

ARE GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES SEEN? A STUDY OF CANADIAN UNIVERSITY WEBSITES, POLICIES, AND FACULTY TRAINING MATERIALS

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Abstract

Despite a national task force recommending policy reforms nearly a decade ago to improve inclusion, increased enrolment, and evolving legislation, the visibility of graduate students within Canadian universities remains limited. This study examined the websites of 55 Canadian universities, their accommodation policies for students with disabilities, and publicly available training resources for graduate faculty. Findings showed that graduate students with disabilities are largely absent from these institutional narratives. Notably, the scope, intent, and rationale behind the accommodation policies varied significantly, indicating a lack of consistency across institutions, which may hinder equitable access and support. The study highlights the need for coordinated efforts among student affairs professionals, graduate faculties, and equity, diversity, and inclusion units to enhance visibility and inclusion of graduate students in higher education.

Keywords: graduate students, students with disabilities, accessibility, accommodation, policy, higher education

Résumé

Malgré les recommandations formulées il y a près d'une décennie par un groupe de travail national visant à réformer les politiques d'inclusion, à accroître les inscriptions et à adapter la législation, la visibilité des étudiants en situation de handicap aux cycles supérieurs dans les universités canadiennes demeure limitée. Cette étude a examiné les sites Web de 55 universités canadiennes, leurs politiques d'accommodement à l'égard des étudiants en situation de handicap, ainsi que les ressources de formation publiquement accessibles destinées au corps professoral des cycles supérieurs. Les résultats révèlent que les étudiants en situation de handicap aux cycles supérieurs sont largement absents des récits institutionnels. De plus, l'étendue, les objectifs et la justification des politiques d'accommodement varient considérablement d'un établissement à l'autre, ce qui révèle un

manque d'harmonisation pouvant compromettre l'équité en matière d'accès et de soutien. Cette étude souligne la nécessité d'une collaboration concertée entre les services aux étudiants, les facultés des études supérieures et les unités responsables de l'équité, de la diversité et de l'inclusion afin de renforcer la visibilité et l'inclusion des étudiants aux cycles supérieurs en situation de handicap dans l'enseignement supérieur.

Mots clés : étudiants aux cycles supérieurs, étudiants en situation de handicap, accessibilité, accommodement, politique, enseignement supérieur

INTRODUCTION

One of the largest and fastest growing units in many student affairs portfolios are access offices¹ supporting students with disabilities². Between 2019 and 2023, the number of students with disabilities registered with Ontario university access offices rose from 50,581 to 66,939—a 32% increase over four years (Ministry Colleges and Universities, 2024). In contrast, overall university enrolment in the province grew by just 7% during the same period (Ontario Universities, 2025). This overall increase in the number of students with disabilities pursuing university education has contributed to a corresponding rise in those enrolling in graduate and professional programs. For example, the number of respondents who self-identified as having a disability on the Canadian graduate and professional student survey increased by 38% in just three years between 2016 and 2019 (Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, 2019).

This increased participation of students with disabilities in graduate education coincided with enactment of federal and provincial legislative and policy measures designed to strengthen and promote the rights of individuals with disabilities beyond provisions contained in existing human rights frameworks. For example, the federal government enacted the Accessible Canada Act in 2019 which legislates the identification, removal, and prevention of access barriers for people with disabilities across federally regulated sectors. In a similar vein, and following Ontario's lead in 2005, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, British Columbia, and Newfoundland and Labrador enacted provincial accessibility legislation between 2017 and 2021 that apply barrier identification, removal, and prevention to provincially regulated institutions, including universities.

Despite enrolment growth and advancements in legislation, especially at the provincial level where post-secondary education is governed, inclusion for graduate students and Canadians with disabilities in general, is still elusive. As noted in a 2023 report reviewing the legislative framework governing the rights of persons with disabilities in Canada, the Canadian Standards Association emphasized that achieving inclusion requires further efforts to ensure that the enforcement of these accessibility laws must adequately reflect the diverse and complex lived experiences of individuals with disabilities, particularly as they navigate barriers across all facets of daily life, including education (Dragicevic & Thirgood, 2023).

Findings of recent research give strong credence to the Canadian Standards Association's report that students with disabilities continue to face significant barriers when pursuing gradu-

- 1 *Access office* in this article refers to the unit at most Canadian universities with responsibility for assessing and approving academic accommodation plans and providing other supports for students with disabilities, like learning strategies, transition programming, accommodated exams, alternate format and assistive technology. This unit may have other names, including “accessible learning,” “accessibility services,” and “disability services.”
- 2 This article uses person-first language when referring to students with disabilities, though the authors recognize and respect that some people with disabilities and disability communities prefer identity-first language (American Psychological Association, 2025).

ate education. Fear of stigma and ableism make it difficult for some students, especially those whose disability is invisible, to disclose their conditions in the graduate student environment (Ball & Traxler, 2023). Deciding to disclose also means deciding when and in what context to disclose (i.e., before entering the program, after gaining admission, after the program has started, when they begin working as a teaching or research assistant, or only after they encounter access barriers (Carter et al., 2017). Despite this deliberation, some students report they do not receive the services or accommodations they need after disclosures (Black et al., 2015). Other researchers found, for students whose disability is not immediately apparent, the extra work they must perform to navigate academic spaces and processes significantly distinguishes them from their non-disabled peers, “resulting in a process that is humiliating and inadequate” (La Monica, 2016).

Canadian University Websites: Portraying Graduate Students with Disabilities

The preceding review highlights that significant progress is still needed to enhance the experiences for students pursuing graduate education. At a minimum, one might reasonably expect a more visible representation of graduate students with disabilities on Canadian university websites, as well as more inclusive and comprehensive institutional accommodation policies. This expectation is warranted given the notable growth in graduate student enrolment, driven in part by the legislative advancements previously discussed. After all, university websites are crucial sources of information for prospective students and are usually the first place they look when deciding on which programs and schools to apply to (Banerjee et al., 2021). For students with disabilities searching for graduate programs that match their interest and focus, these websites can also reflect how welcoming the university is toward graduates with disabilities and may be seen as evidence of its commitment, or lack thereof, to providing an accessible and supportive learning, research, and work environment.

A comprehensive literature review revealed a striking gap in research on the representation of graduate students with disabilities on Canadian university websites and within institutional accommodation and accessibility policies, with only two relevant papers identified. One was a report commissioned by the Council of Ontario Universities (Rose, 2010) and the other was a taskforce report by the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS; 2015). The reports underscore a broader trend: despite increased enrolment, enhanced legislation, and a growing attention to equity and inclusion, the visibility of graduate students with disabilities remains limited.

The Rose (2010) report highlights the need for clear policy statements specific to graduate students with disabilities. Her review of 20 Ontario university websites found only two institutions had accommodation policies specific to graduate students with disabilities. Eight universities referenced graduate students only in passing within their accommodation policies for students with disabilities, while 10 universities did not mention them at all. Rose (2010) also found through informal inquiries that most universities typically accommodated graduate students under the general undergraduate rubric of accommodations and that respondents overwhelmingly sought better guidelines for responding to a growing complexity of accommodation requests. Highlighting this gap, Rose (2010) noted the implications of universities not considering the access needs of graduate students with disabilities in their publicly available accommodation policies and procedures resulted in a mismatch between student and institutional expectations, which can be difficult to navigate.

In 2015, NEADS launched a taskforce of field experts in Canadian post-secondary education to help address the persistent paucity of research into the experiences of graduate students with disabilities. Using surveys, focus groups, and interviews, the report uncovered some persistent “myths” about graduate students with disabilities. These centred on topics like the cost of accommodation, the differences between undergraduate and graduate program requirements and their impact on accommoda-

tion needs, the interaction of accommodation with academic integrity, the student's ability to achieve certain competencies, and times to program completion. Like the Rose discussion article, the NEADS (2015) report made a series of recommendations related to accommodation policies and processes and called for research funding to better understand the experiences of graduate students with disabilities.

Both reports recommended that universities adopt training for graduate faculty, coordinators, and supervisors about supporting students with disabilities in graduate programs. They also suggested enhancing accommodation policies and procedures to address the unique needs of these students and adapting accommodation practices to meet the specific requirements of graduate education. Additionally, the reports urged universities to publish clear and accessible statements confirming their commitment to welcoming, supporting and accommodating students with disabilities in their graduate programs.

At the small-to-mid-sized Ontario university where the authors are based, the access office reported a 250% increase in graduate students registered for accommodations between 2020 and 2024—rising from 36 to 126 (Parsons, 2025). Despite this growth and the university's increased commitment to student success, a 2023 review by access office staff revealed that graduate students with disabilities were largely absent from the institution's website, accommodation policies, and faculty resources. This prompted a preliminary scan of websites from five similarly sized Canadian universities, which showed comparable omissions. These findings suggested accessibility frameworks often overlooked graduate students, though the extent of this gap remained unclear, due to limited analysis of institutional policies, websites, and training materials.

To build on the work of Rose (2010) and NEADS (2015) from nearly a decade ago, this study investigated how Canadian universities that offer graduate education portrayed graduate students with disabilities on their websites and in their accommodation policies. Publicly available resources and training materials intended for graduate faculty were also examined, as they offered valuable insights into how institutions

represented and supported graduate students with disabilities. These materials—such as handbooks, guidelines, procedural documents, and faculty training sessions—play a critical role in shaping faculty understanding and practices. For example, a graduate supervisor handbook that includes guidance on how to engage in conversations with students about integrating their accommodation needs into the supervisory relationship reflects a markedly different institutional stance from one that omits any reference to graduate students with disabilities.

PURPOSE

This study sought to determine to what extent Canadian universities that offer graduate education reference graduate students with disabilities:

1. On their official websites,
2. Within their institutional policies that govern academic accommodations and support services for students with disabilities, and
3. Within faculty development resources and training materials intended for graduate supervisors and instructors.

METHODS

Data Collection

The Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (CAGS) website lists 77 universities offering graduate study programs in Canada. The association defines graduate education as building upon the undergraduate degree, delving deeper into a focused area, and is concerned with acquiring knowledge and skills, and applying advancing analytical and interpretive skills to understand and/or produce research (Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, 2012). For this study, 55 of the 77 Canadian universities listed on the CAGS website were selected. The sample included at least one university from every province and the territories, including French-only universities in Quebec, and 40% of universities in provinces or territories with more than one university.

The sample selection included data only from established universities. Data from the following types of post-secondary institutions were excluded because they did not offer graduate programs or were not a member of the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies: (a) colleges offering graduate program, (b) colleges converted to universities in the last five years because these institutions may not yet have developed the documents being examined, and (c) CECEP³ institutions in Quebec (Fédération des cégeps, 2024).

Ethics clearance involving human subjects was not required for this study since the data used was publicly available information extracted from university websites. The researchers worked with a reference librarian in social sciences to identify, narrow, and select the search terms used.

Website Mentions

The researchers visited each of the 55 university websites between December 2023 and January 2024, and again in May 2025. The following phrases were entered into the search bar on each university's website: (a) graduate students with disabilities, (b) disabled graduate students, and (c) graduate students with accessibility needs. With deep respect for person-first language, "disabled graduate students" was also included in the search strategy to ensure that relevant website content and institutional policies using this phrasing—either instead of or alongside person-first language—were not overlooked. The text from the webpages on which one or more of these phrases appeared was copied into a Word document along with the webpage link. This data was labelled "Website Mentions."

3 An acronym from the French term *Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel*, which translates to *General and professional teaching college*. In Quebec, Canada, it refers to a public school that provides the first level of post-secondary education.

Policies

As government-assisted public educational institutions, Canadian universities have legal obligations to prevent discrimination against students with disabilities by granting accommodation. Most universities adopt policy documents to communicate their commitment to fulfilling these obligations. A policy is a written document that establishes a standard by which the institution manages its affairs. A policy mandates, specifies, or prohibits conduct to enhance the institution's mission, coordinate compliance with applicable laws and regulations, promote operational efficiency, and reduce institutional risk (UW-Madison Policy Library, 2024).

While making these policies public may not be a legal obligation, universities must be able to produce their accommodation-related policies when requested. For example, the Ontario Human Rights Commission issued a directive in 2016 requiring all provincial colleges and universities to produce policy documents about how they accommodate students with disabilities by a specific timeline (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016).

The research assistant was tasked with completing website searches using the website search bar to collect copies of the universities' policies specifying accommodations for students with disabilities. Search terms used combined with the words "policy" or "policies" included: (a) students with disabilities, (b) disabled students, (c) academic accommodations for students with disabilities, (d) accommodating students with disabilities, and (e) accessibility for students with disabilities. Five universities that did not have policies regarding students with disabilities on their websites were emailed information about the study and invited to share their policies either by sending a website link or PDF copy.

When available in PDF format, policy documents were saved to a shared online folder. When available only in HTML format (i.e., website text only), policy text was copied and pasted into a Word document named for the applicable university.

Faculty Materials

The final search conducted using the website search bar for each university was for publicly available documents intended for or that referred to graduate faculty, supervisors, coordinators, or administrators (e.g., associate deans or deans). Search terms used included the word “graduate” with: (a) student handbook, (b) supervisor handbook or guidelines, (c) training sessions and workshops, and (d) guidelines and procedures.

Data Analysis

The lead researcher conducted the data analysis using text frequencies, percentages, and z-scores to assess and compare text frequencies. Thematic analysis, defined by Braun and Clarke (2021) as identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data, was also conducted. An inductive approach was used to build patterns, categories, and themes (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative code list was created to guide identification of categories and themes, with subthemes emerging through iterative review of the materials for recurring or distinctive textual elements.

RESULTS

Reference Counts: Graduate Students with Disabilities

Of the 55 university websites visited, only 36% mentioned graduate students with disabilities or variations of this phrase. Among the universities that referenced graduate students with disabilities, 70% of them appeared on the access office website and 30% appeared on the graduate studies office website, typically as text about available supports with links primarily to the access office.

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the university websites that mentioned graduate students with disabilities did so in the context of the support or help they may need because of their disabilities. Only 25% of the universities referenced graduate students with disabilities in the context of en-

hancing inclusion for all students, and only 10% described graduate students with disabilities as individuals who contribute to the diversity of the institution. For example, McMaster University (2020) stated, in a paragraph referencing graduate students with disabilities, that “we nurture and support a culture of acceptance, inclusion and celebration of diversity” (p. 1), and the University of Victoria (2017) stated, “the university encourages applications from prospective graduate students with disabilities” (p. 25).

Policies specific to students with disabilities were obtained for 48 universities (88%) of the sample. Only 17% of these policies included graduate students when defining students with disabilities or indicating the students to whom the policies applied. One university had a policy specific to graduate students with disabilities, another university had a procedure document specific to graduate students with disabilities. In both cases, these graduate-specific policy and procedure documents differed from the policy and procedure documents for undergraduate students with disabilities only with regard to the faculty with whom students and the access office would communicate and engage with about accommodation matters (i.e., graduate faculty and supervisors, instead of faculty teaching undergraduate courses). Faculty material collected included 28 documents: 11 guideline, resource, and practice documents for graduate coordinators (or their equivalent), and 18 guide documents from graduate supervisors. Only five of the documents (18%) referenced graduate students with disabilities and included language about the duty to accommodate. Of these, four documents (14%) contained inclusionary language like inclusion, dignity, diversity, and equity.

Only one university published graduate supervision guidelines that included detailed guidance about supporting graduate students with disabilities. For example, the document stated that:

more than the legal obligations, graduate supervisors have to make every reasonable effort to provide accommodations to students with disabilities to provide

them the opportunity to demonstrate and develop their academic, research, and scholarly potentials to the fullest. (University of Toronto, 2024, para. 3).

Three universities referenced students with disabilities by including a link to the access office without any commentary. Three other universities referenced students with disabilities using the following language to remind supervisors or coordinators to consider: (a) a student's disability may be at play in program evaluation, (b) students who are struggling, including those with disabilities, and (c) progress reports should identify any challenges the students may be facing, including their disabilities.

Thematic Analysis

Through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), language referencing students with disabilities in the policy documents fell into one of two main themes: legal requirements or inclusionary. The legal theme included four categories, described as follows:

1. Academic accommodations must not threaten or diminish academic standards.
2. The university will provide reasonable accommodation.
3. The university will accommodate to the point of undue hardship.
4. The university's legal duty to accommodate.

Reasonable accommodation and undue hardship are legal terms that describe the limits to the accommodation an employer or educational institution must provide (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2024).

The inclusion theme included seven categories, described in the policy documents as follows:

1. **Support:** Providing academic accommodations to support students with disabilities.
2. **Collaboration:** Emphasizing the need for collaboration between the student, access, and faculty in the accommodation process.

3. **Individualized:** Tailoring accommodations to the students' specific access needs and the barriers they experience in the learning environment.
4. **Dignity:** Ensuring accommodations are provided in a way that protects or enhances the students' dignity.
5. **Inclusion:** Supporting the university's goals related to inclusion through accommodation.
6. **Diversity:** Promoting the university's diversity goals by accommodating students with disabilities.
7. **Participation:** Using accommodations to help students fully participate in the university experience.

Legal-themed language appeared significantly more frequently in the policy documents compared to inclusionary language, as indicated by the z-scores in Table 1.

References to the requirement that accommodations not lower academic standards appeared significantly more frequently than any inclusionary terms. The same was true for references to reasonable accommodation. References to accommodating to the point of undue hardship and statements about the institution's legal duty to accommodate students with disabilities were significantly more frequent than references to inclusionary terms like dignity, inclusion, diversity, and participation.

While appearing significantly less than the other legal references, 15 universities qualified their obligation to accommodate by stating it applied only to students who were academically qualified. One policy document stated it like this: "The University seeks to remove barriers that may hinder or prevent *qualified* [emphasis added] students with disabilities from participating fully in University life" (Concordia University, 2022, p. 6). In a policy document, another university stated that it "recognizes and affirms the rights of students with disabilities *who are academically qualified* [emphasis added] to have full, fair and equal access to university services, programs and facilities" (Simon Fraser University, 2003, para. 1).

Table 1
Legalistic vs. Inclusive Language in Canadian University Accommodation Policies – Z-scores

Legal Language	Inclusion Language						
	Support <i>n</i> = 28	Collaboration <i>n</i> = 28	Individualized <i>n</i> = 27	Dignity <i>n</i> = 21	Inclusion <i>n</i> = 19	Diversity <i>n</i> = 19	Participation <i>n</i> = 18
Academic standards (<i>n</i> = 39)	2.445*	2.445*	2.642 ^{aa}	3.795 ^{aa}	4.174 ^{aa}	4.174 ^{aa}	4.364 ^{aa}
Reasonable accommodation (<i>n</i> = 38)	2.202*	2.202*	2.041*	3.565 ^{aa}	3.948 ^a	3.948 ^{aa}	4.140 ^{aa}
Undue hardship (<i>n</i> = 35)	1.504	1.504	1.707	2.898*	3.292 ^a	3.292 ^{aa}	3.489 ^{aa}
Legal duty (<i>n</i> = 31)	0.629	0.629	0.835	2.048*	2.452*	2.452*	2.654 ^{aa}

Note. **p* < .05

^{aa}*p* < .001

Defining Accommodation

One unexpected finding was the variation amongst the universities in how they defined *accommodation* in their policies specifically established for students with disabilities. Nine of the universities (19%) did not offer any definition at all, while eight (17%) used the following same definition: *planned variation in the way a student receives course materials, participates in or completes course activities, and/or demonstrates mastery of course content*. The remaining 65% of the universities used assorted action words and phrases to define accommodation as shown in Table 2.

Some of the action words may have similar meanings, like adjustment and adaptation. However, these words differed significantly from words like modification, revision, exception, exemption, and waiver.

University accommodation policies also varied in their stated purposes, which fell into two main themes. The first, emphasized by seven universities, framed accommodations as responses to disability-related challenges. For example, policies described accommodations

as necessary when “functional limitations arise from a student’s disability” or to “minimize the impact of barriers caused by the student’s disability.” The second theme, reflected in policies for five universities, focused accommodations on removing barriers in the environment such as inaccessible physical spaces, teaching practices and materials (i.e., textbooks or course readings), and systems and policies. While 16 universities did not specify outcomes, 14 did; these outcomes aligned with two themes. The first, found in nine policies, emphasized equal opportunity, using phrases such as “equitable opportunity to attain the same level of performance” and “fair opportunity to engage in academic activities.” The second theme, achievement, appeared in five policies and focused on enabling students to meet academic standards, as reflected in statements such as “perform the essential requirements of their course” or “demonstrate essential competencies.”

Table 2

Accommodation Defined: Action-Oriented Language in Canadian University Policies

Action Words					
Adaptation	Adjustment	Alter	Alternative	Change	Exception
Exemption	Modification	Revision	Substitution	Variation	Waiver
Sample of Phrases					
Means of putting end to discrimination					
Practices, systems, and support mechanisms designed to accommodate diversity and difference					
Modify program delivery or assessments while maintaining rigorous academic standards					
Remove, reduce, or eliminate barriers					
Making exceptions or exemptions to regulations, policies, standards, or practices					
Modify academic requirements, policies, procedures, or educational environment					
Providing support to access services, courses, or programs					

DISCUSSION

This study analyzed the websites of 55 Canadian universities offering graduate programs to examine how graduate students with disabilities are represented on their websites, in their accommodation policies, and in publicly available training materials and resources for graduate faculty. Only 36% mentioned graduate students with disabilities—70% of these mentions appeared on the access office pages, while the remaining 30% were found on the graduate faculty office pages. Of these references, 67% framed graduate students with disabilities primarily in terms of the support they require, while only 10% acknowledged them as contributors to institutional diversity.

Of the 88% of universities that published policies specific to students with disabilities, only 17% included graduate students in their definitions, and only one institution had a policy specifically for graduate students with disabilities. Most universities adopted policies using legal-based language, emphasizing the legal duty to accommodate, the limit on this duty to the point of undue hardship, and the requirement that accommodating students with disabilities must not undermine academic standards. In contrast, inclusive language such as dignity, inclusion, and diversity appeared significantly less in policies specifically for students with disabilities. Among the universities that published resources and training materials for graduate faculty, less than 20% included any reference to graduate students with disabilities, with most focusing on the duty to accommodate. Only one university published detailed guidelines on how graduate supervisors can work with students with disabilities and the support needed to promote their academic and professional success.

One unexpected finding was the considerable variation among Canadian universities in how they defined the concept of accommodation in their policies for students with disabilities. Nearly two-thirds of the institutions used markedly different action words and phrases to define accommodation, almost 20% offered no definition at all, and only a small number of universities used the same text. The policies

differed in whether they viewed the students or the environment as the main reason for obligating universities to accommodate students with disabilities. Additionally, the expected outcomes of accommodation varied: some universities aimed for equal opportunity to access the learning environment, while others focused on achieving academic success for students.

Under-Representation

The findings from this study demonstrated that graduate students with disabilities are under-represented in the publicly available information on Canadian university websites, particularly in policy documents and graduate faculty training and resources materials publicly available in May 2025. This is particularly striking given the increasing enrolment of students with disabilities in graduate programs nationwide. While this under-representation may not be intentional, prospective students with disabilities may interpret this lack of visibility as an indication of the university's commitment (or lack thereof) to their inclusion in graduate education. It may also influence student decisions to not disclose their disabilities even if they need support. By primarily mentioning graduate students with disabilities only on the access office website or having graduate faculty direct them solely to the access office, universities reinforce a deficit-based view of teaching and learning toward students with disabilities. A deficit-based view of teaching and learning focuses on perceived weaknesses and learning gaps in students, emphasizing what they cannot do or can only do with support (Pickard, 2020). Similar to how references to graduate students with disabilities on Canadian university websites are limited to information about the access office, this perspective characterizes students with disabilities as individuals who need help.

The under-representation of graduate students with disabilities on Canadian university websites also suggests their absence from publicly available information about the institutions' equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategy. This finding supports the results of previous research that examined the extent to which EDI

engages with students, faculty, and staff with disabilities (Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021). Of the 1,513 abstracts collected about EDI in universities, Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) found only 16 sources (some full articles, others only abstracts) that referenced students, non-academic staff, and academic staff with disabilities. Many Canadian universities have signed on to the Canadian Dimensions Charter, which aims “to foster increased research excellence, innovation and creativity within the post-secondary sector across all disciplines, through greater equity, diversity and inclusion” (Government of Canada, 2019). If Canadian universities were truly committed to the principles of the Dimensions charter, graduate students with disabilities would be featured more prominently on their webpages and other publicly available documents.

As mentioned in the Methods section, institutions adopt policy documents to coordinate compliance with laws and regulations, promote efficiency, and reduce risk. These documents are also vital tools for universities to communicate their mission and aspirations to their members, outlining behavioural requirements or prohibitions to achieve those goals. The results of this study indicate most Canadian universities primarily use their policy documents for students with disabilities to ensure legal compliance. Further, many universities use these documents to emphasize they accommodate only academically qualified students, and such accommodations must not compromise academic standards. This sharply contrasts with the positive tone and language used in university EDI statements that emphasize promoting racial diversity, sexual and gender diversity, and Indigenous ways of knowing, among others (Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021). In general, universities emphasize the positive aspects of EDI in their published statements, often highlighting the contributions that equity-deserving groups bring to the institution, strengthened by their diverse perspectives and lived experiences. Universities only accept students who are academically qualified, so why is it necessary to specifically point out this requirement in the case of disability? The use of these qualifiers

tends to “other” students with disabilities, making them viewed and treated differently from other EDI groups (Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021).

Defining Accommodation

In an early report about graduate students with disabilities, Rose (2010) defined disability and explained the duty to accommodate and essential requirements for doing so. The report also listed accommodation strategies for graduate education experiences including coursework, research, and experiential learning. While suggesting these strategies can be managed without compromising program essential requirements, the author did not define accommodation in either a general sense or more specifically what it means in graduate education.

Building on the Rose (2010) report, the NEADS (2015) taskforce report asserted that many Canadian universities are not meeting the accommodation needs of graduate students because they use a framework designed for undergraduate education that does not account for the unique access needs in graduate programs. The taskforce called for a new framework with complex accommodation options better suited for graduate education. The envisioned framework would remove funding barriers, improve access office staff awareness about graduate education requirements, and improve graduate supervisor understanding of disability and accommodation issues. The taskforce highlighted two stories in support of this recommendation: (a) a student stating the greatest unmet need was personalized help with organization and staying on track, and (b) a student requesting more transparency in funding decisions. Like the Rose (2010) report, the NEADS taskforce did not define accommodation specifically for graduate education or in support of its recommendations. However, the taskforce’s lead author presented the following definition in a later publication: “an alteration of environment, curriculum format, or equipment that allows an individual with a disability to gain access to content and/or complete assigned tasks” (Sukhai, 2019). It is worth noting this definition does not apply to either of the highlighted stories, as their concerns lie outside the scope

of accommodation targets. Additionally, it is not comprehensive enough to encompass the complexities of graduate education, such as independent research.

Since these reports offered neither a definition of accommodation nor guidance for universities in developing their own, the use of inconsistent definitions in policies concerning students with disabilities amongst Canadian universities is not surprising. Nearly 20% included no definition at all while 65% used action words that differed in scope and intent, like “adjustment,” “modify,” “adapt,” and “change.” Some of these words represent different ends of a spectrum. For example, “adjustment” (Merriam-Webster, 2024a) refers to fine-tuning or making minor changes to achieve a desired fit or outcome, while at the other end, “change” (Merriam-Webster, 2024b) means making something different or significantly altering its state. Using the word “adjustment,” one university indicates that accommodation gives students “a fair opportunity to engage in academic activities and fulfill essential course and program requirements.” Another university, using the word “change,” states that accommodation “can include modification, substitution or waiver” (University of Manitoba, 2017, p. 1) and modification can include “alternate exam formats or alternate modes of course delivery or evaluation” (p. 4). The significant differences in the impact on students and the academic process between these accommodation approaches makes it challenging to compare student experiences across universities. It also raises questions about the effect these differences have on students around accommodations, especially as they transition from one institution to another for graduate studies.

The accommodation definitions adopted by Canadian universities also differ in their rationale for why student accommodations are necessary. One group suggests accommodations address limitations students are experiencing, while the other group indicates environmental barriers create the need for accommodation. The former is based on the medical model, which places responsibility for accessibility issues on the individual and their disability. The

latter reflects principles of the social model of disability, which posits that any challenges people with disabilities experience result from inaccessible environments designed to exclude them. Recognizing that the root causes of inaccessibility extend beyond the individual or the environment alone, theorists later expanded the social model of disability to incorporate biological and psychological dimensions of the human experience. Known as the biopsychosocial model, this more integrative approach acknowledges certain access barriers cannot be addressed solely through environmental modifications (Engel, 1977). Underpinning the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (World Health Organization, 2011), which seeks to balance efforts to remove and prevent environmental barriers while promoting access to disability-related and health care services, the biopsychosocial model can be a helpful framework for informing accessibility and accommodation policy development, especially for universities.

The third way Canadian university accommodation definitions differed was in the outcome institutions expected from granting accommodation. For one group, equal opportunity was the primary outcome, but for the other group, accommodation was framed as a tool for supporting student academic success. While removing barriers can enhance performance for some students with disabilities, framing accommodations as tools for improving academic success raises concerns about academic integrity and fairness, particularly for students who are ineligible for similar supports.

The inconsistencies in how accommodation is defined across institutions highlight the lack of progress in implementing the NEADS (2015) taskforce’s recommendations to establish comprehensive definitions and frameworks that reflect the complexities of graduate education. A robust framework cannot be constructed without first articulating its foundational elements. As a result, students with disabilities continue to face uncertainty regarding how their access needs will be evaluated, interpreted, and supported—particularly during the transition from undergraduate to graduate studies, and espe-

cially when moving between institutions. This ambiguity may discourage students from disclosing their disabilities to accessibility offices or communicating their accommodation needs to graduate faculty.

LIMITATIONS

The findings of this study are limited by their reliance on information published on university websites. The information may already be out of date if universities updated their content after the data collection period. Published policies may not reflect actual practice within the institution and personnel changes can introduce practice changes different from those informed during initial policy development. Furthermore, updating disability and accommodation policy documents can often take a back seat to frontline student service, especially for universities and access offices with limited resources. The limited number of faculty training and guidance materials collected suggests that universities tend not to make these documents public. While the sample of universities was reflective of universities offering graduate education in Canada, the findings may have been strengthened by including all 77 universities offering graduate programs.

Despite these limitations and considering that websites are the source of first impressions, this study highlights significant gaps in website information for graduate students with disabilities. These gaps may unintentionally suggest they are not welcomed or included at Canadian universities.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate the need for better representation of graduate students with disabilities on the websites of Canadian universities offering graduate education. Their noticeable under-representation and the marginalization of references to the supports they need suggest that—whether intentional or not—Canadian universities may be signalling that the presence and contributions of graduate

students with disabilities are not as valued as those of other equity-deserving groups on campus. These findings also call for student affairs leadership to facilitate a national dialogue about what is meant by accommodations for students with disabilities in graduate education. This could be achieved through collaboration with graduate students with disabilities and associations like the Canadian Association of College and University Students Services (CACUSS) and the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies. This collaboration should produce templates adaptable by individual institutions that include:

- **An accommodation policy** with inclusive language that clearly encompasses graduate students with disabilities, emphasizes the value and contributions they bring to universities, and contains the requisite legal components.
- **A co-created definition of accommodation** as it applies to graduate education that considers the ICF and biopsychosocial model of disability. This definition should focus on removing environmental barriers and clarify the intended outcome of accommodation.

In the small number of faculty materials examined in this study, only one institution published some guidelines for graduate supervisors about creating equity for all students and incorporating accommodations into the supervision process for students with disabilities. The above collaboration could also produce a well-researched set of guidelines for graduate faculty, supervisors, and coordinators to help address some of the barriers identified in the Rose (2010) and NEADS (2015) reports about disability disclosure, accommodations in the supervision process, and maintaining open dialogue about access needs that may change over time.

To address assertions in previous research that universities use accommodations frameworks designed for undergraduate students to inform accommodation planning for graduate students, further research using task analyses is needed. This research should help determine if the demands on graduate students are uniquely more complex than those on under-

graduate students. For example, exploring the use of job demands or task determinant tools to clearly define the specific demands of graduate education would help distinguish what, if anything, makes these demands different than those placed on undergraduate students. Future research should also examine university, government, and research agency funding policies and procedures to identify inherent barriers that impact access for graduate students with disabilities. Defining and articulating these barriers more precisely may help identify possible strategies for reducing or eliminating them.

CONCLUSION

As one of the largest student service units within most student affairs portfolios at Canadian universities, access offices hold both an interest in and responsibility for advancing the inclusion of graduate students with disabilities. Supporting this imperative, reports published in 2010 and 2015 called for the development of more effective accommodation policies and procedures, alongside the publication of clear institutional commitments to fostering inclusion in graduate education. However, despite notable increases in graduate student enrolment and legislative progress aimed at proactively removing and preventing access barriers over the past decade, the diverse and complex lived experience of graduate students with disabilities remains insufficiently reflected in Canadian higher education.

This study examined the websites of 55 Canadian universities along with their policies specific to students with disabilities and their publicly available training and resource materials for graduate faculty, supervisors, and coordinators. Findings showed graduate students with disabilities are poorly represented on Canadian university websites. Most references to graduate students with disabilities appeared on access office webpages.

Graduate students with disabilities were also largely excluded from the definition of “student” in their disability and accommodation policies, and only one university had a policy specific to graduate students. Canadian universities have adopted definitions of accommodations that

use significantly different action words (e.g., adjust, modify, change, exception, exemption, and waiver). The policies also differ in the reasons for providing accommodation (to address a student’s need or remove an environmental barriers) and in the expected outcomes of accommodation (equal opportunity or improved student success). Only 18% of the faculty materials referenced mention graduate students with disabilities, mainly in the context of the duty to accommodate.

The results of this study offer a clear roadmap and actionable recommendations for student affairs leaders, graduate faculties, and EDI units to improve the representation of graduate students with disabilities on websites, as well as in institutional policies for students with disabilities and resource guides and training material for faculty. Taking such steps will help convey to prospective students with disabilities that Canadian universities are genuinely committed to their inclusion in graduate education.

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