

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students who graduate from master's and PhD programs make substantive contributions to their communities on a regional, provincial and federal level through 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 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 lead 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 20 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 face complex challenges to their success within graduate education, many issues are 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.