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<b>SUBJECT</b>	Impact of COVID-19 on Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Fellows
<b>SUBMITTED TO</b>	Learning & Research Committee
<b>MEETING DATE</b>	June 2, 2020
<b>SESSION CLASSIFICATION</b>	Recommended session criteria from Board Meetings Policy: OPEN
<b>REQUEST</b>	For information only - No action requested

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Graduate student and postdoctoral researchers are key contributors to much of the research and scholarly activity at UBC's two campuses. COVID-19 and the resulting physical distancing measures, on and off campus, have significantly disrupted the progress of many of these researchers. Students and postdocs from all disciplines have experienced financial difficulty, mental health issues, and personal circumstances that disrupt work. Those whose research relies on laboratory access, fieldwork, library print material, or interaction with people face to face have experienced additional and more severe disruption. For many, the consequences on degree progression and research output will extend well beyond the period of physical distancing measures and on-campus research activity curtailment.

The University recognizes the impacts faced by these students and postdoctoral fellows and has taken a number of actions to mitigate the effects of COVID-19, physical distancing and on-campus research curtailment. To help address financial impacts, the University has significantly increased access to emergency bursaries and is providing stipend support where industry or foundation funding has been interrupted. The University is addressing other issues through increased mental health supports and the provision of additional online learning opportunities. Phased resumption of on-campus research activities is being planned, enabling more students and postdoctoral fellows to advance their research. Additional measures are also being considered as we navigate the continuing situation in order to appropriately support these key members of our academic community.

The following picture from G+PS/CoGS was gleaned over the past two months from regular ongoing communications, town halls, working meetings, and surveys of graduate students, graduate program staff, faculty, the Postdoctoral Association, and administrative leaders, and the results of two VPRI Working Groups. Note that the narratives and the estimates of proportions affected were compiled before the recent implementation of the emergency bursary and the President's Academic Excellence Initiative award (UBC-V). The observations and assessments are relevant to both campuses unless otherwise indicated, and the indications of percent individuals affected are very rough estimates.

## Numbers (2019W T2):

- UBC-V: 2128 research master's; 3770 doctorate; 890 postdocs
- UBC-O: 346 research master's; 383 doctorate; 69 postdocs

## Issues affecting progress: [~70-80% overall affected]

### 1. Financial [~20%]

- Loss of current or anticipated income from campus employment, scholarships, outside work, partner work; loss of research grant-derived income, particularly from industry and foundation sources; lost possibility of work due to childcare responsibilities, etc; unplanned expenses (e.g., remaining in or out of country).
  - **Effects:** inability to focus (stress, anxiety); lost time looking for employment and/or seeking and arranging for compensation (EI, bursaries, government programs); necessity to move etc.

### 2. Personal circumstances, mental health: [~50%]

- Sub-optimal work arrangements at home; childcare/dependent responsibilities; general stress and anxiety
  - **Effects:** inability to focus; lack of time to devote to research

### 3. On-campus research curtailment, distancing measures generally [~50-70%]

- Affects much of research requiring lab access, fieldwork, publicly-engaged work, creative work, human participant research, library print material access; includes lost internships, external collaborations

## Longer-term consequences:

- Decreased research productivity; many trainee's output will be reduced in scope and/or depth
- Graduate student times to completion will be longer for many, having both personal and financial implications for them
- For many, the disruption will extend well beyond the next few months for reasons including the requirement to restart long-term experiments, missed fieldwork opportunities and/or longitudinal data collection time points
- Uncertain adequacy of future grad student/PAEI funding as surpluses are being spent this year [UBC-V only], programs will likely be longer

## Mitigation approaches – implemented

At student/postdoc/supervisor level:

- focusing on or finding other scholarly work
- making use of mental health resources, best practices; individual support by programs/faculty
- reducing scope/depth of planned research

At institutional level:

- providing financial assistance (bursary, emergency research trainee fund)
- introducing the PAEI PhD award early [UBC-V only]
- planning for phased-in resumption of on-campus research and scholarship
- delaying due date for tuition
- expanding online professional development opportunities
- advocating for continuation/extension of funding sources
- providing and/or communicating about online mental health support
- providing workshops, resources on ideas & best practices to faculty on scholarly 'pivots', supervision in this context
- holding town halls for graduate programs – sharing practices, information, Q&A
- providing an automatic one-term extension for program completion, candidacy
- creating summer TA or AA positions to support faculty implementing online courses and related activities

## Other mitigation approaches being considered

- Extend major scholarships by one term (4YFs, Killam, Aboriginal Graduate Fellowships, [UBC-V only]; IDPT, [UBC-O only])
- Increase general graduate student scholarship budget
- Waive fees or provide tuition awards for those with extended completion times
- Ensure research student and postdoc needs are among top priorities when on-campus research activity is resumed
- Provide support for graduate students and postdocs unable to move to next post until travel restrictions eased
- Increase TA positions in fall to support academic courses as well as cohort connecting and building for undergraduate students

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## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

1. Graduate Student Narratives



# Impact of COVID-19 on Research Progress of Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Fellows

June 2, 2020

**Susan Porter**, Dean & Vice-Provost, Graduate and Postdoctoral  
Studies, UBCV

**Jennifer Jokobi**, Dean pro tem, College of Graduate Studies,  
UBCO



# Issues Affecting Progress



- Finances ( $\approx 20\%$ )
- Personal Circumstances ( $\approx 20\%$ )
- Mental Health ( $\approx 50\%$ )
- Physical Distancing (including on-campus research curtailment), travel restrictions ( $\approx 50-70\%$ )

# Finances



- Loss of TAships, grant-funded stipends/salaries, other campus work, outside work, partner's work
- Inability to work because of childcare
- Unplanned expenses
  - Inability to focus (stress/anxiety); lost time looking for work, EI, moving, etc

## UBC mitigations:

- Creation of UBC Research Staff and Trainee Emergency Fund
- Creation of emergency graduate student bursary
- Early introduction of the PAEI PhD award (UBC-V)
- Delayed tuition due date
- Advocacy to federal/provincial governments
- Advice, information on accessing external supports
- Creation of TA, AA positions to support course transfers to online

*Reduced TA hours translate to reduced income -- this year it will be 40% of what I made last year*

# Mental Health



- Stress/anxiety related to:
  - COVID-19 and public health measures, social distancing
  - Concerns about distant family
  - Finances, paying tuition
  - Lack of academic/research progress, time to program completion and milestones (PhD candidacy)

## UBC mitigations:

- Automatic approval of leaves of absence
- Extension of milestone and completion deadlines
- Enabling P/F notations for courses
- Creation of and communication about mental health supports
- Advice to supervisors, programs on wellbeing
- Financial mitigations

*I find it difficult to focus on my thesis...My anxiety level is so elevated that it's difficult to focus in general.*

# Personal Circumstances



- Sub-optimal work arrangements at home
- Childcare (or other family member) responsibilities

## UBC mitigations:

- Provision of laptops

*I have been unable to work on my thesis due to loss of childcare. I am a single mother of a toddler.*

# Research Curtailment, Public Health Measures



- Lack of access to labs, library
- Inability to conduct fieldwork, publicly-engaged work, much human participant research
- Loss of internships, sponsored research placements

## UBC mitigations:

- Advice on alternative scholarly activities
- Provision of online professional development
- Phased-in resumption of on-campus research (June 1)

*I will be unable to go on a research cruise that only happens in summer, so PhD delayed by a year*

# Longer Term Issues

- Some theses/papers will have more limited scope/depth
- For many, disruption longer than the 2-3 months
- Longer times to program completion for many (requiring additional tuition from students, additional funding from university)
- Labour market bleak

## Mitigation considerations:

- Extend major scholarships by one term
- Increase funding budget
- Provide tuition awards for extended times
- Increase TA positions
- Provide short-term research positions for recently finished students, postdocs
- Implement concurrent microcredentials to enhance employability

*I was forced to cut lab work and will have to work with a much more limited data set than initially anticipated*

## Graduate Student Narratives

### General

*The efforts that the university has taken to support the student community are greatly appreciated, but they are still not enough to alleviate the extremely precarious situation of many graduate students. We are increasingly worried that we might not be able to complete our degrees, either in a timely manner, or at all, as things stand. (UBC-O)*

### Personal circumstances, mental health

*My lab component is done. My mental health has deteriorated and I find it hard to concentrate and work from home. (UBC-V)*

*I am currently in the process of writing my thesis, with a proposed defense at the end of this summer. I have been unable to work on my thesis due to a loss of childcare in response to the COVID pandemic (I am a single mother of a toddler). (UBC-O)*

*I have family in France, who are currently in lockdown, and who I am very concerned about. My studies and my work are impacted by the strain that has been put on my health, both physical and mental, and the strain that has been put on my time and energy, as I scramble to find solutions to ensure that I can survive financially, remain in Canada, and complete my degree. (UBC-O)*

### Finances

*I normally TA the Vancouver Summer Program so that chunk of income will be lost...it will be a challenge to figure out how to pay my rent if I cannot find another job. (UBC-V)*

*I was already struggling to pay tuition and now my plans are suspended and will have to keep paying rent and tuition for longer than I expected. (UBC-V)*

*My part time consulting work has dried up for the moment. (UBC-V)*

### Research curtailment

*I require use of equipment and lab services, several high-precision instruments...These are critical elements to my research/thesis. The impact may result in not being able to upgrade from a masters to PhD as per my intentions with my funding (NSERC) and research plan. (UBC-V)*

*I will be unable to go on a research cruise that only happens in summer, so PhD delayed by a year (UBC-V)*

*I was enrolled in the Summer Indigenous Art Intensive—in fact, the Intensive is one of the key factors that drew me to UBCO. As you are aware, the Intensive was cancelled. If I pay tuition this summer (for drastically reduced learning opportunities), I may not be able to pay it next summer, and will forfeit the Indigenous Arts Intensive. (UBC-O)*

### Impact on final research products

*I am unable to complete the lab work necessary for my PhD. As I am in my final year, I was forced to cut lab work and will have to work with a much more limited data set than initially anticipated. (UBC-V)*

*My field program was cut short and I will have to work with what I have already. (UBC-V)*

*My data collection can't be completed because I work with humans. I will be able to defend my thesis with too few subjects but not publish my work (UBC-O)*

**Little impact, or able to mitigate impact of curtailment**

*I have enough data already to work with for a while, but I will still need [equipment] in the future. Those can wait but not forever. (UBC-V)*

*My fieldwork this summer won't be feasible anymore....I'm fortunate that my thesis also requires a fair bit of modelling, so I'm able to reorder it and focus more on modelling for the next year. Probably not quite ideal, but fine given the circumstances! (UBC-V)*