



Subject: Support for Graduate Students During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Date: April 13th, 2020

Dear members of the UBC Board of Governors,

This submission is made on behalf of the Graduate Student Society (GSS), which represents the Graduate students of UBC-V. In this matter, we are also representing the interests of the Graduate Students of UBC-O, with the express consent to do so, in collaboration with the UBC Student Union of Okanagan.

It has been a pleasure to work with the UBC Board and Administration throughout the year and to see thoughtful discussion and response to graduate concerns. We acknowledge that the Administration, in particular the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, the Provost, and the President, have actively listened to the graduate student voice and put enormous effort in enhancing the graduate student experience at UBC. Graduate students are the lifeblood of the academic mission, and we are grateful to have been in the forefront of your minds in recent months.

It is very encouraging to see that the presentation for the UBC Budget for 2020-2021 fiscal¹ includes \$2.8 M in the category 1 asks for support of Doctoral Students. This important step indicates to us that the Administration and the Board, not only recognize the financial hardships of graduate students and the impact of these hardships on the University's research and teaching endeavors, but that we are ready to act. We also recognize and thank the Administration and the Board for the inclusion of the GSS in the Academic Renewal Working Group, and the decision to make graduate student funding a key aspect in its discussions.

Despite these efforts to bolster the supports for graduate students, we wish to raise concerns around the current impact of the COVID-19 situation and request that there are specialized efforts made to counteract the additional hardships that graduate students will experience due to these unprecedented events. There is a need for greater and more rapid supports for graduate students on both campuses, if we intend to retain our graduate students and their wellbeing.

The funding survey carried out by the GSS shows that, in order to make ends meet, UBC-V doctoral graduate students, on average, require an additional \$4000 dollars a year above what is provided to them through stipends or UBC-related employment (figure 1). While similar data is not available for the Okanagan campus, it is not unreasonable to expect that UBC-O graduate students struggle financially at least as much, if not more, than their UBC-V counterparts. This extra income is generated through a number of sources, which are no longer available in the current context.

¹ https://bog3.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/04/2.1_2020.04_Budget-Fiscal-2020-2021.pdf p. 161



Interestingly, figure 1 also shows that doctoral students in the Faculty of Science require less supplemental income than students in other faculties. It is noteworthy that this Faculty provides a full tuition award for its doctoral students in the first 4 years of their degree programs. It is immediately evident that tuition awards are the most effective method to support graduate students, and hence, why we advocate for them.

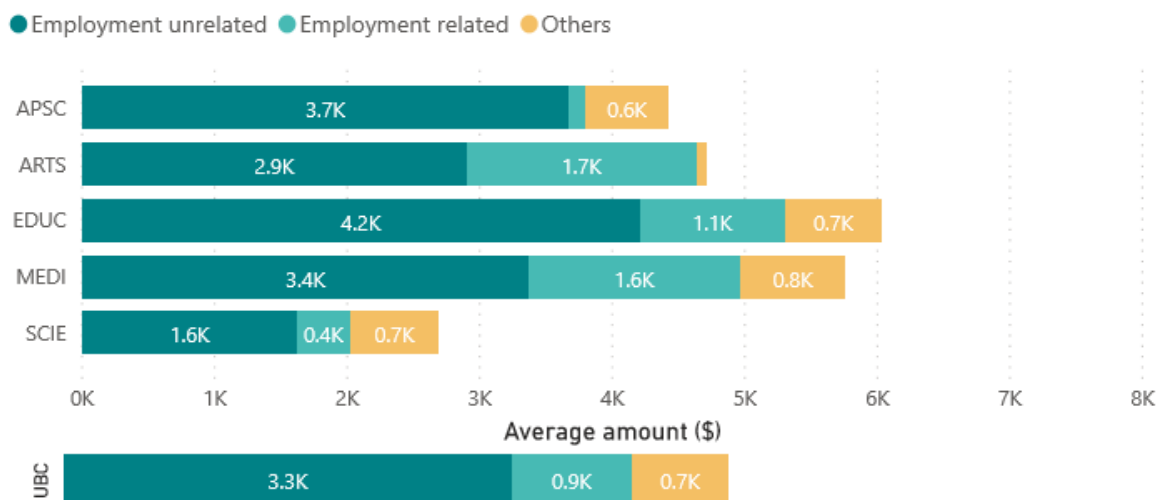


Figure 1 - Additional annual income of UBC-V doctoral students through employment unrelated to their program. Employment unrelated: Employer other than UBC. Employment related: Through UBC, but unrelated to program. Others: Informal employment (e.g. private tutoring). Source: GSS 2019 Funding Survey.

As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, a vast majority of the alternative sources of incomes that graduate students rely on to support themselves has been made unavailable. Access to bursaries on a case by case basis can be an effective strategy to address the need of individual students in particularly difficult situations. However, the interruption in supplemental income is a widespread issue that is best addressed with a system wide approach.

The Graduate Student Society, in representation of all UBC Graduate Students, asks the UBC Board and administration to consider and adopt the following proposals:

- Accelerated implementation of increased long-term support for all Doctoral Students, based on the proposed Budget for 2020-2021 fiscal, starting in the 2020 summer term.
- Additional increased financial support for all research graduate students, in the form of tuition awards, starting in the summer term and for the duration of the COVID-19 outbreak.
- For international graduate students, matching of aid provided by the government to domestic students.



We acknowledge that additional measures may be necessary to assist departments and graduate programs which may have been disproportionately affected by the outbreak. The GSS recognizes that the current climate of uncertainty creates unforeseen challenges and that there are many moving parts that must be managed. We would remind the Board and the Administration that our constituents were already living in financially precarious positions that we were seeking to remedy. In times of crisis, we need to make financial supports available directly to students, where it can help the most.

We are deeply concerned that we will see increased rates of food insecurity, housing insecurity, and mental health crises among graduate students that the system cannot support. We are also concerned some students may be forced to abandon their studies. It is hard to imagine a future in which the University can continue to operate without graduate students as the core component of its teaching and research mission.

The University has a unique opportunity to take an empathic, student centric approach, by showing that it is ready to proactively assist students with a tuition award, instead of placing the undue burden on the student to apply for assistance through enrollment services, an act that can be deeply uncomfortable and challenge a person's sense of dignity.

We are open to collaborating with the University to find the best path forward.

Yours Sincerely,

Nicolas Romualdi

President

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Enclosed:

- Letter of Consent from UBCSUO.



To whom it may concern,

We the Student Union of the University of British Columbia, Okanagan are writing in support of an award to cover graduate student summer tuition. This initiative is led by a fast-growing movement of students and is supported by many substantial student groups across both campuses.

Graduate students have been expressing a great deal of concern regarding their ability to pay summer tuition fees during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact that this expense would have on their capacity to survive financially throughout the summer and ability to pursue graduate studies at UBC.

This campaign is run in partnership between multiple groups including UBCSUO, GSAC, and GSS. We the Student Union of Okanagan agree that the GSS is well positioned to represent our interests and consent for the GSS to advocate on our behalf. The UBCSUO and GSAC will continue to work in partnership with the GSS on this campaign. These groups will remain in constant communication regarding this campaign through the president of the SUO, Romil Jain, and the graduate student representative on the SUO, Cassidy Wallis.

Sincerely,

Student Union of the University of British Columbia Okanagan

Cassidy Wallis, Graduate Student Representative on the SUO

Romil Jain, President of the SUO

