

Guidelines:

Graduate Programs

These guidelines identify considerations and offer advice in support of the development of comprehensive Part A proposals for master's and doctoral degree programs.

The ministry conducts system coordination reviews for graduate programs to assess how well offerings anticipate and remain responsive to the needs and interests of current and prospective students and align with institutional mandates, provincial priorities, system capacity, and institutional resources.

The Program of Study Regulation stipulates that ministry approval is required for a post-secondary institution to establish a new degree program, which includes graduate degree programs.

Scope

This guideline addresses system coordination review considerations. Campus Alberta Quality Council addresses quality considerations in Part B templates.

New graduate degree programs include all programs of study, including both new degree programs and new first-level specializations within ministry-approved degree programs leading to the conferral of a master's or doctoral degrees.

This guideline focus specifically on considerations that can be unique to graduate programs. Please consult related guideline documents to access advice about topics applicable to both undergraduate and graduate programs.

Graduate degree programs in the field of Divinity fall outside the scope of these guidelines, since they are not subject to review by the ministry.

Guiding Principles

- Albertans should have access to the highest quality of graduate education.
- Graduate students in research-oriented programs contribute significantly to the research mission of their institution and also play an important role in undergraduate education.
- Graduate research is one of the engines and incubators of innovation and economic growth in the province.
- Graduate programs are often essential for advanced professional training across a range of fields and should be responsive to labour market conditions.

Graduate Program Proposal Considerations

- Types of Graduate Programs
- Student Funding and Program Costs
- Enrolment Planning
- Contribution of Program to the Institution
- Accessibility and Cohort Enrolment Mix
- Value-Added Elements for Research Capacity
- Documenting Budgetary Considerations
- Employment and Academic Outcomes

Types of Graduate Programs

Graduate programs involve a program of study that leads to the conferral of a master's or doctoral degree in a particular field. Graduate programs can be categorized as:

- Research-intensive programs that prepare students to undertake independent research within a field or interdisciplinary grouping (e.g., most Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Arts and Master of Science programs) and prepare graduates, among other educational and career paths, either for further education within a field (in the case of master's level programs) or for academic careers (in the case of doctoral graduates); or
- Profession-oriented programs that prepare graduates to become practitioners informed by research in a closely associated field (e.g., Master of Social Work) or a general field (e.g., Master of Business Administration) or to fill a specific private sector need (e.g., Master of Geographic Information Systems).

Programs can be further classified as primarily thesis-based or course-based.

Depending on whether the program is research-intensive, profession-oriented and/or course-based, only selected considerations offered below may apply to a particular proposal. For example, profession-oriented and course based programs, are more likely to have Work Integrated Learning components than research-intensive programs.

Student Funding and Program Costs

Research-intensive graduate programs normally offer partial or full-funding to admitted students.

This funding can take many forms (tuition waivers, bursaries, fellowships, instructorships, etc.) and funding packages for individual students may be assembled through multiple sources. In some cases, admitted students will bring their own funding in the form of external awards that may come in addition to or in lieu of institutional funding. In other cases (particularly in STEM fields), a student's supervisor may offer stipend support to a student through research grants held by the supervisor.

For this reason, when developing a proposal, institutions should:

- identify minimum stipend support that will be offered to admitted students;
- describe the mix of internal supports and external awards that potentially comprise funding packages; and
- comment on the benefits for students of the funding package.

Research-intensive and profession-oriented programs may award academic, merit-based scholarships.

Such scholarships are not considered part of a program's budget since institutions account for them in other larger, institutional budgetary categories.

Similarly, external scholarships that potential students may obtain should not be considered part of a program's budget since they come from sources external to the institution.

The ministry takes graduate student funding into account when reviewing graduate proposals since the potential funding package:

- can directly impact the fiscal viability and sustainability of a program;
- can be a relevant factor when assessing tuition levels and affordability considerations; and
- can potentially affect student recruitment and enrolment outcomes.

Enrolment Planning

Enrolment plans for research-intensive graduate programs can be impacted by the availability of external funding sources (in addition to supervisory capacity and graduation rates within the program).

When developing proposals, institutions should comment about the extent to which projected enrolments may be dependent on:

- potential students obtaining external (typically Tri-Council) awards; or
- stipend support from supervisors' own research grants; and
- local, national and/or international demand.

Institutions should also describe plans to mitigate risks should external funding sources decrease or become unavailable.

Accessibility and Cohort Enrolment Mix

The cohort enrolment mix for a graduate program is typically contingent on a number of factors. In general, however, graduate programs tend to have a higher percentage of international students than do undergraduate programs.

When developing a proposal, institutions should:

- clearly identify the targeted population(s) of potential students based on the nature of the proposed program; and
- differentiate projections for enrolment of international and domestic students.

If a program will have international students, institutions should:

- supply evidence that this cohort will not significantly displace domestic students; or
- provide a rationale for why some limited displacement may be warranted.

Proposals should also take the opportunity to identify potential benefits of introducing the program despite associated risks, institutional costs, and relatively modest enrolment numbers.

The ministry takes into consideration accessibility factors for domestic learners as well as alignment factors regarding provincial economic and innovation priorities when assessing the proposed enrolment mix.

Documenting Budgetary Considerations

Institutions should ensure that the budgetary considerations discussed above are documented in the budgetary planning section of the new graduate program proposal template. Please contact the Program Design and System Innovation unit, if you have questions regarding how best to document these considerations.

The ministry is committed to a review process that includes consideration of a proposed program's financial viability and sustainability.

Employment and Academic Outcomes

Employment outcomes and/or learner pathways for master's and doctoral degree graduates should be documented.

In the case of master's programs, institutions should specify:

- whether the majority of graduates are expected to continue on to doctoral programs or enter directly into the labour market; and
- whether new or expanded pathway opportunities are created.

In the case of doctoral programs, it is important that proposals document

- the types of academic and professional positions for which graduates are prepared; and
- the program supports that assist graduates successfully transition from university to employment.

It is useful for institutions to document viable career paths and institutional supports to aid employment transitions given the long-term investment made by the government and system stakeholders in the education of graduate students.

Further Information and Assistance

For additional information contact:

Director, Program Design and System Innovation

Alberta Advanced Education

780-643-9472

Related Guidelines:

- Proposal Timelines
- Enrolment Planning
- Program Learning Outcomes
- Program Duplication
- Labour Market Demand
- Learner Demand

Other related documents:

- Proposal Template: New Master's and Doctoral Degree Programs

To obtain a copy of other guideline documents, or to ensure that you have the most recent copy of this guideline, please send a request via email to ae.psp-paprs@gov.ab.ca.