



Subject: Impact of COVID-19 on Graduate Students

Date: May 31st, 2020

Dear members of the Learning & Research Committee,

This submission is made on behalf of the Graduate Student Society (GSS), in relation to the agenda item “Impact of COVID-19 on Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Fellows” with the purpose of sharing the views of the GSS on its contents, for consideration during discussion. While the GSS 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.

Similarly to our submission to the Board of Governors at large in April, we want to start by acknowledging that the Administration, in particular the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, the Provost, and the President, continue to actively listen to the graduate student voice and put enormous effort in enhancing the graduate student experience at UBC. In particular, the creation of the President’s Excellence Initiative Award for UBC-V PhD students constitutes a landmark achievement, and is significant step for a more affordable, accessible, and inclusive graduate school. Additionally, the creation of the Graduate Student Bursary, which, at the moment of writing this submission has disbursed almost 3 million dollars in financial aid to graduate students, has been a much more effective process to address need in the graduate student community. While the assistance has been timely, the amount disbursed begs the question of why such a need exists in the first place and if it’s entirely the result of the COVID-19 outbreak, or whether the pandemic has compounded and exposed systemic issues in graduate student funding.

We are pleased to see the wide range of issues that have been captured in the presentation included in the Committee’s docket. It is equally encouraging to see the proposed mitigation strategies, which are meaningful and effective ways to address the identified concerns. The following list presents the key points of the GSS’ reflections on them:

- **Graduate Students with Children.** This group of graduate students (approximately 9% of Vancouver graduate students¹) 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.

- **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 Learning & Research Committee to recommend to the Board of Governors a one-time allocation of funding to enable the possibility of extending major scholarships by at least one term.

¹ Based on the 2019 GSS Student Satisfaction Survey.



- **Extension of Guaranteed Funding.** While not expressly indicated as a possible mitigation strategy, it is necessary to extend guaranteed funding of Graduate Students for at least 1 term. In some cases, individual departments may not have the financial resources to do this. We recommend an assessment is made on the need for central allocation for this purpose in preparation for a future decision.
- **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 subsidized, this is done in recognition of the ongoing need of students to access affordable housing. 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.

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 Committee and the Board can prioritize.

Additionally, the Committee can consider the fact that 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 consider creating awards that fully offset the tuition cost for full time research students in its December presentation², as a result of the nature of their engagement with the University. In the current context, these students will also be faced with the likely reality of an increased 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.

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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² https://bog3.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2019/11/0_2019.12_Graduate-Students-SocietyPres.pdf