

External Review Report on the College of Graduate Studies and the Graduate Student Experience at UBC Okanagan

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Executive Summary

The College of Graduate Studies (CoGS) at UBCO has flourished under the exceptional leadership of Dean Peter Simpson, who is universally praised for his collaborative, student-centered, and forward-thinking approach. He has successfully fostered a strong sense of community through initiatives such as the Postdoc Appreciation Day, which recognizes the contributions of postdoctoral fellows, and by implementing the minimum funding guarantee for PhD students, a key factor in attracting students. CoGS has also been a driving force behind innovative programs like the decentralized Interdisciplinary Program and the recently launched Doctorate in Education. Additionally, its involvement in graduate program approvals and curriculum development has aligned the institution with national trends while addressing gaps in graduate education.

Despite these strengths, CoGS faces significant challenges. A critical issue is the lack of a Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) plan for graduate studies, which has resulted in uncontrolled growth and resource strain. Space limitations—whether for classrooms, student housing, or offices—pose further barriers to accommodating this growth. Administrative inefficiencies, particularly those tied to WorkDay and the application process, hinder productivity and frustrate staff. Students also face challenges such as unclear pathways through their programs, and insufficient career services tailored to graduate students. The absence of a graduate student union has left this group underrepresented in campus governance.

Opportunities for improvement include streamlining processes to reduce administrative burden and shifting staff focus to higher-value activities, such as student advising and onboarding for supervisors and program coordinators. Strengthening the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms, such as improving progress report structures and enhancing supervisor onboarding, could address delays in student completion. Clearer communication about program milestones, better training for ethics approval processes, and differentiated support for graduate students in cross-listed courses would enhance the academic experience. Extending postdoc access to PhD-level resources and creating more robust community-building initiatives could further bolster their experience.

UBCO's provincial funding formula, which does not separately account for graduate students, has created financial constraints that impact operations and growth. A perceived lack of transparency around funding allocation exacerbates tensions, as does lower resources as compared to the Vancouver campus. Misalignment between Enrollment Services and CoGS has slowed implementation of essential systems, creating operational bottlenecks. If these systemic issues are not addressed, risks of reputational damage due to inefficiencies, subpar graduate outcomes, and the erosion of student confidence will persist.

In summary, while CoGS has made impressive strides under strong leadership, future success depends on strategic planning, operational reforms, and strengthened advocacy for resources and funding. Addressing these challenges will be essential for sustaining its positive impact on UBCO's graduate community.

Strengths

- The Dean of Graduate Studies, Peter, is unanimously acknowledged as the best leader of the college for as long as those we met could remember. Peter has made a real difference for graduate studies, post-doctoral fellows and UBCO as a whole. He is student centered, forward looking and collaborative. The various groups, post-doctoral fellows, students, faculty members, other senior leaders feel very heard, understood, supported and served by the College of

Graduate Studies. Regular communication channels between the Dean and CoGS such as recurring meetings with various groups facilitate the flow of information and the identification of potential silos or issues that need to be addressed.

- Instituting minimum funding for PhD students has been a very successful initiative in recruiting and retaining students. The annual funding report generated By CoGS is particularly useful in monitoring funding levels across the graduate student population. Besides verifying that the minimum levels are respected, interesting insights can be drawn over different average levels across different sectors, or funding inequities and disparities.
- Postdoctoral fellows felt recognized and truly appreciated. Post doctoral fellows typically are scattered around campus and tend to go unnoticed without a voice to represent them. The appreciation day created a focal moment for the group.
- The TA Training program offered by the center of Teaching and Learning is very much appreciated by graduate student groups. Same welcoming and appreciative comments were expressed over the writing support provided by the Library. Although it is not CoGS that offers thesis support services, they have been advocating for them and coordinating the offerings with the students.
- The Interdisciplinary Program is very appreciated by students, staff and faculty who stated that it is functioning much better now that it's decentralized, although this comes with caveats as articulated in later sections.
- CoGS has been supportive of interdisciplinarity and innovative programming and a perfect example is the newly launched Doctorate in Education.
- Last but not least CoGS has recently been involved in graduate program approval. The involvement of CoGS in curriculum is a welcoming change as CoGS can lead and support units in the development and implementation of new and valuable graduate programs. CoGS is in a position to follow national trends as well as identify potential challenges that curriculum can pose.

Weaknesses

- Lack of space is a problem identified by pretty much every stakeholder we met with. Among the types of deficiency, classroom shortage (90% capacity during working hours) was identified as a major one, student housing was another and the latter is potentially hampering student enrolment. The main driver behind the shortage appears to be budgetary, but given the enrolment implications this may have, a serious discussion with CoGS at the table should be taking place.
- Although the annual funding report generated (already discussed under Strengths) is very useful, CoGS is unable to monitor live funding throughout the year and make sure that the minimum funding is respected. It can only identify after the fact (a year later), if a student received funding below the minimum guaranteed.
- Also, part-time registration may become a back door to avoid minimum funding, student status should therefore be monitored by CoGS.
- Workday appeared to be a major source of frustration for many stakeholders with CoGS at the forefront. Although it is understandable that major changes of this type can cause frustration and resistance, two issues were identified as "steps backwards" in the change and not process improvements. Firstly, workday has converted electronic processes into manual entries leading to work inefficiencies and inability to get proper analytics. Secondly, several capabilities are taken away from CoGS (potentially due to misunderstanding the idiosyncrasies of a graduate student's pathway). Examples of removed access are: (i) Grade change and email addresses access. Not leveraging data for CoGS moving forward will be debilitating in properly supporting graduate programs (i.e. declaring supervision).
- The application process can be greatly improved: (i) several programs process applications outside the system - students formally apply only when they are informally accepted leading to inefficiencies and lack of proper data. (ii) CoGS is also duplicating efforts by verifying files twice in the process, wasting thus resources and time. It is also rather strict by applying uniform criteria that perhaps can be adjusted for particular programs.

- Although the interdisciplinary program is very popular and the decentralization was well received by students and supervisors (as already argued under Strengths) it is challenging to monitor and address student progress by the program coordinators, as it is scattered across the various units. Students can fall off the rails not knowing where they belong or who can support them and follow up with the successful progression through their milestones.
- Perhaps the biggest weakness is the lack of a Strategic Enrolment Management Plan for Graduate Studies which has resulted in uncontrolled, unplanned and uneven growth (with some exceptions in Course-based Professional Programs). Another risk associated with lack of SEM is random and potentially unsuccessful recruitment tactics. Also new programs are created without space and funding provisions. It is imperative for future success that resources match the growth of student population.
- Challenges with Vancouver Campus were frequently mentioned by many groups: The gist of it is that competition prevails to cooperation not only for students but also for resources. Some resources/offers are available only in Vancouver and when resources are shared, they are designed to fit Vancouver needs. Lack of transparency on provincial student funding vis-à-vis money allocated to UBCV leads to the presumption of unfairness. Even though communications around this subject are already in place, they can perhaps be intensified.
- *****NO GRAD UNION***** Graduate students do not have a voice on campus. They feel underrepresented within the larger student union. Their numbers are no longer marginal and they should therefore have an official seat to speak from.
- Challenges with local employment for graduate students after graduation seem to be common and career services do not address the graduate student population differently. Failure to place graduate students post degree can create long-term reputational issues on the value of the degrees.
- Information flow towards graduate students has not been very smooth, in particular around tuition fee changes. Students were surprised with significant tuition hikes post-arrival. Tuition fees by cohort (even if they include a pre-determined annual changes) are a transparent way of preparing students for the true cost of their education.
- Clawing back research assistantships by supervisors from student funding packages when other funding is secured is a very dangerous practice, as it is not controlled, and it jeopardizes the supervisory relationship. Taking funding back should only be done by CoGS on centrally allocated funds in a controlled and fair manner that does not remove the students' incentive to apply for external funding.
- Postdoctoral fellows can and would like to teach but it is very unclear how they can identify and pursue such opportunities. The Postdoc staff within CoGS is part-time, although she is very much appreciated and needed.
- Time to completion should be considered carefully, especially around Masters Programs that last much longer than advertised while funding does not get extended. The attempt by CoGS to reduce the time limit to 3 years should be supported and implemented. Students complained about the misalignment between the funded terms and time to completion, and what they actually requested is to graduate on time and move on with their careers - a very legitimate ask.
- Progress Reports are structured in a way that they do not allow graduate students to flag any issues (everything is seen by the supervisor). This does not allow the disclosure of problematic situations that can lead to delayed time to completion among other things. Moreover, annual progress reports are not accessible by program coordinators retroactively (proper archiving may be an issue).
- There is no training/onboarding for Graduate Programs Coordinators on rights and responsibilities as well as on conflict resolution, an issue graduate program coordinators are often called upon to resolve.
- Indigenous graduate student advisor staff member has contributed significantly to the recruitment and retention of indigenous students, but the position is not permanent. Given potential upcoming budget cuts, this position should be protected. Moreover, there seems to be no support within CoGS for black students or students of color.

- CoGS appears to be intervening on these after successful defense and approval on matters other than mere formatting, leading to delays unnecessary tuition charges. A review of the thesis submission and defence process is due.

Opportunities

- Membership rules (about who can supervise) can be further improved through modification and monitoring of progress reports. The student portion of the report should not be visible to the supervisor and graduate program coordinators should be able to access progress reports retroactively. The graduate program coordinators should be empowered to follow up on problems identified in the reports and support should be provided by the associate deans at CoGs. There is a need for proper onboarding of new supervisors, supervisory guidelines and a student-supervisor agreement template.
- Students mentioned that they would like to complete within their funding window but do not feel supported in doing that. The following will help here: (1) curriculum review to ensure it is not too heavy, (2) making clear timelines and milestones available for students so they are prepared for each step in the program, (3) oversight of supervisory practices by graduate program coordinators and decanal team at CoGs, (4) identification of a clear place that students can go when struggling with progressing.
- Workshops and instructional material for graduate students on applying for ethics approval should be developed. Delays in that process can mean that a masters' student will not finish within 2 years.
- The instructors of cross-listed courses need clear guidance from CoGS about how to differentiate between graduate and undergraduate learning so that they can be a positive experience for graduate students.
- Graduate admissions and record officers are very stressed and worried about the amount of work but do not realize that they are spending time on the wrong things. These positions can be completely reworked by eliminating most of the outdated processes and focusing on higher value activities. For example, they should not be checking on other units' work: If a program has decided that a particular student should be admitted or given a scholarship then that decision should not be revisited. Rather CoGs should review an application for admissibility before sending it to the program and then accept the programs' recommendations without question. Additionally, the manual calculation of GPAs for admission committees must stop; this is a waste of time that has no relevance to the decisions made by committees. The grad admissions and record officers should be encouraged to trust their colleagues and to view their role as providing expertise and support rather than checking for/catching mistakes. Time could then be freed for them to act as advisors for students who are having difficulties and provide onboarding for new graduate supervisors and coordinators among many other higher value tasks.
- Postdoctoral fellows should be able to access the same supports and services as PhD students. Whether they are classified as employees or not, the postdoctoral fellowship is universally viewed as "training or development" as evidenced by the low salaries. Implementing this will require dedicated discussions with service units as well as a clear agreement about the level of service. There is also a need for more community building for the postdocs. International postdocs should be hired into longer contracts whenever possible due to complexities and costs of the work visa process.

Threats

- The BC funding formula for UBCO does not support grad students separately. This likely means the institution is underfunded for its operations. We understand that the provincial government is not open to the idea of funding more graduate student seats at UBC. Perhaps then, a discussion needs to take place about transferring some of the funded seats from the Vancouver campus. A transfer that would have little impact on the Vancouver campus could be game-changing for UBCO. We expect that there is resistance to this kind of idea left over from how UBCO was created but it needs to be considered for the health of the entire institution.

- Many people mentioned a lack of transparency with respect to financial matters. This is likely due to the way in which financial information is presented to the community (Finance believes they are very transparent but then mentions people not understanding accounting practices). The translation of the information into something the community can grasp will be very much appreciated. This is likely to be even more important soon.
- Many graduate workshops are offered by the Library and Teaching and Learning instead of CoGS. As a result, services to graduate students may be cut during financially challenging times, without the oversight of CoGS.
- There appears to be a large disconnect between Enrollment Services and CoGs which is obvious to the faculty deans and perhaps others. Enrollment Services does not understand why certain procedures are different for graduate students and CoGs does not recognize the extent to which their own processes result in manual work in Enrollment Services. This gulf is exacerbated by the lack of a Registrar on campus. We strongly encourage filling the Deputy Registrar Position and that the Dean of Graduate Studies begin meeting regularly with them and the Registrar. We note that this gulf is likely resulting in slowed implementation of graduate studies functionalities in WorkDay among other operational difficulties at both ES and CoGs.