

# THE EARLY IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON GRADUATE STUDENTS ACROSS CANADA



The Toronto Science Policy Network (TSPN) is a student-run science policy group based at the University of Toronto. TSPN provides a platform for students (undergraduate and graduate), post-doctoral fellows, faculty, staff, and members of the local community to learn about and engage in the science-policy interface through workshops, public panels, talks, and various advocacy efforts.

The survey, report, and associated materials are the work of the [Toronto Science Policy Network](https://www.toscipolicynet.ca/).

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**Acknowledgements:** We wish to acknowledge the history of the lands on which we are each living on. Canada is home to many different Indigenous peoples. We ask that each of you take a moment to research, learn about, and reflect upon the Indigenous people whose lands you are currently on. For example, many of our contributors reside in the Greater Toronto Area. We are located on the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples. This territory is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties, and is within the lands protected by the “Dish With One Spoon” wampum agreement. It is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

We would like to thank all the graduate students who participated in our national bilingual survey, and all the individuals, student groups and departments who assisted us in the development and distribution of this survey across Canada. In particular, we would like to thank Paul Dufour, Kimberly Girling (PhD), Ellen Gute (PhD), Shawn McGuirk, Jennifer Polk (PhD), Vasa Lukich (PhD), Reinhart Reithmeier (PhD), and Molly Sung (PhD) for their critical insights as reviewers of this report. This project was made possible thanks to funding from the [University of Toronto's COVID-19 Student Engagement Award](https://www.utoronto.ca/engagements/award).

**Disclaimer:** This report is based on survey data collected between 22nd April to 31st May 2020, presenting a snapshot of the early impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on graduate students in Canada, which continue to change rapidly. Participation in this survey was voluntary, and may therefore be prone to self-selection bias. In addition, we acknowledge that all of the contributors to this project are full-time graduate students and post-doctoral fellows who are living, and working, through an ongoing global pandemic. We have taken all efforts to address survey limitations and report data as accurately as possible.



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# Executive Summary

This section summarizes key survey findings and opportunities for action.

# Executive Summary

The [Toronto Science Policy Network](#) conducted a national bilingual survey to understand the early impacts of COVID-19 on the lives of graduate students across Canada, including their graduate studies, health and wellness, and future prospects. This survey was open from April 22nd, 2020 to May 31st, 2020, collecting a total of 1,431 responses. All responses to this survey were anonymous. Based on this survey, we make recommendations to ensure graduate students receive support as Canada slowly begins to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Key Findings

-  **Financial concerns:** Graduate students are increasingly concerned about their possible sources of income and ongoing expenses, including tuition fees, stipends and assistantships.
-  **Impact on research:** Around three-quarters of graduate students reported that COVID-19 has negatively impacted their ability to conduct research due to institutional closures. Seventy-eight percent of research-stream graduate students planning to study or research abroad had to cancel their plans.
-  **Financial stability among research-stream students:** Only twenty-seven percent of research-stream graduate students have guaranteed funding until the end of their degree. In addition, forty percent of research-stream respondents received no, or insufficient, communication to alleviate their concerns about stipend continuation.
-  **Impact on work experience among professional-stream students:** Forty percent of respondents in professional-stream programs reported that their internships for the summer and/or fall 2020 semesters had been cancelled or postponed.
-  **Impact on health and wellness:** Twenty-six percent of respondents are now considering taking a long term leave of absence, compared to pre-COVID-19 (10%). Graduate students increasingly reported experiencing anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness, loneliness, or being overwhelmed compared to before the pandemic. Seventy-two percent indicated that these feelings increased as a result of COVID-19.



-  **Impact on teaching:** Seventy-nine percent of graduate students with teaching responsibilities received no compensation for the additional time and work needed to transition to online teaching. Thirty-five percent of graduate students with teaching responsibilities reported being dissatisfied with the level of departmental support.
-  **Impact on coursework:** Graduate students were increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of their lectures and practicals. Twenty-nine percent of respondents had the practical component of their courses cancelled.
-  **Impact on international graduate students:** Sixty-percent of international graduate students planned to travel home, but were unable to. Over half of international graduate students indicated that in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were worried about completing their degree requirements before the expiration of their study permit.
-  **Insufficient communication:** Half of the graduate students indicated that they received no, or insufficient, communications regarding expectations for remote work from their department and/or supervisor.
-  **Impact on professional development opportunities:** Half of the graduate students reported cancellations to professional development activities they were participating in, including campus events, student organized conferences, and professional training programs.
-  **Impact on degree completion:** Around forty percent of research-stream respondents reported that COVID-19 would impact their degree timeline, and their ability to complete their degree. Within the professional stream, half of the respondents were not concerned about the impact COVID-19 would have on their degree timeline, and reported that COVID-19 had not impacted their ability to complete their degree.
-  **Impact on graduation:** Of those planning to complete degree requirements by August 2020, half of respondents report being unable or uncertain about their ability to graduate because of changes resulting from COVID-19.

## Key Recommendations

Based on our survey findings, we have identified the following opportunities where supervisors, student groups, institutions, and governments can take action to support graduate students. Additional details regarding each recommendation is available on page 42 of the [full report](#).

**Recommendation 1:** Establish clear and direct lines of communication between graduate students, supervisors, departments and institutions.

**Recommendation 2:** Reduce the financial burden faced by graduate students, and introduce flexibility into degree completion times.

**Recommendation 3:** Improve existing health and wellness support systems available at institutions.

**Recommendation 4:** Provide extensions to study and work permits for international students.

**Recommendation 5:** Mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the ability of graduate students to conduct research.

**Recommendation 6:** Improve the quality of virtual teaching and coursework by establishing clear expectations, introducing relevant pedagogical training and increasing the flexibility of course structures.

**Recommendation 7:** Mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the ability of graduate students to participate in professional development opportunities.

**Recommendation 8:** Advocate for increased support for graduate students to decision-makers within institutions, and in various levels of government.

**Recommendation 9:** Embrace long-term planning to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 in the years to come.

# PREPARED BY THE TORONTO SCIENCE POLICY NETWORK

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