

## Graduate Précis of “Imagining the Future”

### **Preamble**

This document aims to provide the Queen’s community, and its graduate students in particular, with a summary of the recommendations contained in the Academic Writing Team’s contribution to the academic planning process, “Imagining the Future: Towards an Academic Plan for Queen’s University” (September, 2010). The immediate objective for undertaking and publishing this summary is to facilitate informed awareness about the process. Participation of various kinds will hopefully follow.

As a summary, this document resists entering into debate with the content of “Imagining” but does note what the author believes are important observations, omissions, and potentially contentious recommendations. In many cases, the Academic Writing Team already signals the latter as such. Further, as a summary from the perspective of a graduate student and one intended for other graduates, special attention is given to certain themes and goals relevant to graduate studies and the graduate-student body.

The text consists of 50- to 200-word summaries of the each goal in “Imagining.”

“AWT” refers throughout this document to the Academic Writing Team.

An undergraduate summary is also available, authored by the AMS Academic Affairs Commissioner, Kieran Slobodin.

Respectfully submitted to the Queen’s community,  
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### **Goal 1.1: To identify and agree on the values we share at Queen’s that will serve as a guide to academic planning.**

Academic excellence is the foremost value in this goal, embracing “undergraduate teaching, graduate and post-doctoral education and supervision, and research.”

The University’s values have traditionally included “a sense of community, a broader learning experience, engaged students, loyalty, and school spirit.” The goal proposes that we include “international engagement, inclusivity, innovative teaching and research<sup>1</sup>, and interdisciplinarity” among the new values we can all agree upon.

Internationalization and inclusivity receive some special attention here. It is noted that increased international attendance will “deepen” the campus community’s “cultural sensitivity,” but Queen’s also dedicates itself to intentionally facilitating this process.

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<sup>1</sup> On innovative teaching, the goal states that “Queen’s should emphasize inquiry and discovery-based learning,” presumably in lower-level undergraduate courses as well as upper-year and graduate seminars.

One value that the goal describes as “potentially conflicting” is (de)centralization, an issue which the AWT phrases in the form of an open-ended question: “how decentralized or centralized should Queen’s be?” They suggest that Queen’s may need to consider embracing a more centralized structure so as to coordinate interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary efforts as well as build special areas of research.

***Goal 1.2: To capture the essence of what studying at Queen’s involves, and ensure that this unique experience is preserved and enhanced. Students cherish the “Queen’s experience” and we need to preserve its distinctiveness.***

By “Queen’s experience,” the AWT refers to extra-curricular activities and cultures of current students and alumni. The goal observes how many students and alumni are involved in the Kingston-Queen’s community, but the school may not be aware of their contributions nor include such activities in metrics used to appraise student engagement beyond the standard analytics used by the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) and Maclean’s. The AWT also suggests that the school should draw on alumni more directly to provide feedback on all areas of the “Queen’s experience.”

On the topic of establishing new metrics, the goal recommends that we use the academic plan as an opportunity to establish a “permanent mechanism for driving change facilitated by rigorous, but comprehensible, system of metrics to assess our achievements.”

***Goal 1.3: To improve on the collection, analysis and interpretation of performance indicators in order to provide timely feedback on our successes and failures.***

This goal picks up where 1.2 left off on university-wide metrics, contending that the University is ill equipped to demonstrate excellence in the current culture of performance evaluation. To do so, it needs to develop in-house evaluation criteria that are appropriate to Queen’s and institute formal procedures at the department and faculty level to address findings from external evaluations.

Anticipating some hostile response to its proposal for added metrics, the AWT submits the following in conclusion: “The anxiety surrounding metrics comes, in part, from the concept that academic freedom and autonomy for individuals, units, programs and institutions is of fundamental importance. However, Queen’s is a primarily publicly funded, post-secondary institution and should always strive to find an appropriate balance with respect to the needs of students, faculty, staff, on the one hand and the interests of society on the other.”

***Goal 2.1: To develop a niche position as Canada’s only research-intensive university that offers both high-quality graduate degrees in selected fields and a rich undergraduate educational experience.***

Here the AWT offers its vision of the identity the University should pursue in the “medium term”. Over the last two decades the mission of the school has bifurcated between undergraduate teaching and graduate education and research. The institution’s historical reputation as a high-quality provider of undergraduate education is now

complicated by increased research activity and graduate enrolment.<sup>2</sup> Undergraduate teaching now competes with graduate supervision and research responsibilities for the attention of faculty, whose numbers have not increased at the same rate as graduate enrolment. The AWT does not suggest that Queen's abandon any one of these missions but rather i) consolidate its growth in graduate education and ii) "reinvigorate the undergraduate mission." What the second will entail is bringing undergraduate education into closer alignment with the school's research mission, for instance, by encouraging inquiry-based or deep-learning education (earlier) in the undergraduate curriculum.

2.1 makes it very clear Queen's should not seek to expand existing graduate enrolment. In fact, current graduate programs, especially doctorate programs, "need to be monitored carefully for quality" (see 3.2 for more details) and these programs should be consciously "selected."

The AWT concludes by offering suggestions about metrics that might be used to evaluate this goal, such as teaching performance indicators and graduate student data (retention rates, graduation rates, post-graduation employment, etc.).

**Goal 3.1: To foster and sustain a rich, innovative and dynamic research environment that attracts the best researchers and provides a rich learning environment for our students.**

In the first of three central missions it proposes, the AWT recommends that Queen's solidify its relatively new standing as a research-intensive institution by i) making good on the current Strategic Research Plan (SRP) and ii) supporting "investigator-driven research programs outside of the stipulated areas of research excellence" in SRP.

i) The AWT observes that the University's good standing as a research institution in Canada is tied to its already existing SRP, which allows the school to participate in federal research programs by identifying specific areas of research expertise. But changes to the SRP should be on-going and "transparent and must fully engage the Queen's community, including alumni and graduate students."

ii) The Academic Plan presents an opportunity to consider how the school will foster research outside those areas identified in the Strategic Research Plan. A number of metrics that might be used to measure individual faculty members' contributions are proposed. How the school will "support" (as opposed to evaluate) individual research is not discussed.

**Goal 3.2: To ensure that graduate, professional\* and post-doctoral education and research opportunities are advanced as a critical enterprise within the Queen's community.\*\***

\* Professional students are not mentioned in the body of this goal.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the AWT, since 1998 and 2008 MA enrolment rose 41 per cent and Phd enrolment grew 48 per cent.

\*\* We recommend graduate students using this summary as a guide read this entire goal. It contains a number of important pieces of data that may help contextualize some of the goal's recommendations.

3.2 makes six recommendations that stand out because of their sheer importance but also because they call for more discussion and clarification:

i) In order to “be aggressive in attracting the best students,” Queen’s will need to provide “guaranteed, centrally facilitated, competitive funding packages.”

How is the funding that departments currently provide not “guaranteed”? Does the AWT mean to suggest that Queen’s Graduate Awards be administered centrally, by the School of Graduate Studies, rather than by departments?

ii) The graduate experience the University offers should be both “student- and career- progression centred.”

One issue embedded in this recommendation is the career prospects of especially those who will not find or try to seek a career in academia. Is the AWT suggesting that the school better support MA and PhD students who do not find employment in the post-secondary sector, or that the school should develop better strategies for helping graduate students make the transition from student to faculty? Either one will require substantial attention, resources, and articulation in the academic plan.

iii) 3.2 notes that the University “take[s] in considerable government revenue to support graduate studies, and yet students are funded by non-traditional [non-governmental] revenue streams. System-wide transparency and a revenue attribution approach might provide a clear picture of the benefits of strong and innovative graduate programs.”

An investigation of graduate funding practices is certainly welcome, but does this goal suggest we undertake such an investigation in order to find out which graduate programs are especially lucrative? How would this approach overshadow academic needs and innovative academic courses of action?

iv) It is suggested that the school “implement a transparent funding formula that is fair and equitable to both new and successful existing graduate programs.”

What metrics does the AWT imagine when it refers to “successful existing graduate programs”? Also, what exactly does the AWT find inequitable and unfair about existing funding practices?

v) The AWT recommends that we “inaugurate a regular and transparent academic planning process that advances new graduate programs, appropriately supports successful ones, and provides for sunset clauses for programs winding down.”

The final suggestion deserves substantial discussion. One issue (but *not* the greatest) that needs to be considered is how sunset clauses might do *unforeseen* damage to a program, faculty, and students before a program actually ends.

vi) 3.2 says we need to “formally recognize the importance of faculty mentoring in graduate student training. Currently, there is little assessment of this activity.”

Recognition and assessment are two different things. Why does the AWT not expand on its recommendation for greater assessment—which would include training and monitoring of graduate supervisors?

**Goal 3.3: To provide Queen’s undergraduates with a rich educational experience.**

The broad recommendation here is that the school should “reinvigorate its commitment to the undergraduate experience while maintaining its strong commitment to research and graduate studies.”

The specific suggestions for executing this re-commitment are quite familiar: increasing faculty-student ratios, creating more interdisciplinary flexibility, and creating more international exchange possibilities.

A more novel suggestion is that “Queen’s incorporate the culture of research intensity more systematically throughout undergraduate programs.” (See 4.1 in “Imagining.”)

3.3 concludes with a list a proposed metrics for assessing “the quality of the undergraduate experience.”

**Goal 4.1: To provide transformative learning experiences that assist students in becoming self-directed, responsible, life-long learners.**

This goal contains a long list of suggestions for broadening how the school defines and delivers “learning,” opening with the observation that current educational practices are quite traditional, hierarchical, and compartmentalized. The AWT envisions “a continuum of learning that reflects changes in the way in which knowledge is acquired and created.”

Many of the suggestions are taken from earlier goals in “Imagining,” particularly 3.3. Virtualization, non-credit certificates, extra-curricular recognition, and community engagement are all discussed in some detail.

4.1. concludes by turning to graduate students as current teachers at Queen’s and proposes that the Centre for Teaching and Learning be highlighted as a resource and coordinated more purposefully with graduate programs and professional training.

**Goal 4.2: To deliver the curriculum with maximum efficiency and simplicity in order to offer the highest-quality educational experience to students.**

The majority of the AWT’s comments and recommendations in this goal clearly have the undergraduate curriculum in mind. First-year class sizes and Faculty of Arts and Science degree combinations are discussed at length. Graduate program and curriculum review in light of time-to-completion rates are not mentioned, nor are comprehensive exams, PhD course-work requirements, or thesis examinations.

The AWT's summative comment on class sizes: "We recommend that Queen's focus its efforts on innovation to promote the most effective learning experience, and not dwell on class size as a specific end goal."

**Goal 4.3: To increase opportunities for interdisciplinarity.**

This brief goal avoids particulars and suggests a strategy for implementing interdisciplinarity in general. The AWT cautions against creating "new autonomous units" before we explore interdisciplinary possibilities already available in "existing structures," including new collaborative possibilities between units.

**Goal 4.4: To increase international engagement (student exchanges, research collaborations, and international students).**

This lengthy goal begins by defining 'internationalization' as a process that "refers to both the international activities of Queen's students and faculty and the number of international students and researchers who spend time at Queen's." It proceeds to discuss internationalization with special attention to the school's revenue, collaborative initiatives with foreign institutions, international undergraduate student numbers (low compared to graduate), and support for international students at Queen's. Amid these discussions, the AWT recommends, "Greater central support, particularly financial support, should be allocated to the multiple facets of the university's internationalization plan." No rationale for this decision is offered in the immediate context of the recommendation.

**Goal 4.5: To develop better incentives for innovation.**

The AWT observes how faculty has fewer opportunities and resources necessary to develop innovative teaching practices. In addition to fostering "regular recognition," the AWT suggests material resources and finances be directed towards stimulating these efforts. (The suggestion seems unimaginative since financial scarcities are identified as the reason for a lack of opportunity in the first place.)

**Goal 4.6: To rethink how we "count" teaching and learning.**

4.6 reiterates some of the points about credit distribution in 4.1 but adds "course-credit allocation for instructors" to the mix. Since not all course workloads are equal from the perspective of instructors (too) Queen's should investigate a more flexible credit counting system.

**Goal 4.7: To integrate the principles of inquiry, interdisciplinarity, internationalization, imagination, innovation, and inclusivity into the university's core mission.**

The AWT immediately establishes what they are trying to get at in the list above, "diversity and equity," but neither terms are defined nor included in the goal's title.

After referring readers to *Queen's Diversity, Anti-Racism, and Equity Panel Report, 2009* and encouraging the school "to evaluate the many aspects of belonging and community" at play at Queen's, the AWT makes two specific points:

1) We need to combine all of the qualities listed in the goal in relation to diversity and equity. The AWT believes an amalgamation “would better support the university’s goals,” but it remains unclear why. (Diversity and equity are not limited to internationalization, for instance, so how could or why should we combine all the three?)

2) The AWT suggests that we limit our approach to diversity by only thinking “about services we can offer” to “visible or invisible minorities.” It is suggested that the school needs to better solicit the perspective of minorities regarding the learning environment on campus.

**Goal 5.1: To preserve a sense of community, congeniality and cooperation at Queen’s.**

The AWT argues that the school’s decentralized structure presents many challenges to fostering a sense of community and that these challenges need to be consciously tackled through cross-departmental and cross-unit communication.

**Goal 5.2: To embrace a culture of openness and transparency in allocative decision-making.**

The AWT suggests that the rationale behind non-transparency practices at the school—especially those relating to finances—is a deliberate attempt by administrators to soften the “politics of cross-subsidization.” The AWT argues that these practices are in fact detrimental to multi-unit relations: “Let the community see clearly the cross-subsidies that are necessary to keep a university in balance—and hear the rationale. We believe that sharing information openly, and giving members of the community an opportunity to discuss allocations, would result in a stronger community.”

**Goal 5.3: To recognize the value of time and to strive to achieve efficient use of all of our human resources.**

The specific issue at hand here is a decrease in faculty productivity resulting from “the variety of administrative tasks that have been downloaded to faculty” to recent memory. The AWT identifies for examples website maintenance and new accounting procedures, which both sap faculty’s time from when they were introduced on the premise that they could save time. The very broad suggestions here include giving attention to “what the university expects faculty to do with their time” and better analysis of “hidden costs” in any additions or changes to common procedures in the future.

**Goal 5.4: To value non-academic staff as crucial for the central missions of the university.**

The only goal to single out staff in “Imagining,” 5.4 recommends that “advancement opportunities and training” and “Internal mobility should be actively encouraged.” The AWT devotes the most space to allocation of staff among units, finding that many allocations appear outdated and compensation grades between staff in similar roles in different units are inconsistent. 5.4 concludes: “The senior administration needs to ensure that all administrative units on campus *directly* contribute to the overall core missions of

the university. We therefore recommend that all units be regularly reviewed to assess how they can more effectively contribute to these core missions.”

**Goal 5.5: To ensure that academic units are sustainable.**

I want to cite two very important paragraphs from this goal in lieu of a paraphrase:

“In a period of fiscal restraint, it is important that resources be allocated to units that directly contribute to the university’s core missions. We note that since 1998, 18 centres have been closed or have had their operations suspended. We recommend that the university develop appropriate metrics to ensure that all existing units . . . to which Queen’s resources are being allocated are indeed contributing to the university’s core missions. We recommend that these metrics be applied to any proposal for the creation of any new academic unit.”

“We are of course aware that disciplines in the modern university have evolved as a result of fission, as new ways of exploring broke out of the ‘disciplining’ boundaries of existing academic structures. We are nonetheless concerned about the sustainability of existing discipline-based structures, particularly since some very successful graduate programs, in particular, continue to be discipline-based and are regulated by the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies. It may be time to consider consolidating various related departments into *multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary* schools.”

**Goal 5.6: To initiate a permanent educational infrastructure planning and implementation process involving all members of the Queen’s community.**

This goal reviews some earlier plans regarding infrastructure set down in *Queen’s Campus Plans of 2002* and asks what progress have we made on these initiatives. Most currently discussions about infrastructure focus on teaching and social spaces and the question is asked, How do we prioritize between these and how do we develop planning exercises that actually have “widespread input from the Queen’s community.” Sustainability is mentioned only in the closing paragraph.

**Goal 5.7: To use information technology strategically to advance the university’s goals in the face of resource constraints.**

5.7 is very optimistic and confident about the role IT should play in the future while also conceding that this goal is in tension with earlier comments made in *Imagining*: “IT needs to play an increasingly strategic role at Queen’s. Although we believe the creation of new administrative roles generally should be avoided at Queen’s, the centrality of IT/IM suggests that the university should consider creating an Associate Vice-Principle (IT/IM).