account; see Recommendation 3.11) in place of cheques being issued to students for SISC award payments should also substantially reduce confusion, as it would eliminate the confusing requirement for students to pick up cheques at Enrolment Services for awards assigned by Graduate Studies. Moving to electronic fund transfer for SISC payments will also allow us to eventually move our awards that are currently paid through the Payroll system to SISC, which will alleviate confusion of a different kind, that of graduate programs not knowing the status of individual student’s funding offers and payments.

Lastly, as mentioned in the response to Recommendation 3.11, we are partners in a university-wide Student Financial Support project that is intended to provide a single portal for all applications for UBC funding. Together, these improvements will alleviate many of the issues outlined by the reviewers.

R3.8. Central planning of data definition, quality of data collection, and analysis is required.

We agree, and will continue to take the lead on providing relevant data to programs and as needed to the university community. With regards to the specific issue that application statistics are irrelevant for some programs, we completely agree. They are very relevant for some programs, however, and as it is difficult to keep track of which of our over 250 programs have pre-screening mechanisms, we provide those summaries to all programs with the understanding that programs may choose to omit or contextualize them in their self-study documents. We are in the process of improving the relevance and format of the data package we provide for program reviews, and we will include the above caveat relating to the admission statistics in the narrative.

R3.9 Improved institutional IT systems are needed to support delegation and distributed administrative functions and at the same time maintain consistent central data.

We agree, and are working with the university to enable decentralized access to standardized, centrally-maintained, secure student data as much as possible. This will include incorporating financial data into SIS, and eventually, student progress and supervisor data into a secure central system.

R3.10. The first two IT projects requested by FoGS should receive sufficient funding to move these projects ahead in a timely fashion.

The University has committed to developing the admissions system, and we are beginning a business process review in preparation for that. There is currently no clear commitment from the central administration to the student progress tracking system.

R3.11. The third component of GSLMP, awards and other funding management, should also receive funding to move ahead.

We agree that the situation of students being issued cheques for awards is highly problematic, as are separate systems (Payroll and SISC) for awards payments. Our request for a systems change that would allow the direct deposit of funds to students' bank accounts (through SISC) was submitted two years ago, and until this is in place, we are not willing to move all students to the one system (SISC). A commitment has been made for the systems change, and once this happens, we anticipate proceeding to a unified process, thereby improving service to students, eliminating redundant administrative work, reducing opportunities for errors, and, as mentioned above, allowing programs direct access to information on their students' funding.

Rather than implement a separate awards management system for Graduate Studies, we have partnered with Enrolment Services to harmonize and integrate student financial support systems to meet the common needs of undergraduate and graduate students and their administrators. This will ultimately allow a common online portal for application, information and workflow for all awards, both merit- and need-based.

R4. The graduate residential Colleges should be outside the responsibility of the VPG and the central graduate office.

The decision has been made to transfer responsibility of the colleges to the Provost's office through the new position of Associate Provost, Academic Innovation.

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R5. The academic oversight of all interdisciplinary graduate programs should remain with the VPG.

R5.1 The administration of the Interdisciplinary Programs should remain at the disciplinary faculty level, with appropriate governance structure.

The central office will continue to provide academic oversight for all interdisciplinary programs. Consistent with the recommendations, the programs formally associated with the College for Interdisciplinary Studies are being moved to new administrative homes within disciplinary Faculties and interdisciplinary research units.

R5.2. The administration of the (individual) Interdisciplinary Studies PhD and Master's programs should remain within the central graduate unit.

We agree, and it will be retained within the central unit.

R6. The administration of Postdoctoral Fellows should remain in a Postdoctoral office as part of the central graduate unit.

We agree, the central administration has concurred, and with this, we are proceeding towards recommending a renaming of the central unit to *Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies*.

- Susan Porter, Dean *pro tem*