

Graduate Programs Admission Reflection Summary

(Based on EDIAD Admission Reflection Exercise led by Associate Deans - Graduate; Two retreats focused on reflection feedback)

Background:

Western University is committed to equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and decolonization (EDIAD) and the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (SGPS) at Western University is committed to achieving and supporting a diverse graduate community. To address historical disadvantage and under-representation, it is our goal to admit and support more Indigenous and Black graduate students, women graduate students, graduate students with disability, and LGBTQ2S+ graduate students. We recognize that this starts with recruitment of a diverse range of applicants and with admissions processes that reduce bias and take a “holistic” perspective to applicants, taking into consideration the characteristics of each applicant as a whole person rather than limiting our admission decisions to reliance on standard academic criteria. Most importantly, achieving our goal requires changes to our long-standing practices, processes, and institutional culture. These are not the types of changes that can be made by simply mandating new practices and processes. Over the past year, we have undertaken a series of steps to engage with the graduate community to learn together and to collectively identify the areas for change.

SGPS Consulting and Collaborating With our Campus Experts

- The first step was consultation with our Vice-Provost Indigenous Initiatives and our Associate Vice-President Equity, Diversity & Inclusion to: a) to hear their ideas and recommendations about what was needed to achieve a more equitable and diverse graduate community; and b) to get their advice about how to approach the process of fostering engagement in a major change process.
- They have been essential partners in every step of the overall process.

Development of the “Graduate Admissions Guide to Unconscious Bias”

- SGPS created a brief guide to common, unconscious biases (adapted with permission from a guide created by Boyden Executive Search) for use by program admissions committees in order to draw their attention to how the criteria often weighted heavily in the review process may be influenced by unconscious bias.
- The guide was distributed for use in the 2022 admission cycle.
- The guide also helped “prime” program admissions committees for the EDIAD Review of Graduate Admissions.

EDIAD Review of Graduate Admissions

- SGPS, in close collaboration with the Faculty Associate Deans-Graduate (ADGs), developed a “reflection exercise” that all graduate program admissions committees were asked to complete under the leadership of their Faculty Associate Dean-Graduate. This reflection exercise was aimed at reviewing all steps in the admissions process and

all criteria used in each graduate program to make admission decisions. The goals of the exercise were to: 1) identify processes and criteria that are susceptible to bias and/or may be factors in excluding some types of applicants, 2) consider needs and opportunities to change our processes and/or criteria to increase equity and diversity, 3) identify best practices already being used, 4) identify where resources, such as guides, training, or workshops, would be helpful, and 5) guide a strategy to move toward “holistic” review of graduate admission applicants.

Learning from Experts

- SGPS invited an external expert on holistic graduate admissions, Dr. Cynthia Pickett, to present to our graduate program leadership (Associate Deans and Graduate Program Chairs) about the biases inherent in “traditional” admissions process and ways to address these biases.

EDIAD Reflection Retreats

- SGPS hosted two half-day retreats to discuss the findings of the reflection exercise and to identify priorities for changes to our admissions application and processes.
 - The first retreat focused on identifying biases and barriers (see below) inherent in our current practices and processes and the applicants who could be negatively affected.
 - The second retreat focused on identifying the characteristics and attributes (see below) we value in applicants (considering students who have thrived in our programs), considering whether our current application requirements measure or reflect these characteristics, identifying gaps in our application, and prioritizing changes to be made.

Development of voluntary, self-report “equity census” questions for inclusion on graduate admission applications

- The highest priority for change in our application is to include voluntary questions addressing: Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, Indigenous Identity, Black Identity, Racialized Identity, Disability
- Inclusion of these questions will provide valuable information about the characteristics of our applicant pool, allowing us to evaluate the extent to which our admission offers reflect the diversity of our applicant pool.
- Self-identification information will also allow programs to identify candidates for EDIA recruitment scholarships and will leverage the ability of programs to undertake a more “holistic” review of admission applicants.

Next Steps:

- Inclusion of EDIAD questions in the graduate admission application – done
- With the help of our campus experts, review the characteristics/attributes that we value in applicants through an EDIAD lens; modify and expand the characteristics/attributes as needed to optimize inclusion of equity-deserving

applicants – need to consult with VP-Indigenous Initiatives, AVP-EDI, Director-Accessible Education...

- Inclusion of an applicant personal statement in the graduate admission application (sharing information such as why their grades may not be a valid reflection of their ability/potential, how personal/family challenges have affected their academic journey...) – need to consult with VP-Indigenous Initiatives, AVP-EDI, Director-Accessible Education...
- Revise the reference letter requirement in the graduate admission application to make it less subjective – need to consult with Grad Program Chairs and ADGs
- Remove “Marital Status” question from the graduate admission application – SGPS will do this
- Develop EDIAD training for graduate student supervisors (in many programs, supervisors have a key role in admission decisions) – work with VP-Indigenous Initiatives, AVP-EDI, Director-Accessible Education, and Centre for Teaching and Learning
- Share the recording of Dr. Pickett’s presentation with the broader graduate community at Western; continue to engage experts to foster continued learning – SGPS will do this
- Compile information to be shared with graduate students and program staff about the campus supports available to enable students from equity deserving groups to thrive – SGPS to work with Student Experience, VP-Indigenous Initiatives, AVP-EDI, Director-Accessible Education on this
- Create mentorship opportunities and support networks to support students from equity deserving groups once they arrive – engage ADGs and Graduate Programs Chairs in discussion of what this should look like
- Develop better financial support for students from equity deserving groups – Vice-Provost SGPS to work with Provost and Deans on this
- Develop a recruitment strategy to share information about graduate studies with students from equity deserving groups who may not see themselves as future graduate students; develop a mentorship approach to supporting them through the application and admission process, and beyond – engage ADGs and Graduate Programs Chairs in discussion of what this should look like
- Summarize the discussion, findings, and recommendations of this overall process and share it with the graduate programs across campus

Characteristics/Attribute Clusters Identified in Retreat #2:

- Work Ethic
- Social Capital and Context
- Integrity
- Resilience
- Prior Knowledge and Skills
- Willingness/Openness and Ability to Learn
- Communication and Writing Skills (in language of study)

- “Traits” – curiosity, critical thinking, multi-tasking ability, internally motivated, compassionate, respectful, team player, humility, willing to be mentored, good interpersonal skills, flexible and able to shift thinking, self-aware, able to maintain health work/life balance, community engaged

Next Steps in Considering these Characteristics/Attributes:

- Consult/engage with experts who can review the characteristics/attributes through an EDIAD lens
- What do these characteristics look like for individuals from equity deserving groups?
 - What characteristic are missing when EDIAD is considered?
 - How can these characteristics be reflected in the application:
 - References?
 - Personal statement?
 - Something else....?

Biases and Barriers Identified Through the Admissions Reflection Exercise

Biases are inherent in how we interpret and value information about our applicants.

BIASES IDENTIFIED	Who would be excluded by this bias?
<p><u>Performance biases</u> related to our interpretation of the applicant's performance and achievements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grades • nerves/performance in interview • publications (number of publications, authorship status) • awards/scholarships • reference letters • English Language proficiency tests 	<p>Grades: anyone whose national/regional/institutional grading guidelines and conventions differ from ours or from our expectations; applicants who don't excel on the kinds of assessments graded (e.g., people with test anxiety might have lower grades in exam-heavy courses)</p> <p>Interview performance: non-neurotypical folks, anyone with a communication difference, people with social anxiety or even garden-variety anxiety, those with limited Internet connectivity, access to good-quality mics and cameras/ability to travel for a F2F interview. Plus, anyone who's really invested in a program might be really nervous in an interview for it.</p> <p>Publications: applicants who come from teaching-focused universities or possibly research-intensive where undergraduate participation in research is less of a priority; discipline: not such a big deal in admissions as it is in scholarships where we compare students across disciplines, but anyone applying to a grad program from a different discipline with different publication conventions might be at a disadvantage.</p> <p>Awards/Scholarships: Anyone from an institution that doesn't have a lot of scholarship money to offer; applicants who don't think to list their "standard" funding packages (I'm thinking of the real differences among our grad students applying for CGS/OGS: some indicate full amounts for WGRS and others only record competitive scholarships even though they might be receiving the same amounts. This at least we might be able to overcome by being really clear in our applications what we mean by prior scholarships so at least we ask everyone to report the same things).</p> <p>Reference letters: Anyone relying on part-time faculty to write reference letters: the timelines for letter-writing may arise after the end of their contracts so there may be little incentive to put in a lot of effort.</p>

BIASES IDENTIFIED	Who would be excluded by this bias?
	<p>And anyone who's been taught by FT faculty who don't write effective letters.</p> <p>For letters - anyone who's had primarily large undergrad classes where it is challenging for the faculty member to know who the student is and write a more personalized letter (i.e., many students may find it challenging to distinguish themselves in large classes. e.g., too nervous to ask questions in a big group).</p> <p>English language proficiency tests: Anyone whose working academic ability in English isn't captured by a test</p>
<p><u>Reputational bias:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prestige and ranking of institution where previous degrees were earned • Reputation and institution of referees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People without the means to travel to/study at "prestigious" institutions; those for whom institutional prestige wasn't part of their decision-making. • An example here could be on-line programs/course work, which are not widely viewed as "prestigious" or sometimes even "comparable" in certain academic areas. • Applicants graduating from the increasing number of programs that rely on part-time instructors, who haven't been taught enough by full-time research faculty to get letters from them.
<p><u>Opportunity bias</u> related to the applicant's opportunity to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • publish, perform, or have their creative outputs exhibited or performed • engage in volunteerism • engage in extracurricular activities and athletics • gain work experience • engage in undergrad research • travel and/or study abroad • disciplinary variations 	<p>Lots of people:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those with limited financial resources • Those who need to work/earn income • Those who have family responsibilities and/or care commitments • Those with limited access to transportation

BIASES IDENTIFIED	Who would be excluded by this bias?
<p><u>Comparison</u> biases related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comparing diverse applicants with one another • <u>Confirmation bias</u>: comparing applicants with an “ideal” or stereotype • <u>In-Group & Projection biases</u>: comparing applicants with ourselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anyone who doesn’t “look” like those making the admission decisions • Anyone who doesn’t align with our image of the “ideal” grad student
<p><u>Supervisor bias</u> related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the supervisor’s contribution to the student’s funding and perceived right to personal preference in selecting applicants • supervisor’s focus on selecting applicants who will be competitive for external scholarships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who are not seen as “competitive” for external scholarships • International students (less access to scholarships; higher funding needs, especially for masters)
<p><u>Interviewer bias</u> related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expectations of interviewer • interviewer’s interpretation of applicant’s responses • possible normative bias among interviewers or admissions committee members - feel pressured if a member's view differs from other interviewers/committee members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anyone applying to a program that requires interviews, especially if interviewers are not trained in EDIAD • applicants with limited interview experience
<p><u>Reduction or Efficiency/Speed bias</u> related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what we use as filters for the first pass through applications to reduce the applicant pool to manageable size 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicants with lower academic averages because averages are a common filter used to reduce the applicant pool • Anyone whose application is complex and/or requires more time to review • Applicants with less “traditional” characteristics

BIASES IDENTIFIED	Who would be excluded by this bias?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to prioritize “efficiency” of our processes • the program’s need to make quick decisions about applicants 	
<p><u>Projection or In-Group bias</u> related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • letters of reference and insider shared knowledge about letter writers • the tendency to accept students who use similar theoretical, methodological, and/or practice approaches to our own • also the tendency to accept students who have certain personality or character traits that align with graduate program field or area of research; might accept students who followed a similar path to themselves (e.g., did vs. did not work between degrees) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • applicants whose referees are not well known • applicants who have been away from academia for some time and don’t have current contacts to obtain academic references • applicants whose previous studies have been based on less traditional methodologies and/or theoretical framework (e.g., Indigenous ways of knowing) • applicants who have taken an “untraditional” path through their studies, personal life, and/or career
<p><u>Quantification bias</u> related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • over-reliance on quantitative information and rubrics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • applicants whose numeric grades are lower • applicants whose grades have been converted from their original scale to a common admission scale • applicants whose referees have not ranked them in the upper percentiles
<p><u>Attribute/Characteristics bias</u> related to the applicant’s:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • age / years since previous degree • ability to get academic references 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Older applicants, particularly those who have been out of school for several years • Applicants who have taken a less “traditional” academic path

BIASES IDENTIFIED	Who would be excluded by this bias?
<p><u>Competitive bias</u> related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Giving weight to things such as scholarship and award history even though the highly competitive nature of scholarships and very limited availability of scholarships makes the differences between those who are awarded scholarships and those who aren't indistinguishable and trivial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anyone who hasn't received an award or scholarship International students who tend to have far fewer opportunities for scholarships
<p><u>Intersectional bias</u> related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> applicant's socioeconomic status, gender, demographics, and personal context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> anyone whose background and characteristics are non-normative
<p><u>Recruitment / Selection bias</u> related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> an applicant's perception of their "fit" with our program / institution / London an applicant's decision about whether or not to apply to our program an applicant's ability to pay the application fee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Those who don't even apply because they don't "see themselves" at Western Those who can't afford the application fee

Barriers are characteristics of our processes and structures that introduce challenges or limit our ability to admit diverse applicants.

BARRIERS IDENTIFIED	Who would be negatively affected by this barrier?
The way SGPS calculates admission averages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People taking part-time courses of study, those returning to post-undergraduate-degree study, particularly mature students
Conversion of international grades	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International applicants whose grades are converted from their original scale
Changing/increasing requirements for international students to obtain a study permit, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the requirement to demonstrate that they have living accommodations arranged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • international applicants with limited financial means
Lack of graduate student residence and living space on campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • applicants concerned about safe, affordable housing – likely disproportionately international applicants and those from equity deserving groups
International Master's tuition (differential between domestic and international)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • international Master's applicants, especially those with limited financial means
International student funding packages, especially for Master's students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • because there is no guaranteed funding for Master's students, masters funding varies considerably across Faculties and programs, and students in some disciplines are disproportionately affected by this
Linking of supervisor funding with admission decision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • applicants who apply to study with a faculty member with limited grant funding • applicants who apply to study with a faculty member who has a narrow/limited focus on the characteristics they value in students • applicants applying to a faculty member whose priority is to accept students who are likely to be competitive in scholarship competitions

BARRIERS IDENTIFIED	Who would be negatively affected by this barrier?
Requirement for applicants to secure a supervisor in order to be considered for admission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • applicants who have not been coached or mentored in how to connect with potential supervisors • applicants from cultures and backgrounds where directly approaching a faculty member would be considered inappropriate • applicants from cultures and backgrounds that are different from the potential supervisors they would like to study with • applicants who are unfamiliar with this practice • applicants who would like to study with a supervisor who is currently not accepting new students • applicants who reach out to a faculty member who does not respond to inquiries from potential applicants
Western's emphasis on high grades for undergraduate admissions – has created an institutional culture that over-emphasizes/values high grades	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anyone whose grades are not exceptionally high • this “culture” supports the use of grades as an efficient filter to reduce the applicant pool
Cost of professional programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anyone with limited financial means, but especially international applicants because of the international tuition differential
Silos within the university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • applicants whose interests are interdisciplinary
Application fees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • those who can't afford the application fee
Lack of non-traditional pathways to graduate education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those without a four-year undergrad degree • Those with ample life/career experience, but without formal academic credentials

IDEA/QUESTION “PARKING LOT”
(items we need to keep thinking about)

Including a personal statement in the application

- What should be included in a personal statement?
- How is a personal statement different from a research statement?
- How would programs use the personal statement?

Financial need

- How do we support financial need, especially for members of equity-deserving groups?
- Should there be central bursaries? Or should Faculties/Programs be responsible for this?

Reliance on numeric grades

- How do we avoid relying on grades while still being “efficient” in our review process?
- How do we address issues arising from grading scale conversions for international applicants?

Multiple perspectives amongst admissions team/committee

- How do we ensure that admissions teams/committees include a diverse range of perspectives and experiences?

EDIAD Training

- How do we provide EDIAD training for our admissions committees and for supervisors who have a voice in making admission decisions?
- Who would contribute to the content of training resources?
- Who would take the lead on creating training resources?
- How do we make sure that those making the admission decisions have completed the training?