McMaster University's pursuit of excellence in graduate and postdoctoral education has been made stronger by the new School of Graduate Studies (SGS) External Review. Its findings will inform the development of a mission, structure and vision for SGS at our university.

I expect this report will also shape our future conversations around development, innovation and support for graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, undergraduate researchers and programs across campus.

As much as the report is written from the objectivity and expertise of the reviewers, it is also a reflection of the thoughts and insights of the McMaster faculty and staff who took part in consultations on March 22-23, 2023.

I am particularly thankful to our vice-provost and dean of graduate studies, Steve Hranilovic, and his predecessor, Doug Welch. Both met with the reviewers given the recent leadership change and were generous with their time and with their honest assessment of the current operations.

External reviews are regularly completed at McMaster as they help to identify areas for improvement, opportunities to leverage strengths, and help align the strategic direction with the evolving needs of our academic community and society at large. I feel optimistic about the positive steps that will be taken next.

The Office of the Provost will continue to support the School of Graduate Studies as we strive to be a leader in graduate education and postdoctoral support across the post-secondary sector.

Susan Tighe
Provost and Vice-President (Academic)

McMaster University

School of Graduate Studies (SGS) External Review

Site Visit: March 22-23, 2023
Report Submitted: April 24, 2023

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McMaster University School of Graduate Studies Review Report

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Preamble

We extend our sincere gratitude to Provost Susan Tighe, Nancy Mckenzie, Steve Hranilovic, and others for inviting us and facilitating an enriching site visit. Our colleagues at McMaster University impressed us with their warmth and hospitality, for which we are grateful. We would also like to express our appreciation to all participants who generously shared their thoughts and insights with us during our conversations about the strengths and challenges of SGS. The site visit was conducted only a few months following a leadership transition of SGS, and we appreciated meeting with both the former and current Dean and Vice-Provost. We comment on and commend the initiatives of the past administration, and suggest and/or affirm considerations for improvements and strategic direction as the School looks to the future.

Executive Summary

The School is valued for providing an essential set of services that support graduate programs in their work to provide an excellent educational experience at McMaster, and the staff are widely held to be committed, responsive, and helpful. The relationships of the School's leadership and staff with others on campus are positive and productive.

While there have been substantial improvements in some administrative processes over the last few years, there is a general consensus, both within and outside the School, that the School has challenges in completing transactions and providing support in a timely fashion. Several structural and operational issues affecting the efficiency of operations were raised with, or observed by us, encompassing systems ineffectiveness, lack of procedural consistency, and redundant layers of approval. We affirm the importance of the School's and University's efforts to improve the systems, and provide a number of recommendations to address the procedural issues.

It is our assessment that the School of Graduate Studies has the potential to position McMaster University as a leader in graduate and postdoctoral studies. Achieving this potential will require a clear mission for the school and empowered positioning of its leadership, as well as structural considerations, and strategic re-alignment and/or investment in resources. The leadership of the school should ideally be positioned as an equal peer and contributor in the decanal and provostial leadership teams. Organizationally, the current structure of Associate Deans with dual reporting to SGS and their Faculties, while effective in supporting unique disciplinary needs, inhibits articulation and achievement of broader graduate priorities and innovations necessary to ensuring contemporary relevance and competitiveness. In our view, this organizational structure also contributes to redundancy and inefficiency in many core processes. Similarly, some of the operational inefficiencies that we heard about relate to an information system (e.g., PeopleSoft) that has been configured with little consideration to the needs of graduate education.

Graduate student funding was identified as an important topic in many of our meetings throughout the review. We recognize that this is an issue that extends well beyond McMaster. The task force that was announced just prior to our visit is welcomed, however there is concern with the timeline for the completion of the work of the task force. In addition to concerns about funding, we heard from students that they feel isolated and disengaged. There is recognition that some of this is due

to the isolation resulting from remote learning because of the pandemic; however, we heard a clear request from students for opportunities to engage with the broader academic community. Similarly, we heard some frustration about the lack of opportunities for graduate students to access professional development and career-related supports.

Likely, the most significant conclusion of the review is that the School does not have a clear mandate for its role, and that the development of such a mandate is critical. We encourage the School in its desire to develop an ambitious vision for SGS as not only the provider of effective academic and administrative services, but as a central focus point for support and leadership in graduate and postdoctoral education.

Recommendations:

Mission

1. Through broad discussion and collaboration, the SGS and current Vice-Provost and Dean should be empowered to develop and disseminate a clearly articulated mandate for the Graduate School, including a mission statement, a vision statement, a set of core values, and a defined set of core functions.

2. Likewise, a strategic plan for the School should be developed, focusing on initiatives and enhancements the School and University can advance to promote excellence and relevance of graduate and postdoctoral education for today's context. Special attention should be paid to student and postdoctoral support, graduate supervision, program support, innovations in graduate and postdoctoral education, and the advancement of EDI and reconciliation in the graduate and postdoctoral domains.

3. Once an expanded mandate and vision of the School has been broadly determined, central resources should be provided to enable its implementation.

4. The Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies should be included as a regular participant in all meetings attended by the Deans.

Organization

5. Replace the six co-reporting Associate Deans with two Associate Dean positions in SGS reporting solely to the Dean of Graduate Studies, with responsibilities for discrete operational and/or strategic mandates of the School. These two Associate Deans would work collaboratively with the Associate Deans in the Faculties to improve efficiency and consistency of SGS administrative operations/procedures; support students, faculty, and programs across the university; and help lead innovation and strategic initiatives. The Faculty-based Associate Deans would work collaboratively with the SGS Associate Deans to ensure that discipline-based needs continue to be met and to inform the strategic directions of SGS.

Organizational efficiencies

6. Invest the resources needed to address the limitations of the PeopleSoft system to enable effective, accurate, and efficient management of graduate student records. Ensure also that the schools' student finance system meets the needs of the graduate student enterprise.

7. Move to standardize approval processes and rules for administrative and academic decision-making to limit the variability across programs, thereby enabling streamlining of processes in SGS.

8. Carefully review current required levels of student record approvals involving Associate Deans to assess their necessity in the context of clearly articulated parameters for staff decision-making.

9. Reconsider the role of SGS in determining the eligibility of students for graduate research assistantships.

Graduate Student Funding

10. Reconsider the timeline for the Graduate Funding Task Force report to enable its completion as soon as reasonably possible.

11. Support the development of a data management system that enables timely access to accurate, comprehensive data related to individual graduate student financial support.

12. Review all communications regarding graduate student funding for accuracy and create a central repository of funding information and current cost of living estimates.

Graduate Student Support

13. Provide sufficient ongoing central funding to the Student Success Centre to ensure graduate students (and postdocs if possible) receive essential support in the areas of career services. Review the mandates of all service units to ensure there are no gaps in support for graduate students.

Other issues

14. Ensure that the SGS office is sufficiently accessible and appears appropriately welcoming to members of the graduate and postdoctoral communities.

A. Overview of Strengths

The review team found much to applaud at the School and the broader graduate and postdoctoral community at McMaster. Of particular note was the highly skilled, hard-working, and extremely collegial staff team in the SGS office. It is most evident that these dedicated experts are committed to high standards and a student-centric focus. The relationships of these staff and the SGS decanal group with graduate programs and other university units seemed very positive and productive, and there is a great deal of respect in these units for the work that SGS does.

We uniformly heard in our conversations that there has been a significant improvement of admissions process efficiencies and a successful launch of the new admissions system since the last review. Communication with students, faculty, and programs has also been enhanced, a testimony to the significant efforts made by the School to implement town halls and a number of regular electronic communication avenues. Responsiveness to program and student needs was evident by examples such as the altered doctoral defense policies and the recent collaborative initiatives to address graduate student career development needs.

The outstanding office staff, the strong commitment from upper administration to Dr. Hranilovic and SGS, and the positive relationship the school has with the larger graduate, postdoctoral, and institutional community position Dr. Hranilovic and SGS for success in further advancing the role of graduate and postdoctoral studies and the priorities of the University.

B. Mission

Articulating a vision for SGS: defining its mandate

Similar to the observations in the 2016 review, we found that SGS is generally seen to function solely as a service unit; that is, it is perceived to be a process-centric, bureaucratic unit serving the University through the enforcement of rules and regulations ('gatekeeping') and administering registrarial and financial services. There was little clarity on what, if any, its broader roles, mission, or mandate are; there was significant enthusiasm, however, for developing such a mission focused on a bolder vision of its role in advancing graduate and postdoctoral education at McMaster. We fully agree, and reiterate the conclusions from the 2016 review that the current, limited, mandate is not serving the graduate and postdoctoral education enterprise as well as it could, or enabling McMaster to reach its full potential.

As discussed further below, we believe that the limited perceived mandate of SGS may be to some extent an unintended consequence of the relatively decentralized and siloed SGS executive structure and function. It was also articulated by many that the budget model reinforces this perception; that is, that SGS is funded by what is perceived as 'taxes' from the Faculties for services rendered to them. We believe that such implicit categorization hampers SGS's ability to carry out its critical role as a collaborative yet autonomous academic unit and to collaboratively set strategic directions for graduate and postdoctoral education.

Given the rapid changes in the world, in educational paradigms, and in graduate and postdoctoral career pathways, most research-intensive universities have understood the necessity of having a

robust, pan-university academic unit devoted to support, innovation, and thought leadership in graduate and postdoctoral education. Challenges relevant to such a unit include: How can the University adapt to and lead in the changing terrain of graduate education? What are the emerging trends in areas such as doctoral education, life-long graduate-level learning, program innovation, student support, decolonization, and EDI? How are digital disruptions, increased societal complexities, inequities, misinformation, and the ideas economy shaping the conventional thinking around the future of graduate and postdoctoral training and needed competencies? How can immediate challenges in graduate and postdoctoral education be addressed (e.g., funding, enrolment planning, declining domestic application pool, student and postdoctoral wellbeing, supervision effectiveness)? These and other questions are being explored and addressed by graduate and postdoctoral leadership across the world. Graduate schools that are not positioned and enabled to lead these discussions and advances are at a distinct disadvantage.

SGS will need to continue to play an instrumental role in supporting graduate programs, providing a coordinated service for data management and sharing, record-keeping, and conflict management. With the added broader lens discussed above however, we believe it will also need to develop policies and/or approaches to enhance the student and postdoctoral experience; to support and promote excellence in graduate supervision; to support broader forms of scholarship to meet the evolving needs of the 21st century; to support interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, and program innovation; and to ensure the graduate enterprise embodies a decolonized, Indigenized ethos and a culture of inclusivity and belonging. With no central graduate leadership in these areas, any efforts would likely be inefficient, duplicative, and inconsistent, and would likely contribute to exacerbated inequities across disciplines and between graduate and undergraduate students.

We believe that the Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies should be given authority to collectively articulate a pan-university vision for graduate and postdoctoral education. Apart from developing a broad-based consensus (and thereby alleviating confusions) about SGS's mandate, this will help the larger community to come together to facilitate a fulsome and thoughtful conversation about the functions of the graduate school. Such an initiative is also expected to put forward a bold yet realistic plan for strengthening McMaster's reputation as a destination of choice for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. Moreover, it will enhance SGS's visibility and help McMaster advance a forward-looking shared agenda for graduate and postdoctoral training shaped by both internal and external factors, including Ontario's Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA3), institutional reputation, and the changing context of EDII.

Increasing the visibility and voice of the SGS Vice-Provost and Dean in institutional planning

Strong collaborations throughout the institution are crucial for the Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies to chart a clear path forward for SGS. This would necessitate that the Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies be clearly positioned as the leader for the graduate academic mission of the institution and that the Vice-Provost and Dean be welcomed as a valuable contributing member of McMaster University's provostial and decanal groups. It is paramount that the university's senior leadership and the Faculty Deans regard the Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies as a respected peer who plays a pivotal role in the institution's planning processes.

Considerations for an expanded mission and mandate

In addition to a stronger role in planning and leadership, the following areas are suggested focuses that could comprise the recommended broader, supportive and strategic mandate for SGS:

- **Graduate student professional development**. As noted in the self-study, graduate student professional development is a 'critical aspect of a graduate student's educational path'. While some curriculum or offerings are best offered at the program or disciplinary level, or through specialized units, there are significant benefits to having a central 'hub' to provide and coordinate opportunities, as well as support programs in their own efforts. We believe this 'hub' should be the graduate school.

- **Improved support for postdoctoral fellows**. Despite the key role postdocs play in contributing to the University's mission, it seems that coordinated academic, professional, and administrative support for them is limited. The current approach appears to be ad hoc and highly variable across Faculties and Departments. The decentralized, variable processes for appointing and on-boarding postdocs contributes to highly variable experiences for postdocs and a lack of consistent access to core services and supports, particularly professional development opportunities. Postdoc support is increasingly assigned to graduate schools in North America, as there is significant overlap in focus and support with that provided for graduate students. We encourage consideration of this for McMaster. Centralizing postdoctoral services and strategic support in SGS, from appointments and on-boarding, through to professional development, community-building, and innovative initiatives would better serve postdocs and promote a more consistent and enriched experience for all postdocs at McMaster.

- **Enhancement of graduate supervision**. We believe the graduate school to be the optimal 'hub' for the critically important role of a university in ensuring graduate supervision is taken seriously, and that faculty are supported to develop their abilities in this distinct pedagogy. The graduate school has daily experience of the best and worst of supervision practices, and participates in a broad community of practice on the subject with their colleagues across the country and beyond.

- **Graduate and postdoctoral community-building.** It was evident from our conversations with both students and postdocs that many feel a sense of isolation, and have a strong desire for community and interactions with those from outside their immediate department. There is a sense that the University is oriented to providing such opportunities for undergraduates only, and they would appreciate similar opportunities and a dedicated space for these interactions for graduate students. The current support system for graduate students is primarily structured around Faculty and/or program initiatives, which does not promote broad, cross-disciplinary engagement. SGS can develop a robust support system to enrich the student/postdoctoral experience.

- **Recruitment.** 'Recruitment' is a very broad area involving outreach, awareness-raising, prospective applicant and applicant support, information, a welcoming environment, and onboarding. It can also potentially include skill-building (e.g., preparation for graduate school). While much recruitment activity occurs at the supervisor or program level, we believe there is a significant role as well for a central graduate school. A well-constructed website and social media presence, for example, can attract very large numbers of prospective applicants, and can assist them in finding supervisors, research projects, and programs that meet their interests; the graduate school site can provide an inspiring and welcoming place that piques and keeps their interest in applying and/or accepting an offer. There is also a huge opportunity for supporting applicants and those offered admission in connecting them to each other and in providing the information they need to make or keep their decision to come to McMaster. There is much that graduate programs can do themselves, and the graduate school can be an important source of support, advice and best-practices for them.

- **Promoting and supporting innovation in graduate education and scholarship for the needs of the 21st century.** We believe that graduate education is in a time of signficant flux and innovation as traditional models and values inherent to graduate education are proving in many ways inadequate to the rapidly changing world with its increasing complexities and urgent problems. Graduate schools should play a central role in helping to lead and support these changes, whether they be through rethinking educational partners and supervision modes, through helping redesign program structures and experiential opportunities, or through supporting expanded notions of scholarly work and outputs. There are many resources and engaged colleagues across Canada and beyond to help develop approaches to these issues of our day for the McMaster context; see the <u>CAGS Dissertation Task Force Report</u> as an example with respect to expanding notions of scholarship.

- **Advancement of equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI) and Indigenization**. It became clear in our conversations that there is a need for SGS to have a stronger focus on EDI and Indigenization and decolonization. There are many relevant needs and opportunities distinctive to graduate education that would be beneficially addressed by a central role of SGS in advancing the goals of diversity, cosmopolitan humanism, inclusivity, and Indigenous reconciliation and decolonization within the graduate and postdoctoral community. Comprehensive recommendations related to the latter area are outlined in the recent <u>CAGS (Re)conciliation Task Force Report</u>.

Recommendations:

1. Through broad discussion and collaboration, the SGS and current Vice-Provost and Dean should be empowered to develop and disseminate a clearly articulated mandate for the Graduate School, including a mission statement, a vision statement, a set of core values, and a defined set of core functions.

2. Likewise, a strategic plan for the School should be developed, focusing on initiatives and enhancements the School and University can advance to promote excellence and relevance of graduate and postdoctoral education for today's context. Special attention should be paid to student and postdoctoral support, graduate supervision, program support, innovations in graduate and postdoctoral education, and the advancement of EDI and reconciliation in the graduate and postdoctoral domains.

3. Once an expanded mandate and vision of the School has been broadly determined, central resources should be provided to enable its implementation.

4. The Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies should be included as a regular participant in all meetings attended by the Deans.

C. Organization

There was a consensus among the reviewers that the current Associate Dean structure (co-appointments of Associate Deans with SGS and individual Faculties) is not conducive to a role of the School in leading renewal in graduate and postdoctoral education at McMaster. This was raised in the 2016 review as a concern, and while we understand the structure is experienced by some as working well, we believe we have seen continued negative effects of the structure and, in part because of it, lost opportunities to ensure efficiencies, fairness and equity across disciplines and lost opportunities to grow SGS's strategic mandate.

We are unaware of any other graduate school with this executive organization; rather associate dean portfolios typically encompass cross-campus focuses including one or more of: funding, academic oversight, academic integrity, supervision support and development, grad student and postdoc professional development, postdoctoral fellow support, graduate program development and support, and policy. Some graduate schools divide some of these thematic portfolios by broad disciplinary field (e.g., STEM, SSH).

Our concerns about the structure (evidence-based and/or potential) include the following:

- **Minimal capacity for cross-campus strategic thinking and initiatives, or deep reflection on important areas of graduate education.** With the current structure, the Dean is the only academic in the School with a mandate for supporting and enhancing graduate education at large. We believe that is insufficient – any significant improvements across the campus will require more individuals dedicated to those essential goals.

  That each Associate Dean also has direct responsibilities to their Faculty and Dean, in addition to their professorial position, leaves less time and energy to devote to SGS activities. The fact that only their disciplinary Faculties remunerate their administrative work would be expected to 'tip the balance' of effort towards those deans.

- **Siloing of Faculties, services, academic decision-making, and administrative processes**. With students and programs in each Faculty receiving support and oversight by a different person (ie, the associate dean for their Faculty), the nature of that support and

oversight has the potential to diversify over time. We heard evidence in fact that the decision-making, expectations of support, and administrative processes are in some cases problematically 'customized' between Faculties or programs (e.g., blocking enrolment for non-visa status in only one Faculty; Faculties differing in their levels of required approvals; different programs expecting different 'rules' etc). This has clear ramifications for efficiencies of processes as well as academic equity and standards across the campus. We fully understand that disciplines have unique values and customs that may benefit from expert advice and oversight from someone versed in the discipline; however that can be achieved with Faculty-specific Associate Deans working in collaboration with one or more SGS Associate Dean(s) who have well-honed expertise and insight informed from a broader perspective. It is always important to have a breadth of disciplinary expertise across the decanal group.

- **Duplicated building of expertise and limitations of breadth.** The expertise of Faculty-based Associate Deans takes longer to build, and does not support an ongoing cross-fertilization between different disciplines, cultures and approaches through broad exposure and collaboration. This cross-fertilization helps promote the development of best-practices and supports innovation. We believe that it is inefficient to require each of six Associate Deans to build experience and expertise independently in every area of graduate administration. The role of the Faculty-based Associate Deans is important in supporting the needs of their disciplines, but does not replace the critical role of SGS-based Associate Deans who ensure a pan-university consistency of quality, integrity, and fairness while also driving forward innovations and key university-level strategic directions.

- **Conflicting interests.** As also noted in the 2016 report, reporting to two deans can sometimes place an Associate Dean in a situation of conflicting interests, and this may be exacerbated by remuneration by only one of these deans (that is, it may tip the balance in terms of interest as well as effort). As examples, sometimes decisions have to be made within SGS that may benefit some Faculties more than others, and it is often very difficult dealing with problematic supervision when the faculty member is revered for their research contributions in the Faculty. We believe that one of the most important values of a graduate school is its arms-length focus on the education and support of graduate students.

Associate Deans embedded in SGS with sole reporting to SGS ensures that the graduate school supports the unique disciplinary needs and priorities of the Faculties while also ensuring that the overall goals and priorities of the university remain central to the work of the School. As a possible analogy, it would not be considered good practice for the University Executive to consist solely of Vice-Presidents representing (and being remunerated by) single Faculties, carrying only responsibility and accountability to their Faculties.

Recommendation:

5. Replace the six co-reporting Associate Deans with two Associate Dean positions in SGS reporting solely to the Dean of Graduate Studies, with responsibilities for discrete operational and/or strategic mandates of the School. These two Associate Deans would work collaboratively with the Associate Deans in the Faculties to improve efficiency and consistency of SGS administrative operations/procedures; support students, faculty, and

programs across the university; and help lead innovation and strategic initiatives. The Faculty-based Associate Deans would work collaboratively with the SGS Associate Deans to ensure that discipline-based needs continue to be met and to inform the strategic directions of SGS.

D. Operational Efficiencies

While we heard that the effectiveness of academic administrative processes, especially admissions, had much improved at SGS since the last review, we also heard from many individuals and groups, including the staff teams in SGS, about continuing concerns. Both the academic records and finance teams noted a number of inefficiencies and often great difficulty managing the workload. Graduate program staff and faculty noted that turnaround time for records, administrative assistance (and sometimes admissions) were often very long; although all seemed to recognize the School and staff were doing their best with existing resources. The custom-built Admin Tools system was seen to be helpful in addressing some inefficiencies, but was not sustainable for the longer term.

More details on the above, and suggested causes for inefficiencies include the following. Please note that given our limited time at McMaster and our limited knowledge of specific processes, these descriptions and suggestions are made to the best of our understanding:

- **PeopleSoft**. Some of the concerns seem to relate directly to the PeopleSoft system, and its lack of flexibility required to code or address the unique characteristics of graduate-level processes. We understand that it can take significant manual intervention and 'work-arounds' for staff to go through layers of the system in order to interact with and record relevant graduate student data. To illustrate this, we heard that it can take up to 276 "clicks" in the system to graduate a single student from a graduate program. While ultimately effective in managing graduate student records, these manual work-arounds are time consuming, inefficient, and susceptible to error.

  We heard that when the PeopleSoft system was installed, the set-up was 'bare bones' with a focus predominantly on supporting undergraduate student record needs. Although it is not uncommon for student record systems to be designed at first pass to support undergraduate students who comprise the majority of university enrolments, customizations (or integrated, separate systems if need be) are critical to support the needs that are unique to graduate students and graduate programs.

- **Superfluous layers of approval; institutional expectations**. It was apparent that the School requires Associate Dean approvals for decisions or transactions many universities would handle at the staff level, one example of which is individual grade changes (which in at least some Faculties requires sequential approvals by the instructor, program director, area chair, and the Associate Dean in SGS – apparently all through email exchanges). We also understand that Associate Deans – apparently because of system limitations - do not always have access to relevant background for the decisions they are asked to make.

In terms of broader institutional expectations of the graduate school, we were also surprised to hear that SGS verifies the eligibility for every student receiving a Graduate Research Assistantship (otherwise handled by HR or the program). In our experience, it is quite unusual for the graduate school to have this degree of responsibility and involvement. We believe that this may be an example of the administrative responsibilities that have been allocated to SGS at the cost of enabling the School to fulfill more relevant academic responsibilities.

- **Customization and flexibility in processes.** We heard from both graduate program and SGS staff that one of the most problematic and inefficient aspects of student records processing was the customized nature of the procedures, 'rules', and expectations within and between Faculties. As noted above, we believe this is, to some extent, a result of having a separate Associate Dean responsible for each Faculty's academic systems. While the SGS staff are proud of their flexibility (staff members said they don't recall ever denying a non-standard request), they also find the differences difficult to manage at times and are aware of its downsides in efficiency losses.

- **AwardSpring.** Similar to the student record system, the student finance system was apparently developed with undergraduate students in mind, and does not have the most effective functionality for the very different structures and processes inherent to graduate student funding. We understand SGS is exploring different options for this system.

Recommendations:

6. Invest the resources needed to address the limitations of the PeopleSoft system to enable effective, accurate, and efficient management of graduate student records. Ensure also that the schools' student finance system meets the needs of the graduate student enterprise.

7. Move to standardize approval processes and rules for administrative and academic decision-making to limit the variability across programs, thereby enabling streamlining of processes in SGS.

8. Carefully review current required levels of student record approvals involving Associate Deans to assess their necessity in the context of clearly articulated parameters for staff decision-making.

9. Reconsider the role of SGS in determining the eligibility of students for graduate research assistantships.

E. Graduate Student Funding

Task Force

The issue of graduate student funding was raised in several of our meetings. In particular, we heard concerns about the current minimum funding guarantee (Tuition + $13,500) in the current context of high inflation, rising cost of living, and challenges securing safe, affordable housing. These issues are not unique to McMaster; they are being raised across the province and more broadly.

We also heard of the urgent need for the graduate school, Faculties, and programs to have timely, comprehensive access to individual student funding data.

We applaud McMaster for striking a task force to study these challenging issues and offer a couple of considerations based on feedback that was received in the course of our review.

- **Funding data.** Pulling together the data needed to fully understand current graduate student funding is challenging because the information/data systems for the various sources of graduate funding (e.g., teaching assistantships, research stipends, internal and external scholarships) are separate and do not allow for efficient linkage of information across systems. That said, graduate student funding information is extraordinarily important for quality assurance, recruitment, and program administration. Timely investment of resources to develop or modify information systems to enable linkage of information across systems would greatly facilitate not only the work of the current task force, but the ongoing and future work of SGS in assessing and reporting graduate student funding.

- **Timeline**. The timeline for the work of the task force (with a report due to the Provost by the end of 2023) is long in light of the urgent needs expressed. It is entirely possible that the timeline was established to accommodate not only fulsome consultation, but also the information/data access challenges described above. A timeline that would enable implementation of recommendations to address the challenges experienced by graduate students as soon as possible is recommended.

Communication

In addition to the minimum guaranteed funding level, we also heard concerns about the communication of funding information to applicants and students. We heard that information provided in admission offer letters was sometimes vague or incomplete, leading to uncertainty about the sources of funding (ie, scholarship versus employment) and about the extent to which the funding would support the basic cost of living. We recognize that decentralization of funding package decisions makes it challenging to communicate in a consistent, clear manner; however, we encourage SGS to take the lead in compiling current, accurate information about funding package components and about cost of living that could be made available to all applicants who are offered admission *prior* to accepting their offer.

Internal scholarship allocations

Funding for internal scholarships is allocated to Faculties by SGS based on a formula that considers individual programs' master's, doctoral, domestic, and international enrolment. While there were some concerns from Faculties of the challenges in determining their internal distributions, we believe it serves Faculties best to leave these decisions in their hands. Some universities incorporate 'excellence' measures in their allocation formulas (e.g., federal scholarship success rates) to help incentivize best practices, or retain some funding for broad competitions, but it is also common to allocate internal funding in a pro rata fashion.

Recommendations:

10. Reconsider the timeline for the Graduate Funding Task Force report to enable its completion as soon as reasonably possible.

11. Support the development of a data management system that enables timely access to accurate, comprehensive data related to individual graduate student financial support.

12. Review all communications regarding graduate student funding for accuracy and create a central repository of funding information and current cost of living estimates.

F. Graduate Student Support

The current role of SGS in many aspects of graduate student education, experience, and educational innovation is primarily limited to 'championing' and facilitating, rather than leading or directly supporting. We don't believe this is due to a lack of ideas or will, but rather a lack of resources and clear mandate. As noted in the first section, we encourage the University to expand its conception (and resources) of the role of SGS to enable it to provide more thought leadership and direct support to students, faculty, and programs.

Other units, including the Student Success Centre. Not all services relevant for graduate students, of course, should or could be provided directly by the graduate school. Career services (i.e., interview skill training, employer connections, etc), English language support, financial advice, and entrepreneurial support, for example, are best provided by units with more in depth expertise in these areas. The role of the graduate school in these cases would ideally be to advocate for inclusion of graduate students in these units' mandates, to collaborate with them as relevant, and to coordinate with them as needed on communication and offerings.

A laudatory example of collaboration is the recent development of a career development initiative for graduate students. However, we were disappointed to hear that the Student Success Centre does not otherwise support graduate students, and were surprised to hear that this was perceived as a necessary consequence of the fact that no graduate student ancillary fees were allocated to career services, while undergraduate fees were. The lack of graduate fees appears to date back to a GSA vote in 2015.

This situation is out of step with most research universities. If the University's mission is to ensure graduate students' time at the University prepares them to contribute effectively to society, career development is essential, and services should not be subject to the provision of discretionary funding from students. Other universities support graduate student and postdoc career development through central budgets, irrespective of dedicated student fees for these services. It is common to have a central career services unit that supports both undergraduates and graduate students (in collaboration with the graduate school); and graduate student and postdoc professional development more broadly is typically provided through the graduate school in collaboration with other units.

Recommendation:

13. Provide sufficient ongoing central funding to the Student Success Centre to ensure graduate students (and postdocs if possible) receive essential support in the areas of career services. Review the mandates of all service units to ensure there are no gaps in support for graduate students.

G. Other issues

- **Access to the SGS office**. We heard from multiple stakeholders that the current 'locked door' setup for the office gives the impression that SGS is not accessible to students, staff, or faculty, and that is is not actively engaged with the graduate community. While there are pros and cons to having a completely 'open door' policy, we wondered whether there could be a compromise to facilitate access and create a more welcoming 'face' to the School. Of course, other modes of connecting with the School should also be visible and effective.

- **Support for undergraduate students**. Support for undergraduate students is not generally a feature of a graduate school's mandate, and the review team had some concerns about the use of scarce resources for this focus. Our concerns would be less if the support provided is directed primarily at recruitment activities.

Recommendation:

14. Ensure that the SGS office is sufficiently accessible and appears appropriately welcoming to members of the graduate and postdoctoral communities.