Forgotten and Let Down

Early Impacts of COVID-19 on Graduate Students at uOttawa
Preface

GSAÉD Description: The Graduate Student’s Association des étudiant.es diplômé.es (GSAÉD) has represented graduate students at the University of Ottawa since 1989. GSAÉD’s mission is to represent, promote and defend the common interests of its members; promote and support the interest and activities of graduate student associations in all departments and faculties; bring together its members to discuss and take democratic positions on issues affecting them; and represent its members at the administrative level of decision-making. We also enrich our members’ graduate experience with many social and cultural activities.


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Acknowledgements: We wish to acknowledge that at The University of Ottawa, we live and work on the unceded and unsurrendered traditional territories of the Algonquin people. We also wish to thank all the graduate students who took part in our survey, the GSAÉD executive members and Directors of the Board who helped to review and distribute this document and the survey, and the departmental student associations and faculties for helping to share our report. We would like to extend our gratitude to the Human Kinetics Graduate Student Association (HKGSA) for providing the survey questions upon which the Covid-19 Student Survey were expanded upon.

Disclaimer: This survey was conducted in early July when we were a few months into the pandemic (although the second semester during the pandemic). As such, our survey results cannot reflect the immediate problems that graduate students faced when everything shut down in mid-March in Ottawa and when there was even greater uncertainty. Given the rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic, we are also unable to evaluate how students’ situations have changed over time. This survey therefore represents a snapshot in time. Nonetheless, we have made every effort to report the results of this survey as accurately as possible. We also acknowledge that there are questions which were not asked in our first survey. We therefore are creating another survey in Winter 2021 to gain a more in-depth understanding of the ways in which the pandemic has impacted graduate students at the University of Ottawa.

On Language: Some quotes were left in the original language that respondents used. We felt it necessary to leave these quotes in their original language to best represent their intended purpose and meaning.
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COVID-19 Graduate Student Survey

75% of students reported needing more support from uOttawa.

Need Extra Time:
- Yes: 62.4%
- No: 30.2%
- Unsure: 7.4%

33.2% of students estimate needing 1 semester to 6 months extra while 29.9% of students estimate needing 6 months to a year extra.

Extra Financial Help:
- 58.8% of students reported needing extra financial help. 51.1% of students reported not being eligible for CERB/CESB.

Grad students have worries about...
- Health: 74.6%
- School Work: 70.3%
- Isolation: 69.4%
- Finances: 64.5%
- Social: 63.3%
- Jobs: 59.7%
- Degree Time: 53.1%

73% reported that their mental health was affected by the pandemic and 97.8% of students reported feeling more worried because of the pandemic.

Students Need More Information On...
- Financial Resources: 65.6%
- Tuition Refund: 64.2%
- Academic timelines: 50.8%
- Health Services: 45.2%
- Campus Ops: 42.4%
- UO Response to COVID: 36.9%

Source: GSAED COVID-19 Survey July 2020
Introduction

We started this survey in July 2020 to document the impacts of COVID-19 on graduate students at the University of Ottawa. As members of GSAÉD, we were very concerned about not only the health and well-being of graduate students at our school but also about the University’s response to the pandemic. We received 788 unique responses of which 83% were domestic students, 12.9% identified as student parents, and 87.3% were full-time students. This document was inspired by the Toronto Policy Science Network's national bilingual report which aimed to understand the impact of COVID-19 on graduate students across Canada. Their results similarly show that graduate students throughout Canada are significantly impacted by the pandemic on all levels including coursework, professional development opportunities, degree completion, finances, and mental health. For example, 72% of graduate students throughout Canada reported that the severity of mental health symptoms including depression, anxiety and loneliness increased and 44% of graduate students in the research stream were concerned that COVID-19 would affect their ability to finish their degrees (TPSN, 2020).

The Toronto Policy Science Network's report includes nine recommendations which we echo; notably, we demand increased and improved communication with graduate students; financial aid specifically for graduate students impacted by COVID-19 in line with efforts made by other Canadian Universities (see examples on page 8); increased access to mental health supports and resources; flexibility with time-to-completion deadlines and deadlines for program requirements; that the University of Ottawa make greater efforts to lobby Governmental bodies on behalf of graduate students; and that the University of Ottawa make meaningful efforts to collect information about how graduate students have been impacted by COVID-19 and related delays on academic progress.
With over 7000 registrants and counting, Graduate students act as the backbone of the University of Ottawa (“University”), whether as teaching assistants, research assistants, or ambassadors.

As **teaching assistants**, we play a key role in the education of undergraduate and graduate students – devoting ourselves to supporting Professors by providing supplementary training in the course material through guided lessons, 1-on-1 support, and providing the lion’s-share of coursework marking.

As **research assistants**, we dedicate our time, energy, sweat and sometimes tears to perform original research while balancing substantial administrative work, management of projects, dissemination of data and the production of outstanding publications. All of which contribute to the ability for the University to obtain notoriety as a Tier 1 research institute, and with that, the increased funding that seldom benefits the very researchers responsible for it.

As **ambassadors**, whether acting within the capacity of a research assistant at a global conference or as representatives to the public, we take pride in our affiliation with the University while productively contributing to society through our knowledge and skills. A great example of this is the continued dedication of volunteers of Let’s Talk Science, a national organization that supports the STEM education of Canadian youth through classroom activities, lab tours, and the development of online resources.

These roles, and many more, cement the contribution of Graduate students at the University of Ottawa, undeniably deserving the respect and support of fellow students, professors, and the Administration.

The next few pages include key findings that are distilled from the data collected from the survey, conducted by GSAÉD and exclusively answered by graduate students at the University of Ottawa.
“Trying to Survive”: Financial and Academic Impacts of COVID-19

Financial Stability and Academic Progress

Financial stability and resources are a growing concern for nearly 65% of graduate students. Whereas just under 32% of the respondents were able to apply for the Canadian Emergency Student Benefit (CESB), over 41% required additional financial assistance in the period leading up to this survey. One student writes, “I lived and worked abroad last year and thus was unable to qualify for EI, as well as not qualifying for CERB. In speaking with peers and friends, these individual experiences which impact the ‘regular’ avenues for support seem to be the norm not an exception”. This experience is particularly problematic given that there are graduate students who are conducting field work for their thesis or dissertation outside of Canada and for those who might be doing international field placements. Students also reported having to take on other work in order to support their families which ultimately impacted their academic progress.

Did you need extra financial help due to COVID-19?

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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
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RA and TA Positions

Given the financial precocity of graduate students, it is concerning that the University has recently made the decision to cut teaching assistant positions. For example, the Criminology department alone is slated to lose between 25-40 positions – work that graduate students rely on to pay rent and to buy groceries and other essentials. These positions are crucial for the financial stability of many graduate students. Nearly half (45.7%) of graduate students reported that they are financially dependent on these positions where only a little over a third (35.4%) received an offer for these positions in Fall 2020.

“I had to take up a full-time job to support the household as my partner lost his full-time job and couldn’t apply for CERB. […] I have been trying to keep up with work while trying to support my household” - Master's Student

“TA, RA ships, and scholarships are simply not enough to live off of. The inability to work over 10 hours a week is not realistic and has been very frustrating/has put me in a tough financial spot. It is the reason I can’t do a PhD right now” - Master's Student
How have other Canadian Universities provided Financial Relief to Graduate Students Impacted by Covid-19?

Referenced below is a compiled list of efforts made by other Canadian Universities to specifically help graduate students with the financial impact of Covid-19-related delays on their academic progress. Please note that this list is non-exhaustive but includes institutions at a similar caliber of research productivity and quality to the University of Ottawa:

The University of Toronto provided a tuition waiver for those needing an extra semester to complete their thesis work and were delayed due to Covid-19.

The University of Guelph offered students a $2500 tuition top-up in Summer 2020. Further, individual faculties at the University of Guelph have provided financial support to their graduate students (e.g., CSAHS COVID-19 Delay Assistance Program).

Dalhousie University offered "Program Continuation Scholarships" for graduate students in thesis-based degree programs that have been prolonged as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The University of British Columbia developed an emergency fund specifically for graduate students and introduced a new scholarship for PhD students to help with Covid-19-related impacts.

The University of Waterloo also has implemented financial support for graduate students delayed due to Covid-19, by providing the “Academic Readiness Bursary” in the form of up to $500 per student.

The University of Manitoba also set up an emergency fund specifically for graduate students.
“Isolation equals Depression”: Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19

When the lockdown occurred in March 2020 many were left isolated and alone. The mental health effects of the lockdown and isolation severely impacted graduate students. With three-quarters of respondents in agreement (74.6%), mental and physical health is the #1 concern for graduate students at the University of Ottawa. Nearly the same proportion (73%) reported a negative change in their personal mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a whole, only a third (34.6%) of students sought mental health support(s), owing possibly to still existing stigma, where of those, only 58.8% received said support. These conclusions support previous research which has documented that 36% of graduate students have sought support for anxiety or depression caused by their studies. Canadian studies show that 31% of graduate students have anxiety around seeking and/or affording mental health support and that 63% of students have anxiety about failing or appearing weak.

"Financial hardship especially that OSAP reduced its fundings. I have no grant and only $2500 loan for the whole 3 semesters. And TAs are not guaranteed. My mental instability to focus and sadness because of lack of interactions with others hindered me working on my thesis. I live in a small bachelor with my husband and it is very hard" - PhD Student

J'aurais aimé avoir plus de soutien et plus d'information sur le service de soutien aux étudiants avec handicap. Dans une situation normale, avoir accès à ce service est déjà complexe. J'ai d'ailleurs dû renoncé en raison des difficultés d'y avoir accès (devoir laisser un message pour qu'on nous rappel et nous donner un rdv qui ne correspond pas à nos disponibilités et devoir rappeler et laisser un second message, etc.) […] je pense qu'il serait légitime que lorsque l'étudiant s’est enregistré par internet comme étudiant avec handicap qu’il reçoive un téléphone du service pour établir avec lui de VIVE VOIX un rdv qui lui convient […] J’angoisse pour mes stages en milieux public et hospitalier, car la restriction d'air qu'impose le masque mimique un début de crise d'anxiété ce qui me fatigue énormément et fait en sorte que je n'arrive pas à étudier le soir en revenant. Je ne sais toujours pas comment je vais faire pour passer les 12 semaines de stage qui me reste en milieu hospitalier et me préparer pour mes examens nationaux - Masters Student

“Financial hardship especially that OSAP reduced its fundings. I have no grant and only $2500 loan for the whole 3 semesters. And TAs are not guaranteed. My mental instability to focus and sadness because of lack of interactions with others hindered me working on my thesis. I live in a small bachelor with my husband and it is very hard" - PhD Student

“I had pre-existing mental health issues, and this had already been a difficult year for me because of issues other than COVID. I know the university has a poor track record regarding mental health, and I'm quite concerned about students like myself who already had problems and are now having an even worse time. I already know how to navigate mental health services at the university (although they are overly complicated, compared to other universities I've attended), but with everything else going on I think these issues might be extra difficult for people who hadn't yet accessed these services to deal with. I really hope the university continues to focus on mental health resources, facilitating access to those resources (by clarifying what resources are available, who can use them, if there is an associated cost, etc.) and financing access to those resources. I know a lot of other stuff is going on, and I've already seen some progress made on these issues during my time here, but now's not the time to let that stuff fall to the wayside” - Graduate Student
It is undeniable that mental health is tied to financial (in)security and with that student's ability to progress in their academic work. As the graph below shows, finances are the fourth highest worry that students have while mental and physical health is the first. Students also worry about their ability to complete program requirements such as their comprehensive examinations, coursework, and proposal (70.3%), the lack of social connection (69.4%), job prospects including their ability to network and worries about how a leave or lack of progress would look to hiring committees (59.7%), and worries about completing within the time to completion deadlines set by the university (6 years for PhD and 4 years for MA) (53.1%).

Graduate students also worry about their families and relationships (63.3%). In this report, 12.9% of respondents identified as student parents. Graduate students with children have been disproportionately impacted (financially, in their mental health, and in their academic progress) by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. The quote to the right explains just how hard it is for students with children, including their ability to take care of their children while also completing their work and living up to the "productivity" standards of their supervisor, professors, and colleagues. It is disheartening that the University has not considered the impact the pandemic has on student parents and that there has been no financial or mental health supports offered to this group of students in particular.

"Il n’y a pas beaucoup d’étudiants parents dans mon domaine et avec un enfant très jeune c’est difficile de travailler à la maison. Pourtant les professeurs, superviseurs et autres collaborateurs et collègues attendent de nous qu’on soit aussi productifs parce qu’ils croient qu’on a plus de temps en étant à la maison alors que c’est faux. Nous ne sommes pas en vacances. C’est très difficile de s’occuper de jeunes enfants et de bébés toute la journée et de travailler aussi. Je dors 5 heures par nuit maximum parce que je dois m’occuper de mon fils toute la journée et cuisiner et faire les tâches ménagères. Le soir après l’avoir mis au lit je travaille jusqu’à épuisement pour rattraper le retard et pouvoir présenter des résultats. Les réunions et les séminaires sont aussi difficiles à suivre. Mon fils pleure tout le temps ou crie quand il me voit sur l’ordinateur. Je n’ai plus envie de participer à des réunions ou assister à des séminaires à cause de ce stress et l’impossibilité de se concentrer.” - Graduate Student

"Isolation equals Depression”: Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19

Graduate students have worries about…

- Mental & Physical Health: 74.6%
- Completion of Program Req: 70.3%
- Lack of Social Connection: 69.4%
- Finances: 64.5%
- Family & Relationships: 63.3%
- Job Prospects: 59.7%
- Time to completion: 53.1%
- Other: 3.9%

GSAÉD COVID-19 Report
The Reality of Covid-19 For International Students

While the majority of respondents were classified as domestics students (83%), we can’t forget that international students account for 31% (Institutional Research and Planning, 2020) of the graduate student population at the University of Ottawa. They are an integral part of our community and yet, they have been forgotten by the administration, faculties, and departments during the pandemic. Some options were offered to graduate students; however, they did not appear to benefit international graduate students. For example, while international students were able to take a leave of absence some were not able to use this option because they were did not know how it would impact their visas while others were not sure whether they even qualified to take a leave.

“International students were particularly concerned about finances because they did not qualify for CERB or CESB and they could not find jobs on campus because these positions are given predominantly to students who are bilingual. For example, a Masters student wrote that they, “would like to see more financial support being offered to international students and to individuals that are not bilingual. Jobs on campus favour Canadian citizens that are bilingual, making it difficult for them to make ends meet”. Others felt that the university should have created specific scholarships or financial help for international students as their situation is unique. One student said, “I am very financially dependent on my income from the school as an international graduate student. I would've liked the school to have helped international students who are ineligible for CERB find alternative employment options during this time”. Another student even wrote that they felt ignored by the University, “No specific financial and non-financial help was provided to international students by the University. Problems weren't even addressed or recognized”.

““There should be more scholarships for international students as we cannot apply to either CERB or CESB. We are not eligible for merit scholarships, even when we keep a high GPA in our master's program. As a result, international students do not have any type of support from the university, although we are the most vulnerable in this critical situation. As an example, in my program, preference has been given to students who received merit scholarships for T.A.s and R.A.s positions. In other words, preference has been given to Permanent Residents and Canadian Citizens because, as I mentioned, international students are not eligible for these scholarships. In summary, international students need more support from the university” - Masters Student
“If there are any options available, they are a well-kept secret”: Student Satisfaction with University Response to the Pandemic

Although a slight majority of Graduate students at the University of Ottawa are at least somewhat satisfied with the institution’s response, the overwhelming majority believe that more options (e.g., more TA/RA opportunities during summer session, option to switch to part-time and leave of absence option in Fall 2020 and Winter 2021, scholarship extensions, flexibility for student parents, more information on financial aid, more resources for when the library closed) should have been provided. This includes additional information from the University on their enrolment, for which nearly 43% of students found insufficient.

Leave of Absence

It is notable that only 9.3% of students who answered our survey reported taking a leave of absence. Respondents stated that they could not take a leave of absence because they are financially dependent on scholarships that require them to stay full-time students. Others wanted to continue working on their research because they could not afford to stay or they genuinely wanted to keep progressing in their studies. The option to take a leave of absence, that the University offered at the beginning of the pandemic, was not an adequate solution precisely because 70.3% of graduate students were worried about completing their academic work while two-thirds (63.3%) reported that their academic progress was negatively affected by the pandemic. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds (62.4%) of respondents stated that they require extra time to complete their degree, with two-fifths (42.8%) of those respondents requiring 6 months or more. Instead of the option to take a leave of absence, students wrote that they wished the University offered part-time options, extended scholarships, and a reduction in tuition fees to lessen the financial burden and thus the impact on their academic progress.

“Overall, I'm quite disappointed as a graduate student at the University. I feel like the University did a good job addressing Undergraduate programs, but failed to acknowledge the impact or provide a long-term plan for us graduate students, who’s success is dependent on our ability to [do] research [which] relies heavily on the facilities as advertised by the University - that is one of the major factors in my decision to pursue graduate studies here, and now I am unable to do so. It is very frustrating […] there have been NO long-term plans laid out for us.” - Graduate Student

Being far from family, living alone, worrying about my income after I graduate in December. Not being able to be "less productive" as everyone seems to be encouraging us— that somehow we can be less productive during this time. It’s such a frustrating narrative to hear because I wonder how hiring committees are going to respond to the fact that I didn’t do anything in my last year of the PhD because of the pandemic. In an increasingly competitive job market, I can’t afford to just take time off. I have to finish my degree and, in the process, keep publishing, […] so that I can even have a shot at a job after years of dedicating myself to academic work. - PhD Student
Overwhelmingly graduate students at the University of Ottawa are concerned about their mental health, finances, and academic progress. These three concerns, we argue, form a triangle as each issue affects the other. As such, we demand that the University of Ottawa immediately act on these concerns, especially since moving forward, graduate students at the University of Ottawa would like, from the University, additional information and support through financial resources (65.6%), financial deadlines (e.g., tuition, refund) and academic timelines (64.2%).

There is a desperate need for the University to respond to these issues as soon as possible because graduate students are suffering in silence and in isolation.

In this report we have highlighted student voices and therefore want to end with this quote from a Doctoral Student:

“Je trouve que l'Université d'Ottawa poursuit quasiment ses opérations comme si de rien n'était, s'envoyant très souvent de nombreuses fleurs sur sa façon de gérer la situation. Je trouve qu'elle n'a absolument rien fait pour m'informer de quoi que ce soit quant à la prolongation possible de mon parcours doctoral ou les possibilités qui s'offrent à moi dans les circonstances. L'Université a simplement tout fait pour continuer de fonctionner et faire en sorte que la pandémie ait le moins d'impact possible sur ces activités habituelles. Elle a donc essentiellement transformé sa façon de délivrer ses activités habituelles, mais n'a rien changé d'autre ou pas que je sache. Elle ne considère pas vraiment les impacts de cette pandémie sur le programme des étudiantes ; elle les contourne pour s'assurer sans doute de ne pas perdre un sou de trop dans toute cette histoire.”
We conclude this report with several recommendations. **We call on the University of Ottawa** (herein we refer to those departments or groups that have the power to institute change including Central Administration, the Vice Provost’s Office, and individual Faculties and their respective Deans and Vice-Deans) to respond and commit to addressing the following issues:

**We insist on increased and improved communication with graduate students. This includes (but is not limited to):**

1. Open forums for communication and dialogue between graduate students and the University administration (e.g., town halls available to students from all disciplines, levels, and Faculties);
2. Reducing bureaucracy surrounding communication attempts by providing students with direct lines of communication with those in power to provide solutions for Covid-19-specific academic delays and disruptions (e.g., If students cannot reach a feasible solution in consultation with their supervisor or Faculty, a higher body must be available to mediate a resolution, namely the Vice Provost Office);
3. Improve communication between students and Faculties by hosting monthly or bi-monthly meetings with your student association in order to discuss issues their members are facing to facilitate meaningful solutions (e.g., as has been observed in the Faculty of Health Sciences and the School of Human Kinetics);
4. Specific communication to address issues faced by international graduate students. With the rapidly changing global climate during these times, it is paramount to ensure international graduate students are kept aware of the support and resources available for them;
5. Increasing access to communication technologies like Zoom by not distinguishing between student and work emails. Graduate students without TA or RA contracts fail to have premium access to these platforms. Give all graduate students access to this technology through their student emails or abolish student emails and transition students to only their work emails;
6. Improve access to information on the role of the Thesis Advisory Committee during Covid-19 to encourage collaboration and to seek solutions for Covid-19-related academic delays;

**We ask for increased access to mental health support and resources**

1. Increase the number of counsellors available to graduate students;
2. Provide mental health training for supervisors which includes, but not limited to, suicide prevention; burnout indications, and referral protocols;
3. Offer greater opportunities for our graduate students to participate in virtual networking events. We ask for Departments and Faculties to check in on your students by hosting events where students can socialize in order to avoid social isolation.
**Recommendations**

**We call for financial aid specifically for graduate students impacted by Covid-19, in line with efforts made by other Canadian Institutions (examples on page 8)**

1. This should include tuition top-ups;
2. Tuition reduction/alleviation/waiver, or extension of existing scholarships for students (Admission scholarship, Excellence scholarship) whose research was impacted/prolonged because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This should include both domestic and international students, and especially student parents;
3. We call for efforts to make it easier to apply for funding (i.e. Improved Faculty-specific communication of funding and bursary opportunities for both domestic and international students).

**We demand flexibility with time-to-completion deadlines**

Major delays and disruptions to academic progress should be accounted for by increasing the time-to-completion of important deadlines (i.e., Comprehensive examination, thesis proposal, thesis defense, degree completion). Students should not be penalized for being unable to meet deadlines as a direct result of Covid-19-related delays.

**We ask the University of Ottawa to make greater efforts to lobby Governmental bodies on behalf of graduate students**

This includes the Federal and Provincial Governments. Federal government aid was inaccessible to some students (namely, international students and other students who did not qualify for CERB/CESB) and other efforts to extend Tri-council scholarship funding was limited.

Further, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship was not extended in a similar fashion to Tri-council federally-funded scholarships. The University has an obligation to relay major crises (as is the current financial state of graduate students impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic) occurring within the University community.

**The University must make meaningful efforts to collect information about how graduate students have been impacted by Covid-19 and related delays on academic progress**

1. Some students have reported that their faculties have asked them to complete a ‘Covid-19 Progress Impact Report’, but is not standardized practice across all faculties. Further, the response to submitted reports has been neither objective nor clear in terms of its use (i.e., It was not clear what the purpose of the documentation was since there was confusion about how the contents of the form would be responded to). We ask that students of all Faculties complete a ‘Covid-19 Progress Impact Form’ with clear instructions and a transparent action plan as to the fate of the information contained in these forms.
2. There have been no formally documented reports of the University assessing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on graduate student academic progress. **This is an immediate concern that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.**