



# **Academic accommodations for graduate students outside of courses**

Yeates School of Graduate Studies

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## **Executive summary**

To date, the Yeates School of Graduate Studies has not reviewed nor evaluated the efficacy of the existing academic accommodations provided for Ryerson graduate students, particularly as it relates to graduate students outside of courses. University-wide services that support students registered in undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education do exist. These services support students within courses if they are registered with the Academic Accommodation Support office, however, little has been done to ensure the unique needs of graduate students are met in a formal and equitable way.

The sub-committee for Academic Accommodation and Consideration for Graduate Students was struck, in part, to conduct a review of the current status of both access to graduate education, and the support available for graduate students with disabilities. This report reflects the first steps of this process of review. The committee will continue to meet and review the progress of addressing the recommendations outlined and identify any further challenges or recommendations that may arise.

The committee determined that while there is a need to address some of the gaps in the existing services as well as the scope of those services, there are also challenges related to a broad lack of understanding of disabilities by program faculty and staff, insufficient communication from YSGS and information sharing of existing services, and inadequate visibility of options for academic and non-academic accommodations in YSGS print and digital materials.

Additionally, while individualized accommodations provide vital support for students, and a need for these disability-related accommodations will always exist, the committee notes that there is the potential to decrease the dependency on an individualized approach to accommodations through increasing generalized accessibility within and across courses, program events, non-course requirements, and the overall graduate student experience. The committee contends that an important starting point to achieve the goal of diminishing barriers more broadly is to enhance the understanding of what accessibility encompasses.

The main recommendations identified by the sub-committee are to:

- Institute a working group that will develop an action plan to address the recommendations listed below
- Create an ongoing process of evaluation to determine the efficacy of the initiatives in meeting the needs of graduate students
- Increase the overall accessibility of the graduate student experience
- Formalize a process of access to academic accommodations for non-course program requirements
- Evaluate the processes for equitable funding decisions and identify options for increasing equity in awarding internal scholarships and awards for students with disabilities
- Identify opportunities for early intervention for students who may need accommodations

- Embed information about disability and accommodations within supervisor guidelines and resources

## **Context and Purpose**

As the needs of our graduate students grow and change, we are presented with new opportunities to challenge the status quo while maintaining the high caliber academic expectations of our programs. In recognition that greater accessibility leads to a lower need for personalized accommodations, it is important to focus on opportunities to remove barriers where possible. This commitment to a vision of inclusivity aligns with Ryerson's core value of diversity and inclusion and directs action to eliminate systemic barriers and reflects on YSGS's strategy to "further embed the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion and Indigenization throughout graduate studies".

The provision of accommodation services for students with disabilities realizes Ryerson's obligation toward equitable and inclusive participation of all students in their academic experience. Accommodations for documented disability are negotiated in order to diminish or eliminate existing barriers that might emerge in Ryerson's learning environments, while still maintaining the integrity of degree expectations. This service aims to foster collaborative understanding between students and faculty through the formal approval of documented accommodations that address individual learning needs.

While the university continues to make great strides at increasing accessibility in classrooms and by adopting the best practices of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the focus until now has been more on academic accommodations for undergraduate work which has left graduate programs, faculty members, and student services without formal guidance in supporting students in need of accommodations outside of the classroom setting.

## **Background and Mandate**

Through Yeates School of Graduate Studies (YSGS) Council, the Vice Provost and Dean, Graduate Studies struck an ad-hoc committee with the purpose of undertaking the review of the current practices of providing graduate students with accommodations to meet their needs in the completion of non-course requirements. The Committee was charged with the task of identifying current challenges and practices, exploring best practices for accommodations of graduate students, and developing informed recommendations to promote access to and the success of students with disabilities.

Without limiting the primary objectives described above, the responsibilities of the Committee included the following:

1. Identification of current practices of programs across Faculties to meet the needs of students with disabilities and extenuating circumstances in non-course requirements.

2. Completion of an external scan of current practices to support the needs of students with disabilities and extenuating circumstances in non-course requirements.
3. Establishing the distribution of responsibility between supervisors and graduate students to determine appropriate accommodations and considerations.
4. Identifying supports both on and off-campus for faculty members and students to appropriately accommodate students.
5. Reviewing documents with consultation groups (ADs, GPDs, GPAs, Student Advisory Group) and responding to feedback and comments.
6. Moving documents through governance structure as appropriate.

## **Approach**

In November 2019, YSGS Council voted in favour of striking an ad-hoc committee to assess and review the current state of support provided for students with disabilities outside of courses. The committee consisted of representation from all Faculties including graduate program administrators, faculty members, associate deans, students, accommodation professionals and administrative staff. The committee met over the course of the winter term at which point a research assistant was hired to complete some additional background research and compile all the information from the committee. The committee's initial plans for information gathering broadly across stakeholders were scaled back due to the limited communication avenues available due to COVID-19, however, the more centralized information points (Graduate Program Administrators) were contacted directly to provide experiential input. The recommended working group will be supported in their additional data collection by the research assistant. Collectively the group worked together to identify the key issues faced for students with disabilities and the impact on their graduate student experience and then develop recommendations for moving forward to address these issues.

## **Key issues**

While all university students face similar challenges, graduate students may experience additional challenges and/or may require different support strategies to navigate a number of additional areas including, but not restricted to those outlined below:

- Laboratory settings, cooperative education or work terms, project-based studios or fieldwork requirements.
- Graduate seminar participation and seminar leadership.
- Issues related to the relationship between students with disabilities and their supervisors.
- Completion of graduate milestones such as theses, dissertations and major research papers and projects, that involve the completion of independent research and the writing (and iterative editing of) major writing components.
- Roles such as teaching assistant, assignment marker, invigilator, or research assistant that are sometimes part of the graduate student experience or essential funding opportunities, and employment experience.

- International mobility for research opportunities.
- Extra-curricular activities that serve to expand and enrich the graduate experience including networking opportunities, conference attendance, post-seminar receptions, amongst others.
- Graduate student funding options

## **Current supports at Ryerson**

### **Academic Accommodation Support (AAS)**

At Ryerson, Academic Accommodation Support (AAS) is designated to work with students and faculty in order to facilitate reasonable and appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities. This service connects students with front line staff, Student Accommodation Facilitators, who create each student's individualized accommodation plan, which is then available to be distributed to instructors or faculty. This is a vital campus support and key touchpoint for student accessibility at Ryerson. AAS serves both graduate and undergraduate students.

For graduate students, AAS is the sole support service at Ryerson dedicated toward creating formalized, official plans of accommodation that can allow for documented and collaborative communication between graduate students and faculty as it pertains to disability disclosure. Furthermore, the graduate use of AAS services can create a vital link between the graduate student and the institution; it is the means through which to register as a graduate student with a documented disability requiring academic accommodations. The maintenance of this line of support and ongoing outreach from this service to the graduate student is significant in that it could potentially mitigate further barriers or challenges.

Therefore, it is imperative to recognize potential gaps in outreach and resources from AAS to the graduate student community. Greater clarity in communicating the graduate-specific and non-coursework related services offered by AAS could strengthen this outreach and the participation of graduate students.

### **Graduate Program Administrators**

Graduate Program Administrators (GPAs) serve as the main point of contact and administrative link through which students can identify resources and support services and navigate the university. Therefore, an internal scan of Ryerson GPAs was conducted via emailed questions regarding current protocol and resources in order to gauge how programs might be managing the needs of graduate students with disabilities.

Overall, this scan revealed that Graduate Program Administrators are not well-equipped to confidently handle or intuit the barriers to full accommodation at the graduate level. The feedback given by GPAs indicates a lack of awareness and information of efficient, formalized,

and across-board policy towards graduate accommodation. Rather, GPAs noted that they most often defer or outsource to existing campus services including the Academic Accommodations Support Office in order to handle requests related to disability.

## Ryerson website for access to information

An internal scan of [ryerson.ca](http://ryerson.ca) revealed:

- Both undergraduate and graduate students are referenced in the content on the *Academic Accommodations Support* webpage, but descriptive information is mainly centered around coursework, lectures, etc., thereby grouping together the undergraduate and graduate student experience without clear differentiation.
- Specified graduate student support is offered under *Student Learning Support*, but appears limited to writing workshops and is not geared towards students with disabilities.
- The Graduate Studies website does not feature an accessibility module or dedicated resource page for graduate students with disabilities.

## Overall Findings

With an understanding of the current state at Ryerson and the services that exist for students with disabilities, it becomes apparent that the first roadblock faced by students is access to information about what is available to support them.

## Supports at other Ontario Universities

A scan of other Ontario universities revealed minimal differences from Ryerson in the services and supports provided for graduate students. However, in a number of cases access to information about what supports are available is more easily navigated through their websites.

External websites were reviewed in order to assess how other Ontario postsecondary institutions present information regarding academic accommodations in relation to graduate students with disabilities. This scan revealed that several Ontario universities have notably integrated graduate-specific needs in their online accommodations resources. The key points that differentiated these websites include:

- Clarity: *Specific types of graduate-specific accommodations and potential barriers are outlined online.* (McMaster; York; University of Toronto). Graduate students are provided with comprehensive descriptions and/or lists of what might constitute a barrier in need of formal accommodation in the graduate level experience. For example:
  - Non-coursework degree requirements, e.g., thesis defence, comprehensive exams, conference attendance, etc.
  - Supervisor/committee meetings and communications

- Workplace accommodations (Teaching Assistantships, Research Assistantships)
    - Students are advised on pathways to accessing graduate accommodation.
- *Visibility: Graduate students with disabilities are clearly recognized on institutions' websites.* (Queen's; U of T; McMaster; York; Western). This information is provided on a separate, designated online space which further emphasizes the presence and specific needs of graduate students with disabilities.
- *Formalized/Key Contact: Designated Graduate Accommodations Officer or consultant appointed specifically to graduate students with disabilities seeking accommodation* (Laurier, University of Toronto). This information is available online as a response to graduate students' unique academic needs.
- *Resources: Handbooks, guidelines, and resources are created and made accessible online.* (U of T; Queen's; McMaster). These include supervisor guidebooks which include but are not limited to in-depth reference to disability; information on campus groups /events for graduate students with disabilities; funding and scholarship information; guidelines for faculty and supervisors.

## Recommendations

After discussions, internal and external scans, and consultations regarding supports for students with disabilities, the following recommendations have been identified by the committee:

- Institute a working group that will develop an action plan to address the recommendations listed below and a structure of evaluation of the efficacy of the initiatives in meeting the needs of graduate students
- Increase overall accessibility of the graduate student experience
  - Develop a guide for the faculty and staff of graduate programs to increase the accessibility of non-course events/opportunities and raise overall awareness of AODA requirements and Human Rights Requirements
  - Develop e-modules for faculty, staff, and students regarding accessibility, accommodations and considerations to increase understanding of options and resources that exist
- Formalize a process of access to academic accommodations for students outside of courses
  - Work with the Academic Policy Review Committee's subcommittee for Policy 159: Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities to ensure that graduate student's needs are adequately addressed
  - Develop a system of documentation of agreements around accommodations that are being provided
  - Develop a guide for graduate student supervisors regarding providing accommodations for graduate students in the completion of milestones

- Collaborate with Academic Accommodation Support services and Ryerson's Accessibility Coordinator in OVPECI to establish a common understanding of the broader needs of graduate students with disabilities and the best practices that exist
- Work with Accommodations Support Services to establish a dedicated academic accommodations officer for graduate students
- Evaluate the processes for funding decisions and identify options for increasing equity in awarding internal scholarships and awards for students with disabilities
- Identify opportunities for early intervention for students who may need accommodations
  - Provide guidelines for how the tracking system of academic consideration requests can be used by graduate program directors and assistants, associate deans, or directors of research for early intervention processes
  - Collaborate to develop an orientation/transition program for incoming students with disabilities that reflects all aspects of the graduate experience (course work, extracurricular work, employment)
- Embed information about accessibility, disability, and accommodations within supervisor guidelines and resources

## **Appendix 1: Ad-hoc committee terms of reference**

### **Mandate**

The mandate of the Academic Accommodation and Consideration for Graduate Students ad-hoc committee is to develop guidelines to meet the needs of graduate students with both temporary and permanent disabilities as well as extenuating circumstances that impact their academic functioning outside of course requirements.

### **Committee Objectives**

The Vice Provost and Dean, Graduate Studies has struck this committee with the purpose of undertaking the review of the current practices of providing graduate students with accommodations and considerations to meet their needs in the completion of non-course requirements. The Committee is charged with the task of identifying current challenges and practices, exploring best practices for accommodations and considerations of graduate students, and developing informed guidelines to promote access to and the success of students with disabilities and extenuating circumstances.

Without limiting the primary objectives described above, the responsibilities of the Committee will include the following:

1. Identifying current practices of programs across Faculties to meet the needs of students with disabilities and extenuating circumstances in non-course requirements.
2. Completion of an external scan of current practices to support the needs of students with disabilities and extenuating circumstances in non-course requirements.
3. Determining the distribution of responsibility between supervisors and graduate students to determine appropriate accommodations and considerations.
4. Identifying supports both on and off-campus for faculty members and students to appropriately accommodate students.
5. Reviewing documents with consultation groups (ADs, GPDs, GPAs, Student Advisory Group) and responding to feedback and comments.
6. Moving documents through governance structure as appropriate.

### **Accountability**

The Committee is convened by the Office of the Vice Provost and Dean, YSGS and approved by YSGS Council. The Associate Dean, Student Affairs, YSGS will chair the Committee and will be responsible for reporting to the Vice Provost and Dean regarding the work of the Committee. The Office of the Vice Provost and Dean will prepare any necessary agenda materials and supporting materials required in this process.

## Membership

The Office of the Vice Provost and Dean, YSGS appoints members to the Committee to ensure representation from across faculties. The term of the Committee members will expire upon the approval of any final adjustments by the Committee to the proposed amendments after moving through the levels of governance at Ryerson. Recognizing that Committee members are volunteering their time, any Committee member may resign at any time upon notice to the Committee Chair. The chair of the Committee is responsible for the conduct of the meetings, including oversight of action items. The chair will delegate work, as necessary, to the Strategic Initiatives and Policy Advisor, YSGS.

Chair:	Janice Waddell, Associate Dean, Student Affairs, YSGS
Associate Deans:	Miljana Horvat, FEAS Michael Kolios, FOS
Faculty Members:	Deborah Fels, TRSM Zhixi Xhuang, FCS Miranda Campbell, FCAD
GPA's:	Sarah Edmonds, Communication and Culture Julia Macan, Public Policy and Administration
University Staff:	Heather Willis, OVPECI Amanda Masterton, Acad. Accommodation Support Marc Emond, Acad. Accommodation Support Rachel DiSaia, YSGS
Student:	Alicia Kassee, Nursing

## Meetings & Quorum

The Committee will meet at scheduled meetings arranged by the Chair, as required to discuss the drafts of any proposed amendments. All Committee members will be canvassed and every effort will be made to suit the availability of Committee members. Quorum is 50% of the membership present.

## Timeline

The committee will present to YSGS Council a report with recommendations by June 2020.

## Appendix 2: Definitions

### Definitions

#### Accommodations

as defined in Ryerson Policy 159: Academic Accommodations of Students with Disabilities

a planned variation in the way a student with a disability receives course curriculum and materials, participates in course activities or demonstrates mastery of course content and skills through evaluation and assessment. (Ryerson University is committed to providing academic accommodation so long as it does not impose undue hardship).

#### Consideration

as defined in Ryerson Policy 167: Academic Considerations

alternate arrangements that may be made in response to students with extenuating circumstances.

#### Disability

as defined in the Ontario Human Rights Code

(a) 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 other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device,

(b) a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability,

(c) a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language,

(d) a mental disorder, or

(e) an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997; (“handicap”)

#### Extenuating circumstances

as defined in Ryerson Policy 167: Academic Considerations

occurrences of reasonable significance that:

(a) are outside of students’ immediate control;

(b) could not have been reasonably foreseen or avoided; and

(c) significantly affect the students’ ability to fulfill their academic requirements.

## Appendix 3: Consultation

### Consultation process

In gathering relevant information on the pathways currently available for graduate students with disabilities, it was deemed necessary to consult with the Graduate Program Administrators (GPAs) across graduate studies at Ryerson. The aim of this contact was to assess the level to which GPAs felt equipped to facilitate accommodation for students with disabilities and to gain insight into the resources and information that might be provided by graduate programs to their administration.

Therefore, four key questions were developed that were intended to identify the current administrative approach to graduate program accommodations and barriers to accessibility. The questions were as follows:

- (1) Has your program identified any existing barriers that may impede the academic/extra-curricular experience of any graduate students living with a disability?
- (2) What kinds of accommodations or resources, have you or a faculty member offered a graduate student who has raised concern about a barrier they are facing as a student?
- (3) Please describe recent initiatives/supports your program has put in place recently to enhance/increase accessibility for graduate students with a disability.
- (4) As a program administrator, how prepared do you feel to direct students with disabilities to relevant resources and supports at the university?

These questions were emailed to all Ryerson GPAs on May 13, 2020. Recipients were informed that their feedback would be considered in the compilation of a report conducted by YSGS on accommodations for graduate students with disabilities. All responses were collected by Monday, May 25th, 2020. These responses were then read and considered for key themes and recurrent issues. The findings from this survey were as follows:

There was a lack of uniformity in both the response to and understanding and awareness of, graduate student disability and accommodation from the different graduate program administrators. This indicates that there is likely not a top-down, streamlined, or efficient protocol present in YSGS that could allow for a desired formalized process of response. Rather, graduate accommodation seems to be addressed on a case-by-case basis by graduate program administrators.

There were several common themes in the feedback given. Firstly, GPAs from several programs note possible barriers in students' access to facilities, physical space, and technology; the program, therefore, works to coordinate this ease of access. Secondly, modifications to degree timelines, schedules, and coursework were flagged as a common type of

accommodation requested from the program. GPAs remarked that mental health, anxiety, or overwhelming schedules seem to contribute to the need for accommodation. Others noted the need to ensure on and off-site resources to accommodate a disability (e.g., interpreters, equipment) are funded and coordinated by the program. Overall, most feedback suggests that GPAs feel they can only refer students to, or coordinate with, Academic Accommodation Services, and are unaware of further supports or resources available.

Most of the feedback did centre around coursework accommodations, degree timelines, and facilities access. More absent from responses was an awareness of non-coursework barriers or program support for degree milestones. Furthermore, there was no discussion of negotiating supervisory issues or faculty interactions.

There is an evident disparity between the culture of accessibility across graduate programs; while some GPAs indicated no awareness of any resources made available by the program, others provided more fulsome responses on student diversity, “compassion” for disability and mental health needs, and desire to make students aware of accommodation policies. To be sure, it is also unclear as to how each GPA interpreted the concept of ‘disability’. This, however, could provide insight into how prevalent or in-depth the discussion of disability might be in each program.

## **Appendix 4: Ad-hoc Committee Input and Suggestions**

### **Committee Suggestions**

The following action points and suggestions, gathered via collaboration with the ad-hoc committee, have informed the broader recommendations in this report. These ideas are detailed here in order to ensure that the roll-out of recommendations from this report continue to be guided by valuable committee input.

- Ensure the incorporation of destigmatizing language around well-being and mental health into any outreach pertaining to accommodations and accessibility in order to foster an environment of inclusivity and understanding. The goal in outreach to graduate students is to lessen barriers and stigma around seeking help at the graduate level
- Collaborate with AAS regarding the roll-out of non-coursework related accommodation for graduate students or
  - Follow-up with AAS for data on current pilot program with designated program facilitators (e.g., FCAD pilot program)
- Strengthen early intervention strategies and outreach
  - Consider implementing or improving the tracking of incoming/current graduate students with documented disabilities in order to foster an accurate vision of numbers

- Continue to collect data pertaining to graduate students who register with or contact AAS, transition programs, or wellbeing services
  - Investigate barriers to entry
  - Create individual transition plans and outreach strategies that progress alongside graduate students' evolution through different stages of their program
  - Coordinate with SLS on a potential summer transition program that can incorporate elements of Ryerson's existing SHIFT program
- Ensure the consideration of workplace accommodations for graduate students' teaching and research assistantships and other enrichment opportunities
  - Coordinate with key contacts at other Ontario universities in order to gain insight into similar graduate disability accommodation strategies and resources
  - Funding and Time-to-Completion
    - While the provision of accommodations for disability does not necessarily result in an inevitable delay to students' program completion, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that flexibility and accommodation might result in a prolonged time to completion for some graduate students with disabilities. This could have an impact on the accessibility and availability of funding, which is tied to scheduled time limits.
    - With this in mind, it is prudent to consider strategies and resources that can improve graduate students' time to completion, but *with specific attention to, and consideration of, disability and accommodation*. As such, the working group recommended by this report could investigate the ways in which supervisors and graduate programs can guide students toward timely program completion with the aim of maintaining critical funding, while still supporting an accessible learning experience which can require reasonable time accommodations.
    - Suggestions regarding funding and time-to- completion for the working group:
      - Undertake a more detailed exploration of how accommodations for disability currently impact time to completion at the graduate level at Ryerson
      - Examine the funding available for students with disabilities in the case of program delays
      - Explore possible additional funding from other sources to alleviate the financial burden on programs and supervisors for a student whose extended time-to-completion is due to academic accommodation
    - Consider developing resources and guidelines for graduate programs/supervisors informing them of best practices to help facilitate timely program completion alongside the provision of necessary accommodations, for example:

- Explore improved, regular communication regarding funding and program limits/time regulations
- Consider individualized outreach strategies that follow-up with students' continued movement through program after accessing accommodations, creating individualized plans of study that incorporate accommodation
- Explore the current information and resources available for supervisors regarding ways to support and facilitate timely program completion

## Appendix 5: Relevant resources

[Accommodating graduate students with disabilities - 2010](#) - Council of Ontario Universities

[In It Together 2020](#) - Foundations for promoting mental wellness in campus communities

[Introduction to Accessible Education](#) - Council of Ontario Universities

[National Educational Association of Disabled Students Graduate Task Force](#) - Understanding Accessibility in Graduate Education for Students with Disabilities in Canada

[Not in the syllabus](#) - Findings from the Canadian Federation of Students - Ontario's survey on graduate student mental health

[Policy on Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities](#) - Ontario Human Rights Commission