



**TO:** Mike Mahon  
President and Vice Chancellor

**DATE:** October 3, 2019

**FROM:** Alan Siaroff  
Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee

**RE:** Ph.D. Program Academic Quality Assurance Review

In accordance with the U of L *Academic Quality Assurance Policy and Process*, the Academic Quality Assurance Committee approved the review of the Ph.D. program at its September 27, 2019 meeting. The Self Study Committee for this review comprised Craig Coburn (Program Review Coordinator), Claudia Gonzalez, Tony Russell, and Louise Barrett.

The review produced five documents:<sup>1</sup>

1. Self Study Report. Written by the Self Study Committee. Received March 20, 2019.
2. External Review Report. Written by Janet Giltrow (UBC) and Jaqueline McLeod Rogers (University of Winnipeg), based on a site visit on April 15-16, 2019 and received April 22, 2019.
3. Program Response. Written by the Self Study Committee. Received May 22, 2019.
4. Deans' Response. Written by Helen Kelley, Interim Dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Matthew Letts, Interim Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science. Received August 29, 2019.
5. Reply to Deans' Response. Written by the Self Study Committee. Received September 17, 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> All documents are available upon request.

## ***Self Study Report***

Strengths noted in the body of the report:

- The Ph.D. program has attracted students from around the world and across Canada, has 116 current students, and over 100 alumni.
- A survey of faculty, students, and alumni found the strengths of the program to be: high quality faculty; good student completion times; high student satisfaction; and personalized development opportunities.
- Recruitment efforts have borne fruit with a consistent growth in applications and enrolments over the past decade. There has been a dramatic increase in international and non-local domestic students.
- Library resource concerns have been addressed by the expansion of the Library's digital holdings.
- Student space concerns have been eased by a reserved Library space for graduate students and the development of two significant academic buildings.
- The School of Graduate Studies has added administrative positions.
- Student satisfaction with coursework and instruction is on par with or slightly better than other institutions nationally.
- The Ph.D. program in the sciences is very flexible with regards to coursework and can be tailored to student needs.
- Faculty members are engaged in world-class research and are committed to graduate education.
- There is a vibrant and developing graduate culture on campus.
- The average number of semesters for degree completion has remained stable over the past decade.
- The relative gap between the number of male and female students has closed to the point that it is now close to 50/50.
- Employment rates for graduates are strong.
- Research facilities and equipment rival those of much larger institutions.

Weaknesses and challenges noted in the body of the report:

- A survey of faculty, students, and alumni found the weaknesses of the program to be: lack of coordination in program governance; high faculty workload; and low levels of staffing in program administration.
- Determining an appropriate balance between graduate and undergraduate activities for faculty members has been problematic.
- Among the faculty there is confusion over the program structure and administration.
- Provincial government funding cuts have restricted or stalled funding levels for graduate students.
- Federal government restructuring of research grants has limited the available funding for graduate students.
- The continued success of the program requires clear policies, improved administrative structures, and workload balance.
- Integration of graduate teaching load in faculty evaluation has to be addressed.
- Institutional funding has not increased in many years due to the budgetary model for supporting the School of Graduate Studies.

- The administrative structure results in a lack of transparency, and it means that sometimes a decision that was made outside of the School of Graduate Studies is thought to have come from within that office.
- Though the number of graduate-level courses has grown in recent years, there is still a perception among students that there is a lack of graduate courses.
- Students are often unconvinced of the reason for their courses.
- Faculty receive no teaching credit for graduate student supervision.
- There is no formal method for evaluating a faculty member's performance as a supervisor.
- Hiring has been limited due to budgetary constraints.
- Faculty have concerns regarding the evaluation of international student candidates for entry into the program.
- Student advising needs attention.
- Compared to larger institutions there are fewer technical support staff for research equipment.
- Workloads for administrative support personnel are increasing.
- The GPA-based student funding model means that some students cannot access all of the internal funding sources and rely on the external funding of the supervisor.
- Some departments feel that teaching assistantships should not be merit based.
- The devolution of some decision making from the School of Graduate Studies to the departmental level in Arts and Science is an ongoing challenge.

Specific questions for the External Reviewers:

1. What recommendations would improve the quality of the Ph.D. program?
2. How can the program improve its reputation and attract high quality students?
3. Are there aspects of the curriculum that can be improved?
4. How can the program get an appropriate balance of undergraduate and graduate priorities?
5. How can the quality of applicants be assessed fairly?
6. How do other universities assess the qualifications of international students?
7. How can student advising be improved?
8. How can the program improve its strategies for monitoring student progress?
9. Should faculty be compensated for Ph.D. supervision?
10. What are best practices for achieving balance in administering a Ph.D. program?
11. Is the current graduate student funding model appropriate?
12. Should all Ph.D. students admitted be given a graduate assistantship?
13. How can Ph.D. program governance be more efficiently organized?
14. To what extent should decisions and activities be devolved to the departmental level?

## ***External Review Report***

The External Review Report noted several challenges for the PhD program:

- There is a lack of resources to make the changes needed to move the U of L forward in its transition to a comprehensive university.
- The centralized budget process is opaque and not tied to performance measures and metrics at the program level.
- There is reluctance to devolve authority to the administrative levels (Faculty or program level) where decision-making is most likely to be effective.
- There are no clear and transparent policies and procedures for areas like: setting enrolment targets; expectations for program outcomes; and rationalizing budgets with actual expenditures and program needs.
- For international students, providing documentation in the application process can be expensive.
- GPAs from foreign institutions are difficult to calculate as they have varying grading practices, norms, and reputations.
- After being admitted to the program there are no opportunities to compete for funding support.
- There are few graduate-level courses.
- Some programs require several semesters of seminar-type courses that have little value at the doctoral level.
- There are vague and uncertain rules and regulations that are unevenly applied.
- It is difficult to get reliable information about degree progress, reporting requirements, and student responsibilities.
- There are unclear rules about advising.
- Faculty are concerned about workload issues and the proper recognition of graduate supervision.
- Faculty members' recommendations for admission and ranking of applicants are sometimes ignored or adjusted by the Program Committee.
- Many students feel they are not getting the guidance and support they need, when they need it.
- School of Graduate Studies staff feel overburdened and stressed.
- There is an unusually large number of degree programs for a small university.
- The annual allocation of graduate assistantships is not keeping pace with expanding need as the graduate programs grow.
- Programs that receive Graduate Assistantship allocations are obligated to find work for the admitted graduate students, even if such work does not exist. This results in uneven distribution of duties for the Graduate Assistant, some duties being essential and others non-essential to the program.
- The names of the Ph.D. science programs are misleading or detrimental to the students.
- Students in the same program are not part of a coherent program as they are treated differently, depending on their supervisor's home department, and are assigned to discipline-based departments, where they have different course requirements and sit different comprehensive exams.
- SGS staff handle a large volume of paper-based forms and spend significant time on data entry.

The report included the following recommendations for improvement:

1. Realign human and financial resources to achieve faculty workload outcomes consistent with a Ph.D.-granting university. There are several possible options:
  - Find additional external resources, by lobbying the Alberta government or using the Development Office, to support the institution as a whole or alternatively the needs of strategic programs.
  - Reduce the number of degree programs offered and redeploy resources to programs that have strategic value.
  - Develop a “Teaching Professor” track that is focused on excellence in pedagogy and is equally valued for tenure and promotion.
  - Allow departments to declare their priorities regarding undergraduate and graduate programming.
  - Explore strategies to efficiently allocate resources and free up faculty resources for redeployment in graduate courses. Possible strategies include reducing the number of courses offered by a department through streamlining the curriculum, and using senior Ph.D. students as lecturers in some courses.
2. Reevaluate student financial aid:
  - Strike a committee that evaluates options for revising how financial aid for graduate students is distributed to programs. Members: Dean of SGS; Dean of Arts and Science; senior finance officer; chairs of graduate programs; chairs of academic departments; and elected representatives from faculty, staff, and students.
  - Base the amount currently allocated to departments for Graduate Assistantships on metrics like number of students, quality of new applicants, and others (e.g., number of publications per student, number of conference presentations per student, time to completion, external awards, letters of recommendation).
  - Split the amount currently allocated for Graduate Assistantships into two budgets, one for Teaching Assistantships and the other for merit-based scholarships. Assess which undergraduate courses need Teaching Assistants, estimate the number of TAs required in Arts and Science, and use this estimate to allocate financial resources. Department chairs that have been given a TA budget will then assess if graduate students in their programs can handle TA requirements. The remainder of the allocation will be for the scholarship budget. Make the value of scholarship awards flexible, with a base award plus increments.
  - The School of Graduate Studies should develop a global policy on if a student that receives an external scholarship will have internal funding withdrawn.
3. Restructure management responsibilities and shared services.

Explore ways to restructure management responsibilities to produce more effective processes, procedures, and outcomes for the Ph.D. programs. Devolve oversight responsibilities for day-to-day management tasks to the Faculty level. This will involve: transferring the GA budget for PhD science programs to Arts and Science; and central support for two new staff members for the Arts and Science Dean’s office.
4. Review admission criteria for Ph.D. applicants.

Strike a committee to: define metrics to be considered when admitting Ph.D. students and assigning them financial aid; and establish procedures for Ph.D. student admissions that ensure equitable outcomes and take into account student quality and faculty needs.

5. Rename or reaffirm Ph.D. science programs.

Using broad consultation, decide to either embrace the current, transdisciplinary Ph.D. science programs and develop management structures that map onto them, or move to disciplinary based programs that are named accordingly.

6. Improve the web presence.

The SGS website should have more direct links to the Ph.D. science programs and links to faculty member websites. The individual Ph.D. science programs should develop web content that: describes past and current research; graduate student opportunities; and department-specific policies and procedures. Students should be able to find information quickly when they need it.

7. Make the transition to electronic forms.

**Program Response**

The Program Response addressed the recommendations from the External Review Report:

<p>1. <b>Realign human and financial resources to achieve faculty workload outcomes consistent with a Ph.D.-granting university.</b></p>	<p>Agreed. However, the Self Study Committee feels that the suggestion to create a Teaching Professor track will result in a split between research and teaching faculty. Graduate teaching must be recognized as teaching and should be accounted for in faculty teaching load assignments.</p>
<p>2. <b>Reevaluate student financial aid.</b></p>	<p>The Self Study Committee supports reallocating Graduate Assistantship budgets to departments and the competitive awarding of a Graduate Assistantship based on departmental needs.</p>
<p>3. <b>Restructure management responsibilities and shared services.</b></p>	<p>Agreed.</p>
<p>4. <b>Review admission criteria for Ph.D. applicants.</b></p>	<p>Agreed. This is needed due to growth in the Ph.D. program.</p>
<p>5. <b>Rename or reaffirm Ph.D. science programs.</b></p>	<p>Agreed. The U of L needs to move to disciplinary-based programs.</p>
<p>6. <b>Improve the web presence.</b></p>	<p>Agreed. This would help grow the program.</p>
<p>7. <b>Make the transition to electronic forms.</b></p>	<p>Agreed. But this will be a difficult change to implement.</p>

## **Deans' Response**

The Deans' Response addressed the recommendations as discussed in the External Reviewers Report and Program Response:

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| <b>1. Realign human and financial resources to achieve faculty workload outcomes consistent with a Ph.D.-granting university.</b> | <p>The Deans will work with senior administration to communicate to the provincial government the economic contributions of graduate students and obtain increased funding for graduate students.</p> <p>The suggestion to reduce the number of degree programs is not supported. Doing so would affect the U of L's mission as a comprehensive university, and would not produce significant cost savings because of the sharing of courses across programs.</p> <p>The goals of the suggested Teaching Professor track are mostly addressed with the existing Instructor classification and the option for professors to emphasize teaching in their professional activities.</p> <p>The Deans support continued departmental autonomy in decision making regarding the emphasis on undergraduate vs. graduate programming.</p> <p>The Deans support some redeployment of resources towards supporting graduate enrolment targets for the institution. The current reallocation of financial support for occasional sessional appointments for Ph.D. students should be expanded.</p> |
| <b>2. Reevaluate student financial aid.</b>   | <p>The Deans will establish a mechanism to evaluate options for restructuring financial aid. The evaluation will include: consideration of the potential impacts on other academic units and programs; identification of additional external funding sources; and assessment of the contributions of faculty research grants.</p> <p>The School of Graduate Studies will work with the Faculty of Arts and Science to explore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Developing an agreement template for assigning Graduate Assistantship funds to departments and program areas and automated processes for the assignment of these funds. The agreement template should include reporting requirements.</li><li>• In the Graduate Assistantship budgeting process, assigning more functional responsibility and accountability to academic units, departments, and areas.</li></ul>  |
| <b>3. Restructure management responsibilities and shared services.</b>  | <p>The academic units must be properly resourced to manage growth in graduate student numbers and in graduate programming.</p> <p>The Faculty of Arts and Science supports assuming increased administrative and operational responsibility for some aspects of graduate studies. Examples of aspects that could be transferred to Arts and Science are: recruitment planning; recommendation for admission; managing the allocated financial support; assigning and coordinating graduate</p>  |
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	<p>assistantships; graduate student advising; and managing student progress.</p> <p>The Faculty also supports giving to Department Graduate Education Committees and Department Chairs some increased authority to advise students on program issues.</p> <p>The FAS and SGS should work with IT to develop appropriate electronic workflows.</p>
<p>4. Review admission criteria for Ph.D. applicants.</p>	<p>The FAS and SGS will develop orientation and training sessions in admission procedures for faculty and staff, and will work with the Program Chairs Committee to optimize Ph.D. admission processes and criteria.</p> <p>The FAS and SGS will work with the Program Chairs Committee to convert the present set of criteria for financial aid decisions to a broad range of metrics for merit-based financial aid and to develop an adjudication template based on these metrics to be used for funding allocations during the admission cycles for graduate programs.</p>
<p>5. Rename or reaffirm Ph.D. science programs.</p>	<p>The FAS and SGS support the development of disciplinary PhD programs in areas that show academic capacity and student and labour market demand.</p> <p>The existing interdisciplinary programs will continue to be supported.</p>
<p>6. Improve the web presence.</p>	<p>The FAS and SGS will continue to support the U of L's Digital First project which is transitioning web design to an external focus for marketing and recruitment.</p> <p>The FAS will work with the departments to provide timely content for SGS web pages on graduate programs and faculty members' research areas.</p>
<p>7. Make the transition to electronic forms.</p>	<p>The SGS will work with IT to design and implement electronic workflows for all graduate programs.</p>

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### ***Reply to Deans' Response***

In their optional reply to the Dean's Response, the Self Study Committee noted:

- The undergraduate teaching load does not allow graduate teaching without additional teaching resources.
- The External Reviewers recommended pursuing discipline-specific degree naming to focus program offerings.
- The recommendation that there be a method to evaluate graduate student workload as part of a faculty member's workload should be addressed.



The Academic Quality Assurance Committee is satisfied that the Ph.D. Program Academic Quality Assurance Review has followed the U of L's academic quality assurance process appropriately, and acknowledges the successful completion of the review.

Sincerely,



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Alan Siaroff

Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee

Cc: Andrew Hakin, Provost and Vice President (Academic)