

Lisa A. Robinson, MD FRCPC FASN FCAHS
Dean
Vice Provost, Relations with Health Care Institutions

April 24, 2025

Professor Nicholas Rule
Vice-Provost, Academic Programs
Division of the Vice-President & Provost

Dear Professor Rule,

INTERIM MONITORING REPORT | Department of Molecular Genetics

On behalf of the Temerty Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, I am pleased to provide an interim monitoring report for the 2020-21 external review of the Department of Molecular Genetics and its degree programs. This report was prepared in consultation with the Chair of the Department, Professor Timothy Hughes. It is organized, at a high level, by the areas prioritized in the FAR-IP, which was reported to AP&P in the fall of 2021.

Faculty Recruitment

Annually since 2022, the Department has recruited jointly with Sinai Health's Lunenfeld-Tanenbaum Research Institute (LTRI), SickKids Research Institute and the Donnelly Centre for Cellular & Biomolecular Research. With shared recruitment priorities with the Donnelly Centre, we recruited three faculty in computational biology and one in functional genomics: Dr. Artem Babaian, Dr. Aleksandrina Goeva, Dr. Shu Wang. Two jointly-formulated searches are in progress (one each in the Department and the Donnelly Centre). The Department remains strong in all of the broad research areas it encompasses and the faculty roster is balanced. Educational programs have not been impacted by faculty retirements.

Space

While space continues to be an important consideration, at present it is not an impediment to recruitment. Equitable and efficient allocation of space on MaRS remains challenging. Consequently, the Department has looked to the Donnelly Centre for space for its recent recruitments in both computational biology and wet-lab research. In addition, there are ongoing renovations and other plans in MSB that will make lab space available, especially for infectious disease research.

Administrative Graduate Program Support

To ensure adequate support, the Department's graduate team has been augmented by the proposed coordinator (Kyle Turner, MSc, Learning Strategist, Graduate Programs). The role of the Graduate Coordinator is being re-envisioned in light of a recent staff departure; there is a greater need for compilation and analysis of data on student outcomes, from the first stages (e.g., application and recruitment) to the last (e.g., graduation, subsequent career). The administrative support of our graduate students remains a priority.

Student Stipends

Under the Harmonized Base Funding Agreement, the graduate stipend was raised to \$40,000 in 2023-24. The entire University followed suit this academic year.

Time to Completion

The Department had already implemented several modifications to address the long times to student completion of graduate studies. The modifications implemented included targeted focus during student committee meetings, revision of the didactic portion of the curriculum, increased administrative oversight, enhanced access to faculty mentors, clarification of departmental expectations for student projects and faculty supervision, compression of the student seminar series and earlier discussion of graduation and career plans during student program advisory committee meetings. While PhD completion times have not yet decreased significantly, they have not increased. (NB: Students graduating now would have commenced their studies prior to the implementation of the modifications and would have experienced the disruptions of Covid-19.) Importantly, the Learning Strategist has been tasked with identifying additional impediments to degree completion, and additional measures are now being considered and developed. The above notwithstanding, several senior graduate students have attributed delayed graduation times to unexpected research outcomes.

Curriculum Review

To minimize potential overlap and redundancy in the curriculum, the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee has expanded (from two) to six members. A new Undergraduate Coordinator was appointed in 2023: Dr. Erin Styles, Associate Professor, Teaching Stream and previous MHSc, Medical Genomics Program Director. In collaboration with the Office of the Vice-Provost, Innovations in Undergraduate Education, Prof. Styles conducted a review of all courses in the spring/summer of 2024, and has nearly completed a full curriculum map. She will be launching a course content review of all MGY courses this summer. To assess our program structure and learning outcomes, Dr. Styles is running evaluative exit focus groups with 4th-year students.

Career Development Programs for Graduate Students

The IDP is now a widely accepted standard practice. To enhance career development programming, the proposed Associate Chair in Communications, Careers & Alumni Relations was appointed in 2021 (Dr. Martina Steiner) and, in 2022, the proposed staff member (Communications & Outreach Officer Marcia Iglesias, who is also charged with outreach). A Career Advisor was seconded for most of 2024. The monthly career development workshops were restarted, but have enjoyed mixed success. Alumni engagement is mainly focused on the annual Career Symposium. The Department continues to explore ways to enhance career development. The Department will endeavor to access the alumni database to enhance networking and placement.

Postdoctoral Fellows | Inclusion, Mentorship, Career Development

The Department has been supportive of the efforts by the Office of the Vice Dean, Research & Health Science Education to improve the postdoc experience, and has engaged in activities and committees. Promotion of postdocs falls in the portfolio of the Vice Chair, Education & Operations, Dr. Julie Claycomb. Of particular interest to postdocs is gaining teaching experience and in, response, for the last 2 years the Department has implemented a policy whereby postdocs are hired as Instructors or TAs to deliver lectures and engage in other aspects of course mechanics (organization of syllabi and other course materials, office hours, composing assignments/exams, proctoring, etc.) during faculty absences (e.g., for reasons of health, leaves, recent retirements, sabbaticals).

MSc in Genetic Counseling

To address the growing demand within the field, enrolment has been expanding four to six students per year. The Department discusses expansion with the Director of the GC program, Professor Stacy Hewson, on an annual basis. (Expansion would be financially favourable for both the Department and the program.) While an expansion to eight students was planned for 2025, it was postponed because of difficulties with job placement for the classes of 2023 and 2024. Ongoing demand may not be as high expected.

Engagement of Institutes

To enhance collaboration with partner institutes (e.g., to facilitate recruitment and space allocation), the Chair's Advisory Committee has expanded to nine members, including faculty at all major nodes: SickKids (Dr. Sean Egan), LTRI (Dr. Daniel Schramek), Donnelly Centre (Dr. Tim Hughes, Department Chair).

CIHR

With the sunseting of the CIHR Foundation program, financial projections are given to PIs and internal pre-review processes continue with near complete engagement. To date, investigators who held Foundation Grants have been active and mostly successful in securing other funding sources. Of current concern to all, however, is that the new sources are dominated by CIHR Project Grants, institutional funding streams (e.g., EPIC) and the NIH—all three of which appear to be in danger of reduction and/or instability in the near future.

Yours sincerely,



Lisa A. Robinson
Dean, Temerty Faculty of Medicine
Vice Provost, Relations with Health Care Institutions

cc: Timothy Hughes – Chair, Department of Molecular Genetics
Justin Nodwell – Vice Dean, Research & Health Science Education
Denis Bourguignon – Chief Administrative Officer
Anastasia Meletopoulos – Academic Affairs Manager