UTM Graduate Programming Qualitative Needs Assessment
2018-2019

Introduction

The Robert Gillespie Academic Skill Centre's (RGASC) mission is to help students identify and develop the academic skills they need for success in their studies. For graduate students, this support comes in the form of workshops, seminars, individual consultations, a weekly writing group, and the bi-annual Graduate Professional Development Conferences (GPDC).

In August 2018, the RGASC hired a Graduate Student Support Strategist (50%). One of the primary goals of this position was to conduct research on the University of Toronto Mississauga's (UTM) current graduate student programming in order to identify opportunities for growth and development of graduate student programming. The purpose of this internal research initiative was to gain a deeper understanding of the needs of UTM-affiliated graduate students to develop suitable graduate programming. The following report is the result of this research.

Methods

From December 2018 to April 2019, the RGASC's Graduate Student Support Strategist (GSSS) conducted interviews with graduate students and graduate supervisors. The GSSS sent interview requests to all UTM staff and faculty member who were supervising graduate students during the 2018-2019 academic year. She interviewed thirty-two graduate supervisors and five staff members from across campus (see details in Table 1). The GSSS also requested interviews with graduate students through UTM's graduate listserv, department coordinators, graduate associations, and graduate supervisors. She also posted a notice on the RGASC website and distributed posters across campus. A total of twenty-eight graduate students from a range of departments, degrees, and program years responded to these invitations (see Table 2 for a breakdown of the participants' characteristics); twenty-four graduate students participated in interviews and four participated in a focus group. Each graduate student participant received a $10 Starbucks gift card as an honorarium.

The interview and focus group questions concentrated on three areas: 1) familiarity and experiences with current RGASC graduate programming; 2) improvements to current offerings; and 3) future offerings (see appendices A-C for all interview and focus group questions). Due to small sample sizes, the interview and focus group results are combined here.

Table 1. Characteristics of Graduate Faculty and Staff Participants.

Total Number of Graduate Supervisor and Staff Participants		37
Graduate Departments		
Department	**Number of Faculty**	**Number of Staff**
Anthropology	3	1
Biology	1	-
Chemical and Physical Sciences	8	-
Geography	8	-
Psychology	3	-
Sociology	5	-
Number of Graduate Students Supervised		
1	3	
2	4	
3	8	
4	2	
5	5	
6+	3	
No Response	3	
Degree Graduate Students are Pursuing		
PhD only	11	
MSc only	2	
MA only	-	
PhD and MSc	8	
PhD and MA	4	
No Response	3	
Professional Graduate Programs		
Program		
IMI	-	1
MFAcc	1	-
MMI	1	1
MScBMC	1	1
MScSM	-	1
MBiotech	1	-

Table 2. Characteristics of Graduate Student Participants

Total Number of Graduate Student Participants									28
Department	**Degree**					**Year**			
	PhD	MSc	MA	MScBMC	MScSM	1	2	3	4+
Anthropology	1	1	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
Biology	4	1	-	-	-	1	2	-	2
Chemical and Physical Sciences	5	5	-	-	-	5	2	-	3
Geography	3	2	1	-	-	3	2	1	-
Professional Graduate Programs	-	-	-	1	4	-	5	-	-

Results

Graduate Student Results

Graduate Students' Interaction with the UTM Campus

The GSSS asked graduate students how frequently they were at the UTM campus. Nineteen graduate students said they were frequently at the UTM campus (i.e., 3-5 days a week). Three graduate students said they were not frequently at the UTM campus (i.e., 1-2 days a week). Six graduate students said their frequency varied. All graduate students from CPS and Biology and two students each from Geography and the Professional Graduate Programs reported being on campus frequently. Two Geography students and one CPS student reported being at the UTM campus infrequently. Graduate students not frequently on campus expressed only being on campus for teaching assistant responsibilities. Three students from Professional Graduate Programs, two students from Geography, and one student from Anthropology said their frequency at the UTM campus varied because of having to attend required courses at the St. George campus.

Graduate Students' Familiarity with the RGASC

Eighteen graduate students reported being familiar with the RGASC, nine graduate students expressed being unfamiliar, and one graduate student mentioned being unsure of what the RGASC offered. Graduate students familiar with the RGASC stated knowing the RGASC from emails, workshops, writing cafes, and from contact with RGASC staff (e.g., the Writing Specialist and the Graduate Student Support Strategist). Among graduate students who were familiar with the RGASC, six students interacted with the RGASC over email exclusively. However, graduate students were more familiar with the RGASC through workshops. Seventeen students said they attended a workshop hosted by the RGASC. Of the seventeen students that attended a workshop, five attended GPDC, seven attended one-off workshops, and four attended both GPDC and one-off workshops. Four graduate students expressed familiarity with the RGASC from attending writing cafés.

Suggested RGSAC Resources, Services, and Workshops for Graduate Students for the RGASC to Offer

Table 3 outlines the resources, services, and workshop topics that graduate students suggested the RGASC offer UTM graduate students.

Table 3. Suggested RGASC Resources, Services, and Workshops Offerings by Graduate Students

	Resource/Service/Workshop	Description of Resource/Service/Workshop
Resource	Calendar (n=5)	
	Handbook (n=2)	
	General communication (n=1)	What students have to do/think about (e.g., administrative, grants)
	Monthly Newsletter (n=1)	
Service	Writing Cafes (n=4)	
	Networking Nights (n=2)	
	One-on-one appointments (n=2)	
	Writing boot camps (n=2)	
	Data support (n=1)	
	Accountability group (n=1)	

Workshop	Writing (n=17)	Grants; theses/dissertations; papers/publications; generally (e.g., grammar, semi-colon, citation); abstract, GCAC writing workshops, literature review, RGASC workshops, research proposal, results, writing a narrative
	Presentation skills (n=7)	General; how to talk on stage; how to present based on your audience; creating a presentation/slides; poster presentation; presenting a narrative
	Programming (n=7)	Python; R; MATLAB; ArcGIS; NVivo
	Personal effectiveness (n=4)	Communication; developing confidence; general professionalism; how to work in a group
	Time management (n=4)	General; managing workload; research planning
	Publishing (n=4)	How to publish; how to co-write; peer-review process; writing to reviewers
	Basic statistics (n=3)	
	Excel (n=2)	
	Portfolio Development (n=2)	Teaching; research
	Photography (n=1)	Set-up; capture measurements through microscope
	TATP Workshops (n=1)	
	Case Analysis (n=1)	
	Fieldwork Best Practices (n=1)	
	Project Management (n=1)	Software

The desire for improved communication was a theme when discussing suggested resources. The most mentioned type of resource requested by graduate students was a calendar, although these requests only came from CPS students.

In regards to services, writing cafés were the most frequently mentioned service suggested by Biology, CPS, and Geography graduate students in their first or second year. Students who attended writing cafes described them as very helpful, but requested for more availability and more food.

Workshop topics were the most suggested offering. Writing related workshops were the most suggested type of workshop among graduate students in all research-based graduate departments (approximately 61% of graduate student participants; n=17). The top three writing workshops suggested were on writing grants, theses/dissertations, and publications. Graduate students from Anthropology, CPS and Geography identified grant-writing workshops as a need. Approximately 62 percent of graduate students requesting grant-writing workshops (n=5) were in the first year of their MSc or PhD. Graduate students in various years and degrees from CPS and Geography suggested workshops related to thesis and dissertation writing (n=6). Writing workshops related to publications was suggested by graduate students in Geography, Anthropology, and CPS. Graduate students in Professional Graduate Programs did not

suggest writing related workshops. Rather, they suggested professional development workshop topics such as basic statistics, confidence building, and case analysis.

Graduate students also frequently suggested workshops related to presentation skills and computer programming software. Twenty-five percent of graduate student participants from CPS, Biology, Geography, and the MScSM Program requested workshops on presentation skills (n=7). Twenty-five percent of graduate student participants from Geography, CPS, and Biology requested workshops on computer programming software including Python and R (n=7).

As for the form of these workshops, the majority of graduate students preferred them to be offered on campus (n=18), in-person (n=24), and in groups of less than 20 people (n=21). They also preferred that the workshops be offered through a series, as opposed to one-off workshops (n=12).

Opportunities for Growth in UTM's Current Graduate Programming

Communication was the highest identified gap among graduate students (n=12). For instance, not knowing what the RGASC offers graduate students was the most mentioned communication gap. To improve such a gap, graduate students suggested having a package for graduate students, introducing the RGASC and the GSSS yearly, and more promotion of RGASC graduate programming in the form of posters.

Workshops were another gap identified in UTM's graduate programming (n=10). Specifically, graduate students reported the desire for more workshops, particularly discipline-specific workshops. Six graduate students expressed no gaps in UTM's current graduate programming. Two graduate students voiced the desire for additional services such as writing boot camps and networking opportunities.

Barriers to Accessing Graduate Programming

Graduate students expressed four main barriers to accessing graduate programming. The most mentioned barrier was competing responsibilities (n=14). Graduate students mentioned having to get accustomed to doing a lot of work on their own time and how it could be difficult to balance their time when trying to complete course work, research, teaching assistant responsibilities, and attend graduate programming. Interestingly, graduate students who participated in the focus group expressed time management as the most challenging part of graduate school.

The second barrier to accessing graduate programming was communication (n=12). Several graduate students reported being unaware of programming, and those who were aware were unsure of a workshop's relevance or usefulness. The third barrier to accessing graduate programming was campus location (n=6). Graduate students perceived graduate programming outside of UTM to be a barrier. Attending programming at the St. George or Scarborough campus was an inconvenience because of the time required to commute from UTM. Lastly, three graduate students described personal barriers to accessing graduate programs, such as stress or forgetfulness.

Suggested Improvements to Existing Graduate Programming at UTM

Graduate students expressed a number of ways graduate programming could improve at UTM. Improvements to workshops were the most frequently mentioned (n=13). Suggested improvements included: making workshops more discipline-specific; offering the same workshop multiple times to address scheduling difficulties; and designing workshops around completing work that graduate students already have on their to do lists (e.g., completing an abstract for a conference presentation).

Another common suggestion was to improve communication of graduate programming (n=12). Graduate students were unsure of existing offerings and felt offerings needed more promotion, but expressed hesitancy about receiving more emails. The email subject line "UTM grad students" was highlighted as a helpful way for emails to catch participants' attention during inbox sorting. It also helped students quickly differentiate between UTSG and UTM offerings, which sometimes caused confusion among participants. Familiarity with the GSSS was also noted as an effective way of recognizing emails related to UTM graduate student programming. Many participants identified a programming calendar as the best way to communicate graduate programming opportunities across UTM. Graduate students in the focus group also suggested that they would like to see everything in one central location (e.g., website).

Graduate Supervisor Results

Suggested Resources, Services, and Workshops for Graduate Students

Overall, graduate supervisors in CPS, Geography, Psychology, Sociology and the Master of Biotechnology Program felt additional writing support would be most beneficial for their students. Other resource suggestions included efforts to build more community among graduate students, information about where to find academic advising and professional development support, a dissertation support package, a monthly graduate student programming newsletter, and a centralized resource to provide information for graduate students.

When asked what services could benefit graduate students, the most frequently mentioned service was a mentorship program, which was suggested by supervisors in Biology, CPS, and Sociology. Additionally, graduate supervisors in Anthropology and Sociology mentioned services such as writing retreats and supervisors in CPS and Psychology mentioned assistance with numerical literacy.

Graduate supervisors also suggested specific workshop topics. The top three workshop topics were related to writing, time management, and presentation skills. Writing related topics were expressed by supervisors in five graduate departments (e.g., Anthropology, CPS, Geography, Psychology and Sociology) and two Professional Graduate Programs (e.g., MMI and MScSM). A workshop on time management was viewed as beneficial by supervisors in four graduate departments (e.g., Anthropology, CPS, Geography, and Psychology) and two Professional Graduate Programs (MScBMC and MScSM). A workshop on presentation skills was viewed as beneficial by supervisors in four graduate departments (e.g., CPS, Geography, Psychology, Sociology) and three Professional Graduate Programs (e.g., MMI, MScBMC, and MScSM). Table 6 provides a comprehensive list of resources, services, and workshop topics suggested by graduate supervisors.

Internal vs. External Support

The GSSS asked graduate supervisors what supports they wanted to provide their graduate students internally (i.e., supervisory or department level) or externally (i.e., support from the RGASC, etc.). Approximately forty-two percent of graduate supervisors (n=15) who were interviewed reported that research skills, technical skills, and anything discipline specific or related to the supervisors' area of specialization would be best handled internally. At least one supervisor in all graduate departments represented and one Professional Graduate Program expressed this finding. Conversely, supervisors felt oral presentation skills, writing, and computer programming (i.e., R, ArcGIS, NVivo, Python) were all appropriate topics for external support. Approximately 32 percent of graduate supervisors (n=12), which

includes supervisors from Anthropology, CPS, Geography, Psychology, Sociology, and MScSM, stated that graduate students should seek external support from all available resources.

Encouragement from Faculty for Graduate Students to Attend Graduate Programming

When asked if they encouraged their students to attend graduate student programming, approximately 74% of supervisors said yes (n=28). Three supervisors reported that they did not encourage graduate students to attend graduate programming either because they were not familiar with what was available for graduate students or their graduate students were not on campus. Six supervisors opted not to respond to the question.

Table 6. Resources, Services, and Workshops Perceived to be Beneficial for Graduate Students

	Resource/Service/Workshop	Description of Resource/Service/Workshop
Resource/Service/Workshop	Writing (n=12)	Generally; grammar; how to write a narrative; explain work to broader community
	Understanding milestones (n=1)	
Resource	How to be a part of the greater graduate community (n=1)	
	Where to get support (n=1)	Advising and professional development
	How to be a graduate student (n=1)	
	Centralized resource for graduate students (n=1)	
	Space (n=1)	To write; to study
	Monthly newsletter (n=1)	
	Dissertation support package (n=1)	
Services	Mentorship program (n=3)	
	Writing retreat (n=2)	
	Numerical literacy (n=2)	Help with analyzing large datasets
	Providing professional development opportunities (n=1)	
	Providing someone to evaluate a graduate student's research methods (n=1)	
	Virtual community (n=1)	

Workshop	Writing (n=18)	Grants; thesis to publication; graduate student peer writing; writing a comps exam; GCAC workshops; fellowship and postdoc applications; curriculum; publications generally; courses with a faculty and TA where student can work towards something/on a document; reports; business writing; dissertation
	Time management (n=11)	Transitioning from undergrad to masters; balancing courses, research, teaching; structuring time; handle stress; manage time from the start and how to build; know when things get busy
	Presentations (n=9)	Generally; media communication; oral; conferences; posters; structure; corporate; build a slide deck; explain work to broader community
	TA (n=5)	How to grade efficiently; make rubrics; how to support English second language learners; pedagogical workshops
	Programming Software (n=4)	R; Python; MATLAB
	International students (n=2)	Dealing with a different culture (e.g., lots of emails, language)
	Online workshops (n=2)	
	Teaching (n=1)	
	Science geared workshops (n=1)	
	Qualitative research (e.g., how to interview; how to transcribe) (n=1)	
	Data visualization (n=1)	
	Case training/case competition (n=1)	
	Excel (n=1)	
	What to expect from the supervisor (n=1)	
	How to get to your goal (n=1)	

Discussion & Conclusion

The aim of this research was to gain insight on the needs of UTM-affiliated graduate students. The findings shed light on the desire for more workshops at UTM as well as improved communication between the RGASC and the UTM graduate community. Graduate students and supervisors suggested discipline specific workshops and workshop topics related to writing, presentations, computer programming, and time management. However, forty-two percent of graduate supervisors (n=16) felt that research skills, technical skills, and anything discipline specific or related to the supervisors' area of

expertise should be handled internally. Continued collaboration between the RGASC and the graduate community is required to understand how to offer appropriate workshops that meet students' needs.

Workshops are not the only way to support students' writing, presentations, computer programming, and time management. One-on-one appointments and writing cafes can also provide support for these topics. The Graduate Professional Development Conference also provides an opportunity to support these topics, and provides the added benefit of allowing students to attend multiple sessions over a two-day period instead of trying to fit several one-off workshops into their schedule.

Although, having identified these opportunities, it must be reiterated that expanding programming offerings is unlikely to succeed without improved communication between the RGASC and the graduate student community. Currently, information regarding RGASC graduate programming is communicated via email through multiple avenues including the UTM graduate listserv, department coordinators, department and campus graduate associations, and graduate supervisors. Other modes of communication include the RGASC website and posters across the UTM campus. Despite these efforts, there continues to be a lack of familiarity with the RGASC and the available programming among both graduate students and graduate supervisors. Graduate students suggested several new modes of communication for improved communication. For example, the RGASC could experiment with a yearly programming calendar, handbook, or monthly newsletter. These communication initiatives would allow for more advanced planning and would address the scheduling barriers identified by graduate student participants. More regular and centralized modes of communication would also meet the communication needs identified by graduate student supervisors and may initiate a more fruitful discussion about professional development opportunities between supervisors and their graduate students. Finally, results suggest that the GSSS should continue the efforts to promote the RGASC through in-person interactions with graduate students.

Appendix A

Interview Questions with Graduate Supervisors and Staff

1. How many graduate students do you supervise?
2. What degrees are they pursing?
3. How frequently are your students at UTM?
4. What forms of support do you think your graduate students would benefit from the most?
5. How do you support graduate students who are not performing up to your expectations?
6. When it comes to supporting your graduate students, what do you like to provide yourself and what would you prefer external partners to provide?
7. Are there workshops or other forms of support that you would be willing to offer that might be of interest to other graduate students?
8. Are there workshops that you think your graduate students would be interested in offering that might be of interest to other graduate students?
9. In addition to what is already offered, what kind of graduate student programming would you like to see at UTM?
10. Do you encourage your students to make use of graduate professional development programming? Why or why not?
11. Would you like to be informed about upcoming graduate programming at UTM? If so, how would you like to be informed?

Appendix B

Interview Questions with Graduate Students

1.   What department/year are you in?
2.   How frequently are you at UTM?
3.   Are you familiar with professional development opportunities available to you at the RGASC?
4.   Have you attended workshops hosted by the RGASC? If yes, which one(s)?
5.   What resources (electronic – tip sheets), services or workshops would you like to see offered to graduate students?
6.   What suggestions do you have to improve existing graduate programming at UTM?
7.   Can you identify gaps in UTM's current graduate programming? How can we improve?
8.   What are some barriers to accessing graduate programming (generally)?
9.   What format of workshops do you prefer?
    a.   Online vs. On Campus
    b.   Face to Face vs. Video Conferencing on Campus
    c.   Large Group vs. Small Group
    d.   Single Session vs. Serious of Sessions

Appendix C

Focus Group Questions with Graduate Students

1. Introduction: Motivation for the focus group; What year?; What degree?; Aspirations for after grad school?; Hobby or Interest? Something you do outside of schoolwork?
2. Could you tell me about your experiences with professional development/co-curricular programming since starting your graduate work at UTM?
3. What have you found to be the most challenging part of graduate school thus far?
4. Could you tell me about a time while you were a graduate student at UTM when you felt supported through a challenge?
5. Could you tell me about a time while you were a graduate student at UTM when were unable to find the support you needed?
6. Could you tell me about your experiences with the downtown campus?
   a. How often are you at the UTSG campus?
   b. Do you utilize the services more at St. George or UTM?
   c. How you perceive the relationship between UTM and UTSG?
   d. What about UTSC?
7. Could you describe the role your supervisor plays in your decision to attend grad programming?
8. Could you tell me about any barriers you've encountered when accessing graduate programming?
9. In a perfect world, what programming would be available to graduate students on the UTM campus?
   a. Transferable or workplace-ready skills?
   b. Workshop topics?
   c. Does the food matter?
   d. Does the timing matter?
   e. Does the location matter?
10. With that vision in mind, what are the top priorities for graduate programming at UTM?
11. In a perfect world, what resources would be available to graduate students on the UTM campus?
12. With that vision in mind, what are the top priorities for resource development at UTM?
13. In a perfect world, how would like graduate programming opportunities to be communicated to you.
14. Is there anything you feel I missed? Does anyone have anything else they want to add about graduate programming at UTM?