Expanded PhD Professional Skills Statement

Incenting Excellence in Graduate Programs

Canadian Association of Graduate Students (CAGS) Task Force on Excellence in Graduate Programs, 2021

Introduction

A correlation between the number of PhDs and economic and societal progress has been linked. However, Canada still has one of the lowest (or the lowest) per capita PhD production of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Charbonneau, 2011; CCA, 2021). At the same time, the 2021 expert report from the Council of Canadian Academies, "Degrees of Success", points to the limited receptor capacity by employers who do not appreciate the value of doctoral training. Relatively recently (as university evolution goes) there has been recognition that the supply of PhD graduates is not being absorbed into universities. For many disciplines it has been true for a very long time that many PhDs are employed by industry, governments and other types of organizations such as not for profits, it is more recent that there are not academic positions for all of the social science and humanities PhDs. Doctoral students transition into various careers paths, a great many continue working in post-secondary institutions, or engage in research intensive or research affiliated careers (e.g. Policy Makers) in industry and various other public or private sector areas (UofT 10,000 PhDs, UBC PhD Career Outcomes, Alberta PhD Alumni Study, McGill TRaCE Study). Leaders in graduate education have embraced this issue and provided a range of "professional development" programs and support for career transition.

In parallel with the changes in the career trajectories of PhDs, over the past several decades we have seen a drifting and shifting of the skills needed to become a successful in academic research and scholarship.   The shift is illustrated in the growing expectations placed on researchers by funding agencies with emphasis on collaboration and networks, international and interdisciplinary partnerships, public scholarship and outreach, equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and Indigenization of research and outreach. Being able to address EDI has become integral to being competitive with major funding agencies. For example, CIHR requires applicants to address sex and gender as a variable, NFRF Exploration applications require a robust EDI and decolonization section, and as this report was being crafted, SSRHC was consulting with Deans of Graduate Studies on incorporating EDI statements into doctoral scholarship applications. We have also seen an increased expectation to engage with public scholarship, where outreach and engagement means that academics need to be comfortable outside the traditional domains of the ivory tower (e.g., academic journals and conferences). This means being able to relate the changing needs of society in the design of research and communicate their research to the multiple stakeholders, such as grant funding agencies, employers, and the public. However, the skills identified above are not reflected in current degree level standards in Canada.

Based on the background described above, the taskforce presented a theme of '**Unifying Professional Development (PD) for within and Beyond the Academy**', as part of the at the CAGS conference (November 2019) and the pursuing the theme was endorsed by the participants. As part of this broad theme, an assessment of the state of the PD landscape for graduate students (specifically, PhD students) in Canada was done.

Resulting from the environmental scan and in alignment with the task force's mandate, an expanded PhD graduate skills statement was proposed to embody an "excellent PhD program" and feedback sought as follows.

Rationale

Upon completion of training, PhD graduate students are required to demonstrate certain skills in their professional lives. These skills whilst being required in their chosen career path are not often emphasized in contemporary graduate programs. Roy (2003) corroborated this claim by suggesting, "in recent decades, the expectations in teaching, practice, and service that new graduates face have escalated. Students can no longer achieve success by mastering research and technical skills in graduate school while waiting until they are on the job to learn the art of teaching, the ethics of practice, the responsibilities of service, and the navigating of professional organizations". This assertion is also supported by a growing body of literature that supports and acknowledges the importance of equipping graduate students with non-traditional professional development skills as part of excellent graduate education (Edge & Munro, 2015; Gould, 2015) and recommends that universities adopt this approach. It is against this backdrop that the expanded PhD graduate skills statement was proposed.

The statement builds upon the existing degree level standards contained in the **Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada** (2007) to ensure that the skills required of PhD graduates are adequately captured in Canadian graduate programs. This statement underscores the skills that PhD graduates would have developed during their PhD journey aligned with the desired standards or learning outcomes. Additionally, the inclusion of the Expanded PhD Skills Statement in the degree level standards supports the case for greater translation and articulation of the skills and competencies required of PhD graduates and the skills being developed in current PhD graduate education. To this end, a set of standards has been developed in alignment with the professional skills needed for PhD graduates in their subsequent careers. The standards recommended in the skills statement also reflect the expectations stakeholders, such as grant funding agencies.

Objective: Development of PhD skills statement to achieve the following:

1. Unify professional development for within and beyond the academy (CAGS, 2019).
2. Incent excellence in Canadian PhD curricula (CAGS, 2019).
3. Communicate the professional skills of the Canadian PhD graduate.
4. Maximize the employability of PhD graduates in multiple sectors by ensuring that the "acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge is complemented by the development of transferable skills" (National Framework for Doctoral Education, 2015, p. 2).

5. Guide program and course level designers through the provision of learning outcomes or standards (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2007, p. 5).
6. Use as a tool to assist with the facilitation of the quality assessment of credentials (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2007, p. 5).

Method/Process

The selection of the proposed skills was based on an environmental scan of skills needed by PhD graduates entering the workforce in academic or non-academic track careers. A comparative analysis of similar guides or statements developed by other institutions or jurisdictions was also done as reflected in figure 1. The steps in the process include: 1) Developed rationale aligned with overall aim of promoting excellence in graduate education 2) Defined (or recalled definition of) excellence in graduate education 3) Outlined list of professional skills proposed based on work already done 4) Researched similar set of skills recommended for graduate students in other English speaking jurisdictions e.g. Europe and the United States 3) Cross-referenced these other recommendations with proposed set of skills and highlighted the commonalities for the development of standards/learning outcomes. The finalized PhD skills statement builds upon the existing degree level standards.

Figure 1
Process Diagram
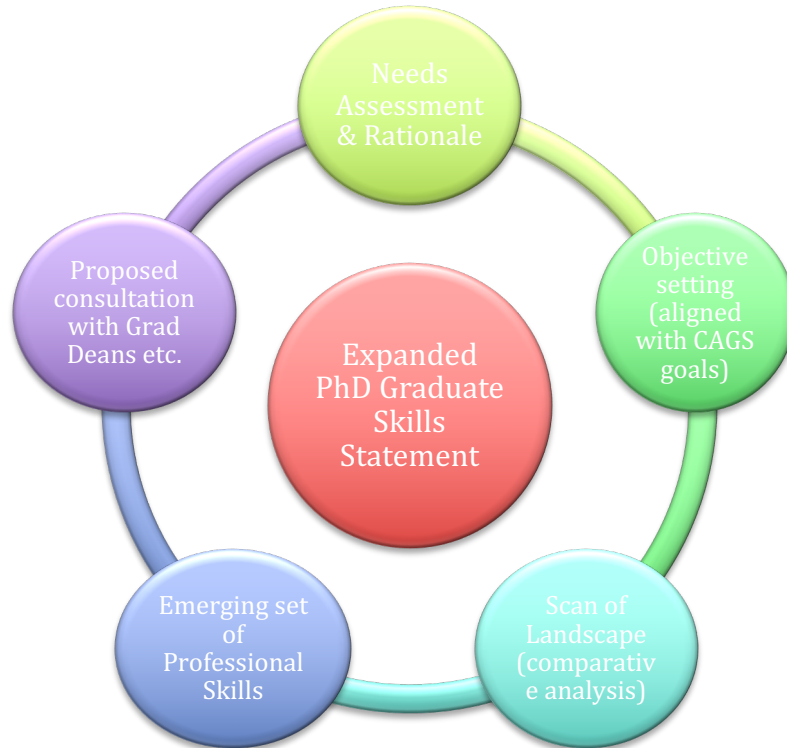
Rationale for the inclusion of selected professional skills below:

1. Consideration of skills and competences required of graduate students by employers
2. Skills in demand for academic track careers
3. Skills in demand for non-academic track careers
4. Skills increasingly required by research funding agencies

Many European countries have valued and capitalized on professional development skills training for PhD students and it is embedded in their mainstream programs. A number of Canadian universities have accepted the importance of including professional skills and have created programming, funding opportunities, and piloted initiatives to expand graduate skills. An environmental scan of a sample of institutions within and outside the Canadian jurisdiction with initiatives in support of this goal was conducted (links to their documents/sites are provided in the appendix with a list of proposed sets of PhD graduate skills relevant to their institutions).

A variation of non-traditional PhD graduate skills were gleaned from a comparative analysis of graduate PD skills conducted. The skills highlighted (in bold) reflect those skills that overlap across skillsets identified in appendix 1. There was a fair degree of commonality across the various skillsets. The focus then of the expanded skills statement was to explore and present additional PhD graduate skills that were not captured in the degree level outcomes in the Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2007) but deemed necessary for the employability of PhD graduates in the 21st century. The following **proposed set of new professional skills** are needed to incent excellence in Canadian PhD graduate education in the following categories:

1. **Professional Communication**
2. **Project Management**
3. **Leadership**
4. **Interpersonal**
5. **EDI**
6. **Teaching & Mentorship**

Figure 1: Proposed Set of New Professional Skills

Professional Communication and Knowledge Transfer	Project Management	Leadership and Mentorship	Collaboration and Interpersonal

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Table 1 elaborates the skills needed for the above categories.
Table 2 illustrates the incorporation of the additional skills (blue font) into the doctoral portion of the existing degree level standards (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2007).

Figure 1: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion is embedded in the skills and competencies of graduate professional skills. We recognize Indigeneity and Decolonization need to be part of this conversation and work in concert with the Reconciliation in Canadian Indigenous Graduate Education Taskforce.

Table 1
Expanded PhD Graduate Professional Skills Standards

Expectations	PhD Graduate Skills Learning Outcomes/Standards	Relevance to Future PhD Careers
Professional Communication	Employs complex communication skills in a manner that contributes to organizational, provincial, and national productivity Effectively communicates research to a diverse audience in written, spoken, visual, and other forms Demonstrates effective writing, publication, and public speaking skills	Essential for communicating with multiple audiences such as (including but not limited to funding stakeholders, senior leaders of industry and academe, conferences audience) Essential for communication to lay audiences for outreach and partnership development
Project Management	The capacity to create and undertake diverse projects and effectively manage and monitor projects and/or programs *including people.*	Manage multiple and sometimes competing projects in academia and industry such as research projects, new course or program development, & other research and teaching innovations, and industry innovation projects Transferable to most industry work plans
Leadership	The capacity to create and articulate a shared vision while motivating support for the vision and empowering others to achieve excellence Demonstrate the ability to think critically and problem solve, innovate, and effectively manage change, respond well and adapt to changing environments (https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/top-10-work-skills-of-tomorrow-how-long-it-takes-to-learn-them/) Demonstrate a capacity to guide, motivate, mentor, and influence	Visioning and leadership needed at various levels in academia and industry such as development of strategic partnerships (e.g. public-private partnerships [PPPs]), research collaboration and networks Leading development and change management initiatives

	others to contribute to organizational, provincial, or federal goals Demonstrate an awareness of leadership in team settings and the ability to collaboratively work towards the achievement of mutual team goals The ability to problem-solve, innovate, respond well and adapt to changing environments and influence others to adapt to challenging environments	
Interpersonal	The capacity to collaboratively produce and share knowledge and innovation The ability to strategically work towards common goals and visions that impact organizational, provincial, or national efficacy Demonstrate the capacity to acknowledge and respect diversity Ability to develop, manage, and maintain effective partnerships and relationships among colleagues and other stakeholders Capacity to apply of effective interpersonal skills such as active listening, diplomacy, and negotiating in appropriate contexts	Critical for facilitating collegial processes in the academy and industry such as collaboration on research projects, peer review processes, team teaching, building and maintaining partnerships and relationships with multiple stakeholders Developing and maintaining strategic partnerships (at the provincial, federal, and international levels) Relationship building and maintenance Organizational team-building and maintenance
EDI	Demonstrate the ability to utilize frameworks that aid the understanding of cultural, racial, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and other differences and similarities; Ability to distinguish one's own cultural, racial, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and other	In today's global and culturally rich academic environment, academics need to be able to interact with colleagues (students, faculty, leaders etc.) from diverse cultural backgrounds, abilities, sexual orientations, and gender, while bridging differences in pursuit of

	differences and similarities, influences and an awareness of one's own ways of making meaning, and of one's judgments, emotions, and physical sensations, and the capacity to **bridge** these differences in research design and varying organizational contexts (bridging) (https://www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/developing-intercultural-learning-objectives)	success Articulate EDI strategies for programs/projects e.g. in grant applications Facilitate graduate employees' equitable interactions with industry colleagues from diverse cultures, abilities, gender, sexual orientations and other backgrounds Promote tolerance and awareness of unconscious bias and encourage inclusive environments
Teaching and/or mentorship	Demonstrate the ability to explain complex and/or ambiguous concepts relative to specialized content or skill areas in organizational contexts. Ability to adjust instructional content, methods and mentoring activities to match varying learning styles, abilities, and diverse backgrounds. Capacity to apply sound pedagogical principles including assessment, design, delivery, implementation, and evaluation to various organizational contexts.	Training future academician Applicable to most faculty work in academia including at the graduate levels Skill is applicable to most industry training, mentoring, coaching, and onboarding processes Capacity to develop leaders who can develop new leaders and build future capacity.

Table 2

Incorporation of New Skills into doctoral Degree Level Standards (adapted from the
Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada, 2007
https://www.cicic.ca/docs/cmec/QA-Statement-2007.en.pdf)
Additions are in blue font.

Expectations	Degree Level Learning Outcomes/Standards
Depth and Breadth of Knowledge	A thorough understanding of a substantial body of knowledge that is at the forefront of their academic discipline or area of professional practice. Demonstrates mastery in a significant range of principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and or materials that are associated with a highly specialized body of work or field of learning
Knowledge of Methodologies and Research	A conceptual understanding and methodological competence that enables the graduate to: (a) Conceptualize, design, and implement research for the generation of new knowledge, applications, or understanding at the forefront of the discipline and to adjust the research design or methodology in the light of unforeseen problems (b) Make informed judgments on complex issues in specialist fields, sometimes requiring new methods (c) Produce original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, and to merit publication OR Creates and interprets new knowledge through the creation of original research or other advanced scholarship of a quality that satisfies review by peers and merits publication (d) Ability to engage with other disciplines and operate in inter- or multi-disciplinary teams
Application of Knowledge	The capacity to (i) undertake pure and/or applied and trans disciplinary research at an advanced level and (ii) contribute to the development of academic or professional skill, techniques, tools, practices, ideas, theories, approaches, and/or materials.
Communication Skills	The ability to communicate complex and/or ambiguous ideas, issues, and conclusions clearly and effectively. Ability to translate knowledge for a variety of stakeholders
Teaching and/or mentorship	Demonstrate the ability to explain complex and/or ambiguous concepts relative to specialized content or skill areas in organizational contexts. Ability to adjust instructional content, methods and mentoring activities to match varying learning styles, abilities, and diverse backgrounds. Capacity to apply sound pedagogical principles including assessment, design, delivery, implementation, and evaluation to various organizational contexts.

	Capacity to develop leaders who can develop new leaders and build future capacity.
Awareness of Limits of Knowledge	An appreciation of the limitations of one's own work and discipline, of the complexity of knowledge, and of the potential contributions of other interpretations, methods, disciplines, and other ways of knowing
Professional Capacity/Autonomy	The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex situations The intellectual independence to be academically and professionally engaged and current as evidenced by a commitment to life-long learning The ability to evaluate the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts Demonstrate ethical awareness, the ability to do ethical reflection, and the ability to apply ethical principles in decision-making." (https://www.luc.edu/core/ethicscoursesub-transfer.shtml) Leadership: (i) Demonstrate the capacity to build consensus, articulate and influence support of shared visions and goals. Develop, inspire, and mentor others (or others' leadership capabilities). (ii) Demonstrate the ability to think critically and problem solve, innovate, and effectively manage change, respond well and adapt to changing environments Self-directed learning that demonstrates authority in a specialized field of work and makes decisions and judgements involving a multiplicity of interacting factors **Project Management:** The capacity to create and undertake diverse projects and effectively manage and monitor projects and/or programs *including people*
Intercultural and EDI competencies *(new category)*	Demonstrate effective collaboration skills including intercultural dynamics: (i) Ability to develop, manage, and maintain effective partnerships and relationships among colleagues and other stakeholders; (ii) Ability to utilize frameworks that aid the understanding of cultural differences and similarities; ability to distinguish one's own cultural influences and an awareness of one's own ways of making meaning, and of one's judgments, emotions, and physical

	sensations, and the capacity to **bridge cultural differences** in varying organizational contexts (cultural bridging) (https://www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/developing-intercultural-learning-objectives); Diversity outcomes: (iii) Ability to utilize frameworks that aid the understanding of cultural, racial, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and other differences and similarities; (iv) Ability to distinguish one's own cultural, racial, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and other differences and biases (v) Demonstrate an awareness of one's own ways of making meaning, and of one's judgments, emotions, and physical sensations, and the capacity to **bridge** these differences in varying organizational contexts (bridging) (https://www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/developing-intercultural-learning-objectives (vi) Ability to develop strategies for engaging Indigenous partners in academia and industry (vii) Ability to analyze racism and prejudice relative to Black, Indigenous, and other Peoples of Colour (BIPOC), and others groups with gender, ability, and sexual orientation differences (viii) Capacity to build gender-conscious and other diversity approaches to varying organizational and research contexts

Consultations

Methods: A consultation document (green paper) was produced and circulated in April 28, 2021 to help frame and guide the conversation. Deans, Associate Deans, Vice Presidents, and Associate Provosts from our member institutions were invited to review the document that included the tables above and conduct internal consultations within their institutions with other faculty members, administrators, and students. They were then asked to provide feedback and recommendations. Additionally, members from the Graduate and Postdoctoral Development Network (GDPN) network were also invited to host consultations and provide their feedback and recommendations from their discussions. Summaries of discussions and other forms of feedback were sent to the task force. A total of 16 institutions provided feedback, and a number of PD professionals in higher education also provided feedback. More than twelve formal sessions were held in post-secondary institutions across all regions of Canada (West, East, and the Maritimes) with at least 16 post-secondary institutions participating in addition to discussions held at the 2021 CAGS conference in February, 2021. Participating institutions include Memorial University of Newfoundland, University of Manitoba, Brock University, Queens University, Dalhousie University, Montreal Polytechnic, University of Alberta, University of Saskatchewan, York University, Western University, and Concordia. Even though participants had flexibility with respect to their consultations, they were generally guided by the following questions from our consultation toolkit:

1. **Do you agree/disagree with the idea that the skills needed for aspiring academics and other PhD graduates are not fully covered by the original degree level standards? (Link to standards** https://www.cicic.ca/docs/cmec/QA-Statement-2007.en.pdf**) Explain?**

Overall, there was broad consensus on the support for the expanded PhD Skills Statement. Respondents thought that the current degree level standards do not adequately capture the skills needed for aspiring academics and other PhD graduates. Most also emphasized that PD skills were needed for PhD graduates regardless of career trajectory (even though there were divergent views on whether these should be addressed centrally or not).

2. **Which of the additional skills presented in table 1 resonate as core competencies to be part of all excellent doctoral training and which do not?**

Typically, the responses from most institutions suggest that all the skills presented in the expanded skills statement resonated as core to an excellent doctoral program:

7. Communication (digital literacy; public scholarship, teaching)
8. Leadership (people management, mentoring, collegiality; entrepreneurship)
9. Interpersonal (collaboration and intercultural skills, relationship building)
10. EDI (decision bias)
11. Health and Wellbeing (time management; conflict management)

3. **Are the skills appropriately placed in their respective categories based on your own thinking?**

Respondents thought that the skills to a large extent were appropriately placed; however, there were a few suggestions for altering their placements:
e.g. Some suggested pairing leadership with mentoring as opposed to 'teaching and mentoring' and another suggested removing the people management indicator from the project management category. Generally though, the placement of skills was accepted by the community.

4. **Are there additional skills that that are not included in this statement that you wish to recommend?**

Yes, there were a few recommendations for additional skills to be included in the statement such as, entrepreneurship & innovation (intrapreneurship), interdisciplinary research & networking skills, emotional intelligence & empathy, digital communication skills, career management, and mental health.

5. **Which skills should be incorporated into the curriculum in a program-specific way and which are better delivered through centralized programing?**
Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) - it was thought that EDI was not sufficiently addressed in PhD training and that these skills were essential for a PhD graduate whether they will be going on to an academic or non-academic track career path. Finally, it was agreed that EDI skills are not covered in the original degree level standards, but are essential for graduate students' employability moving forward. Intercultural competencies were also seen as essential and should be incorporated in the PhD curriculum in a program-specific way.

Recommendation: There was also a suggestion that our proposal be expanded to include a shared example of how to implement within institutions, including curriculum mapping and scaffolding. However, these were outside of the initial remit of our mandate, and could be taken up in a phase two of this process.

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Appendix A

Environmental Scan

The lists below represent the sets of graduate professional skills established by other institutions or jurisdictions and from which a comparison was done with our proposed list. The highlighted (in bold) skills reflect the commonalities between skillsets.

University of Alberta's (CA) Skills Expected From Graduate Students in Search of Employment in Academic and Non-academic Settings (https://www.ualberta.ca/graduate-studies/media-library/migrated-media/profdev/career/careerskillsexpected.pdf):

1. **Communication and interpersonal**
2. Critical and creative thinking
3. Personal effectiveness***
4. Integrity and ethical conduct
5. **Teaching competence**
6. Societal and civic responsibilities
7. **Leadership skills**
8. **Research management**
9. Knowledge mobilization and knowledge translation
10. Career management

Western University Discipline Knowledge and Skills via the Own your Future (OYF) Program https://www.uwo.ca/ownyourfuture/events/index.html

1. **Leadership**
2. **Communication and Relationship Building**
3. Thriving
4. Career Engagement
5. **Teaching and Learning**
6. **Intercultural** and Social Fluency

University of Michigan's PhD Transferrable Skills (US) (https://careercenter.umich.edu/article/phd-transferable-skills):

1. **Analysis and problem solving**
2. **Interpersonal and leadership skills**
3. **Project management and organization**

4. **Research and information management**
5. Self management and work habits
6. **Written and oral communication**

Ireland Universities' PhD Graduates' Skills Statement (https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/IUA-Graduate-Skills-Statement-Brochure-2015-edition2.pdf):

1. **Research skills and awareness**
2. Ethics and social understanding
3. **Communications skills**
4. Personal effectiveness/development***
5. **Team-working and leadership**
6. Career management
7. Entrepreneurship and innovation

Guelph University Core Competencies for Graduate Students
(https://graduatestudies.uoguelph.ca/sites/uoguelph.ca.graduatestudies/files/Final Report of the Graduate Students%27 Professional Skills Working Group Feb 2019.pdf)

1. **Communication**
2. Career management
3. Research and training
4. **Leadership, management**, and ethical behavior
5. Wellness and Personal Effectiveness

Appendix B

Consultation Toolkit
(Adapted from Re-imagining the PhD Consultation document)

The intention of this consultation document is to lay the groundwork for conversations about incenting PhD graduate skills at Canadian universities. Schools of graduate studies via the deans of the faculty of graduate studies, graduate student organizations via their presidents, faculty members, and any other group such as disciplinary associations are invited to host conversations about including graduate professional skills in the PhD curriculum, using this Consultation Document as a basis. If you are interested in leading a discussion, please let Debby Burshtyn (Task force Lead at CAGS) or Kenisha Blair-Walcott (Task force member) know, and if you are at the same university or general location as one of the task force members (Mable Ho and Eileen Denovan-Wright @ Dalhousie, Elizabeth Oddone Paolucci @ U of Calgary, Gretchen Kerr @ U of Toronto, Diane Dupont @ Brock U, and Luc Simon @ Laval), please coordinate with them.

The task force has no set guidelines for the format or make-up of the consultation meetings. We believe that both disciplinary and multi-disciplinary meetings are helpful; and the presence of students is encouraged. When organizing the consultation, please consider the following:

Please let Debby Burshtyn or Kenisha Blair-Walcott (Taskforce.Excellence@cags.ca) know in advance if you wish to lead a discussion.

Consider who is to be invited to the consultation - Faculty? Students? Other interested parties?

Please distribute the Consultation Paper to participants in advance. Is there any other material that is relevant for your group that should also be distributed?

If the group is fairly large (more than 10-15), we recommend incorporating smaller break-out sessions, with the smaller groups reporting back to the larger group. This can all be done virtually.

Identify one individual to chair the session, and leads for each small group.

Identify individuals to serve as note-takers for each small group, and one for the larger group.

We recommend that you set aside at least 2 hours for the discussion

To start the conversation, it would be helpful to give a short

presentation outlining the issues

It may also be helpful to have a general discussion about the ideas before addressing the   individual questions. As much as possible, however, we would appreciate that these specific questions be addressed during the consultation:

1. **Do you agree/disagree with the idea that the skills needed for aspiring academics and other PhD graduates are not fully covered by the original degree level standards?** (Link to standards https://www.cicic.ca/docs/cmec/QA-Statement-2007.en.pdf) **Explain?**

2. **Which of the additional skills presented in table 1 resonate as core skills to be part of all excellent doctoral training and which do not?**

3. **Are the skills appropriately placed in their respective categories based on your own thinking?**

4. **Are there additional skills that that are not included in this statement that you wish to recommend?**

5. **Which skills should be incorporated into the curriculum in a program-specific way and which are better delivered through centralized programing?**

Before any break-out sessions, consider asking participants to make notes on their perspective

Be sure that note takers provide summaries of the discussions to the lead

You are welcome to record the sessions, and to submit the recordings to **Kenisha Blair-Walcott** (Taskforce.Excellence@cags.ca) for transcription and/or summary

Please submit your notes and/or recording to Kenisha Blair-Walcott (Taskforce.Excellence@cags.ca) with a description of the consultation group.

The final report summarizing the feedback from consultations with recommendations will be made broadly available in 2021/2022.