



Q&A Session Summary: Graduate Student Association & Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs

On March 31 2020, the UW-GSA and GSPA held a virtual Q&A session. This session aimed to answer questions from Graduate students regarding the effects of COVID-19 on various areas of academics, finances and health/social services. The answers have been summarized below.

Speakers:

Naima Samuel – President, Graduate Student Association (GSA) - gsa-pres@uwaterloo.ca

Jeff Casello – Associate Vice-President, Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs (GSPA) - jcasello@uwaterloo.ca

GSA Services & Fees

Tax Aid & Legal Aid Workshops

- Legal and tax aid service will continue to be offered but will be switched to a remote version.
- Personal one-on-one tax consultations with the GSA Accountant will now take place over-the-phone for tax season. The workshop is free for students that paid their optional advising fees and will cost a fee for students who opted-out of the optional fees.
- More information can be found here: <https://gsauw.ca/services/legal-tax-aid/>

Councillor & Departmental GSA Positions

- Terms for several positions ending on April 30, 2020 will be extended until the end of the Spring 2020 term to support transition efforts. Further communication will be forthcoming.

GSA Incidental fees

- It is expected that Health and Dental fees will continue to be charged, as these facilities are anticipated to re-open during the Spring term.
- The availability of the GSA Health and Dental plan for distance students is being reviewed by the GSA. More information will be provided on this in near future.
- The GSA Board is currently discussing any possible changes to incidental fees charged to graduate students.
- The approval process of Spring 2020 incidental fees has not yet been officially approved.
- Incidental fees will be collaboratively decided upon and/or approved by WUSA, the GSA, Admin and Finance, the Associate Provost and Provost, and the University President.

GSI Funding

- GSI Funding will still be approved and made available to students for the Winter term in the upcoming weeks.

University Tuition & Fees

Spring 2020 Tuition

- University of Waterloo will not be reducing Spring 2020 term tuition.

University Fees

- Fees that would cover services on campus that students will not have access to or will be drastically changed, will likely be removed or reduced (e.g., athletics facilities).
- If the service is being continued with slight modifications, the incidental fees will continue to be charged. See previous note about collaborative decision-making of incidental fees.

Academic Timelines

Delay/Adjustment of Milestone Completion

- If a PhD or Master's student is within three terms of the deadline for a milestone (i.e., comprehensive exams, dissertation proposals, thesis defense), the deadline can be postponed for one term, without the need to petition.
- For example, if a PhD student is in term five in a program where the comp exam must be completed by term six, the student will now have until term seven to complete that exam without the need to petition.
- Decisions about delaying research milestones should always be made collectively with the supervisor and the student.
- Guidelines for remote defenses, proposals, and comprehensive exams have been created.
- For the time being, all online defenses and proposals will be shared solely with the student and committee members. Program testing will occur in the upcoming weeks to explore if additional audience members can tune into the virtual program without interference.

Probation Guidelines

- Students who had a condition to satisfy in Winter 2020 – e.g., meeting minimum academic requirements or finding a research supervisor – will have that condition extended by one term.
- Academic progression rules are expected to be flexible, depending on the individual's case and the impact of the COVID-19 situation on academic progressions.

Convocation

- The timeline for being considered for Spring convocation is now May 15, 2020.
- If a Master's student is set to graduate in August, a letter can be provided at the student's request signifying that all degree requirements have been completed. This may be helpful for students transitioning from a Master's program into PhD in the Fall.
- Further communication will be provided regarding convocation registration/logistics in the near future.

Internal & External Funding

Every student that was guaranteed funding for Spring 2020 will still be receiving funding.

Time Limits & Extensions

- If possible, supervisors are encouraged to provide funding for their students who exceed beyond the guaranteed funding of twelve terms for PhD, or if a Master's student exceeds their guaranteed funding time limit.
- Recommendations are being put forward to the Provost to suggest additional funding from the university for students who will exceed the time limits, but cannot be funded by their supervisor.
- The above-mentioned recommendation is applicable in the case of having to extend beyond anticipated time and funding limits due to recent circumstances from the virus (research delays, etc.) – i.e., if a student was in their last term of funding in Winter 2020. This is not applicable if the student was beyond time and funding limits prior to the Winter 2020 term.
- If a student's work (in-lab research work, fieldwork, etc.) has been severely delayed or paused due to public health regulations but the student is not yet nearing the completion of their degree, it is not yet known how the university will proceed with the possible extension of term limits in the future.
- The University will work with students to understand how the delay has affected each student's work to offer academic and financial assistance on a case-to-case basis.

Funding & Financial Support for International Students

- The International Student Doctoral Award is expected to be continued for students by one term, for those who are exceeding their term limit due to COVID-19 delays.
- Due to the situation of international banking concerns occurring in many countries, tuition payments and late fees are expected to be flexible for the Spring 2020 term. There has not yet been an official decision on this.
- The Contingency Bursary is available for international students that have experienced extenuating circumstances and are in financial need.
- Information on the requirements and process for the Contingency Bursary can be found here: <https://uwaterloo.ca/forms/graduate-studies/graduate-student-contingency-bursary-application>

General Bursary Information

- Information on bursaries and how to apply: <https://uwaterloo.ca/graduate-studies-postdoctoral-affairs/current-students/financial-need-funding>

Tri-Agency Funding

- The University has not yet received a formal decision regarding funding from the Tri-Agency, but it is hoped that funding will continue uninterrupted for the Spring 2020 term.

Doctoral Completion Grant

- The eligibility for the Doctoral Completion Grant is determined per-faculty, but it is not expected that the budget will increase for the grant. The GSPA is continuing to look into the logistics of the Doctoral Completion Grant, given the current circumstances.

OGS Award

- Students will be able to accept and receive OGS awards for the Spring semester.

Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)

- Eligibility for the CERB is assessed at an individual level from the government. This is a benefit that is completely independent from the University of Waterloo.
- Inquiries from students that may be eligible for CERB due to their employment with a Waterloo University service (e.g., food services) have been brought to the University's Associate Provost Human Resources for discussion.

Spring 2020 Term – Courses & Expectations

Term Model

- Instructors are encouraged to develop their lectures, material, audio, etc. and post all content to LEARN in advance. This is done rather than performing real-time lectures, to ensure that all students receive the same quality of learning, regardless of any additional changes due to the virus (i.e., childcare, different time zones, etc.)

RA & TA Expectations

- As long as teaching assistants are able to fulfill all requirements of the course, it is expected that they can work remotely from anywhere in the world. There are no requirements for TAs to be required on campus for any duties.
- Teaching assistants are still expected to hold “office hours”, but these hours should be flexible, keeping in mind the various time zones that many students will be in.
- Expectations of TA and RA positions will be communicated to students from the GSPA office, as well as via the course instructor/supervisor in the near future.

Winter 2020 Grading

CR/NCR

- Instructors, at their discretion, can change course grading from numerical to NCR/CR for any in-person Winter 2020 classes.
- If a student receives a numeric grade that is felt to be not reflective of their ability, due to course performance being hindered by COVID-19, the student can ask to have their grade changed to a NCR/CR without a petition. Process for this is being developed now.

Delays of Internships, Work Placements, Program Activities

The university is working to come up with other academic methods to help students reach their requirements, especially in programs that are drastically affected by the switch to online learning and/or inability to perform in-person requirements (i.e., Fine Arts program, internships).

Lab Work

- Regardless of the research (animal, electronics, etc.) all research access requires approval from the Office of Research and Jeff Castello from GSPA. No student should be accessing campus facilities without having received formal approval.

Co-op/Practicum

- The Co-op office is working to identify as many student positions as possible that can be performed remotely.
- When this is not an option, the co-op office is currently exploring possible alternatives.
- There may be a resequencing of the internship program to satisfy academic requirements, or financial opportunities provided to students that can no longer complete their internship term. There has not yet been an official decision on this.
- Decisions about postponing practicums (i.e., in the case of course-based students) will be managed at the departmental or program level – students are encouraged to speak to their specific Graduate Coordinator/Chair regarding this.

Fieldwork

- If travel for fieldwork is prohibited by government official rules (i.e., no international travel) then the fieldwork cannot take place.
- Fieldwork that is able to be done safely and without international travel may still take place if it aligns with public health regulations. More information will be provided in the upcoming week from the Office of Research for students who wish to perform their fieldwork.

Inactive Term

Funding Considerations

- An inactive term is a possible option for students, but there are restrictions to be made aware of. Please review all options before considering an inactive term, as it will remove any funding previously granted for the term.
- An inactive status may be suggested if research work cannot happen, and external funders decide to pause funding until research work can begin again. It is possible that external funders will not be willing to pause funding – this should be discussed with the funding agency and/or supervisor on a case-by-case basis.

Inactive Term for International Students

- International students may wish to become inactive for a term to pause their tuition fees and return home for the semester.
- University of Waterloo is awaiting information from the Federal Government regarding the implications of taking an inactive term, and the impact (if any) for international students on obtaining a post-graduation work permit.
- The University is continuing to advocate for international students and will provide more information when it becomes available.

International Students & International Travel

Immigration Status for Returning to Canada/Post-Graduation Work Permit

- If a student's term is disrupted due to the COVID-19 situation, it is not believed to affect their post-graduation work permit. However, regulations for this have not yet been confirmed.
- The GSPA is currently seeking clarity from the Canadian Government regarding post-graduation work permits in this instance.

Attendance of International Conferences/Academic Travel

- The University's rules will be aligned with the Government's rules. If international travel is permitted, then the university will respond accordingly.

Campus Services

Library Access

- The physical volumes in the University libraries may be made available in electronic format to students and faculty. The logistics of this task are currently being discussed, with more information to come shortly.

Mental Wellness & Petitions

- If a student has mental wellness/disability questions or challenges that are affecting their academics, they are encouraged to reach out to their supervisor (research-based) or program director/graduate chair (course-based). If they are not receiving the support needed, they should connect with their Graduate Associate Dean, or the GSPA office.
- Petitions filed previous to the COVID-19 situation should continue, if possible. Campus Wellness is continuing to perform over-the-phone appointments; however, if a student is still struggling to receive time-sensitive information/documents from Campus Wellness, they should connect with Jeff Casello from the GSPA.

COVID-19 Research

- Bruce Muirhead in the Office of Research (muirhead@uwaterloo.ca) will be receiving all of the critical research requests, with top priority going to COVID-19 mitigation research. Please connect with Bruce Muirhead if you have a research idea regarding COVID-19 mitigation.