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Subject: Impact of COVID-19 on Graduate Students

Date: June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Dear members of the Board of Governors,

This submission is made on behalf of the Graduate Student Society (GSS) of UBC Vancouver and the UBC Student Union of Okanagan (UBSUO).

We would like to start by expressing our gratitude to the UBCV Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, the UBCO College of Graduate Studies, the Provost office, and the Vice President Students for their continued engagement in matters that affect graduate students. While some gaps in student consultation have occurred in the last months, which are addressed in a joint AMS/GSS submission<sup>1</sup> in other areas, the GSS would like to highlight the positive and collaborative relationship with these offices as we navigate the COVID-19 outbreak.

The efforts of the administration, and in particular of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies and the College of Graduate Studies, in understanding the way this crisis has impacted graduate students is well reflected in the presentation<sup>2</sup> to the Learning & Research Committee in this cycle. The issues captured in this presentation are relevant to graduate students and we hope to see them addressed effectively and promptly. The goal of this submission is to draw attention to particular issues, that we recommend as a priority area:

- **Graduate Students with Children:**

This group of graduate students (approximately 9% of UBCV graduate students<sup>3</sup>, 8% of international UBCO Graduate Students and 18% of UBCO domestic graduate students<sup>4</sup>) faces several additional challenges compared to their peers without children. From a financial perspective, they are burdened with childcare costs that are incompatible with the relatively modest budget of the average graduate student. In addition, with facilities closed, these students may be unable to make alternative arrangements to be able to carry out their research at labs. Affordable childcare is intimately related to issues of gender equity and inclusion. While we are cognizant of the complexities of the current context, we urge the Board to develop a plan to provide affordable options for childcare for graduate students in both campuses, thinking also beyond the current pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> AMS/GSS Joint submission on student consultation (Jun-2020).

[https://bog3.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/06/1.7\\_2020.06\\_Submission-to-the-UBC-Board-of-Governors-Regarding-Student-Consultation.pdf](https://bog3.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/06/1.7_2020.06_Submission-to-the-UBC-Board-of-Governors-Regarding-Student-Consultation.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Impact of COVID-19 on Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Fellows.

[https://bog3.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/05/4\\_2020.06\\_Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Graduate-Students.pdf](https://bog3.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/05/4_2020.06_Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Graduate-Students.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Based on the 2019 GSS Student Satisfaction Survey.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the 2017 New to UBC Okanagan Survey.



- **Extension of Major Scholarships:**

Time limits are sometimes inconsistent with average graduation times, even under regular circumstances. For example, 4-year fellowships (4YF) have a limit of 4 years, whereas the average graduation time for a PhD student in Vancouver is above 5.5 years. Additionally, many students have experienced delays in their research as a result of, for example, loss of access to labs and impossibility to do field work. We urge the Board of Governors to make a one-time allocation of funding to enable extension major scholarships by at least one term. Furthermore, we encourage the Board to promptly consider an increase in the regularly allocated yearly funding for fellowships to increase their duration to at least 5 years, in closer alignment with average completion timelines.

- **Broad Based Housing Assistance:**

While housing assistance has been made available to renters in BC by the Provincial Government, student housing was not reached by this measure due to its different classification. While student housing is indeed already more affordable than market housing, this is in recognition of the generally limited financial resources of students. In the COVID-19 context, the University should consider matching the Government program with a one-time broad-based allocation to Graduate Students in University housing.

Concerns about housing insecurity have also been raised by residents of Acadia Park and summarized in a publicly available report<sup>5</sup>.

- **Extension of Guaranteed Funding and Broad Based Tuition Awards**

While courses have been moved online with great success, research activities have been negatively impacted and in some cases, students who are engaged in full time research, have not been able to make meaningful progress to their work during the last months. The GSS has already asked the Board to explore the possibility creating awards that fully offset the tuition cost for full time research students in its December presentation<sup>6</sup>, as a result of the nature of their engagement with the University.

In the current context, graduate students will be faced with the likely reality of an increased total cost to their degree, in the form of extra tuition payments due to circumstances outside of their control that may extend their graduation time. From a perspective of fairness, it is reasonable to explore further ways to offset those costs.

While we recognize the fact that graduate student funding is very heterogenous across the University, and this creates a number of difficulties to support individual graduate students, we encourage the Board to consider a one time increase to the funds allocated to the Graduate Student Initiative. In this way, individual faculties would have additional resources to extend

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<sup>5</sup>Acadia Park COVID-19 Survey Report. [http://apra-ubc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Acadia\\_Park\\_COVID\\_Survey-Full-Report-May2020.pdf](http://apra-ubc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Acadia_Park_COVID_Survey-Full-Report-May2020.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>GSS Presentation to the UBC Board of Governors (Dec-2019)  
[https://bog3.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2019/11/0\\_2019.12\\_Graduate-Students-SocietyPres.pdf](https://bog3.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2019/11/0_2019.12_Graduate-Students-SocietyPres.pdf)



support to their graduate students. Additionally, we ask the Board to explore the possibility of a one term tuition award, in recognition of the additional costs incurred by graduate students.

While the list above is not exhaustive, it is our opinion that these are the areas that would maximize the benefit to Graduate Students and, hence, what the Board can prioritize. We hope that you find this submission helpful and informative for your discussions. We remain open to collaborating with the University to find the best path forward.

Yours Sincerely,

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