Memo

To: APPRC via Robert Everett, University Secretariat
From: Michael Zryd, Secretary of Faculty of Graduate Studies Council
Date: February 21, 2017
Subject: FGS response to APPRC Committee call for feedback on “Tracking Progress on Objectives”

In preparing this response to the Tracking Progress Memorandum, we first took into account feedback from the FGS Representative on APPRC, and from the three decanal faculty in the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS). The request for feedback was circulated to FGS Council members and we presented the questions from the memo to FGS Council at its 2 February 2017 meeting, framed by the attached PowerPoint presentation. The two APPRC questions were presented to Council:

1. “How can York improve its tracking of progress and how can it use indicators to greatest advantage?

2. “What specific indicators do you employ or should be employed to create the most inclusive possible set of indicators across the spectrum of scholarly, research and creative activities. Please provide concrete examples.”

This memo integrates the discussion at Council and some other e-mail responses. To begin to address the question of how to deal with “performance indicators” and “research metrics,” we first noted the pitfalls and inappropriate use of some quantitative metrics in different parts of the world. Examples included the widely unpopular RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) and REF (Research Excellent Framework) in the UK and the research performance indicators (HERD) used by the Department of Education in Australia. In addition, many have noted the problems with most University ranking systems (e.g., Maclean’s magazine, QS World University Rankings, etc.), in that inherent biases towards valuing superstar academics (e.g., # of Nobel Prize winners) or medical research not only disadvantage young, non-medical school universities like York, but also fail adequately to capture the innovative research products and impacts of York scholars.

Despite these problems, it was argued that, in the context of Provincial Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA) and the prospect of performance indicators being a factor in provincial funding, the University cannot simply downplay the role of metrics altogether. Moreover, if we believe in evidence-based policy, then we need to provide evidence of our research activities. The two main categories of research measure are “outputs” and “impact,” each of which needs tracking. Ontario’s SMA categories include Research Capacity (Total sponsored research, number of research chairs, number of graduate degrees awarded, number of graduate awards/scholarships); Research Impact (Tri-council funding, number of publications, number of citations, and citation impact); research focus (ratio of grad degrees (including PhD) awarded to undergrad degrees awarded); and international competitiveness (ratio of international to domestic graduates, aggregate of international global rankings).
The question becomes, “How do we at York University want to represent our research?” and, in the terms of the Memorandum, “How do we want to track our own progress on research?” We acknowledge the existence of some standard metrics and tools currently in use, e.g., Tri-Council funding and other external research funding grants, which provide some comparative context for York performance. For example, York’s traditional excellence in social sciences and humanities research means that York is one of the top universities in Canada for SSRHC PhD funding. Other sector tools are less satisfactory in measuring York faculty research outputs (e.g., SciVal / Scopus (Elsevier); RESEARCH Infosource). It was added that as an interdisciplinary university, it would be challenging to rely on a single research metrics that would not appreciate differing disciplinary epistemological priorities and preferences.

How do we account for those differences? In the specific context of FGS, it was noted that many standard tools and metrics do not measure graduate student research activities, including publications, conference presentations, and other standard research outputs. In other words, to the question posed in the Memorandum, “Do these metrics/tools ‘take into account York’s distinctive mission, make up and strengths’”? the answer is “not comprehensively.” How can York both set a standard for York-specific measures and be comparable to the Province? We need fine-grained measures that would allow for comparison across universities, and also by discipline. Moreover, many graduate students at York are in professional programs in which standard “research outputs” are not the focus of the degree. Rather, the training of professionals who contribute to the province’s health, legal, and administrative sectors is an important objective of the university that needs to be tracked systematically. Can we look at metrics outside the academic context to inform metrics for inside?

One way of reformulating the question is: “how do we represent evidence of York University research?” Given the mandate of FGS, the question was posed to find a better way of tracking research outputs of both graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. One important overall measure would enumerate how many graduate students are accredited or licensed (e.g., York’s professional programs), and also consider the impact of York’s graduate students after graduation, an impact extends far beyond the academy. Recent discussions at York (and occurring nationally) on revising the standard dissertation to incorporate non-textual elements (e.g., audiovisual media) and other research dissemination methods also points to other research outputs to track.

Examples of graduate student research activity included
- grants in support of research degrees
- journal and book chapter publications
- publications in languages other than English
- new translations
- conference proceedings
- conference presentations (panels, posters, etc.)
- research symposia and graduate conferences
- exhibitions of creative and artistic work
- curation
- community collaborations
- consulting for government and NGOS
- using research to influence policy-making
- expert witness testimony
- podcasts and other forms of knowledge mobilization
- innovative pedagogy with research dimensions
At Faculty Council, members also raised questions about collecting and managing information in a systematic and responsible way: given resource restrictions, do we have designated individuals to collect and compile research output data? We note that electronic student award software and graduate student Progress Reports (currently in paper form) might be valuable sources of future data. Councillor Adam Taves, Acting Associate University Librarian, provided expert guidance to Council on the availability of some tools on the library website. He informed the Council of the availability of different kinds of metrics, some based on old bibliographic methods, and some as more sophisticated "alternative metrics."

A further question is how we can support these research activities. It is important to note that York provides important resources to students to support their research, starting with competitive funding packages for almost all research degree students, and including strong supervision and the FGS Graduate and Postdoctoral Professional Skills program (which includes sessions on publishing, knowledge mobilization, and grant development). We advise graduate Programs and Faculties to build on current supports to develop graduate student and postdoc grant applications, publications, conference and other research dissemination activities, and to consider the logistics of reporting on these and other graduate student and postdoc research activities.

In summary, while FGS recognizes the challenges of tracking the contributions of York University graduate students and postdocs, we support

- the development of mechanisms that measure the considerable outputs and impacts of current research and professional development
- expanding the definitions of what constitutes research and professional training
- developing more innovative ways to create comparable data that can substantively track York University outputs and impacts in relation to other universities in the province, and in national and international contexts.