

This is a joint message from Dr Jay Doering, Dean of Graduate Studies, and Dr Mark Whitmore, Dean of Science, University of Manitoba

Many of you have undoubtedly been following the media coverage of a case involving a graduate of the University of Manitoba. Much of the media attention has focused on the fact that this doctoral student was provided with an accommodation by the University of Manitoba to complete their degree based on consideration of this student's disability.

While the need to respect and protect the privacy of the student involved is critical, it is also important that the University community and beyond be provided with a more fully formed picture of this case and the facts that surround it. To that end, the University has secured permission from the student in question to release limited additional details in response to the misinformation which has become part of the media coverage of this case.

In order to successfully complete a doctoral program in mathematics, students are required to pass comprehensive exams in three subject areas. For these exams, the department's regulations define a pass as an "A" grade. In this particular case, the student in question successfully passed the first two comprehensive exams. The student attempted the third comprehensive exam and scored slightly below an "A" grade. The student attempted the exam a second time and performed much worse than they did on the first time attempt (an outcome commonly associated with exam anxiety).

The student was notified that they would be required to withdraw from the graduate program as a result of the exam outcome. The student exercised their right to appeal this decision to the Dean of Graduate Studies. As part of the appeal materials, the student provided detailed documentation from a qualified psychologist maintaining that the student suffered from "severe, disabling exam anxiety that appears to have significantly impeded [the student's] ability to perform to [the student's] potential."

The University is notified of many students suffering from examination anxiety each year, and while the vast majority receives support to cope with such stress, there are a few cases which progress to a clinically diagnosed disability. In this case, the disability was real, and the implication made by certain individuals that the student is not being genuine is both irresponsible and uninformed.

Under the Manitoba Human Rights Code, the University was obligated to accommodate this proven, professionally-diagnosed disability. The Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies consulted extensively with those involved with the student and discussed options for accommodation. The graduate studies committee of the department of mathematics recommended a written alternative. Disability Services recommended the student be accommodated with an oral format. The graduate studies committee indicated its preference for a waiver of the exam as opposed to an oral exam in this unique situation.

Following broad consultation in which a variety of options were considered, the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies concurred that the student need not retake the third comprehensive exam in order to obtain the unanimous “A” grade.

Any previous suggestions made that the Dean of Graduate Studies made a unilateral decision, without consultation, are simply false and irresponsible.

The Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies reviewed the student’s academic performance. It was such that they had received an “A” grade in all of their course work and had published more papers in refereed journals than would be typical of a student at this stage of study. The student’s work had received funding and awards by external bodies.

In a further reassurance of the rigor of those statements, the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies subsequently confirmed that the student’s external examiner was a distinguished scholar (i.e., a full professor, impressive laurels, who had significant experience with graduate students). All of the examiners – both internal and external to the University – put this student’s thesis into category 1, the highest category of quality. In short, this student’s work is considered exemplary.

Usually, when the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies concurs with the recommendation and /or preference of a head of a department or graduate committee chairperson, the matter is deemed to be resolved. In this case, however, a faculty member, Dr. Lukacs, has chosen to challenge an accommodation decision which was arrived at after extensive consultations with academics, administrators, and experts, and seeks to have the student’s degree revoked. The matter is now before the courts, and no further comment will be offered except to state that Dr. Lukacs has never taught this student, he was not the student’s advisor, he was not on the student’s advisory committee, and he was not a member of the Mathematics Graduate Studies Committee, at the time the relevant decisions were made.

Both the Faculty of Graduate Studies and the Faculty of Science remain committed to the principles of academic integrity and excellence. Our dedication to the highest levels of academic rigour ensures that our graduates enjoy tremendous success in their chosen professions and their degree from this university is widely respected and valued.

It’s now time to move forward. President David Barnard has outlined a way forward. Today, we want to take this opportunity to state unequivocally our confidence in the work and future of the student, now graduate, involved in this matter. It is time for us all to applaud the student’s success and allow the student the opportunity to enjoy the professional and personal satisfaction that all our graduates should experience for their achievements.