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Guiding Principles for Graduate Student Supervision

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A. Introduction

Post-baccalaureate graduate studies are extremely important to the economic and social well being of Canadians and have an ever increasing role in higher education in Canada. Over the 10 year period between 1995 and 2004, graduate student enrollment increased from approximately 113,000 to 149,000 in Canada¹. Graduate studies are not only a life and career enhancing activity for students, but also a vital component of research and scholarship in Canada, important drivers of the nation's productivity and essential for global competitiveness. The role of supervisors and supervisory committees, as well as the relationship between students and their supervisors, are key components affecting the success of research-stream students in their programs.

Superimposed upon the student-supervisor relationship are the roles of supervisory committees, graduate program committees, departmental bodies, and offices of faculties/schools of graduate studies. Further complicating the issue of graduate student supervision is the diversity in supervision culture across the University, where the relationship may range from a very structured "master to apprentice" scenario to a very unstructured, "subtle guide of an independent scholar."

Despite the complexity and diversity surrounding supervision of graduate students, the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies felt it important that guiding principles for graduate student supervision be identified and endorsed at a national level. While many excellent guides on graduate student supervision exist within various graduate handbooks, senate or faculty by-laws, and websites within graduate schools across

Canada, these are often highly specific to individual departments or graduate programs. This document is meant to identify, at a high level, guiding principles which can apply to all graduate supervisors and students. These principles can be a stand-alone resource or a precursor for graduate schools and programs to customize to their particular academic environment. It is also intended that the document be applicable to defining roles and responsibilities of graduate students in the student-supervisor relationship as well as for graduate supervisors and administrators of graduate programs across Canada.

Various documents have been utilized and are cited in the preparation of these guiding principles, but in particular, a document from the University of Western Ontario² has been used as a “template” for many of the principles identified here. The principles are intended mainly for research masters and doctoral programs, though they may have relevance to “professional” graduate programs where the student works with a supervisor.

B. Guiding Principles

1. A Supervisor should be identified in a timely fashion

One of the most important aspects of graduate training is the timely, clear identification of a supervisor for each graduate student. This individual plays a key role in setting the direction of the graduate student’s research. There are wide variations in the practices of finding such a supervisor, and in the timing of when supervisors are normally assigned to students across discipline, research field and graduate programs. In some fields, students are assigned supervisors before they begin their programs (e.g. commonly the case in engineering, the natural sciences, and some fields in the social sciences), while in others, supervisors are normally assigned after one or more semesters. Whatever the norm for the discipline, field or graduate program, procedures for assigning a supervisor in a timely fashion should be in place and should be followed. Such procedures should also be clearly documented and known to students and faculty.

2. Supervisory committees or equivalents should be established early.

In most graduate programs, a supervisory committee (or an equivalent, such as “second reader”) is also assigned to the graduate student. The supervisory committee normally acts as a supplementary resource for graduate students’ research, helps monitor program progress of graduate students, and approves the thesis for defense. Supervisory committees or their equivalent also can play vital roles in managing/mitigating conflict between supervisor and student should it arise. In order to obtain the maximum benefit from such a committee, it should be established as early as possible in the student’s program.

3. Expectations, roles and responsibilities of graduate students and supervisors should be made clear.

The University and/or individual graduate programs should provide guidelines on the roles of the supervisor and the graduate student. Some faculties/schools of graduate studies recommend that a written agreement or “contract” be signed by supervisor and graduate student on such issues. In these cases, it is important that students have informed consent and are not coerced into signing contracts with which they are not in agreement. Universities should provide workshops for supervisors and graduate students at which the roles of students and supervisors can be discussed.

4. Supervisors should be readily accessible to their students, and regular monitoring and feedback should be ensured.

Graduate study can be a very unfamiliar environment for new graduate students and students who are new to in Canada. Graduate programs tend to be much less structured than undergraduate programs. Also, the rich cultural diversity in our Universities means that the cultural background of graduate students can be quite different from the norms found within the institution. Because of these realities, it is important that supervisors are highly accessible to provide guidance and feedback to graduate students, but particularly to students for whom both graduate programs and Canada are new. Frequent meetings with graduate students at which academic, research and other issues are addressed, progress is reviewed, evaluation is provided, and future activities are identified are extremely important for the success of students. Most graduate programs require a written report on student’s progress to be submitted to departmental, school or faculty offices at least once per year. Such formal procedures, while essential, should not preclude more frequent evaluation of student activities and progress on a more informal basis, such as office or lab meetings, email communications and telephone conversations. When supervisors will be absent from the university for extended periods of time (e.g. field seasons; sabbatical leaves), steps need to be taken to ensure continuation of quality supervision during these absences.

5. Student-supervisor relationships should be professional.

The relationship between supervisors and students, however friendly and supportive it may become, should always be academic and professional. Relationships that are at odds with an arm’s length criterion (e.g., romantic, sexual, family ties) are unacceptable between supervisors and students. If a substantial conflict of interest arises (e.g., when supervisors develop emotional, financial and/or business arrangements with the student) mechanisms should be in place to initiate a change of supervisor.

6. Intellectual debate and challenge should be encouraged and supported.

Intellectual debate is a fundamental component of university activity. Every effort should be made by both the student and supervisor to recognize and acknowledge that a robust element of academic challenge and questioning is a normal, and indeed, healthy aspect of the student-supervisor relationship.

7. Supervisors should be mentors

Supervisors have responsibilities beyond the academic supervision of research and writing. Although the mentoring role will vary across disciplines, and will depend on the needs of the individual student, supervisors should be responsible for mentoring students in the following areas: development of appropriate professional skills; applications for funding; networking opportunities with colleagues in academia and beyond; assistance with publications; and career development.

8. Issues of intellectual property and authorship should be made clear.

Supervisors are responsible for informing students about university policies that govern intellectual property, and about any specific intellectual property issues that are likely to arise from their research. Even when issues are not clearly defined, it is important that students and supervisors have a discussion and reach an agreement early in their relationship regarding issues including rights of authorship, the order of authorship on multi-authored publications, and ownership of data. It is inappropriate for thesis supervisors to ask students to sign over their intellectual property rights as a condition of pursuing thesis research under their supervision.

9. Conflicts should be resolved at the lowest level possible.

From time to time, conflicts may emerge between the supervisor and the student. Involving more people and higher levels of authority in a conflict can result in exaggeration of the original problem. This makes it harder to resolve and causes more damage to the participants and those around them. Conflicts should be resolved as close as possible to the source of the problem (i.e., at the lowest level of administration). If the student and supervisor cannot find a solution after discussing the problem, they should then involve the supervisory committee or equivalent. If the problem cannot be resolved at the student-supervisor level, it may be dealt with by the program. The University should ensure that appropriate resources (e.g. ombudsperson, equity office) are available to assist. If no satisfactory resolution can be found at the program level, the problem may be referred to the higher administrative levels. All parties should follow procedures congruent with established policies of their universities.

10. Continuity is important in graduate supervision.

The relationship between the student and supervisor is often critical to the student's successful completion of the degree. Continuity of supervision is an integral component of this relationship, since it provides (or should provide) stability, security, an opportunity to establish sufficient mutual knowledge and trust to facilitate effective intellectual debate, and generally an environment that allows optimal focus on the goals of the graduate program. As a consequence, a change in supervisor should be made only for strong and compelling reasons such as a mutually agreed major shift in academic direction of the research, major academic disagreements and/or irreconcilable interpersonal conflicts. It is recognized that some programs may place each new incoming student with an initial or temporary supervisor. In these cases, a subsequent timely change in

supervisors, as the student clarifies research interests, is generally a routine matter.

11. Alternative supervision should be available.

Policies and practices should cover situations in which a supervisory relationship cannot be continued, so that the student can continue in the program. These should cover situations beyond the control of the student (e.g. temporary or permanent absence of supervisor), situations that may arise from conflict of interest, and situations that result from personal relations between supervisor and student. Notwithstanding possible delays in time to completion, policies and practices should ensure that a student is not penalized if a change in supervisor is necessary.

12. Students have substantial responsibilities for managing their own graduate education

Students share in the responsibility for the goals that they successfully complete their program, and that it be of high quality. They are responsible for knowing and conforming to the various policies and procedures that may concern academic and research conduct, intellectual property, human subjects, animal welfare, health and safety, as well as degree and program requirements and timelines. They may need to be proactive and take responsibility for ensuring good communication with supervisory committee members, in the meeting of timelines and other program requirements, and in seeking effective advice on academic and other matters. If problems arise in the supervisory relationship, it may be the student who needs to take action and seek advice and remedy from the department or the school. The university, graduate department and supervisor are responsible for providing an appropriate environment for high-quality graduate education, but success is ultimately in the hands of the student. It is therefore essential that universities inform students of their responsibilities, and provide them with the information and support that they need to carry out their responsibilities

C. Conclusion

As noted in these principles, successful supervision of graduate students depends on a healthy and productive relationship between the supervisor and graduate student, within a milieu that involves several other parties and conditions. At the core of successful supervisor-graduate student relationships are mutual respect and professionalism. When combined with clarity on the respective roles of students, supervisors, and others involved in the students education, and information on the policy and procedures relevant to a student's graduate program, these features will serve students, supervisors and the rest of the University community well. Our goal is to ensure the success of graduate students in their programs and in their future endeavours.

D. References

¹Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, 2007. 36th Statistical Report, 1992-2004. CAGS, Ottawa, Canada.

²Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Western Ontario, 2007. Principles and Guidelines Regarding Graduate Student Supervision.
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