Wellbeing in the Graduate Supervision Context

Executive Summary

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Improving and supporting excellence in graduate supervision speaks to The University of British Columbia's commitments of "transformative student learning" and "creating an exceptional learning environment" (The University of British Columbia, 2012, p. 8-9). Graduate students' relationships with their supervisors and their larger scholarly community at UBC are central to their academic progress, their student experiences, their potential as future scholars, and their overall wellbeing. While most students, approximately 85%, indicate that they are satisfied with their relationship with their supervisor (Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, 2013), there is also strong evidence that the supervisory relationship is often a key issue of concern (Graduate Student Society UBC Vancouver, 2014)—one that often correlates with overall student satisfaction. In particular, many respondents to the UBC Graduate Student Society (GSS) Survey noted that having more frequent and meaningful contact with their supervisors was central to their overall satisfaction (Yonson, 2015). The project summarized here speaks to these survey findings by further examining student wellbeing in the graduate supervisory context at UBC within the context of a larger initiative intending to develop a shared understanding of the key principles of excellent graduate supervision at a research-intensive university, and to enhance the quality of graduate supervision at UBC through continued dialogue and resource development (Rogers et al., 2016). We engaged faculty, staff and students across the campus in this conversation and sought their input and feedback on the policies, practices and resources that currently exist and ones we might create to foster wellbeing in the supervisory context. Our goals included: understanding the relationship between wellbeing and excellence in the graduate supervision context, identifying current challenges to wellbeing within the context of graduate supervision, highlighting key resources, professional development opportunities and potential pathway(s) of support, and sharing preliminary recommendations.

Discovery Process

The discovery process was guided by our project objectives and included several phases. First, we situated this initiative in the context of other projects and reports at the university. Drawing on some key university documents and relevant scholarship we refined the objectives of the project and developed a plan. We then completed a university scan of current resources, identified key stakeholders and developed interview questions. We next conducted interviews with stakeholders and analyzed them for emerging themes. Concurrently, we researched best practices and resources from benchmark post-secondary intuitions related to supporting wellbeing of students in the graduate supervision context, and revisited scholarly research on the relationship of graduate supervision and wellbeing. Finally, we re-analyzed key documents, and synthesized information based on the identified themes. This process culminated in a series of recommendations for addressing issues of wellbeing in the context of graduate supervision on the UBC Vancouver (UBCV) campus.

Our stakeholders included people in UBCV offices and related organizations who, directly or indirectly, support student supervision and wellbeing (e.g., Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, Student Development and Services, the GSS, etc.), and in selected academic programs and

departments that we identified as striving to maintain positive graduate student communities (e.g., Applied Sciences, Education, etc.). We developed guiding questions for stakeholder interviews based on a preliminary scan of the literature, and current resources at the university. Stakeholders were invited to consider the questions from both the perspective of the whole university and from their particular unit. Questions focused on challenges that graduate students face around supervision that might affect their wellbeing, the current supports and resources available, as well as the gaps and areas for opportunity. Figure 1 shows a map of the UBCV units that offer resources and impact policy related to supervision and wellbeing
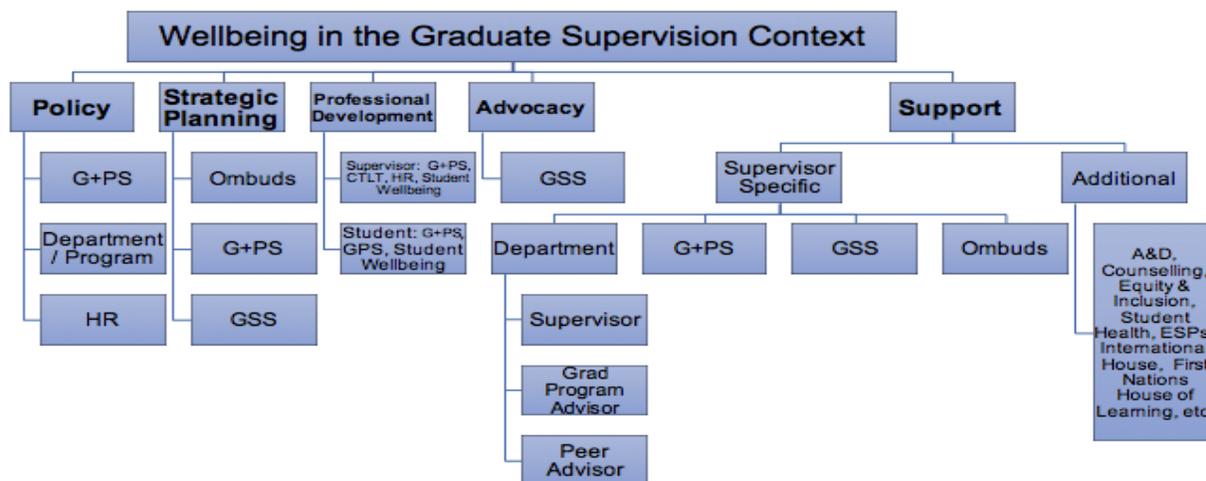

Figure 1: Map of units that offer resources, and impact policy related to supervision and wellbeing

Findings

There has been an increasing emphasis put on excellent graduate student supervision at UBC by various key stakeholders which is reflected in several key reports including: *The Annual Report* (2016, the Office of the Ombudsperson), The Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (G+PS) Graduate Supervision Leadership group paper, focusing on principles of excellent supervision (Rogers et al., in preparation), the white paper, *Supervisory Excellence: A Graduate Student Perspectiv*e (Graduate Student Society UBC Vancouver, 2017) exploring supervisory excellence from a graduate student perspective and the *Framework for Senate Consideration of Student Mental Health and Wellbeing* (Senate Ad Hoc Committee, 2014). For example, the Graduate Supervision Leadership group developed a research-based resource on seven key principles of excellent supervision (Rogers et al., in preparation). The white paper (Graduate Student Society UBC Vancouver, 2017) on supervisory excellence offers sixteen recommendations for both graduate students and supervisors, and acknowledges that supervisory practices have an impact on

student wellbeing. The Graduate Student Society UBC Vancouver's (2017) strategic plan also includes a priority for promoting positive work environments, including supervisory relationships.

At the university level, excellence comes up as a priority in the development of UBC's strategic plan. Feedback on the strategic plan included some uncertainty about the definition of excellence. For example, "excellence may be too narrowly focused on academic achievement and can be broadened to reflect holistic definitions of excellence" (UBC's Next Century, 2017, p. 3). One recommendation, based on a consultation by Keeling and Associates (2016) on mental health and wellbeing, is to balance the demand for high academic performance with empathy and an ethics of care in the context of graduate supervision and mentoring. And, as one graduate student articulated in this project,

> Thinking about excellence holistically, [it is] interesting to focus [on it] from a wellness perspective. [We should] bring that conversation up more often. When we think about [the] supervisor relationship, if it's excellent [we think the] student published a lot, worked really hard, did a post doc at a prestigious university, [and] won scholarships and awards—all great things, but if that comes at [the] detriment of student wellbeing, how sustainable is that and how 'excellent' is that really?" (personal communication, June, 2017)

In 2016, UBC adopted the Okanagan Charter (International Conference on Health Promoting Universities and Colleges, 2015), a health promotion framework. The charter provides a framework for proactively addressing wellbeing at the university (UBC Wellbeing, 2016). Within the priority areas of the charter, inclusion, connection, mental health and resilience stand out as particularly relevant in the context of graduate supervision. According to Brandes, graduate student populations are at an increased chance of developing mental health challenges when they experience such things as isolation, academic pressure, and the challenges of family and financial responsibilities (as cited in Krogman, 2014) and inadequate supervisory support. In contrast, Goplerud argues that students who have positive relationships with their supervisors "are more likely to experience low stress levels, minimal psychological and physical problems, and overall satisfaction with graduate school" (as cited in Adrian-Taylor et al., 2007, p. 92). Reporting on a survey of graduate students at the University of New Brunswick, Gupta (2013) shares that graduate students indicate "proactively managing their supervisors" and "focusing on health and wellbeing" (para. 3) as practices supporting their success as graduate students.

Five key themes emerged from the stakeholder interview process:

1. Communication between students and their supervisors
2. Supervisor's understanding of their role in relation to student needs; recognition of and accountability for that role
3. Scholarly and social community
4. Institutional supports, resources and accountability
5. Intercultural communication and relationships

A sample of what we heard for of each of these themes and related preliminary recommendations are included in the following tables:

Theme 1	Communication between students and their supervisors
Challenges	**At UBCV.** Supervisors can facilitate a space where students feel they can communicate their needs and interests. Discomfort in this area could lead to a sense of isolation or loneliness. **In the literature.** Factors such as "lack of openness," "different expectations re: responsibilities of student and supervisor" and "unclear conversation" were among key sources of conflict reported by both graduate students and supervisors (Adrian-Taylor, Noels & Tischler, 2007, p. 101).
Resources	Graduate Student/Supervisor Expectations Document (G+PS, 2014) and other resources for supervisors on website; Graduate Pathways to Success workshops for students.
Opportunities	**At UBCV.** A program shares the expectations document in a start of year package for incoming students along with other key documents. **At U of C.** A checklist of expectations is required. **At U of T**. An expectations check-list is completed by students and supervisors separately. **At Queen's U**. An expectations scale is included in their handbook on supervision.
Preliminary Recommendations	*Support supervisors in communicating clearly with their students regarding expectations, interests and mutual responsibilities, etc.; address the importance of navigating power dynamics in communication with the students they supervise.*

Theme 2	Supervisor's understanding of their role in supporting students; recognition of and accountability for that role
Challenges	**At UBCV.** Supervisors may benefit from more support and resources to become excellent mentors and to see this form of pedagogy, as well as supporting student wellbeing, as part of their role. **In the literature.** In Adrian-Taylor et al.'s (2007) study, one student reported that "problems with my supervisor are a consequence of the departments' philosophies" (p. 100). Jairam and Kahl (2012) argue that "faculty should provide compassion and understanding when a doctoral student faces difficulty in the program and should provide advice to help a doctoral student attain a work/life balance" (p. 324)
Resources	G+PS offers a biannual workshop to promote effective supervision pedagogy and practices for supervisors and an annual workshop for graduate advisors. Additional resources are offered through the G+PS website.
Opportunities	**At UBCV.** One department hosts informal brown bag lunches where faculty can ask each other questions and engage in professional development in an informal setting. Faculty mentorship on supervision could be one way to provide professional development for new and continuing faculty, including co-supervision and informal mentoring on committees.
Preliminary Recommendations	*Support graduate programs to provide excellent communities of practice related to supervision and mentoring that, in turn, promote student wellbeing. Recognize excellent supervision (e.g., #GreatSupervisors event), include a range of roles and responsibilities in promotion and tenure documents.*

Theme 3	*Scholarly and social community*
Challenges	**At UBCV.** Graduate students can often feel isolated in the university context. Students may be disconnected from their support networks while pursuing graduate studies. **In the literature.** Pyhältö, Vekkaila and Keskinen (2015) found that doctoral students' and supervisors' perceptions of activities within the supervisory relationship included the importance of promoting the doctoral candidate's "active agency as a member of the scholarly community" (p. 9).
Resources	Programs embed opportunities for students to meet other faculty and additional potential mentors. Graduate student peer advisors are embedded in some faculties.
Opportunities	**At UBCV**. Some departments offer one introductory course that includes guest lectures from many faculty members within the program or department. Supervisors can encourage students in taking up social, professional and personal development activities.
Preliminary Recommendations	*Enhance departmental and cross unit collaboration initiatives and programming related to supervision and wellbeing.*

Theme 4	*Institutional supports, resources and accountability*
Challenges	**At UBCV.** Graduate students and supervisors are often unaware of resources, or unsure if and how to access such resources.
Resources	See figure 1.
Opportunities	Opportunity to support resource uptake through collaboration across units at the university.
Preliminary Recommendation	*Address institutional challenges related to communicating resources to students and faculty; increase awareness of, and access to, relevant resources.*

Theme 5	*Intercultural communication and relationships*
Challenges	**At UBCV.** International students may have a limited understanding of Canadian post-secondary culture. Supervisors may also face challenges in navigating the culture at UBC or within their particular department, which can lead to conflict or a breakdown in the supervisor-student relationship. **In the literature.** Thomas, Willis, and Davis (2007) highlight mentoring for minority graduate students as a practice that is of particular importance. Citing Girves et al. (as cited in Thomas et al., 2007) note that "minority graduate students often experience more isolation and less access to mentors and role-models than their non-minority peers" (p. 178).
Resources	Graduate students are currently offered a workshop by G+PS, often in collaboration with International Student Development, which includes intercultural

	communication. The Equity Enhancement Fund has supported a symposium focusing on mentoring across cultures, with Nanda Dimitrov (Nakata et al., 2017). Dimitrov's (2009) guidebook, *Western Guide to Mentoring Graduate Students Across Cultures,* is available on G+PS website.
Opportunities	**At UBCV**. There is opportunity to continue developing resources for both students and supervisors to navigate intercultural relationships (e.g., Nakata et al.'s (2017) Equity Enhancement Funded project on Intercultural Competence in the Supervisory Relationship). **At UWO**. Dimitrov (2009) created a guide focusing on intercultural relationships in the supervisory context that includes recommendations such as being aware of the impact of culture on interaction styles, being clear about expectations in the academic context, and helping students establish a social network.
Preliminary Recommendations	*Continue to develop and offer ongoing professional development opportunities on excellent supervision and intercultural understanding to impact student wellbeing.*

Our next steps include gathering further feedback on these recommendations and creating an actionable report that will support the Leadership Group on Supervision, and the Faculty of G+PS in addressing supervisory excellence at UBCV.

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