



Higher Education  
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## **Beyond Labs and Libraries: Career Pathways for Doctoral Students – Appendix**

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## Appendix A: Focus Group Discussion Guide for PhD Career Path Groups

### Introduction and Warm-up (10 minutes)

Objective: To set the tone and expectations of the focus groups.

- (PURPOSE OF GROUP) I'd like to welcome you to our discussion today. My name is X. I work for a company called Academica Group and we have been commissioned, as a third-party research firm, to conduct a qualitative study to gather opinions on how to better help graduate students in the process of planning their careers.
- In a minute we will introduce ourselves – our first names only, but first I would like to walk you through the consent form that is front of you. (MODERATOR review informed consent form and answer questions. Collect signed consent forms and ensure that participants have a copy of the Letter of Information to take with them).
- (CONFIDENTIALITY) I'd also like to spend a couple of minutes on confidentiality. Keep in mind that all information obtained from these discussions will be reported in aggregate form only. We will not identify quotes or ideas to any one person of this group. We are assuming that when we learn about one another's views they remain confidential. However, in small groups like this, people may be identifiable to some degree by their views and opinions, but as the researcher I will strive to minimize any details in the report that may identify any particular individual. We also ask that you keep the responses of fellow focus group participants confidential as well. Everything that is heard in this room should stay in this room.
- Have said this, and having made these requests, you know that we cannot guarantee that the request will be honoured by everyone in the room. So we ask you to make only those comments you are comfortable making in a public setting and to hold back comments you would not say publicly.
- (USE OF TAPE RECORDER) As you may know, the discussion will be recorded to increase accuracy and to reduce the chance of misinterpreting what anyone says. My colleague is also taking notes through the sessions. All tapes and notes will be kept completely private by me and my co-researchers and no one else will be allowed access. We will not write in any names into the notes to be able to identify you individually.
- (ROLES AND RULES) The format of these groups is to facilitate an open discussion and my aim is to help guide this discussion and to achieve constructive dialogue among all of you that will provide valuable feedback for change. There may be many similarities in your experiences but there will also likely be many differences. We would like to hear all of them, while at the same time respecting that we may come from different disciplines and therefore may have varied experiences. I will step in if there are there too many people speaking at once or to make sure that everyone has had a chance to speak, and I will step in if I feel the conversation is straying off topic. The discussion should be approximately 2 hours long. We may also be using a flipchart to take down notes through the session and I be asking you do a group exercise.
- (INTRODUCTIONS) Just so that we get to know each other a bit before the discussion, let's go around the table and introduce ourselves. Tell us a little about yourself including your area of specialization and what your current situation is in terms of employment and or level of study.
- (Moderator note: throughout the discussion the moderator will guide participants and discussion into possible paths of action to avoid potential negative discussions/frustrations: for e.g., Let's figure out ways to turn this into action, what could your institution have done to help you?)

## Perceptions of the Job Market (30 minutes)

Objective: To understand the decision-making process, including the point at which it started, the factors that had an impact on career paths, key challenges or barriers students face, etc.

- Thinking back to when you had first applied to a PhD program, what had been your original career plans or aspirations, was it a tenure-track position or a non-academic position? And have your plans changed since then?
  - PROBE: Academic career – were you leaning towards teaching or research)
  - (IF CHANGED PATHS) What factors contributed to your changing your mind?
  
- (ASK AMONG PHDs with non-academic positions): Is an academic tenure-track position potentially still in your plans? Could you tell me what the job market is like for ACADEMIC careers within the next five years in your field, either in teaching or in research?
  - PROBE: in Canada, US or internationally?
  
- What about postdoctoral fellowships? What are the opportunities there?
- How are postdocs perceived in your field?
- If you had known what the job market was like, would you have still pursued a PhD or would you have done differently?
- If you were to receive an offer for BOTH a postdoctoral fellowship and a tenure-track faculty appointment, which would you choose? And why?
- Could you also tell me about the job market within the next five years for NON-ACADEMIC careers in your field?
  - PROBE: in Canada, US or internationally?
  
- What skills does one need in order to be successful in the labour market, either academic or non-academic? Are they similar or different?
- Does a program like yours provide you with skills for the labour market? How? What skills has your program emphasized?
- What are some of the key challenges or barriers you are facing or have faced in planning your career?
  - PROBE: lack of centres within university targeting higher level graduates, lack of awareness of organizations, difficulties in networking, lack of understanding of industry requirements, others?

## Awareness and Use of Resources/Perceptions (15 minutes)

Objective: To ascertain the sources and resources students are aware of and/or use of information and guidance in their career paths.

- FLIPCHART EXERCISE – TOP-OF-MIND SOURCES:
- I would like you to take me through a path of the sources you may have used or are considering using as you are planning your career. Who or what have you turned to or will you be turning to for information, for assistance, for advice?
  - PROBE: centres at the institution (which ones?), disciplinary associations, non-disciplinary associations/organizations, informal networking, contacts through supervisor, websites or organizations/centres, others

Are there sources you are aware of but have not mentioned on this list?  
(MODERATOR runs through the different resources listed on the chart)

- How many were aware of. . .? And of. . .?
- Who has used this...? And this...?
- How did you first hear of this?
- How effective is this resource? Why/why not effective?
  - PROBE: How accessible are these resources are in terms of location, hours open/programs offered, online availability

(Where MITACS comes up in the groups, we will explore awareness, overall perceptions, usage, and how participant(s) had first heard of it)

- What does your department do to make students aware of professional development opportunities offered within the university? Should they do more?
- Do you think your department and its faculty understand the reality of the labour market today?
- How else might they better prepare PhD candidates for life after the degree?

### **Create a “Graduate Student Career Support Centre” Group Exercise (30 minutes)**

Objective: To understand the resources that are most effective and to generate new ideas that meets their own personal needs and that of their peers.

- Now I would like you to get together in two groups for some brainstorming. If you, as a group, were given the task of creating a graduate student career centre within your own university to help graduate students or PhD graduates like yourself in planning for their careers, what would you offer, how would you do it? Think of this as your ideal centre that offers everything that you need.
  - Think specifically about your own needs or those of your peers – what kind of support are you looking for, what did you find useful/not useful, what was lacking?
  - What kinds of services would you offer? What types of resources? What kind of information?
  - Any new ideas are welcome! And feel free to name the centre.
- (EACH GROUP TO PRESENT THEIR GRADUATE STUDENT CENTRE; MODERATOR ASKS FOR CLARIFICATIONS/EXPLANATIONS)

### **Conclusion (5 minutes)**

- To sum up our discussion, if there were one piece of advice you would like to provide to the Dean of Graduate Studies to help graduate students in their future career planning, what would it be?

## Appendix B: Focus Group Discussion Guide for Mitacs Groups

### Introduction and Warm-up (10 minutes)

Objective: To set the tone and expectations of the focus groups.

- (PURPOSE OF GROUP) I'd like to welcome you to our discussion today. My name is X. I work for a company called Academica Group and we have been commissioned, as a third-party research firm, to conduct a qualitative study to gather opinions on how to better help graduate students in the process of planning their careers.
- In a minute we will introduce ourselves – our first names only, but first I would like to walk you through the consent form that is front of you. (MODERATOR review informed consent form and answer questions. Collect signed consent forms and ensure that participants have a copy of the Letter of Information to take with them)
- (CONFIDENTIALITY) I'd also like to spend a couple of minutes on confidentiality. Keep in mind that all information obtained from these discussions will be reported in aggregate form only. We will not identify quotes or ideas to any one person of this group. We are assuming that when we learn about one another's views they remain confidential. However, in small groups like this, people may be identifiable to some degree by their views and opinions, but as the researcher I will strive to minimize any details in the report that may identify any particular individual. We also ask that you keep the responses of fellow focus group participants confidential as well. Everything that is heard in this room should stay in this room.
- Have said this, and having made these requests, you know that we cannot guarantee that the request will be honoured by everyone in the room. So we ask you to make only those comments you are comfortable making in a public setting and to hold back any comments you would not say publicly.
- (USE OF TAPE RECORDER) As you may know, the discussion will be recorded to increase accuracy and to reduce the chance of misinterpreting what anyone says. My colleague is also taking notes through the sessions. All tapes and notes will be kept completely private by my co-researchers and me and no one else will be allowed access. We will not write in any names into the notes that would be able to identify you individually.
- (ROLES AND RULES) The format of these groups is to facilitate an open discussion and my aim is to help guide this discussion and to achieve constructive dialogue among all of you that will provide valuable feedback for change. There may be many similarities in your experiences but there will also likely be many differences. We would like to hear all of them, while at the same time respecting that we may come from different disciplines and therefore may have varied experiences. I will step in if there are too many people speaking at once or to make sure that everyone has had a chance to speak, and I will step in if I feel the conversation is straying off topic. The discussion should be approximately 2 hours long. We may also be using a flipchart to take down notes through the session and I be asking you do a group exercise.
- (INTRODUCTIONS) Just so that we get to know each other a bit before the discussion, let's go around the table and introduce ourselves. Tell us a little about yourself including your area of specialization and what your current situation is in terms of employment and or level of study.
- (Moderator note: throughout the discussion the moderator will guide participants and discussion into possible paths of action to avoid potential negative discussions/frustrations: for e.g., Let's figure out ways to turn this into action, what could your institution have done to help you?)

### Perceptions of Job Market (30 minutes)

Objective: To understand plans and intentions, the factors that had an impact on career paths, key challenges

or barriers students face, etc. Intended to provide background and context.

- Could you tell me what the job market is like for ACADEMIC careers within the next five years in your field, either in teaching or in research?
  - PROBE: in Canada, US or internationally?
- Could you also tell me about the job market within the next five years for NON-ACADEMIC careers in your field?
  - PROBE: in Canada, US or internationally?
- Does a program like yours provide you with skills for the labour market? How? What skills has your program emphasized?
- What are some of the key challenges or barriers you are facing or have faced in planning your career?
  - PROBE: lack of centres within university targeting higher level graduates, lack of awareness of organizations, difficulties in networking, lack of understanding of industry requirements, others?
- FLIPCHART: What types of programs or services are available for graduate students to help them in their career planning?

## USERS, Overall Perceptions of Mitacs (20 minutes)

Objective: To understand overall perceptions of Mitacs and brand associations, where they had first heard of it, why they joined.

- All of you have used the Mitacs Step program? / Which of the Mitacs programs did you participate in? Accelerate or Elevate? (ASK SHOW OF HANDS)
- When did you participate? And where?
- WRITTEN EXERCISE: Before we start the discussion, I'm going to ask you to turn the sheet in front of you over and answer the questions. (THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS WILL SERVE TO GENERATE DISCUSSION)
  - Which program did you participate in?  
STEP / ACCELERATE / ELEVATE / ENTERPRISE
  - Overall, how satisfied were you with the program?  
SCALE OF 1 TO 5, NOT AT ALL SATISFIED TO COMPLETELY SATISFIED
  - How would you rate the program in terms of helping you prepare for a future career?  
SCALE OF 1 TO 5, POOR, FAIR, GOOD, VERY GOOD, EXCELLENT
  - To what extent did the program meet your expectations?  
SCALE OF 1 TO 5, 1-NOT AT ALL, 2, 3-MET, 4, 5-EXCEEDED
- FLIPCHART: Thinking about Mitacs, what words would you use to describe it? (BRAND ASSOCIATIONS)
- Tell me about when and where you first heard of Mitacs.
  - PROBE: Department announcement (email, other), posters/flyers, faculty or staff, career centre, others?

- Do you recall what your first impressions were of this organization when you first heard of it?
  - PROBE: What gave you that impression? Word-of-mouth from peers, faculty, staff, etc.
- Did you actively go seek more information about it? Where?
  - PROBE: Website, seminar presentation, others?
  - PROBE: Why did you not actively go seek more information?
- What prompted you to join the particular MITACS program?
  - PROBE: Did you have industry partner in mind?

### **USERS, Overall Satisfaction with Mitacs program (20 minutes)**

Objective: To understand overall satisfaction levels with Mitacs programs participated in, reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction, suggestions for improvement, likelihood to recommend.

- Now, I'd like to ask you to show me a raise of hands: How many of you gave an overall satisfaction rating of 4 or 5? 3? 2 or 1?
- DISCUSS AS GROUP. Why did you give it a rating of 1 or 2? 3? 4 or 5?
- What did you like most about the program? Why?
  - PROBE: Personnel, types of companies they are connected to, helpfulness, workshops, seminars?
- What did you like least? Why?
- What were you initially looking to achieve from the program?
- Did it meet your expectations? (REFER TO SCALE QUESTION ABOVE)
- Did you face any challenges?
- How did you rate the program in terms of helping you with your future career?
  - PROBE: Did it have an impact on changing your career path?
  - PROBE: Did it increase network connections?
- Would you consider using another one of its other programs?
- How likely would you be to recommend the program to a peer?
- Is there anything Mitacs could do to improve their programs or offerings?
  - PROBE: Offer more workshops/seminar sessions
  - PROBE: Offer a greater variety of workshops/sessions
  - PROBE: Communicate better to raise greater awareness

### **Conclusion (5 minutes)**

- To sum up our discussion, if there were one piece of advice you would like to provide to Mitacs to help graduate students in their future career planning, what would it be?





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