

Report of the *ad hoc* Committee on Doctoral Supervision

to

Professor Leslie Shade
Director, PhD Program

March 31, 2014

Background

During the self-study phase (summer 2013) of the Faculty of Information's recent program review, the authors of the self-study report held a series of meetings with the various constituencies. At the PhD consultation meeting, students brought up a number of serious concerns with aspects of PhD supervision in the Faculty. Following the airing of these concerns, the Dean and the Director of the PhD program commissioned a report to address issues raised.

Mandate

1. To agree on mechanisms to raise awareness among supervisors and students in the Faculty of Information of the SGS Guidelines on Supervision of Doctoral Students (<http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/Documents/supervision+guidelines.pdf>).
2. To agree on steps to promote discussion among faculty about best practices in terms of supervision and the sharing of approaches and strategies as an initial step towards creating greater consistency in supervisory practices (or as a way to make the variation in practices transparent and understandable to doctoral students).
3. To take a decision as to whether a localized version of the SGS guidelines, which reflects/responds to the culture of the Faculty of Information and the disciplines it encompasses, is necessary. If the working group concludes that a localised version of the SGS Guidelines on Supervision is necessary, they are asked to produce one and present it to the iSchool Programs Committee for adoption through our Faculty governance processes.
4. To agree whether guidelines for the documentation of supervisory meetings and doctoral committee meetings are necessary. If the working group concludes they are, it is asked to develop them present them to the iSchool Programs Committee for adoption through our Faculty governance processes
5. To recommend, within the context of University guidelines, (a) the maximum number of doctoral students faculty members in the iSchool should be permitted to supervise/advise at any one time, and (b) the maximum number of doctoral committees on which faculty can serve in addition to their doctoral supervisions. This recommendation should be presented to the Faculty's Program Committee for adoption through our Faculty governance processes

6. To make recommendations to the Dean of the Faculty of Information as to what information should be provided by faculty on PTR annual reports about their doctoral supervision.

The committee agreed that recommendation #5 would not be addressed, as this issue fell more appropriately to discussions within the faculty workload committee's mandate, and did not fall within the mandate of the Programs Committee in any case.

Membership

Professor Kelly Lyons, Chair
Terry Costantino, PhD Candidate
ginger coons, PhD Student
Professor Wendy Duff
Professor David Phillips
Ashley Scarlett, PhD Student
Andrew Drummond, Secretary

Meetings

At first, two meetings – on January 8 and January 28, 2014 – were held. During the first meeting, general concerns were identified and discussion focused on the suitability of the existing School of Graduate Studies *Guidelines for Supervision of Graduate Students*. Following the first meeting, faculty members agreed to discuss the issue with colleagues, and PhD students agreed that they should informally survey their colleagues to identify the exact issues of concern. The second meeting focused on identifying both administrative and cultural changes that would assist in reducing the frequency and seriousness of supervisory problems. These changes are reflected in this Committee's recommendations below.

A third meeting was held on February 11 to revise a first draft of this report. A final meeting on March 10 finalized the report.

Issues Identified

Committee members identified five issues that seemed to prevail in PhD supervision:

- Clear communication among the Faculty, supervisors, supervisory committees, and students;
- Awareness of the full range of expectations and responsibilities of supervisors and supervisory committees, on the part of both students and supervisors;

- Awareness of the full range of responsibilities of students, on the part of both students, and supervisors, and supervisory committees;
- Knowledge of program policies; and
- A need for a culture of mentorship and intellectual support in the PhD program.

All committee members were able to cite multiple individual incidences of each of these concerns, though it should be noted that all agreed that these concerns were not universal. In addition, both student and faculty members of the Committee agreed that the power differential can make it difficult for students to advocate strongly for their own interests in some circumstances. As a result, issues, such as a faculty member taking too long to respond to communications, may not be addressed.

Indeed, student members of the Committee reported that members of the PhD cohort were even fearful of coming forward with issues in relation to the work of this Committee unless they could be absolutely assured of anonymity. They also reported that, in discussions with faculty members about the issue of supervision and the role of this Committee, they were met with shocked disbelief and an almost aggressive attitude that these issues were as prevalent as they seemed to be among PhD students.

On the other hand, it was noted that some important opportunities for student involvement in the scholarly activities of the Faculty were missed. For example, faculty members reported in consultation that it was difficult to find PhD students who were available to introduce colloquium speakers, and that many PhD students do not take advantage of opportunities for closer contact with external speakers.

Administrative Recommendations

All members reviewed the *Graduate Supervision Guidelines* provided by the School of Graduate Studies. It was noted that while some supervisors and students were aware of the guidelines, many were not. It was noted that the document provided some good recommendations and common-sense approaches to supervision issues, but that occasionally the guidelines were too general and that some local mechanisms should be created to support and encourage matters specific to the Faculty of Information's PhD program. Having said that, the Committee agreed that all students and supervisors should be made aware of the information in the guidelines, specifically that on pp. 8-10 (detailing the responsibilities of both students and supervisors) and Appendices 2 and 3 (pp. 23-25), which provide useful checklists for both supervisors and students. The Committee agreed that the *Guidelines* should be distributed to both students and supervisors early in the relationship and that their contents be communicated clearly and broadly and reviewed annually.

Recommendation I (a): Distribute the *Guidelines* to all PhD students and to all supervisors, encouraging them to read them, follow them, and regularly to fill out the Checklists in the Appendices. A link to the *Guidelines* should be distributed with the APR, and discussed with students and supervisors at the orientation session for new doctoral students. (Responsibility: PhD Director, all faculty, all PhD students)

Recommendation I (b): Distribute and assign as a reading the *Graduate Supervision Guidelines* provided by the School of Graduate Studies at the beginning of INF3001. (Responsibility: PhD Director, INF3001 Instructor)

In particular, the Committee recommends that the *Guidelines* be supplemented with several specific supports. The Director of the PhD program should ensure that supervisors are aware of and follow general guidelines for appropriate response times to student communications, subject to agreed-upon alterations in individual cases.

Students and supervisors should be clear with each other and arrive at agreements about non-course deliverables, such as publications, conference papers, or research or teaching assistantships, and how the main PhD work will maintain priority even given conflicting demands. These ‘terms of engagement’ should help clarify to both students and supervisors their responsibilities.

Recommendation II: Supervisors and students should develop and regularly review and update agreements about supervisory expectations for deliverables, both for course- and program-related matters as well as for other matters. Included in the discussions about expectations should be an agreement on response times to student communications and turnaround times for reviewing materials, in line with the *Graduate Supervision Guidelines* (Responsibility: all supervisors, all students; Oversight: PhD Program Director)

Faculty members on the Committee were unanimous that the supervision of doctoral students was among the most rewarding aspects of being a faculty member; however, the value of supervision to faculty should not simply rest on the satisfaction it brings, but also on other benefits. The Committee agreed that the annual review process for graduate students should be redesigned in several important ways. First, the preparation of the APR should be seen as an opportunity to set aside time to discuss the process of supervision and what expectations should be forthcoming in the student’s progress and how the supervisor could best support the student’s progress – essentially, a regular, mandated review and update of the supervisory ‘terms of engagement’. This review should help clarify expectations on the part of both the student and supervisor and address how the student is proceeding through the program and how best to support the student’s progress. (Of course, such discussions should also occur as appropriate at other times; committee members agreed that expectations differ at different points in the

program, and, as such, 'terms of engagement' should adapt to students' progress and faculty member commitments.) The APR completion can also be used to encourage supervisory committee members to clarify their expectations so that students are not blindsided by unanticipated requirements.

The Annual Progress Review (APR) process and instructions should be redesigned to include a review of the *Supervisory Guidelines* as well as of student progress and the supervisor's role in student progress. In addition, high quality supervision should be incentivized by including APRs in faculty PTR processes, including a section on the major accomplishments of students supervised.

Recommendation III (a): Ensure that the APR process includes a chance for both supervisor and student to revisit the 'terms of engagement' for mutual expectations of supervision; use the APR process to clarify and ascertain supervisory committee members' involvement and expectations. Modify the APR instructions and email communication to include a link to the *Graduate Supervision Guidelines* and instructions to meet and discuss APR contents and the *Guidelines* before completing the report. (Responsibility: PhD Program Director)

Recommendation III (b): Change the completion requirement date for the APR form to March 31 of every year to enable easier inclusion of supervision information for consideration in PTR reporting. (Responsibility: PhD Program Director)

Recommendation III(c): Modify the (faculty) Activity Report template to include a section for highlights and accomplishments of each doctoral student supervised. Faculty members can refer to material in their students' APRs to complete this section. Faculty members may wish to include student APRs as appendices to their Activity Report. Modify the (faculty) Activity Report template to include an item for doctoral supervisors and doctoral committee members to confirm they have reviewed (in the past year) the Graduate Supervision Guidelines provided by the School of Graduate Studies. (Responsibility: Dean, PTR Committee)

Lastly, the Committee was mindful that structural issues will arise in the PhD program. The students, individually and collectively, should view the PhD Program Director as a principal point of contact among the faculty and the administration, and it should be in the Director's job description to be, when necessary, an 'ombudsperson' with the responsibility to act, when appropriate, in the interests of the students and the program. Although faculty members were unanimous that student voices were absolutely welcomed, students have not always felt that way. The role of the Director should be altered to be that point of contact for students and for the Doctoral Students Association.

Recommendation IV: Redefine the role and job description of the PhD Program Director to add the role of ‘Ombudsperson’ for PhD student interests with the Faculty as a whole and with faculty members, and make clear to PhD students that their interests can be formally represented in the administration by the Director. (Responsibility: Dean, PhD Program Director)

“Cultural” Recommendations

While the administrative changes noted in Recommendations I through IV are important to the improvement of supervision, all Committee members were mindful of the power differential between supervisor and doctoral student. Students feel dependent on their supervisor for so much that even with the best will in the world, any issue, even a minor one, could feel to the student as though her/his career is threatened. Faculty members must regularly remind themselves of this power imbalance, and be prepared to accept well-meant suggestions for change. Students should feel as though they can go to their supervisor with issues, and, if they do not feel that they can, then they should be able to depend on the Doctoral Program Director as an impartial arbiter and intervenor. Students should, for example, feel free to copy the Program Director on messages to supervisors as issues arise. Changes in the program – for example, a change to flex status, a change in supervisory committee membership, or even a change in supervisor – should be treated as matters designed with the students’ academic interests in mind. Committee members agreed that these changes are serious, but should be recognized as events that do occur occasionally in the progress towards a doctorate. In addition, students and supervisors should understand that Supervisory Committee membership and Qualifying Exam Committee membership need not be identical and, following the Qualifying Exam, a Supervisory Committee should be established that best supports the student’s academic interests and progress.

One of the issues brought up by students was that the culture of mentorship seemed to be lacking. Students felt disconnected from faculty members, and especially that faculty members seemed unaware of doctoral student research beyond the annual research days. There was a sense among Committee members that PhD students should be treated as much as possible as involved colleagues. The Committee agreed that the best way of improving this perception was to increase opportunities for both formal and informal contact. PhD students should consider, for example, eating lunch with colleagues once a week in Room 728 (on different days every week to allow for the variety of faculty and student schedules). The Faculty should consider setting up a series of brown bag lunches with informal talks given by both supervisors and students on, for example, current research directions, early reporting of research results, exciting findings not yet worked up into a paper or a chapter, etc. These should be rotated by day and offered once or twice monthly.

Recommendation V (a): Encourage doctoral students to take advantage of the many opportunities for engaging in Faculty events such as colloquium series, Faculty presentations, and other Faculty events. (Responsibility: All)

Recommendation V (b): Use room 728 of the Bissell Building as a joint doctoral student/faculty/staff lunchroom once a week to encourage social interaction. (Responsibility: DSA, Program Director, Administration Chief Administrative Officer)

Recommendation V (c): Develop a brown bag lunch series for doctoral students and faculty members to present ideas or research in development in an informal environment. (Responsibility: Life and Times Committee)

Students could help create an incentive as well: the Committee was supportive of a suggestion for the Doctoral Students' Association to launch a supervision award after developing a set of clear criteria for nomination and for scoring.

Recommendation VI: Develop a Supervision Award, to be adjudicated according to clear criteria. (Responsibility: DSA)

Conclusion

The Committee wishes to acknowledge the support and assistance of faculty members and PhD students who took the time to assist it in arriving at these recommendations. It is our belief that the issues that have become apparent over the last months can be mostly addressed through the application of good will and best practice, and that many of the real and serious issues that have arisen can be dealt with using sound guidelines and a mutual understanding that the success of the Faculty's PhD students is of benefit both to the students themselves as well as to the Faculty as a whole. The committee felt it was important to evaluate the implementation of the recommendations in this report and, thus, offer this final recommendation:

Recommendation VII: Monitor the implementation and success of the recommendations in this report and revisit the topic of Doctoral Supervision in March 2015 to determine if additional changes are needed including whether a localized version the *Supervisory Guidelines*, which reflects/responds to the culture of the Faculty of Information and the disciplines it encompasses, is necessary. (Responsibility: PhD Director and PhD Committee)

May 1, 2014

To: Kelly Lyons, Chair of the *ad hoc* Committee on Doctoral Supervision

From: Leslie Regan Shade, Director of Doctoral Studies

Re: Response to the Report of the *ad hoc* Committee on Doctoral Supervision

Many thanks to the Committee (yourself and members David Phillips, Wendy Duff, Ashley Scarlett, Terry Costantino, ginger coons, and Andrew Drummond) for the considerable attention and thoughtfulness that has gone into your report and recommendations. Following is my brief response to the report.

I take note of Item #5 in the mandate, which the Committee recommends to be best addressed by the Faculty's Workload Committee. I have passed on this item to the Workload Committee for consideration.

In terms of widely advertising the *SGS Guidelines*, in the Winter semester they were distributed to students and faculty on the respective listservs, and this year I conducted a student workshop on supervision in collaboration with the Doctoral Student's Association (DSA). I will ensure that the *SGS Guidelines* be readily available as part of the packages for incoming students in the Fall, and I will recommend that the Director hold a workshop on the *Guidelines* in consultation with the DSA in the Fall semester, to bolster Recommendation I(b).

Several of the recommendations (Ia, IIIa, IIIc) related to modifications of the annual student and faculty Activity Reports, about raising awareness and knowledge of the *Guidelines*, have been done for this year. I will consult with support staff surrounding the logistics of Recommendation III(b), concerning a change in the completion date for the student APR to allow for faculty PTR reporting.

As the job description of the Director of Doctoral Studies is updated and refined, I take note of Recommendation IV, to add 'ombudsperson' to the job description. This role of the Director will also be reinforced in New Student Orientation in the Fall as well.

I will consult with the DSA concerning Recommendations V(a)(b)(c) and VI which relate to faculty-student social and intellectual events.

Lastly, and in consultation with the PhD Committee and DSA, in the Winter 2015 semester we will consider Recommendation VII about whether a localized version of the *Guidelines* seems appropriate. I will also consult with SGS and the CTSI (Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation) as they have been collaborating on best practices workshops on graduate student supervision and might be able to lend some specific advice to our unit.