ACCOMMODATING GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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OVERVIEW

Universities report dramatic increases in the number of requests for accommodation by graduate students with disabilities and in the complexity of the accommodation issues needing to be addressed.

The range of requests has broadened, ranging from disabilities that are apparent to those that are invisible, and from disabilities that are basically physical in nature to those related to mental health or psychological dysfunction. Many of the latter are particularly challenging in terms of accommodation, because they tend to be situational, intermittent or recurrent, requiring different strategies at different phases as the student moves through his or her program of study. As well, significant disabilities that have been accommodated at the undergraduate level may need to continue to be addressed at the graduate level, but in different ways, given the wide range of academic work or different emphases that comprise graduate programs of study in comparison to those at the undergraduate level.

At the same time, the legislative environment has intensified. Legislation such as the *Ontario Human Rights Code* requires that institutions respond specifically and appropriately to individual requests for academic accommodation by students with disabilities, while the collective responsibility of universities for meeting the needs of staff, faculty and students with disabilities is encoded in legislation such as the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA), which was passed into law in 2005.

INTRODUCTION

In October 2008, the working paper *Learning Disabilities: A Guide for Faculty at Ontario Universities* was presented to Council by John Logan of Carleton University. The paper was well-received and was especially appreciated for its work on Universal Instructional Design.

The emphasis in this paper was primarily on meeting the needs of undergraduate students. Clearly some of the strategies, policies and practices outlined in that *Guide* would also pertain to accommodating graduate students with disabilities, particularly during the coursework phase of their programs. However, during the discussions of the paper at COU it was suggested that further work might be done with respect to the accommodation of graduate students, such as those relating to independent research and writing, field work or other kinds of community placements, and administrative matters such as admissions requirements and arrangements for thesis defences at the graduate level.

Indeed during that discussion a fundamental question was raised: how *can* graduate students with documented disabilities be accommodated during certain phases of their programs without compromising the basic requirements of individual graduate programs of study? How can scholarly independence be assured at this level, once accommodations (often expressed as “extraordinary supports”) are put in place?

At the same time, it was maintained by those present that the number of requests for accommodation by students with documented disabilities seems to be increasing at every level, from secondary school through graduate studies, as is the complexity of the accommodation issues that need to be addressed. The range of kinds of accommodation requests has broadened, and expectations regarding highly individualized accommodation at the graduate level seem to have increased, particularly with respect to assumptions that what may have been put in place at the undergraduate level should be continued or maintained at the graduate level.

This discussion paper is a response to that request for further thought. The paper begins with background issues – an encapsulation of earlier work that has been done on this topic as well as the

legislative framework that prevails in Ontario at the present time. Particular attention is paid to the need for definition of "essential requirements" in addressing accommodation issues, an area in which evidence suggests there has been too little work done to date, partially because there is so little awareness of its crucial importance. This section concludes with a brief look at the need for policy development in this area.

The paper then moves to a preliminary discussion of specific accommodation strategies – some of the ways in which, through creativity, flexibility, collaboration and good will, universities can work towards implementing practices that in the end will benefit not only graduate students with disabilities – as the literature on Universal Design for Learning indicates (e.g., Rose *et al*, 2006) – but all students, in that that innovations for specific purposes typically create a stronger learning environment for all learners. Measures that accommodate students with disabilities tend to become, over time, measures that accommodate everyone.

A. ACCOMMODATING GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: EARLY CONCERNS

As early as 1987, a paper surveying the American landscape at the time, *A Survey of Programs and Services for Learning Disabled Students in Graduate and Professional Schools* (Parks *et al*), concluded that only about 24% of the 703 graduate programs surveyed were in compliance with minimal requirements for accommodation required by federal legislation (that is, compliance with Section 504, requiring the development of a written plan describing services to students with learning disabilities).

In reality, a patchwork of *ad hoc* arrangements appeared to characterize the response of graduate programs to the needs of such students. Students with disabilities were often not advised or encouraged to obtain up-to-date documentation of their disability. Accommodations of the most basic kind were frequently not provided (such as allowing these students extra time on examinations). If students were offered accommodations, there was often no follow-up to assess their effectiveness or continuing student need. And almost none of the programs actually advertised the availability of the services that students might access if they knew about them.

Roughly a decade later, in 1998, the report *Removing the Barriers to Graduate and Professional Education and Careers* was produced by the AGAPE (Access to Graduate and Professional Education) Committee, funded by the then-Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. The paper construed Ontario universities as "not yet fully prepared to meet the needs" of graduate students with disabilities, and noted the complexity of the issues:

> Barriers to persons with disabilities may be substantially different in graduate and professional school from those facing undergraduates. Graduate and professional students study in a much more competitive environment. Accommodation needs for independent study may be much more extensive than, say, for an undergraduate course with set texts that can be taped in advance. Placements, internships and travel may present further difficulties. (1)

The report concludes with 34 recommendations (see Appendix), ranging from the generation of publicity materials and the development of admissions policies encouraging applications from graduate and professional students with disabilities to the responsibility of universities to promote employment opportunities for graduates who successfully complete their courses of study and are ready to move into the world of work.

The Cost of Failing to Accommodate Graduate Students with Disabilities

Quite apart from the failure to meet the legitimate needs of students with learning disabilities, Parks *et al* argued for the implications of such neglect, for both the graduate and professional schools themselves and for society at large:

- The loss of income to schools when students are admitted but fail to complete their degrees.
- The potential for litigation, at great cost to the graduate institutions.
- The possible loss of government funds to institutions on the grounds of non-compliance.
- The loss of talent to society at large when learning-disabled students do not graduate, since students with learning disabilities who receive assistance often attain a higher level of success than students without such disabilities.

- The loss of self-esteem and potential income for those unassisted students who are unable to keep pace with their peers, and the general enabling of systemic prejudice within institutions that do not offer support and assistance to qualified learning disabled students, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

To this list might be added an implication particularly relevant to education in Ontario today where it is clear that research capacity and productivity are crucial to the province's economic agenda. As Grundy and McGinn argue, citing R. Giroux, "society cannot afford to exclude and disenfranchise individuals with disabilities from fully participating in the scholarship of the future." It is essential that we "build vital research capacity" through investment in graduate education for all who can contribute to the larger society in this way.

B. THE ONTARIO LANDSCAPE TODAY

One might assume that things have improved considerably since 1987, in Canadian as well as American schools. None would deny, I suspect, that considerable progress has been made in terms of awareness and provision of academic accommodations generally, especially on the undergraduate side. In addition, there is a much broader sense of what constitutes a disability and greater awareness of the barriers encountered by students with disabilities, ranging from traditionally recognized learning disabilities to documented mental health disabilities that may require accommodation.

The Need for Clear Policy Statements

However, my own quick survey of the websites of institutions that form the membership of COU indicates that very few Ontario universities have developed or defined specific processes regarding the accommodation of graduate students. Of the 20[1] institutions that form the membership of the Council of Ontario Universities, a review of readily accessible online information suggests that:

- Two universities offer Accommodation Policies specific to the accommodation of graduate students.
- Eight universities outline Accommodation Policies wherein the accommodation of graduate students is mentioned, more or less in passing, as part of the university's general accommodation policies.
- Ten universities do not specify the accommodation of graduate students as part of their overall accommodation statements.

Anecdotally, most of the university representatives (including Academic Colleagues, Graduate Deans, other faculty members, and student services staff from across the province) who responded to my queries indicated that graduate students are accommodated under the general rubric of their undergraduate-focused accommodation policies. Most suggested that this works well – although requests are increasing, and requests for accommodation are becoming more complex on the graduate side. At the same time, a good number of respondents indicated their interest in and enthusiasm for developing more specific guidelines for the accommodation of graduate students with disabilities, and several indicated concerns about the increasing possibility of litigation under the *Ontario Human Rights Code* should there be claims of failure to accommodate sufficiently in response to graduate student requests for various kinds of assistance.

Legislative Requirements for the Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities

In preparing this summary, I have relied heavily (with thanks) on the policy statement provided by Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), specifically its statement regarding the *Academic Accommodation of Graduate Students with Disabilities,* which is readily available on the WLU website.

The Framework: the *Ontario Human Rights Code*

- The *Ontario Human Rights Code* states that "it is public policy in Ontario to recognize the dignity and worth of every person and to provide for equal rights and opportunities without discrimination" (2004 Annotated *Ontario Human Rights Code*, p. 1).

[1] *Editor's Note:* Algoma University became the 21st member of the Council of Ontario Universities, effective November 1, 2008. The survey for this paper preceded Algoma's membership.

- Further, "Every person has a right to equal treatment with respect to services, goods, and facilities, without discrimination because of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, same-sex partnership status, family status or disability" (2004 Annotated *Ontario Human Rights Code*, p. 14).

According to the Code, disability is defined as:

- Any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect, or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical coordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device.
- A condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability.
- A learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language.
- A mental disorder.
- The Code specifies further that the protection against discrimination because of disability applies not only to persons who currently have a disability, but also to persons who have had a disability and to persons who are believed to have or to have had a disability.

Substantiating Requests for Accommodation

Fundamental to the university's response to requests for accommodation is the requirement that students seeking accommodation provide recent and relevant documentation substantiating the disability and the need for accommodation.

- The student must show that the disability affects his/her ability to benefit equally (vis-à-vis non-disabled students) from the program that the university is providing.
- The student is required to disclose only such information as pertains to the need for accommodation and any restrictions or limitations.
- The documentation supporting the request for a particular accommodation need be provided only to those who need to see it in order to substantiate the request and oversee the development of a course of action.

Duty to Accommodate

The university is obliged to make its services (including program delivery) available in a manner that does not discriminate. Accommodation includes treating students with disabilities in a way that respects their dignity and provides them with equality of opportunity, which is to say that they are not discriminated against.

However, once an academic accommodation is in place, and the student thereby provided with equal opportunity, it is the student's responsibility to meet the essential requirements of a course/program. Two provisions are of particular interest in a discussion of academic accommodations for graduate students:

- According to the *Ontario Code of Human Rights*, it must be shown that "the needs of the person cannot be accommodated without undue hardship on the person responsible for accommodating those needs, considering the cost, outside source of funding, if any, and health and safety requirements, if any."
- "A right is not infringed if the person with a disability is incapable of performing or fulfilling the essential duties or requirements attending the exercise of the right because of disability."

Limitations on the Duty to Accommodate

➢ "Undue Hardship"

The *Ontario Human Rights Code* specifies three factors to be considered in assessing whether a requested accommodation would cause undue hardship:

- cost
- availability of outside sources of funding
- health and safety requirements.

Other, but more subsidiary, factors for consideration include the degree to which an accommodation negatively impacts other students, staff, faculty, and/or the academic integrity of the program.

It must be noted, moreover, that costs must be considered in the context of the university as a whole, not on the basis of a component program, department, or faculty.

➢ "Essential Requirements"

The university is not required to make efforts to reasonably accommodate a student with a disability when the disability alone impairs the student's ability to fulfill the essential requirements of a course/ program.

Considering the academic accommodation of graduate students in light of the general legislative framework summarized above leads to several general recommendations. While accommodations for course-based graduate programs may resemble those possible in undergraduate programs, graduate programs that might be defined as fundamentally "research-based" are not as amenable, it would seem, to typical undergraduate accommodation strategies. In comparison with undergraduate programs of study, for example, the essential requirements of graduate work, particularly in research-based graduate programs, will often include higher-level standards for original and highly independent academic work.

"The Balancing Act"

What emerges, then, is the delicacy of the balancing act that is required in considering academic accommodation for graduate students:

- In some circumstances, the nature and degree of a disability may mean that no reasonable accommodation would enable an individual to perform the essential requirements of a course/ program.
- The university may refuse accommodations in order to preserve the academic integrity (which is to say the essential requirements) of a course/ program.
- However, a person cannot be presumed incapable of performing the essential requirements of a course/program unless an effort has been made to canvass all reasonable options for accommodation.
- And the balancing act presumes that graduate programs have carefully established and articulated the essential requirements that characterize this program of study and its culmination in a particular degree designation.

C. ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS

The definition of "essential requirements," then, is a key factor, and perhaps the *key factor, in dealing with the academic accommodation of graduate students with disabilities.*

The notion of academic integrity in relation to academic accommodation is tied to the idea of essential requirements. There can be no claim that "academic integrity" would be breached by requested accommodations unless it can be shown that to provide such accommodations would compromise the "essential requirements" of a degree program.

In a university setting, the essential requirements of a course or program are likely to include (but are not necessarily limited to), the knowledge and skills that must be acquired or demonstrated in order for a student to successfully meet the learning objectives of that course or program.

As a corollary, then, it appears unlikely that universities will be in a position to define "essential requirements" within an overarching university *policy* that will apply commonly to all of its highly individualized programs. Rather, essential requirements will need to be established by individual programs, and university *processes* for mediating requests for accommodation will need to take these program-specific requirements into consideration within the more general or accommodation policies that are established by and for each institution.

Clearly such a requirement places a burden upon the academic programs themselves. In the case of graduate education:

- *Each graduate program will need to define its learning objectives*
- *Each graduate program will need to specify the specific knowledge and skills that are requisite (its "essential requirements") if those learning objectives are to be met.*

Equally clearly, however, graduate programs cannot be expected to do this alone. University resources must be provided – through, or with the assistance of student services offices (which themselves may need additional resources in the short term to assist with the development of "essential requirements" statements) – to put statements in place reflecting learning objectives and essential requirements.

Such statements will make it clear when a student may not able to be accommodated in light of the impact of the disability upon the student's ability to fulfill the program's essential requirements in the earning of a specific degree.

D. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

With respect to implementation, in fairness to students there needs to be clear access to the university's policies on academic accommodation at the graduate as well as undergraduate level. Only a publicly available statement about accommodation policies that is made available to students before application and admission will reduce the likelihood of a mismatch between student and institutional expectations that will be difficult to reconcile after a student is admitted to a program.

General Accommodation Policy Options

How might such policies be set out to maximum advantage? To date the majority of universities in Ontario have established a general Accommodation Policy within which the availability of accommodations for graduate students is included either as a subsection or is mentioned in passing. It would appear that "mentions-in-passing" are insufficient. Rather, at the very least there should be a clearly labelled subsection on graduate student accommodation, offering clarity about the processes pertaining to requests for graduate student accommodation and linking students to individual programs where curricula, learning outcomes and essential requirements can be reviewed.

A small number of Ontario universities have developed a separate Accommodation Policy for Graduate Students that may include relevant subsections of the university's general accommodation policy, but also includes graduate student-specific detail. Such distinct statements of policy and processes serve as a "one-stop" destination for graduate students seeking accommodation. Again, the separate Accommodation Policy for Graduate Students should urge that students investigate individual programs regarding curricula, learning outcomes and essential requirements through individual program websites. Apart from the advantage for graduate students of having all information relevant to them gathered into a single accessible entry, such an approach underscores the fact that the university invites, welcomes and supports graduate students with disabilities as part of the mandate of its graduate school or faculty.

Because expressions of essential requirements need to be developed by graduate programs with specific reference to the way they set out and measure learning outcomes, statements concerning essential requirements most probably should be listed by those programs in their own overviews (calendar entries, program handbooks, or the like).

Hence the need for university policy to direct students to, or provide linkages to, individual program websites with reference to each program's stated requirements. Clear statements of essential requirements, as endorsed by the appropriate University governing bodies, will provide the framework for mediating requests for accommodation and coming to a collegial conclusion concerning the ways in which a student may be accommodated without compromising the academic integrity of the program in question.

E. STRATEGIES FOR ACCOMMODATING GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

What follows is a sampling of accommodations that may need to be made at the graduate level, and issues related to them. While accommodating graduate students may at times involve the employment of strategies appropriate to the undergraduate sector as well, at other times graduate programs of study give rise to more specialized areas of concern:

- Issues related to laboratory settings, cooperative education or work terms, or fieldwork requirements.
- Issues related to graduate seminar participation and seminar leadership.

- Issues related to the relationship between students with disabilities and their supervisors, upon whom so much of that is related to graduate student success depends.

- Issues related to the completion of exit projects such as theses and major research papers, that involve the completion of independent research and the writing (and iterative editing of) major writing components.

- Issues related to work as teaching or research assistants (though this is generally an enrichment/experiential opportunity rather than essential requirement of the graduate experience).

- Issues related to the expectation, especially on the part of faculty, that part of the goal of accommodation at the graduate level is that (in comparison to undergraduate students) graduate students should become more independent learners as time goes on, and rely less on accommodation over time, partially because they will have chosen to specialize in academic disciplines complementary to their academic strengths.[2]

While not exhaustive, the subsequent are intended to serve as a starting point for further thought and productive discussion on the ways in which academic accommodation for graduate students can be managed in ways that will not compromise the integrity of their degree studies.

[2] It should be observed that the "expectation" that graduate students with disabilities should become more "independent learners" as time goes on is an expectation that also informs undergraduate accommodation practices in disabilities offices in universities today. This is just one of the many ways in which the accommodation of undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities is often more contiguous than discrete, despite this paper's focus on the graduate side. For example, today's undergraduates with disabilities are generally encouraged to become more independent over time, especially given the proliferation of technological aids, software programs and transition programming that are deployed in ways that (it is hoped) will render many students less dependent upon basic accommodation strategies as they move from first year to their graduation with bachelor's degrees.

General Accommodation Strategies

- Informing students about the advisability of disclosing known disabilities and potential requests for accommodation to the appropriate Accommodation Office early, and preferably as soon as they have accepted their offers of admission, especially if the accommodation, if granted, will require the preparation of course materials in different formats (e.g., for the visually impaired).
    - Encouraging self-disclosure to Disabilities Offices during orientation events, again because most universities cannot guarantee a quick response to accommodation needs once the term has begun and courses are well underway.
    - Informing students about institutional protections that exist with respect to privacy and the limitations upon disclosure that help to protect that privacy.

- Providing students, as part of their packages offering admission, with links to the institution's policies, programs and services for students with disabilities.

- Promoting the availability of counselling services should a mismatch become evident between a student and the requirements of a particular program. While this will not always be the case, it is possible that another related graduate program might be a more suitable fit for such a student, and arrangements for transfer might be considered.

Accommodations Specific to Graduate Courses and Graduate Work

- Offering accommodations typical in undergraduate education, where appropriate, from the provision of extra time for the completion of examinations and/or the writing of examinations in specialized facilities to the use of note-takers or audiovisual recorders in the classroom, or authorization of the use of specialized electronic devices that compensate for disabilities without compromising the essential requirements of the graduate program. (Pardo and Tomlinson, 15-16, list an array of possible accommodations worth considering.)

- Paying attention at admission to the challenges of requirements for GRE (graduate record examination) scores and other pre-admission tests for students with disabilities. Depending upon the location at which the tests were written, and whether or not appropriate accommodations were in place, the results of these pre-admission scores may exclude applicants with disabilities from entry into graduate programs or funding at levels awarded to those whose entrance scores are more reflective of their actual qualifications for program entry.

- Providing reasonable generosity in granting extensions to degree time limits for students whose documented disability requires extra time to complete required elements of their course – provided that the student has been making regular and personally timely progress.

- Considering extending not only times to degree completion, where appropriate, but also extension of terms of funding for students who simply cannot complete their work within the prescribed framework, despite all good efforts.

- Ensuring that assistive technologies for overcoming barriers are in place within the university and made available to graduate students, whether at the "low tech" end of the scale or the "higher tech" end, as in specialized computer displays, electronic mobility switches, text-to-speech readers, specialized keyboards, and so on (Rose *et al*).

- Considering adopting at the program level, where possible, the principles of "Universal Instructional Design" (Logan 4-5) or Universal Design for Learning (Rose *et al*). Rose and colleagues identify three mechanisms associated with UDL: multiple means of representing information, multiple means of expressing knowledge, and multiple means of engagement in learning.

- Creating greater awareness on the part of faculty of the cost to students of self-advocacy, which takes a great deal of time and is stressful, especially given the difficulty of accessing scarce professional resources in times of economic constraint. The wait-time for meeting with a case manager can be very long, and the case that has to be made for assistance can be laborious to put together and to present. It may take considerable time for the strategies that need to be employed are fully in place and well-understood by all.

- Similarly paying attention to the fact that self-disclosure, particularly with respect to invisible disabilities, may pose risks to students with disabilities. Students cannot rely on faculty or even student colleagues having the knowledge to understand their disability or the skills to accommodate, a fact likely exacerbated by the expectations of relative academic independence that often accompany graduate programs of study. Student fears regarding labeling and potential isolation, if certain kinds of disabilities become broadly known, call for sensitivity both to privacy concerns and to day-to-day interactions once a disability has been disclosed.

- Consciously developing strategies for attuning other graduate students and instructors – the program as a whole – to the need to accommodate all program registrants equally and generously with attention to the dignity of each individual. Graduate programs typically host many different kinds of learners whose needs must be met, quite apart from those requiring academic accommodation. A respectful environment that adapts to, even welcomes, difference is requisite.

Accommodations Specific to the Research Phase of Graduate Programs

- Encouraging at all times the development of students as independent self-advocates and creative problem-solvers with respect to their needs for accommodation. Often they will be able to think through ways and means of completing the required work in a way commensurate with their abilities (Grundy and McGinn).

- Where thesis defences are open, indicating clearly that exemptions may be available for students with relevant and documented disabilities.

- When selecting rooms for thesis defences (or proposal defences), attending to the needs of students with disabilities, as in the case of a hearing-impaired student for whom strong lighting, close seating, minimal background noise, and the use of cue cards by examiners to supplement their oral questioning proved to be very effective (Grundy and McGinn).

- Permitting students to pre-record their defence presentations to allow for the energy conservation necessary to allow them to be able to answer committee questions.

- Assisting in finding appropriate venues for students with disabilities to present their work to the public – for example by selecting small- to mid-sized conferences held at single sites, and where conference organizers are attuned to the need to accommodate participants with disabilities (Grundy and McGinn).

Accommodations Related to Experiential Components of Graduate Study

It is difficult to overestimate the complexity of accommodation issues related to work "beyond the classroom." For example, in *Implementing Academic Accommodations in Field/Practicum Settings* (2006), Pardo and Tomlinson list a number of examples known to have arisen regarding professional or field placements:

- An education student with severe written language learning disabilities is assigned to a practicum placement with a grade three class. She has requested that a teaching assistant be made available to her as an academic accommodation in her student teaching placement.

- A student with a spinal cord injury has applied to medical school. He meets or exceeds all the criteria for admission. Given limited upper body mobility, the student has requested that an assistive service provider "act" as his hands in class for the duration of the degree.

- A deaf student, admitted to nursing school, requests that sign language interpreters be made available to her for the duration of her clinical placements.

- An environmental design student with chronic fatigue syndrome requests that his field placement be situated no more than a mile from his home.

- A law student with a learning disability requests 50% more time to complete her course work. Faculty members are concerned because in all likelihood additional time will not be available to the student once in the articling environment.

- A graduate management studies student living with a mental illness requests an exemption from his field placement... [arguing] that the added stress of a practicum environment would negatively impact his mental illness. He offers to write a research paper in lieu of the field requirements.

Respondents to my own survey of Ontario institutions contributed other examples:

- A graduate student with severe hearing loss requests the provision of two interpreters for the duration of the field trip, owing to the need for the interpreters to spell one another off, given the physical labour that signing involves.

- A graduate student who was provided during her undergraduate studies with a "tutor/writer" to help her to process her thoughts and to word her academic submissions seeks the same accommodation in an essay- and thesis-based graduate program.

Clearly the experiential dimensions of graduate programs of study present particular challenges in relation to accommodating students with disabilities (while respecting parameters related to "undue hardship" and "essential requirements"):

- Field work, undertaken outside the classroom and under the direction of adjunct faculty or professional staff involved in accredited practica, may require specific accommodations. It will be important to cultivate awareness on the part of field supervisors regarding the capabilities of students with disabilities who are properly accommodated (Pardo and Tomlinson).

- Disabilities offices may need to work with professional programs in particular to set out specific protocols in terms of accommodation, process, expectation and responsibilities specified to the teaching or clinical blocks given the specific requirements and professional codes that are involved in teaching or clinical blocks. (At Brock University, for example, such work has been undertaken in the areas of Education and Nursing.)

- Teaching assistantships may need to be replaced with other kinds of graduate assistantships – or the student with disabilities partnered with a student without disabilities requiring accommodation, such that the strengths of both are incorporated into a team approach.

- Experiential Learning Components, where truly inaccessible to students with particular disabilities, and where possible, may need be replaced with related work that can be done at the university.

F. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There appears to be no doubt that we are going to see more students with disabilities, and more severe and complex disabilities, entering our universities and seeking to move into postgraduate work after completing their undergraduate degrees. At the same time, the broader legislative environment will continue to require that universities accommodate students with disabilities in a variety of ways. While legislation such as the *Ontario Human Rights Code* addresses the need for individualized response to academic disabilities, the collective responsibility of universities to meet the needs of students with disabilities is signalled by legislation such as the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA), which was passed into law in 2005.

Given the clear responsibility of universities to meet such requirements, and to offer graduate students with disabilities the support that they need (and to which they are entitled), much work will need to be done in the very near future with reference to our physical sites, our protocols, and our policies and practices.

This working paper is meant to provide a starting point for ongoing discussions that will need to take place in our universities as growing numbers of graduate students seeking academic accommodation approach us for assistance. It is hoped that the following recommendations will stimulate discussion and subsequent action on our individual campuses in order that we may succeed in enabling all of our graduate students to realize their potential as they undertake their programs of study.

Recommendations for Consideration

1. *That universities develop and make fully accessible, online and through their graduate calendars, the policies and processes that they have developed that are specific to the needs of graduate students with disabilities.*

2. *That individual graduate programs think deeply about, articulate clearly and make fully accessible the essential requirements for degree completion given their curriculum, the kinds of work that must be undertaken, and the kinds of assessments that will ensure the integrity of the credential that is to be earned.*

3. *That graduate program chairs or directors, graduate program committees, and individual graduate faculty work with disabilities offices on their campuses to ensure the appropriate strategies for accommodating graduate students with disabilities within the parameters of and without compromising the essential requirements of the degree program in question.*

4. *That universities work to develop a broad and pervasive culture of responsiveness to the needs of graduate students with disabilities, not only within but well beyond the graduate sector itself.*

Only with these institutional supports in place will we be able to assure ourselves that we are truly strengthening graduate capacity in our universities by ensuring that all who are capable of earning graduate degrees will have the opportunity to do so – and then to go on to contribute to society at large through the application of the knowledge and skills to which their graduate degrees and specializations attest.

APPENDIX

While more than a decade old, the recommendations of the AGAPE Report, *Removing the Barriers to Graduate and Professional Education and Careers* (1998), are interesting – and in many cases still remarkably pertinent.

1. That universities review their policies, agreements and other documents related to the mission, governance and operations of the institution to ensure that these are inclusive with respect to access and retention of persons with disabilities in graduate and professional programmes, and that they require that individual programmes do so as well.

2. That each university name a central information contact for individuals with disabilities seeking information about admission to graduate and professional programmes.

3. That, at a minimum, graduate and professional programs reach out, through the Disability Services Office or in other ways, to ensure that undergraduate students with disabilities at their own universities are encouraged to apply.

4. That virtually all materials used in admissions and recruitment contain a statement encouraging students with disabilities to apply, and providing information about places like the Disability Services Office, where further assistance and accommodation are available.

5. That each graduate and professional school collect or develop informational materials dealing specifically with disability issues (such as campus accessibility, accessible housing, accommodations procedures, funding sources, etc.), and distribute these widely in recruitment efforts.

6. That each graduate and professional school conduct a thorough review of accessibility of information for persons with disabilities, and make appropriate improvements.

7. That application fees for prospective students with disabilities be waived by graduate and professional schools.

8. That graduate and professional schools provide opportunities for and encourage members of faculty to be educated about and sensitized to the special situation of prospective students with disabilities.

9. That each institution ensure that its central office for accommodation includes graduate and professional education in its mandate.

10. That graduate and professional schools designate funding sources, such as bursaries and fellowships, for applicants with disabilities so they will not be precluded from admission by such considerations.

11. That admission offers made by graduate and professional schools and programmes contain clear, positive statements to encourage the recruitment of persons with disabilities.

12. That such additional accommodation needs of graduate and professional school students with disabilities be addressed.

13. That the university and the graduate or professional programme in question (with input and advice from the Disability Services Officer or other central contact where appropriate) develop an initial agreement at the commencement of graduate study with each student with a disability; that the agreement address the nature and extent of accommodation, alterations in programme requirements, and variances in the student's timetable to explicate how the programme is to be completed, including provisions with respect to travel and field work, and scheduling for the completion of course, project and thesis work. The agreement should be subject to periodic review and revision with procedures to be followed if the situation changes.

14. That the institution provide for a mediation and grievance procedure that students and units have access to in case of disagreements.

15. That universities monitor the progress of students with disabilities and be proactive in offering mentorship and other assistance where appropriate. Information should be kept on the progress of students with disabilities, and an effort made to report successes in university publications and press releases.

16. That universities make suitable accommodations so that students with disabilities can comfortably participate in graduate ceremonies. This includes such things as providing a ramp or elevator to allow students with mobility disabilities to go on stage or providing a communication system for students with hearing disabilities.

17. That COU take a lead role, in coordination with OCGS and affiliates representing professional schools, in promoting the participation of persons with disabilities in graduate and professional education in Ontario's universities.

18. That COU work through OCGS and with professional schools and organizations to collect and distribute information to improve access and retention of students with disabilities in graduate and professional education. COU might include general information on disability issues at Ontario universities on its Web site.

19. That, as an example of information collection, COU sponsor a pilot research project, to be undertaken with the help of IDIA to track students registered with Disability Services Offices through the application process, course of study and graduation from graduate and professional schools in Ontario.

20. That COU and other provincial-level organizations involved with professional schools consider means to establish central funding for students with disabilities.

21. That COU, OCGS, other COU affiliates, and professsional bodies examine their own policies and practices to ensure that they are free of any underlying or system biases that may have a negative effect on students with disabilities.

22. That the university system provide central funding for graduate and professional students with disabilities.

23. That the university system consider ways of providing central funding that ensure[s] maximum flexibility and portability for students with disabilities. These could include the provision of a central fund for awards and bursaries held by students with disabilities in any Ontario university graduate and professional programme and a central fund for accommodation to cover the costs of individual accommodations.

24. That professional schools and professions consider ways of providing targeted funding to students with disabilities within the Ontario university system.

25. That individual universities explore means of making their awards to graduate and professional school students with disabilities as flexible as possible to ensure that one source of income is not cancelled by another.

26. That individual universities be flexible about the definition of full-time and part-time status with respect to students with disabilities when making awards and where possible when determining eligibility for external competitive awards.

27. That individual universities consider rent subsidies for graduate and professional school students with disabilities as one means of providing flexible funding.

28. That graduate schools and professional programmes make special efforts to find summer hiring/ assistantship opportunities for students with disabilities.

29. That funding provided by the universities themselves be extended to students with disabilities who require longer times to degree completion.

30. That fund-raisers for the institution, faculty or professional school have special fundraising campaigns for students with disabilities.

31. That COU play an active role in distributing information that would assist universities in promoting academic employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

32. That the suggestions made in this section with respect to the recruitment and retention of faculty members in academic careers be widely distributed to universities and that universities in turn seek to distribute them to academic hiring units and faculty associations.

33. That Deans of Professional Schools and Faculties in Ontario Universities be encouraged to include ongoing discussion about the admission, retention and completion of students with disabilities in their programmes as well as their eventual movement into the professions.

34. That OCGS and COU liaise with and assist their affiliates and the professional schools they represent to address the issues of admission, retention and completion of students with disabilities in their programmes as well as their eventual movement into the professions.

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