Graduate Student Educational and Professional Development Final Report 2009

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the study was to identify student preferences for educational and professional development for graduate students at Athabasca University. The online survey was completed by 699 graduate students. Descriptive characteristics of the respondents revealed that the majority of the participants resided in Canada and were Canadian citizens. Student respondents were from across Canada, including the Yukon, Nunavut and the North West Territories. Over 80% were employed on a full-time basis. Most of the respondents were between the ages of 30 to 49 years. The students were asked to identify the AU support services they utilized. The Library was used by the majority of the respondents. A number of resources currently available for students were used only by a small number of the respondents.

To determine what type of educational development the students would find helpful in supporting their graduate study, they were asked to rank the importance of various topics from a list of identified potential topical areas. They were also allowed to provide their own ideas regarding topics not identified in the survey. The most frequently mentioned topic related to written communication, such as writing styles, constructing a proposal, writing for publication, using learning technology, and. writing term papers.

They were also asked to identify various topics for professional development. These included writing an effective resume, job searching, improving communication skills, conducting conference presentations, and many other topics.

Since AU is an online university, the mode of delivery of any educational and professional development sessions would need to take into consideration the characteristics of the student population. In other words, since the majority of he students are employed, are over 30 years of age, and reside across Canada, the delivery mode of the material would need to be accessible and available. Over 70% of the respondents identified asynchronous group sessions or self-directed print based methods as the most preferred delivery method. Most of the students indicated they would prefer an online taped version that they could view at anytime.

One of the survey findings was that students did not use a number of resources that are currently available for graduate and undergraduate students. One must conclude that students either are not aware of these services or if they do know of them, they have not found them helpful. The survey was well received by students and provided valuable information on the many areas that students rank as important in supporting their educational and professional development. The survey was successful in increasing the awareness of the students of the FGS. It also provided new data for the FGS in its assessment of student needs and the promotion of a high quality graduate education experience.

I.   Background

The Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) in conjunction with the President of the Athabasca University Graduate Students Association (AUGSA) and Institutional Studies conducted a survey of graduate students in the summer of 2009 to elicit information from the students on the types of learning resources they currently use and other resources they would find beneficial to enhance their graduate education and assist in their professional development. Both the FGS and the AUGSA were newly formed having been established within the past year. The survey provided a means for the FGS and the AUGSA to increase student awareness of the existence of the Faculty and the Student Association, as well as a means to obtain feedback from students on their current use of AU services and perceptions of additional resources that should be provided.

II.   Methodology

The overall intent of the survey was to inform policy development, enhance student services, and promote a high quality graduate education experience. The purpose of the survey was to:

- assess the types of AU academic supports graduate students currently use;

- determine what types of academic educational services and professional development supports should be made available; and

- determine the nature of the support provision that would facilitate their availability and accessibility to the diverse student body.

Using Limesurvey, a confidential online survey was sent by Institutional Studies to all AU graduate students who had recently enrolled in a course. The students provided informed consent through participation. The study was given clearance from the AU Ethics Review Board prior to administering the survey. The email list included

approximately 2600 students. The survey consisted of three sections. Information on the participants' educational background, the program in which they are enroled, and their area of specialization was obtained. The second section of the survey included questions on their current knowledge and use of AU services, topic areas they would like offered to assist them academically, and the method of delivery of the topics and services. Finally, demographic information on the participants was obtained. The questions included close-ended and open-ended questions. Analysis of the data occurred in the fall of 2009. Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS 16.0. The responses to the open-ended questions were reviewed. Common themes were identified and the responses aggregated into categories that reflected similar thoughts.

III. Results

Surveys were completed by 699 students resulting in a 26.8% response rate. The response rate was lower than anticipated due to a number of incorrect and non-functional email addresses.

A. Background Characteristics of Respondents

A number of demographic characteristics of the participants were obtained. Most of the participants were female (n=478, 68.3%) with approximately one-third of the participants being male (n=209, 29.8%). The majority of the respondents resided in Canada (n=674, 96.4%) and were Canadian citizens (n=673, 96.2%). Student respondents were from across Canada (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Location of Students in Canada

Province	Number	Percentage
Ontario	n=267	(38.1%)
Alberta	n= 185	(26.4%)
British Columbia	n= 84	(12%)

Saskatchewan	n= 29	(4%)
Atlantic provinces	n= 57	(8%)
Quebec	n=8	(.1%)
NWT/Yukon/Nunavut	n=6	(.08%)

There were a very small number of students who resided in other countries including the United States (n=6, 0.08%), Germany (n=2, 0.03%), and China (n=2, 0.03%). All respondents indicated English as their primary language of choice.

Over 80% of the student participants were employed on a full-time basis (n=577, 82.5%), with 10.8% working part-time (n=76), and only a small number being unemployed (n=28, 4.0%). Three-quarters of the respondents were married (n=512, 73.2%) and the remainder were either single, never married, divorced, or widowed (n=143 or 20.4%). Given that the survey was conducted on graduate students, the majority (80.4%) indicated they had completed a bachelor degree (n=562). Only 11.8% indicated they held a professional degree or designation (n=83). A small proportion (7%) had already obtained a master's degree (n=49). There were 75 students (11%) who had already taken some masters courses in their current AU program.

Figure 1: Age of Student Respondents

Figure 1

Age Groups of Respondents
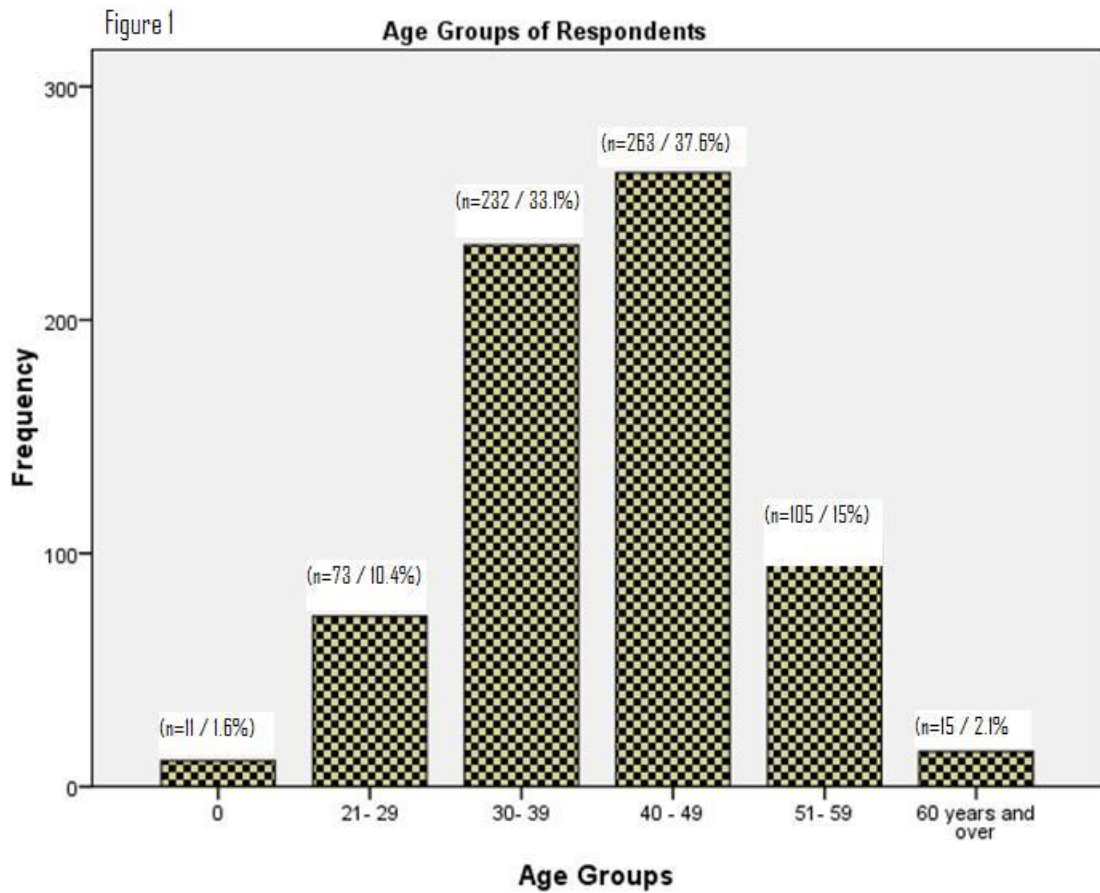
The age range of the student participants reflected the profile of the overall graduate student population seen at AU (See Figure 1). Most of the students were between the ages of 40-49 (n=263, 37.6%) and 30-39 (n=232, 33.1%). There were 105 respondents between the ages 51-59 and 21-29 (n=73, 10.4%).

Figure 2: Graduate programs of Respondents

Figure 2: Graduate Program
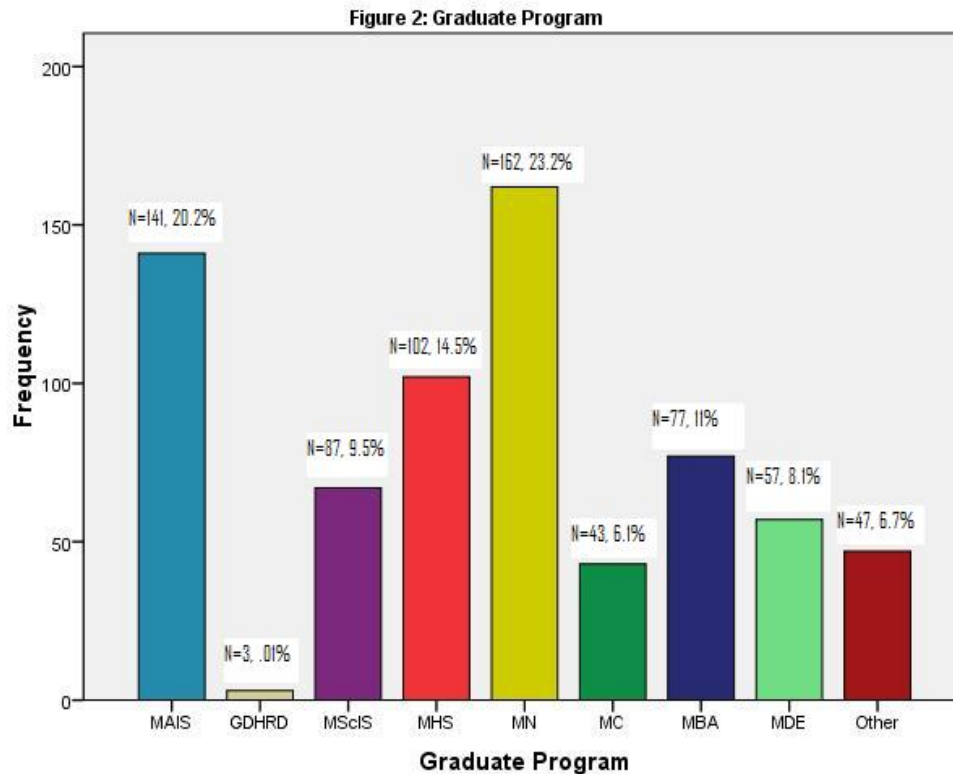
Close to one-quarter of the students who responded were enrolled in the Master of Nursing (MN) Program (n=162, 23.2%), with the second largest representation coming from the Master of Arts in Integrated Studies (MA, IS) program (n=141, 20.2%) (see Figure 2). The third largest group was from the Master of Health Studies (MHS) (n=102, 14.5%). and the fourth largest group was from the Master of Business Administration (MBA) students (n=77, 11%). Following in descending order were the Masters of Science in Information Systems (MScIS) (n=67, 9.5%), the Masters of Education in Distance Education (MDE) (N=57, 8.1%); students who were unsure of the program they were in (n=47, 6.7%), or those who specified an unknown program; the Master of Counselling (MC) (n=43, 6.1%); and finally the Graduate Diploma in Heritage Resource Management (GDHRD) (n=3, 0.01%).

Many of the students indicated they were enrolled in a specialization or stream in their graduate program. The following list identifies the results entered by the students:

Specialization Area	Frequency	Percent
Accounting	4	.6
Change Management	4	.6
Computer Science	4	.6
Cultural Studies	31	4.4
Educational Studies	14	2.0
Generalist	146	20.9
Health Studies	24	3.4
Administration	7	1.0
Information Systems	23	3.3
Information Technology	8	1.1
Project Management	19	2.7
Work, Organization, Leadership	61	8.7
Global Studies	13	1.9
Adult Education	38	5.4
Community Studies	12	1.7
Instructional Design	8	1.1
Advanced Nursing Practice	40	5.7
Other	106	15.1
Missing	137	19.6
Total	699	100

The students were asked to identify the route they had selected in their program. Approximately 20% (n=144) indicated a route. Course-based study included the largest number of students of all the routes (n=23, 3.29%). Project (n=23, 3.29%) and clinical practice (n=22, 3.15%) were the second most frequently selected routes.

Course – Based	39
Project	23
Clinical Practicum	22
Thesis	15
Portfolio	14
Doctoral	11
Essay / Final Exam	5
Undecided	15

Almost half of the students were either in their program for less than a year (n=154, 22%), or in their program for 1 to 2 years (n=203, 29%). There were also 19.7% of the students who were in their program between 2 to 3 years (n=138) and 3 to 4 years (n=101, 14.4%). Some of the students were unsure of how long they were in the program (n=38, 5.4%). Sixty-four students (9.1%) were in their program for more than 4 years.

Most of the respondents had enrolled in one or more distance or online courses prior to starting their current graduate program (n=432, 61.8%), whereas about one-third had never taken an online course previously (n=266, 38%). Approximately one quarter of the students had enrolled in their current program in order to prepare for further graduate study (n=164, 23.4%).

The graduate students were asked to identify their reasons for selecting AU for their graduate education. Numerous reasons were identified. The most common reason for choosing AU was to assist with new career employment opportunities (n=547,

78.2%). The second most frequent choice was to improve their current employment status (n=438, 62.6%). Many of the students also chose AU graduate programs because of their personal interest in pursuing further studies (n=414, 59.2%). A small number of students selected their current program in order to undertake in-depth research in a specific subject area (n=94, 13.4%) and to develop their own plan of study (n=94,13.4%). Other reasons for choosing their current program included:

Other Topics	#
To be up to date in field	8
Fulfilling a lifelong dream	12
Teaching	10
To continue to learn and expand my horizons	8
Employer requested	6

B. Educational Supports for AU Graduate Students

The major part of the survey focused on the use of current AU services by the graduate students, their input on additional services for their academic and professional development, and the mode of delivery for these supports. Educational support refers to seminars, presentations, modules, or other teaching/learning activities that would be outside of coursework and project/thesis work that would complement or supplement the students' studies.

C. *Current AU Resources*

A list of AU resources that students could utilize to assist with their program requirements was provided. The respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they used these resources by selecting either 'yes' or 'no'. The AU library was the resource used by the largest number of respondents. The majority of students used the library's online journals (n=620, 88.6%); the library's digital reference centre (n=504, 72.1%); and the library help centre (n=285, 40.7%). The other resources listed that were listed in the survey were not used by many of the respondents. Their comments

indicated that many of the students were not aware of the services offered. The services that were identified included: the Student Related Policies (n=154, 22%); the Writesite (n=76,10.8%); the AU Career Planning Site (n=34, 4.8%); Study Skills offered by Counselling Services (n=28, 4%); and the Mathsite (n=4, 0.03%).

Students were also asked to provide feedback on the positive experiences they had with AU, either directly or indirectly. Seventeen students (2.4%) specifically noted that they had a good experience with their professor and found them to be a good resource. They also mentioned that email communication with their professor was important, as well as the support they received. A number of the students also provided positive comments on the use of Moodle (n=12 ,1.7%) and the library (n=30, 4.2%) including the Digital Reading Room, Online E-Books, Library Loans, AU Journals, and the digital reference centre. Another important part of their student experience mentioned by the students was the opportunity to consult with staff, such as advisors and administrative assistants and the Access to Students with Disabilities Office (n=22, 3.1%). Other services that were identified as important and helpful were the Computing Services Help Desk (n=26, 3.7%) in the form of technical support and the Student Awards Unit (n=4, 0.05%) for information on scholarships and bursaries. The respondents indicated that wikis, peer counselling, and conferencing with fellow students made the student experience more rewarding and enjoyable (n=9, 0.1%).

D. Topics Identified by the Respondents as Important for AU to Offer

The participants were provided with a list of suggested topics that could be offered for graduate students to assist their educational and professional development. They were to rank the Likert structured question according to the amount of importance they placed on each topic, such as 'very important', 'somewhat important', 'not important', and 'not applicable'. The following results display the number of respondents who indicated the topics were 'very important' and 'somewhat important' for AU to offer:

Workshop Topic	Number	Percentage
Writing Styles (MLA, APA)	n=623	(89.1%)
Writing for Publication	n=600	(85.8%)

Writing Term Papers	n= 592	(84.6%)
Writing a Grant Proposal	n= 569	(81.4%)
Writing an Effective C.V.	n=558	(79.8%)
Writing my proposal	n=538	(76.9%)
Job Searching	n=594	(84.9%)
Learning Technology	n=577	(82.5%)
Assess my learning skills	n=483	(69%)
Manage my time better	n=479	(68.5%)
Improve my study skills	n=459	(65.6%)
Intellectual Property	n=439	(62.8%)
Copyright	n=436	(62.3%)
Instructional Skills for Teaching Assistants	n=435	(62.2%)
Effective Graduate Student Supervision	n=395	(56.5%)
Data Analysis Software Workshops (E.g. SPSS, NVIVO)	n=393	(56.2%)
Preparing an Ethics Evaluation	n=361	(51.6%)
Preparing for Doctoral Candidacies	n=268	(38.3%)

The topics of greatest interest were in the areas of improving written communication skills. Writing styles (MLA and APA formats) (n=623, 89.1%) was the topic most frequently selected by students as most important or somewhat important to have available. There were a number of related writing areas that a large proportion of the respondents identified as important topics for AU to offer, Writing for Publication (n=600, 85.8%), Writing Term Papers (n=592, 84.6%), Writing a Grant Proposal (n=569, 81.4%),

Writing an Effective C.V. (n=558, 79.8%), and Writing my Proposal (n=538, 76.9%). The following list includes other topics the students themselves identified for professional development:

- Communication skills

- Conference presentations and application of teaching over the web

- Lobbying government effectively

- Aptitude, ability & skills assessment for career

- Online collaboration design and research skills within the web based lectures by professors with power point presentations and conference call classes to discuss findings.

- Important to use the technology that is being studied. Practical experience is essential.

- Preparing a presentation

- Soft Management Skills (time management, leadership, team management etc)

- Ability to network with other professionals.

- Public speaking

- Effective leadership

- More on writing professionally, writing novels, short stories ... how to

- Writing bid proposals and answering RFP

- Interviewing skills, job market analysis

- Technology and informatics

- Cultural competency training

- Links or key contacts to industry, popular research areas, setting up a mentor system.

- Decision making skills

- Self-care or Interpersonal skills or Conflict Resolution skills

- Human Resource Development and Personal Management

- Project Approach to curriculum development

E. Mode of Delivery of Educational and Professional Resources

The respondents were asked to rank order from '1' (most preferred) to '5' (least preferred) the method of delivery of any educational sessions that would be offered by AU. The following results indicate the number of students who selected "Most Preferred" for the method of delivery:

Topic	# of Students who Selected Topic as Most Preferred	Percentage
Asynchronous Group Session	N=304	(43.4%)
Self-Directed Print Based	N=238	(34%)
Face-to-Face Session at Regional Centres	N=92	(13.1%)
Videoconference	N=54	(7.7%)
Synchronous (Webcam, Grouped Web Presentation)	N=54	(7.7%)
Self Directed Video Presentation	N=65	(9.2%)
Teleconference	N=27	(3.8%)

The respondents were also given the opportunity to offer suggestions on other methods for delivering the various topics identified. These included:

- Email with professors

- Periodic student conferences held in a main center and run as a conference.

- E-copy of book

- CD-R presentations with print-out materials in Acrobat format and accompanying audio CDs

- Be assigned a thesis supervisor and establish direct contact via e-mail, Skype or Elluminate with him/her.

- Mentoring over phone/web conference

- Downloadable podcasts that can go into my MP3 player that I can listen to during my bus commute

- Powerpoint with notes

- One on one telephone with another student or the professor

- Would be good to have both teleconference and a self-directed soft copy for offline perusal etc.

- Identify groups within areas that can act as presenters and representatives who would touch base and organize meetings with other students.

Most of the students indicated that they would prefer an online taped version that they could view anytime (n=439, 62.8%), in the evening (n=138, 19.7%), during the day on a Saturday or Sunday (n=52, 7.4%), or during the day between Monday to Friday (n=17, 2.4%).

IV. Conclusion

Students identified topical areas for both their educational and professional development. The current AU online resources were used minimally by the respondents. Only 76 (10.8%) of the respondents indicated they had used the Writesite. The survey did not ask the participants the reason for not using the list of current AU services. However their lack of use of the Writesite and yet their high ranking of the need for writing instruction leads to several assumptions – the graduate students were

not aware of the website resource or they did not find it provided the assistance they needed.

The feedback from the students in the areas of educational and professional development will help assist the FGS and the individual faculties/centres provide workshops and services that the students would find helpful to support their educational experience and program. The survey was also very beneficial to students, as mentioned by them in the closing comments from the survey. Many of the students became more aware of the existing services, and were also able to provide feedback on future developments by the FGS.