



April 6, 2020

**Graduate Students' Association Letter to the University of Saskatchewan
RE: COVID-19**

With the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, we are currently in the midst of an unprecedented global crisis. The University of Saskatchewan has currently suspended all activities and is operating with minimal staff on site. We understand the university's decision is essential for the health and safety of the campus community; however, this suspension is severely affecting graduate students' research, and academic programs, for reasons specified below (among others):

- a) Students are physically unable to access labs to conduct research, unable to access specialized software to analyze their data, are physically unable to complete fieldwork to collect essential data, have lost access to archive material and libraries, have lost the ability to interact in-person with their supervisors and colleagues, and may have poor access to technology and work space at home.
- b) Students have stated that this crisis is significantly affecting their physical and mental health, preventing them from concentrating on their research. This is especially true for people originally from countries severely affected by the pandemic, those with loved ones who are at risk, and those who are immunocompromised.
- c) The current crisis requires students to spend time looking for ways to secure housing and finances, ensure they can return home if needed, and make sure their loved ones are safe. Graduate students, who are parents, have no childcare and have to balance their research time and family obligations.

Exhaustion, loneliness, and a lack of access to services and resources are preventing graduate students from doing their work. To mitigate this situation, with fairness in mind, we call upon the University to consider the following and implement a **UNIVERSAL** plan for all graduate students.

1. **Automatic extension of all graduate programs** for as long as university closure remains, and for as long as graduate students are unable to access campus facilities. This crisis will most likely require a lengthening of project timelines. Many students are active caregivers for dependents or have now become the key source of childcare in their households. They may no longer have the time or uninterrupted space available in the coming months to dedicate to their academic work. The stress and worry about timely completion of academic work during this crisis, and doing well, is counterproductive. Such expectations compromise the health and wellbeing of our students.
2. **Automatic extension of funding** (stipends/scholarships, etc.) for all graduate students to guarantee the same level of funding, for as long as university closure remains, and for as long as graduate students are unable to access campus facilities, in parallel with point 1. Additionally, the university should encourage all funding agencies to take a similar

approach, ideally coordinating with them to ensure that no student is unfairly disadvantaged by this global crisis.

3. **Tuition and fee adjustments** for all graduate students for as long as university closure remains, and for as long as graduate students are unable to access campus facilities. At this time, students are not receiving the same level of service, learning, or accessing to the same academic environment.
4. **Waive late payment assessment on tuition and fees and extend tuition payment deadlines** for as long as university closure remains, and for as long as graduate students are unable to access campus facilities, and for one year thereafter. The one-year grace period after graduate students return to campus ensures that students have the time to stabilize their finances and resume financial security.
5. **Repurpose those monies allocated to travel awards** to universally support all graduate students. It is unlikely that graduate students will travel to conferences in the next year, and it is not unreasonable to redistribute these funds accordingly.
6. **Complete refund of meal plan purchases**, including those who have purchased a meal plan, or those who have meals as part of their residences (or otherwise), to ensure students have access to those funds immediately.
7. **Facilitate and ensure the well-being of exchange students** and arrange for their safe return, as needed.
8. **Universal support to all graduate students** to ensure they have adequate access to technology, workspace, and access to mental health and well-being resources and services.
9. **Allow all students to choose a pass/fail option** for their current courses, considering that students no longer have access to the same learning environment, are overwhelmed with the current situation, and may be hindered by a lack of technology.
10. **Guarantee a graduate student representative**, appointed by the Graduate Students' Association, on the pandemic planning committee. During this time, it is crucial we have open lines of communication so that we can properly inform our members of the actions being taken as well as directly advocate for their needs in these spaces.

We would discourage the university from adopting a case-by-case approach for granting any of the above, because it would leave students in a state of uncertainty that would be even more detrimental to their mental health. Additionally, one of the major problems with means testing in times like this is the simple fact that it delays our assistance when it is most needed, which is what the American government is finding out concerning their first stimulus package which is being disseminated through IRS.

In this time of crisis, students should be allowed to prioritize their personal, physical, and mental wellbeing over their academic work. It is time to bring student leaders to the drawing board to ensure we are moving forward with the best interests of our students in mind. **TRANSPARENCY, COLLABORATION AND MEANINGFUL CONSULTATION** is key. It is no longer appropriate to make these decisions behind closed doors.

We look forward to working with the University to ensure our graduate students are not disadvantaged by this crisis. For any questions or concerns, please contact the GSA President at gsa.pres@usask.ca.

Sincerely,

GSA Executives