

**UNDERSTANDING ACCESSIBILITY IN GRADUATE EDUCATION FOR  
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN CANADA**

**Executive Summary and List of Recommendations**

**Of the**

**National Graduate Experience Taskforce  
Empanelled by the  
National Educational Association of Disabled Students**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students who graduate from Masters and PhD programs make substantive contributions to their communities on a regional, provincial and federal level within their employment and other contributions, such as their volunteer work. There is to date a critical lack of research and information about issues faced by graduate students with disabilities. As the number of students with disabilities entering graduate education in Canada continues to increase, disability service providers, financial aid administrators, student life professionals, students themselves, graduate departments, deans and student services directors, and universities as a whole are having to develop new strategies to facilitate their success. This effort is also driven in part by the need to be responsive to new and evolving provincial legislative landscapes in Canada. Institutions are driving policy and practice guidelines on limited, anecdotal and local experience. No significant research on this population has been undertaken within Canada or the United States, and demographic data sets are lacking. In this environment, a number of myths and misperceptions have arisen, which can evolve policy and practice in potentially inappropriate directions. Therefore, there is a significant requirement to have a detailed understanding, both quantitative and qualitative, of the experiences of students with disabilities in graduate studies.

To address this knowledge gap, the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) empanelled the National Taskforce on the Experience of Graduate Students with Disabilities, populated with content and subject matter experts drawn from multiple sectors across the Canadian post-secondary landscape. The Taskforce, after consideration of the issues, chose to undertake a multi-pronged approach, including a comprehensive online national survey of graduate students with disabilities; institutional surveys; focus groups of professionals involved in addressing the issues faced by graduate students with disabilities; key informant interviews with subject matter experts; data mining of extant relevant surveys; and a detailed national and international literature review.

Our overall goals were to:

(1) review and discuss the academic experience of graduate students with disabilities, through exploration of graduate students' experiences in the context of the last twenty years' advancement in technology, attitudes, and legislation;

(2) develop a "landscape snapshot" of the current system issues faced by graduate students with disabilities; and,

(3) develop testable and implementable recommendations around the continued improvement of graduate experience of students with disabilities.

The outcomes of the project focused on the major myths and perceptions surrounding the academic experience of graduate students with disabilities, identified through our research efforts. These include:

- Issues surrounding expected vs. actual times to program completion;
- The disconnect between student training in academic integrity issues and institutional perceptions around the impact of accommodations on academic integrity;
- The ability to achieve the “necessary competencies” of graduate programs and disciplines;
- The nature and cost of academic accommodations and undue hardship;
- The differences between the accommodation requirements of undergraduate and graduate programs of study; and,
- The importance of faculty education in understanding the complexities of the interface between disability issues and graduate education.

Major themes included a renewed appreciation for the complexity of the barriers faced by trainees (graduate students and postdoctoral scholars) with disabilities within the research enterprise; the critical need for appropriate resources and frameworks that can be implemented at an institutional level to enhance the participation and success of trainees with disabilities; and, the national and international context of disability issues within the research enterprise, as well as the importance of ongoing data gathering and advocacy approaches in driving the inclusion, participation and success of postdoctoral scholars and other trainees in the research enterprise.

Finally, of note was the observation that, while students with disabilities faced complex challenges to their success within graduate education, many issues were at their root matters of the philosophy of graduate education, as informed by the disability context. The project's findings translate into key messages and resources that institutions and research trainees with disabilities may apply to enhance the inclusion, participation and success of this population within the research enterprise.

The findings from this unique first-in-class, multi-stakeholder research effort into the issues and barriers faced by graduate students with disabilities in Canada were used to evolve a series of policy, practice and professional development recommendations with three broad themes:

- (1) Increasing our knowledge of students with disabilities in graduate education;

(2) Leveling the playing field and providing equal opportunities to graduate students with disabilities; and

(3) Increasing the effectiveness of academic and co-curricular accommodations in the graduate environment.

These findings and recommendations will lead to changes in professional development and continuing education for faculty and service providers; alter the nature of student preparation for graduate education; significantly impact institutional, provincial and national policy and practice; and, enhance the potential for success of graduate students with disabilities in their programs of study and chosen careers.

## **LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **PART 1: INCORPORATING REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 1: STRENGTHEN THE STUDENT-SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIP FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN GRADUATE EDUCATION**

We recommend that efforts be undertaken to educate both students and supervisors about their rights, obligations and responsibilities, in particular those that relate to disability in the context of graduate education in order to foster strong relationships and student success.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 2: CLARIFY ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATE PROGRAMS**

We recommend that efforts be undertaken to educate both students and supervisors about essential requirements in graduate education and within their field of study, and their interfaces with disability and accommodation. Sentence about what the research indicated this efforts should look like?

#### **RECOMMENDATION 3: DEVELOP ACCOMMODATION FRAMEWORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF GRADUATE EDUCATION**

We recommend that the accommodation framework and models in use for graduate settings be examined and improved to better ensure the success of graduate students with disabilities. How are we defining success? Completion? Also, what specifically needs to be incorporated?

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4: PROMOTE AWARENESS ABOUT DISCLOSURE IN THE GRADUATE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT**

We recommend efforts be undertaken to provide educational materials and supports to service providers and students transitioning into graduate school on disclosure. These supports are intended to ensure the full awareness of the nuances of disclosure in the graduate environment, and to familiarize students and faculty with their responsibilities under provincial and national legislation.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 5: IMPROVE PROCEDURES TO ACCESS ALTERNATIVE FORMAT MATERIALS**

We recommend that academic departments and university libraries work together to determine ways to enhance the provision of alternative format materials to graduate students with disabilities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 6: BUILD FLEXIBLE ACCOMMODATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

We recommend that policies and practices around accommodating graduate students with disabilities account for creativity and flexibility in accommodation planning and accomplishing graduate degree requirements, and that eligibility guidelines for scholarships, academic employment opportunities and other components of the graduate student environment take this creativity into account.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 7: CLARIFY ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT POLICIES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

We recommend that steps be undertaken to appropriately clarify or develop policies and practices around disability, disclosure and accommodation in the academic employment setting, and that these be disseminated to students, union staff, faculty and departmental administrative staff, as appropriate.

### **PART 2: LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 8: DEVELOP FINANCIAL AID POLICIES TO HELP REMOVE BARRIERS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

We recommend the development of policies, practices and resources aimed at ameliorating financial barriers to graduate education.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 9: ESTABLISH NATIONAL FUNDING FOR DISABILITY-RELATED ACCOMMODATIONS IN GRADUATE EDUCATION**

We recommend that national granting agencies (specifically, SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR) research and establish appropriate funding sources and mechanisms to provide centralized national disability accommodation funding for researchers.

#### RECOMMENDATION 10: REVIEW EXISTING POLICIES TO ENSURE THE ACCESSIBILITY OF EXISTING TRI-COUNCIL AND CHARITABLE FOUNDATIONS FUNDING AND SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS

We recommend that funding agencies undertake reviews of their practices and policies to ensure accessibility and full inclusion of students with disabilities.

#### RECOMMENDATION 11: DEVELOP MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS AND POLICIES FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

We recommend that policies, practices and resources designed to support students with mental health disabilities be established.

#### RECOMMENDATION 12: ENCOURAGE UNIVERSAL DESIGN IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

We recommend the adoption of a set of consensus “principles of success” arising from universal design concepts to foster the enhancement of the graduate student experience for students with disabilities on campus.

#### RECOMMENDATION 13: RECOGNIZE STUDENT SUCCESS

We recommend that institutions and relevant national associations should consider methods by which their promotional campaigns around academic achievements in graduate studies may be designed to be inclusive of and enhance participation and success of students with disabilities.

#### RECOMMENDATION 14: REMOVE BARRIERS TO THE POSTDOCTORAL EXPERIENCE FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

We recommend that appropriate steps be undertaken at the institutional, organizational and national levels to identify and implement solutions that would enhance access to and participation in the postdoctorate for persons with disabilities.

### **PART 3: BUILDING KNOWLEDGE**

#### RECOMMENDATION 15: CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH ABOUT EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

We recommend that coordinated efforts be undertaken at national and institutional levels to gather on an ongoing basis relevant demographic information about this population.

#### RECOMMENDATION 16: ESTABLISH DATA COLLECTION METHODS TO RESEARCH THE EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

We recommend that a multi-pronged and ongoing data collection effort, integrated with data collection for the overall graduate student population where possible, be established by institutions and relevant provincial and/or national organizations, as appropriate.

#### RECOMMENDATION 17: PROTECT STUDENT PRIVACY IN THE MANAGEMENT OF DATA

We recommend that a series of standards and practices be put in place to protect student anonymity and confidentiality in the analysis of large datasets relevant to the student experience of graduate students with disabilities.

#### RECOMMENDATION 18: REMOVE BARRIERS TO CO- AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR PROGRAMMING IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

We recommend that efforts be undertaken to explore the interface between disability and co/extra-curricular programming.

#### RECOMMENDATION 19: IDENTIFY BEST PRACTICES FOR TRANSITION PLANNING INTO GRADUATE EDUCATION

We recommend that further research to identify best practices for transition planning for students with disabilities intending to pursue graduate education be undertaken, to enhance supports that can be developed and implemented for students with disabilities intending to pursue graduate studies.

#### RECOMMENDATION 20: IDENTIFY BEST PRACTICES FOR TRANSITION PLANNING INTO THE LABOUR MARKET POST-GRADUATION

We recommend that further research to identify best practices for career and transition planning for students with disabilities transitioning out of their graduate programs be undertaken, to enhance labour market outcomes and measures for students with disabilities.

#### RECOMMENDATION 21: BETTER UNDERSTAND BARRIERS IN THE GRADUATE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

We recommend that further research on the issues and barriers faced by students with disabilities during the recruitment, application, interview and admissions cycle for graduate education be undertaken as part of future initiatives looking at the graduate students with disabilities experience.

## RECOMMENDATION 22: IDENTIFY BEST PRACTICES FOR ONLINE AND REMOTE LEARNING IN THE GRADUATE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

We recommend that further research to identify student needs and best practices in online and remote learning for students with disabilities pursuing graduate education be undertaken.

### **PART 4: NEXT STEPS**

## RECOMMENDATION 23: COLLABORATE ON FURTHER RESEARCH

We recommend that collaborative undertaking of further studies to assess the longitudinal experiences of students with disabilities in graduate education, and to ensure the successful implementation of policy and practice changes, be undertaken.

## RECOMMENDATION 24: ESTABLISH A NATIONAL CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOCUSED ON GRADUATE EDUCATION

We recommend that the feasibility of establishing a national centre of excellence focused on the experience of graduate students with disabilities be examined.

## RECOMMENDATION 25: DEVELOP RESOURCES

We recommend that resources supporting the initiatives fostered herein be developed.