

Report of The School of Graduate Studies on Common Standards and Procedures for Ph.D. Programs

As amended and Approved by Senate – May 26, 1995

Membership of the original task force: B. Woodside, Chair; B. Bhat; B. Foss; L. Kryzanowski; Y. Tsantrizos;
G. Vatisas

Preamble

In November 1992, the Dean of Graduate Studies established an advisory committee to study Ph.D. programs at Concordia University and make recommendations concerning university-wide standards related to Concordia's doctoral programs. Such standards would form the basis for the pursuit of academic excellence in Concordia's highest degree. This committee, the Advisory Committee to the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies on Common Standards and Procedures for Ph.D. Programs, submitted its report to the Dean in April 1994 and it was received by the Council of the School of Graduate Studies in May 1994.

The document brought to Council at this time has two major sections in it. The first deals with recommendations for the establishment of certain basic regulations for doctoral programs; and the second consists of a set of guidelines for programs and departments with respect to doctoral programs. These sets of recommendations have come about in an attempt to update the original report by taking into account the diverse and occasionally conflicting forms of input received from the broad graduate community across the university. The report of the advisory committee was forwarded to the four Faculty deans for feedback, as well as to all departmental chairs, graduate program directors, and in particular doctoral program directors, for specific feedback; it was also presented at the Assembly of Graduate Program Directors.

The mandate of the original committee was to review current practices in doctoral programs at Concordia and elsewhere, and to make recommendations concerning them. Because the doctoral degree is the highest degree the university offers, it deserves particular attention and support in keeping with the School's orientation toward academic excellence and the promotion of graduate studies. One of the ways in which the School can provide system-wide support for this pursuit of quality is through the development and establishment of regulations and guidelines to support and promote academic standards. This will help safeguard the reputation of the university's doctoral programs. The most stable way to develop and sustain quality work in doctoral programs is to ensure the academic calibre of our faculty. All programs at the university, and in particular those in graduate studies, rest on the appropriate calibre of the faculty which offer courses, seminars, tutorials, mentoring, supervision and research opportunities. The calibre of this foundation is essential to the overall academic well-being of graduate studies in the university. We should also establish standards for the admission of quality graduate students who will be most suited to work with the faculty and their research specializations. Both of these, faculty and students, should be supported by a fitting program management structure.

As noted in the advisory committee's original report:

The aim of Ph.D. studies is to prepare the student for active scholarship and research, and to be competitive in his/her field. Excellent programs focus on the student's capacity to produce original contributions in a context of freedom of inquiry and expression. However, in order to achieve the above, standards and procedures that are most likely to lead to a successful doctoral program must be in place.

In the first instance the university must hire and maintain faculty that will be able to fulfill its missions which includes a high priority being given to graduate education. The enrolment of only those doctoral students who are most likely to succeed in the program is also one of the most important elements. In the case of foreign students, evidence of proficiency in the language of instruction and proof of financial self-sufficiency will save the student and the university a lot of time, aggravation and valuable resources. (p.1)

The diversity of programs and orientations in graduate studies makes the task of developing very specific university-wide uniform standards for all programs a daunting one. In keeping with this diversity and in

keeping with the School's obligations, the School should establish basic principles of excellence and operation. The advisory committee proposed a wide variety of recommendations, some of a legislative nature, some of a program management nature, and still others as guidelines or suggestions. Some were suggestions for the application process, the dissemination of information, cost effectiveness, graduate appeal procedures, etc. Clearly, many of the recommendations were already operational in many of our excellent programs. Some of the recommendations in the original report are self-evident to many faculty. Happily, several of the items which arose in the original study as matters of concern have already been addressed through the natural process of maturation.

The reason that some recommendations are in the form of legislative action and others in the form of guidelines, is that the former were deemed to be essential features for the support of quality doctoral education while the guidelines were seen as important for consideration, but with more local variation for implementation at the individual program level. They may be implemented in a variety of ways depending on the specific needs and circumstances of individual programs and student clientele. The recommendations for legislative action are geared strongly to ensuring the formal base-line academic quality of programs. These proposed regulations would constitute a university-wide minimum and leave the way open for individual programs to be more stringent in their requirements. Programs are encouraged to view these proposals as a fundamental starting point on which further excellence may be built. In principle, the purpose of these recommendations is to ensure elemental academic quality for all doctoral programs and to help provide means to ensure the entry of highly qualified students to these programs.

The guidelines are geared to aid in the effective administration of programs and to help pave a way for dealing in a clear and informative way with students and applicants. These guidelines are also directed to programs but not with the same direct impact in mind as the more formal recommendations. There is considerable variety throughout disciplines, even though there are certain consistent patterns. The guidelines are designed to allow flexibility yet present a coherent picture of program operation across the university.

The categories of recommendations are: 1. Faculty who participate in doctoral programs; 2. Thesis supervisory committee membership; 3. Program requirements for students; and 4. program management structures. The guidelines fall into the following categories: 1. Information availability; 2. Program planning for students; and 3. Program management.

There are four appendices to this report: 1. a summary of the recommendations in this report; 2. a summary of the guidelines in this report; 3. a summary of the recommendations in the original advisory committee's report; and 4. other issues.

Recommendations

1. Faculty Participation in Doctoral Programs:

It is virtually self-evident that the strength of doctoral programs rests on the calibre of faculty who participate in them and who oversee and supervise students. It is they who form the foundations of requisite specialization and expertise on which the various elements of the doctoral program are built. It is from within this group that the curriculum and advanced research are developed and it is this group which oversees the admission of qualified students in keeping with the ability of the department to manage the students' programs of study. Doctoral programs offer the university's highest and most prestigious degree and they are a significant signpost of the university's reputation in the broader academic community. In light of such expectations, we recommend certain base criteria for participation in doctoral programs to ensure that the university grounds its activities in the highest standards. Participation in doctoral programs may consist of one or several components depending on the level of faculty involvement, viz., advising or mentoring students in the early stages of admission and study, teaching courses and seminars or offering reading courses, directing laboratories, creative activities and other experimental or field work, overseeing comprehensive examinations and supervising students' dissertations. In order to secure the most solid foundation for doctoral programs as well as for the appropriate education of doctoral students, faculty should have successfully undertaken this training themselves.

Recommendation 1:

That all faculty who participate in doctoral programs have an earned doctoral degree relevant to the field.

Recommendation 2:

That faculty who participate in doctoral programs must be active in scholarly research within the last five years as evidenced by peer reviewed publications, grants or other such expressions appropriate to the discipline.

2. Criteria for Faculty Participation in the Ph.D. Thesis Supervisory Committee:

The mission of the Ph.D. Thesis Supervisory Committee is to facilitate the student's acquisition of expertise in the discipline and area of specialization, and to encourage the student to think critically and make significant contributions to the field. Some programs establish such a committee very early in the student's career, occasionally even with the admission of the student, while others work in less structured ways with the establishment of such a committee only after comprehensive examinations. In what follows, we are discussing only the thesis supervisory committee and not, for example, advisory committees which might be formed to help students in the early stages of their study, but whose function does not include thesis supervision. The Ph.D. Thesis Supervisory Committee should consist of a minimum of three faculty members, a supervisor and at least two other members with appropriate expertise in the field. As noted in the original report, "The Ph.D. supervisor should be an individual holding a faculty position at the assistant, associate, or full professor level who has been approved by... the appropriate Ph.D. Program Committee." (p.9) Such faculty members will be active and productive in scholarly research over the previous five years as shown by publications, analyses of exhibitions or performances, grants, and the like.

Recommendation 3:

That every Ph.D. thesis supervisor have tenure or be in a tenure-track position in the University; and that they have expertise in the specialization of the research of the student.

In most circumstances, the full mentoring for the candidate's research project would be managed by the supervisor and the Thesis Supervisory Committee. In some cases, the candidate's research might require expertise in addition to that of the Thesis Supervisory Committee. In other cases it might be appropriate to involve individuals holding formal research positions in the University. In all cases the co-supervisor must meet the general qualifications that tenure track faculty must meet, as determined by the Department Personnel Committee and the Graduate Program Committee.

Recommendation 4:

That individuals without tenure or not in tenure track positions in the University, may be appointed to co-supervisory positions when the student's supervision would benefit from the additional expertise provided by the co-supervisor, or when these individuals hold a formal association with the university through a recognized research funding agency (e.g. as University Research Fellow, Chercheur Boursier, Research Professor, etc.) In both cases the co-supervisor must be deemed to have met all other qualifications for supervision by the Graduate Program Committee.

3. Program Requirements for Students:

The advisory committee noted that "To ensure the quality of its students and equitable treatment for all applicants, an adequate and consistent evaluation process should be applied to all applicants. It is important that admissions decisions be made by an admissions committee and not by an individual in the department or program. Such a committee has the responsibility to establish and ensure admission standards for the program to safeguard the quality of students admitted to the program. The composition of the admission committee should be decided by the Ph.D. Program Committee." (p.5)

The proposed admission regulations are regarded as a minimum for quality doctoral programs; individual programs are encouraged to develop more stringent admission requirements in keeping with the needs and

aspirations of the faculty. The regulations address basic academic standards, language needs and time limits.

While it may be generally agreed that there will be some variation in specific academic requirements for admission to the diversity of programs across the university, it seems equally clear that base-line standards will only help to establish the reputation of Concordia's highest degree.

These fundamental expectations are to be understood in the context of certain disciplines which permit, and occasionally promote, what is called "fast tracking", i.e., entry to a doctoral program from mid-way through a masters program or occasionally directly upon graduation from a bachelor's degree. The specific criteria for such admissions would be different from basic ones for students with masters degrees and would be seen as an exception. Students admitted in this fashion would display outstanding academic qualities such as their ability to undertake independent research. Supplemental requirements which would permit fast-tracking must be made transparent in the calendar and address the significant differences between the two types of admissions.

Recommendation 5:

That programs require candidates for admission to doctoral programs to demonstrate achievement and potential as evidenced in previous academic accomplishments, such as: G.P.A.; letters of reference; publications; portfolios; awards; and the like.

Recommendation 6:

That programs require candidates for admission to have completed a master's degree, or if programs permit admission without a master's degree, that the program delineate precise academic conditions for such admission in the graduate calendar.

The advisory committee clearly noted several concerns about international students, one of them related to matters of proficiency in the English language (p.5). International students contribute a great deal to graduate studies at Concordia. In order for students to receive full benefit from their study, it is important that they show proficiency in the language of instruction. This proficiency has benefits for spoken communication and serves as an essential base for the formulation of proposals and the writing of dissertations. International students whose first language is not English should meet a minimum score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language, TOEFL, or its equivalent (e.g., other standardized proficiency tests) to be eligible for admission into any doctoral program.

Recommendation 7:

That the minimum TOEFL admission requirement for doctoral programs for international students whose first language is not English, be a score of 550 (or its equivalent in other acceptable standard tests).

Current regulations for doctoral time limits at Concordia are related to "admission to candidacy" and not to original registration in programs. This gives rise to situations of inequitable treatment since some students will have significantly longer than others to finish their degrees; it also gives rise to circumstances in which students frequently take very long to complete degrees, calling into question the currency of the research and findings articulated in dissertations. The advisory committee indicated it favoured that "The SGS should adopt and adhere to a maximum allowable length of time for a student to remain in a Ph.D program. The maximum duration should be measured from the date of the student's original registration..." The proposed time limit may be shortened by individual programs in keeping with their own needs and such differences must be noted in the graduate calendar. In Quebec for example, the Université de Montréal allows 5 years for full-time students from original registration for doctoral programs and 6 years for part-time students. This assumes entry after a master's degree. UQAM has variable time limits ranging from 4 to 6 years for full-time students and 5 to 8 years for part-time students. McGill allows 5 years from the end of residency requirements.

Recommendation 8:

That the time limit for a doctoral program be 6 years of full-time study or 8 years of part-time study from the time of original registration in the program.

Under exceptional circumstances the time limit may be extended upon the recommendation of the Ph.D. Program Committee and the agreement of the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies.

4. Program Management:

The advisory committee noted that the administration of programs varies greatly across the University. When the advisory committee wrote its original report, some departments had no graduate program committee, and some graduate programs were administered solely by the graduate program director in consultation with the chair. Since that study, this state of affairs has changed, and now all doctoral programs are appropriately managed by Ph.D. Program Committees. Evidently, this is prudent for such reasons as fairness, consistency, broad consultation and consensus, appropriate cross departmental input, distribution of administrative work, equity, academic and supervisory planning, and the like. The following recommendation should be seen as a rule for existing doctoral programs and as one which will also govern newly developed ones.

Recommendation 9:

That each doctoral program establish a Ph.D. Program Committee for administering the program.

The membership of the program committee is best decided by the department itself in keeping with the university-wide standards set by the School of Graduate Studies. This committee should include wide representation of the faculty involved in graduate education. Given its mandate to manage the doctoral program, this committee should be central in determining active faculty, admission committees and precise admission standards. The Ph.D. Program Committee would establish admission criteria, standards, procedures and course offerings as they relate to the particular graduate program, and to the base-line criteria set by the School of Graduate Studies.

Recommendation 10:

That the Ph.D. Program Committee make decisions concerning which faculty satisfy the required qualifications to participate in the various activities of the program.

As noted above, the admission of quality students is of paramount importance to graduate studies at Concordia. In order to ensure across the board fairness and appropriate planning by the program, it seems evident that decisions on admissions are best made by an admission committee rather than by an individual alone, or even simply a GPD in conjunction with a departmental chair. This is now the case with all doctoral programs across the university and should be so. In many programs, the Ph.D. Program Committee may also serve as the admission committee; for those programs in which this is not the case, a separate committee should be established to address this matter.

Recommendation 11:

That each Ph.D. Program establish an Admissions Committee consisting of a minimum of three members; and that all admission recommendations be made by this committee.

Any exceptions to the recommendations in this report must be approved by the School of Graduate Studies.

Guidelines**1. Information Availability**

It is of paramount importance that students be given as complete, transparent and accurate information as possible with respect to all aspects of the program and any other matters directly related to their enrolment

at Concordia. From the academic point of view students would be best informed if, as the original report indicated, they received "proper information concerning the expertise of the faculty, sources of student support, availability of resources and a clear description of the programs requirements..." (p.1) early in the application and admission process. In addition, once students are admitted to and registered in programs, their academic planning needs would be best served with a clear outline of formal requirements, not only of the academic content of programs but the various time schedules which they will be expected to follow. This would include for example, the timing and credit value of comprehensive examinations, the timing and placement of research proposals, as well as full information about the regulations of the School of Graduate Studies concerning the writing and defence of dissertations. Equally importantly, students should have some basic idea of their rights and responsibilities within the context of graduate study.

Guideline 1:

That each doctoral program compile a complete list of faculty members involved in the program along with full lists of their specific fields of expertise as expressed in recent peer-reviewed publications, etc.; and that this documentation be made available to all applicants.

Guideline 2:

That each doctoral program outline in detail the sources of possible funding from within the program itself, such as research and teaching assistantships; and that criteria for teaching assistantships be stated clearly in program literature; and that information concerning costs related to the program be transmitted to applicants and students.

2. Program Planning

Certain information is important in the application phase in order to have the most informed applicants and help render the overall process effective. In addition, once students are registered, a fuller complement of information should be forthcoming to assist them in understanding the circumstances peculiar to Concordia.

Guideline 3:

That doctoral programs establish rules for the timing of comprehensive examinations and for the timing of the research proposals; that these regulations take into account not only the course content of the program, but also the time limits for doctoral programs; and that these regulations be published in program literature.

Guideline 4:

That the School of Graduate Studies forward to all newly registered students literature on all basic regulations and definitions pertinent to doctoral students.

3. Program Management

In addition to setting up mechanisms for helping students coordinate with potential supervisors, to plan their academic schedule and to be informed about possible sources of funding, it seems reasonable that the program itself should be clear about the place of the Graduate Program Director in the program. This person should certainly have experience in graduate studies, although the exact level of involvement is best established by the Ph.D. program committee.

Guideline 5:

That the Graduate Program Director be a faculty member who participates in the doctoral program; and that the GPD be chosen in consultation with the Ph.D. Program Committee.