

THE DRIVERS OF SUCCESS
IN **GRADUATE STUDIES**
IN THE UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC
NETWORK

SUMMARY

BRIEF FROM THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE OF
LA GRANDE INITIATIVE RÉSEAU EN RÉUSSITE

In 2018, the Direction des études et de la recherche (DER) proposed an action plan to increase the graduation and retention rates of graduate students in the Université du Québec (UQ) network. In keeping with the plan, *La Grande initiative réseau en réussite* was created in 2019, followed by a scientific committee with the mandate to document graduate success, provide an up-to-date status report and ultimately to help build institutional capacity to support graduate education and success. This document provides a summary of the brief entitled The Drivers of Success in Graduate Studies in the Université du Québec Network.

To consult the brief, go to: <http://www.uquebec.ca/reseau/fr/publications/rapports-des-groupes-de-travail>

1. Context and problem

The UQ network is proud of its diversified educational offering adapted to today's realities, and it recognizes that graduate education is a key to an educated, innovative, high-performing, and competitive society (UQ, 2013). Consequent to UQ's mission of openness and accessibility to studies, student populations are diversifying, and their needs are becoming more complex. Given that the graduation rates and average durations of graduate studies at UQ institutions are of concern (Couillard et al., 2018b), how can we promote student success at the master's and doctoral levels? Despite the diversity of the student population, is it possible to identify success factors that are common to as many students as possible? This is the goal the scientific committee set for itself: to present the most recent scientific data on graduate success. This current review of the literature provides, among others, a description of what is possible in terms of the realities of graduate students in UQ institutions and the issues related to their success.

2. The graduate student population in the Université du Québec network

Since the creation of UQ, the profile of the graduate student population has greatly diversified (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (CSÉ), 2019). Network surveys and censuses currently indicate that eight out of ten graduate students are enrolled at the master's level¹ (GDEU system, PRISME). Graduate students are older than students outside the network (on average 34 at the master's level and 36 at the doctoral level), and 56% are women. A distinct reality at UQ is that first-generation university students (FGUSs) make up 45% of the graduate population. FGUSs are also older, beginning their studies without necessarily having optimal intellectual, academic, or financial support (Bonin et al., 2015).

Seven percent of graduate students have disabilities or emerging disabilities, or they have declared limitations (2016). This figure is growing steadily (Bonin, 2017; Prud'homme et al., 2013), the self-

1. Independent studies, short program, specialized graduate degree, professional or research master's degree.

declared, personal data (AQICESH, 2020) suggests that a higher proportion of students faces these types of challenges. The same holds true for the 2% of the population who declare themselves to be members of Indigenous peoples (Bonin, 2019).

The graduate student profile also stands out for the significant presence of international students (26% at the master's level and 36% at the doctoral level). This population appears to be predominantly male, younger, with a large majority enrolled full time and with few family and financial responsibilities. Permanent residents represent 7% of the population at the graduate level. They are mostly male, and more than half of them have dependent children and work more than 30 hours a week.

Considering the student population as a whole, funding for graduate studies at UQ is provided by means of off-campus employment (37%), scholarships and bursaries (44%), or by the family (18%) (CGPSS, 2019). Despite these sources of income, more than a third of students consider their financial situation to be precarious. In terms of family responsibilities, 30% of students on average have a dependent child.² Possibly to promote work-study-family balance, slightly more than half of master's students (54%) opt for part-time studies, as do almost two thirds of doctoral students (64%). Finally, with regard to distance education, current ministerial and institutional surveys do not enable the determination of the specific characteristics of the student population enrolled only in distance education or partially in distance education.

3. Success at university

Although graduation rates were long considered to be the primary indicators of success, succeeding at university is now seen as a path, a direction, and a process (CSÉ, 2019; Monfette, 2016; Robert et al., 2016; Roberts, 2018). Success must be defined not only based on the student's own experience but must also be analyzed based on many interrelated factors (Acker & Haque, 2017; De Clercq, 2019; Kirkby, 2018; Vasseur, 2015; Wibrowski et al., 2017). At each stage of the study project, different determinants appear and act complementarily on the student's perseverance (Denis et al., 2019).

4. Graduate success factors in accordance with the concerns of the Université du Québec network

At the graduate level, given the unique realities (Daigle et al., 2019) outlined above, four groups of success factors were identified from the literature.

Individual characteristics (Berthaud, 2019; Robert et al., 2016) refer to the student's personal background, the nature of the program, and the cognitive and methodological competencies targeted by graduate education. This first group reaffirms the importance of graduate students having a good understanding of the goals of training at the master's and doctoral levels. For the study project to go smoothly, students must develop organizational, informational (GT-PDCI, 2016), literacy (Bégin, 2019),

2. This family reality varies considerably from one institution to another (Bonin and Girard, 2017).

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digital (Van der Maren et al., 2019; Vincent et al., 2019), and emotional competencies (Bertucat, 2017; Guilmette et al., 2019). These core competencies vary from one student to another (Lee, 2018), and appear to be cross-curricular and interconnected, especially given the high-level tasks and responsibilities required of students at these levels.

The second group of success factors relates to **motivation and commitment**; being motivated and committed promotes balance. Complex, multidimensional processes (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2018) that are open to internal and external influences, sustained motivation (perception) and commitment (level of effort) are seen to have an impact on well-being, perseverance, and overall academic satisfaction (Dericks et al., 2019). Consequently, an individual who has a clear idea of the direction or purpose of their study project would be more inclined to succeed (Vasseur, 2015). To promote motivation and commitment, the authors address the power of students' social and institutional integration (Diallo et al., 2009; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Being better integrated into one's research environment (Gemme & Gingras, 2006) and thus less isolated can have many benefits on a student's psychological and mental well-being (Guilmette et al., 2019).

The third group, the **graduate pedagogical supervisory relationship**, is well documented in the literature (Brassard, 2016; Couillard et al., 2018b; Denis et al., 2019; Denis & Lison, 2016; Fonds de recherche du Québec, 2016; Gerard, 2009; Hutchings, 2017; Jutras et al., 2010). In terms of supervisory practices, a single model is not desirable (AELIÉS, 2018; Bégin, 2019; McCallin & Nayar, 2012): supervision must be adapted to each individual. For example, the literature suggests that one of the optimal strategies in the supervisory relationship is to consider the importance of the initial contacts between the supervisor and the student (Pyhältö & Keskinen, 2012; Pyhältö et al., 2015), to have a good understanding of the roles of the parties involved in the relationship and to agree on the planned modalities of supervision (Ali et al., 2016; Bégin, 2019) (availability, regularity of meetings, etc. (Couillard et al., 2018b)). Some authors state that the pedagogical supervisory relationship includes an interpersonal and social component that is also essential to success: this socialization notably promotes the academic, scientific and, ultimately, professional integration of the student (Couillard et al., 2018b; Denis & Lison, 2016; Van der Maren et al., 2019). Finally, despite some tools available to help research supervisors in their practices (research office, co-supervisor, committee, etc.), no common and standardized method seems to be widespread (AELIÉS, 2018; Bégin, 2019; CAGS, 2018) in the network.

The last proposed group concerns the **resources offered by UQ's institutions**. Far from questioning their presence and relevance, the literature suggests instead that the success factor is based on the use and the frequency of use of the services offered by institutions and programs (Fonds de recherche du Québec, 2016). The literature discusses the importance of promoting access to what is available in institutions. To this end, awareness, dissemination, and promotion appear to be crucial in fostering a better knowledge of resources among all (intramural) university partners. Support tailored to the needs of students promotes psychological benefits (Martineau et al., 2017). Despite the presence of services, their promotion and their openness, the essential component of this success factor lies in the student's self-knowledge and their autonomy and self-management (CAPRES, 2018; Dauphinais et al., 2016; Robert et al., 2016). In terms of financial resources, given the particular challenges related to UQ's student profiles, the benefits of adequate financial support are also noted. Funding studies through collaboration with a

research team, for example, can have a positive impact on students' personal responsibilities. However, the real advantage lies in the integration into the program and the proximity of the research field (Larivière, 2013), represented by paid work within the program.

From these factors identified in the recent literature, a summary of the determinants of success is proposed. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather is intended to inspire reflection on possible actions to promote success.

- 1- The development of cognitive and methodological competencies.
- 2- The formulation of clear intentions with regard to the study project.
- 3- Institutional and social integration as a support for balance.
- 4- Varied and flexible training modalities.
- 5- The pedagogical relationship and customized, quality supervision.
- 6- The offering of adapted and continuous support services.
- 7- The utilization of resources and services offered.

5. Success, a collective concern

The student's academic career path is a collective concern, shared by all those involved in the university (professionals, faculty, students, administration, etc.). Graduate student success inevitably depends on the effectiveness of a strong, consistent collaborative network, shared by all parties involved in supporting the students: students, supervisors, the program and the institution.

The primary role of the graduate student is to be active in their learning, to be motivated and to demonstrate autonomy (Audet, 2008). The **student** is the main person responsible for their success (Bégin, 2019). In particular, an attitude of autonomy promotes a better pedagogical relationship with the research supervisor (Goldman & Goodboy, 2017; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that despite this apparent autonomy, graduate students still need more guidance, especially at the beginning of their program (Lee, 2018).

The student's **research supervisor** has long been identified as the central determinant of a student's graduate pathway. The supervisor is sometimes an advisor, buddy, expert, resource person or guide (Bégin, 2019; Brassard, 2016; Couillard et al., 2018b; Denis et al., 2019), the role is non-standardized. Although many documents describe various supervisory styles, what appears to be crucial is the adaptation of supervisory responsibilities to the discipline and the needs of the supervisee.

The **program** is emerging as a central to graduate success. The primary responsibilities of program staff are to orient and integrate and then support students throughout their path, either through recruitment or by offering training activities that are relevant and consistent with the expectations of scientific and professional fields. In this regard, the program and its employees play an important role in the socialization of students (Sverdlik et al., 2018), spurring students' intellectual drive and creating stimulating opportunities and partnerships (Ross et al., 2018).

Finally, the **institution** acts as a vital support for graduate student success by ensuring that the necessary services and resources are available and accessible (Jutras et al., 2010). Related to this is its

encouragement of professional training for its staff (Vasseur, 2015). Institutional support appears to be a determining factor in the development of graduate students, which is why institutions must ensure that they coordinate and maintain a higher level of support, for example, by adapting their training offering to the realities and needs of student populations (CSÉ, 2019). It is critical that institutional staff be aware of student profiles and potential challenges, programs offered, available resources and services.

6. Findings and drivers of success

Findings

This scientific brief leads to the conclusion that:

- The diversification of the student population has led to the emergence of a plurality of needs in terms of graduate support;
- Success is a transitional process that is embodied in the realization of a study project specific to each individual;
- Graduate success factors are multiple, related and synergistic;
- Academic success is a collective concern shared by the student, the research supervisor, the program and institutional staff.

The drivers of success in graduate studies

An interpretative analysis has identified five drivers that can be used to optimize the benefits of the success factors for the study project at the graduate (and all other) levels. These independent drivers, which evolve with the others, are adaptive in nature, based on the student path, the institutional context or the program culture.

COMMUNICATION

"Communication" refers to the importance of encouraging an institutional and program culture based on sharing and of placing interpersonal dialogue involving all employees and students of the institution at the heart of the success process.

COLLABORATION

"Collaboration" refers to the cooperation and contribution of the exchange network at university. Promoting the sharing of expertise and the pooling of knowledge enhances the student experience, particularly in terms of reasoning and problem solving.

CONSOLIDATION

"Consolidation" refers to the improvement and development of student support practices. This integrative driver aims to improve the strategies in place by taking into account the unique realities of each institution.

COHERENCE

"Coherence," which is fundamental to the operation and optimization of the effects of the other drivers, promotes the harmonization of perceptions. The support offered should be in line with the direction of the student's study project, and should be aligned with the institutional values and culture of the program.

RECOGNITION

"Recognition" places value and individuality at the centre of its concerns. It seems crucial that everyone value the diversity, richness and expertise brought by those who contribute to supporting students. This driver also refers to the importance of recognizing the diversity and individuality of student needs.

Possible Further Action

There are many structures, services and resources available to support student success at network institutions. In light of the factors, roles and drivers discussed in the preceding pages, we should ask ourselves about the impact of the findings. Considering the drivers outlined in the conclusion, it would be desirable to examine the best practices in graduate supervision and support that are already in place. How can they be optimized? How can they be adjusted to the realities and needs at the graduate level? How can we verify the benefits to graduate students?

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