

## Working Group on *The Dissertation* FINAL REPORT

### Background and Rationale

The landscape of graduate education is changing in response to wider changes in universities and their relationships with societies, which in turn influence the nature of the dissertation. Among these changes are the deepened relationships between universities and communities, the expansion of research, scholarship and innovations using more diverse methodologies, more emphasis on experiential learning to bridge theory and real-life applications, and students' interests in non-academic career trajectories.

Taken together, these changes stimulate consideration of new ways to enhance the relevance of doctoral learning, including re-thinking the content and form of the dissertation. The traditional monograph style of dissertation, which typically focuses on a single approach and methodology, and is the norm in some disciplines, is being challenged in other disciplines. In fact, several disciplines have moved away from this traditional model and now use the manuscript form dissertation as the norm. Others are moving towards the inclusion of knowledge mobilization chapters, digital content, and scholarly expression through creative products, as ways of enhancing the relevance of the dissertation.

Clearly, changes to the dissertation have already emerged organically in many disciplines, however, benefits may be gleaned from thinking about ways to broaden the content and form of the dissertation in purposeful and deliberate ways. Clarification and communication of acceptable structures and formats of the dissertation will be helpful to students and supervisors.

In response, SGS established a *Working Group on the Dissertation*.

### Purpose and Goals

The purpose of the Working Group was to develop clear guidelines for students and supervisors regarding acceptable structures and formats of the dissertation while ensuring scholarly quality and rigour.

While continuing to value the traditional, disciplinary-based scholarship and form of communication in the traditional dissertation, the goals for the *Working Group* included:

- Confirming learning outcomes for the dissertation
- Providing clarity around acceptable structures and formats of the dissertation
- Providing clarity regarding expectations for various structures and formats of the dissertation
- Providing a report of recommended guidelines for the dissertation to Vice-Provost, Graduate Research and Education, and Dean of SGS.

## Membership

The following individuals served as members for the Working Group on the Dissertation:

- Jacques Bertrand, Director, Collaborative Master's Specialization in Contemporary East and Southeast Asian Studies, Professor of Political Science
- Rachael Cayley, Associate Professor (teaching stream) in the Graduate Centre for Academic Communication
- Allan Kaplan, Vice-Dean, Medical and Life Sciences Education, Faculty of Medicine
- Lisa Haley, Senior Advisor & Manager, Program Completion and Postdoctoral Services, School of Graduate Studies
- Eva-Lynn Jagoe, Professor of Comparative Literature and Spanish and Portuguese
- Jeff Packman, Associate Dean, Graduate Education, Faculty of Music
- Tamara Trojanowska, Director, Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies
- Gretchen Kerr, Vice-Dean, Programs and Innovation, School of Graduate Studies

## Process

Initial work began with consultations with various stakeholders, a review of related literature on the dissertation, an environmental scan of peer institution websites, and discussions with representatives from other Canadian universities who have been exploring flexibility with respect to the dissertation. The summary of the literature review and consultations provided context on the discussions regarding the state of the dissertation within the current landscape of graduate education. The environmental scan identified noteworthy examples of how some peer institutions are incorporating flexibility in the structure of the dissertation and how they are communicating expectations for students and supervisors.

Members of the Working Group met four times in the Spring 2020 to discuss the information gathered through a review of literature and environmental scan, contribute discipline-specific considerations, and develop guidelines for doctoral theses.

## Findings and Recommendations

The Working Group recommends that students and supervisors would benefit from:

- Clear identification and communication of the required academic criteria for a doctoral thesis
- Clear identification and communication of acceptable thesis formats and structures
- Guidance with respect to decision-making regarding the thesis format and structure

Based on the findings, and as a way of framing the recommendations, the Working Group created 'Guidelines for the Doctoral Thesis' (a student-facing and a faculty-facing document).

The 'Guidelines' are grounded in the Statement of Principles below and are written to be applicable for all doctoral students. While Faculties and Departments can – and should – have more refined, discipline specific requirements, the 'Guidelines' have been designed to help students and supervisory committees identify the required academic criteria of the doctoral thesis by describing the various formats and structures. The description of multiple formats is intended to give validity to different formats and the potential inclusion of other components such as creative elements.

#### Statement of Principles

- The dissertation continues to represent the culmination of doctoral education;
- The core criteria of the dissertation continue to be the communication of an original and significant contribution to new knowledge;
- Scholarly rigour must be a hallmark of all dissertations;
- Traditional, disciplinary-based scholarship will continue to be valued;
- The traditional single monograph dissertation will continue to be valued.

#### Next Steps

Once the Guidelines for the Doctoral Thesis (student facing and faculty facing versions) have been reviewed and approved by SGS leadership, the documents will be shared with the Council of Graduate Deans and the Graduate Education Council in the Fall. The final documents will live on the SGS website for both students and supervisors to easily access and review. The Guidelines for the Doctoral Thesis will be publicly announced to Graduate Deans, faculty, and staff through a Decanal memo and to students through the website and Grad e-news.