



**UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO
GRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATION**

Research Report for Council

GRADUATE STUDENT PARENTS - ISSUES AND RESOURCES

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1. Purpose

The GSA represents a diverse community of graduate students at the University of Waterloo. Graduate students (both domestic and international) with families may experience particular impediments to pursuing and completing graduate education. The purpose of this report is to review the issues and resources (e.g., housing, health/dental for dependents, on and off-campus resources, etc.) applicable to graduate student parents in order to provide more supports for these members of our community.

2. Issue

Graduate school is challenging, and the completion rate depends on a university and field of study. The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS) in the report on the completion of graduate studies (Canadian Association for Graduate Studies 2003) shows that the median graduation rate for master's students is above 70% for all fields of studies (i.e. humanities, social sciences, physical sciences, and life sciences). The more dramatic situation applies to doctoral students, where the median completion rate is within the range of 45 and 75% (with the lowest rate for the humanities studies). The challenges of obtaining a graduate degree increase when students are parents and try to balance graduate education and family responsibilities. It has been shown that the severity of this issue depends on gender and family structure (Theisen, McGeorge, and Walsdorf 2018), with women with children having the highest leave rate (when compared with non-parent students, regardless of gender, and men with children). This becomes an important issue when the structure of graduate students is considered. The Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey conducted in 2016 (Mosaic Research Solutions 2016) shows that the majority of graduate students (58.6%) are women. Nearly half of the students are within 26 and 35 years of age, and 45% of students live with a spouse (both married and with domestic partner marital status are considered). The 2016 survey reports that 22% of students have at least one child. It can be concluded that graduate parent students are a significant part of the graduate student community. Despite this, limited literature is published regarding that group of students (Theisen, McGeorge, and Walsdorf 2018). Therefore, an effort on the understanding of the needs of graduate parent students is needed at the scientific, national, and local levels. This report represents the local response and the effort taken at the University of Waterloo (UW).

The background section of this report includes a review of the issues seen by graduate student parents reported in the literature and the analysis of the survey taken at the UW. The key considerations discuss the currently available resources. The report finishes with recommendations for the GSA.

3. Background

The basic idea of the difficulties of graduate parent students can be found in the CAGS's completion report. Amongst the major issues, the following factor can be found: insufficient funding, lack of constructive supervision, or academic isolation. Although the report was prepared for all graduate students, it will be shown that these factors play an increased role when a subgroup of student parents is considered. For graduate student parents, financial issues (additional to the problems seen by students in general) include the cost of healthcare and daycare. Issues related to supervision are extended by aspects of flexibility (for example allowing working from home) and understanding of parental commitments. Isolation problem is also more significant as parent students do not have as much free time as regular students and cannot take an active part in events organized for graduate students. Finally, a major problem that uniquely applies to parent students is the availability of childcare. Based on the literature review, the following aspects will be discussed in detail:

- (a) Work atmosphere
- (b) Daycare
- (c) Health insurance
- (d) Assistantships
- (e) Family housing
- (f) International student issues

Additionally, this report offers a comparison of the perception of the resources by master and Ph.D. students, and how the perception changes with gender. Finally, resources reported in the literature facilitating successful graduation are discussed.

Issues reported in the literature

(a) Work atmosphere

The literature review shows that family life and work-life balance is often ignored or devalued within academia (Theisen, McGeorge, and Walsdorf 2018). It is proposed that creating an environment supporting work-life balance could promote the well-being of student parents in grad school. The activities that could be taken by universities include training both faculty members and students about work-life balance, potential challenges of student parents, and enhance the value of parental roles.

These actions are extremely important as it has been found that student parents experience significantly more stress than non-student parents (Theisen, McGeorge, and Walsdorf 2018), and have 50% less time for schoolwork, sleeping, and leisure activities (Study International Staff 2019).

(b) Daycare

Daycare is one of the most important resources for graduate student parents. The major factors that are reported in the literature are affordability, location, and the times the care is offered. In the US, 75% of universities provided daycare services available to graduate students (Theisen, McGeorge, and Walsdorf 2018); however, only half of these services were subsidized by universities, and often faculty members have priority. In the region of Waterloo, the fee of childcare in the centres provided by the region ranges from C\$817 to C\$900 (depending on the child's age, (Region of Waterloo 2020)). The private centre can have (and often have) higher rates. The report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CBC News 2016) gave an even higher number (C\$1031-C\$1320) and called the rates to be second highest in Canada. Moreover, an 11% daycare fee increase was observed in the period of 2014-2016. Finally, 90-100% of childcare centres have waitlists, and quite often, the wait time is measured in months and years.

A preference for university-provided childcare services was reported amongst graduate students (Theisen, McGeorge, and Walsdorf 2018). However, the off-campus centres tend to offer decreased wait times and an increased number of families that could enroll for the care. Finally, nighttime care was reported as desired, as it matches with typical study hours of graduate students.

(c) Health insurance

Another major financial expense reported by Theisen et al. (2018) is health insurance. Subsidized insurance available to students and their dependents is suggested to be helpful. Another healthcare-related issue is due to the fact that universities often do not consider graduate students as employees, despite the fact that a significant part of undergraduate teaching activities relies on graduate students (Kornblith 2016). Therefore, graduate students are not included in the benefits offered for university employees.

(d) Assistantships

One of the ways of financial support to graduate students is offered through graduate assistantships. However, the availability of these positions vary, is not guaranteed on a continuous basis, and salaries depend on discipline. The social science and humanities disciplines are reported as the lowest-paid graduate assistants. The lack of stability with assistantships requires graduate students to seek job opportunities outside of the university, which puts extra constraints on already busy schedules of graduate student parents.

(e) Family housing

A solution for solving an issue of obtaining affordable housing can be offered through university residences and subsidized rent. Amongst the universities in the Association of American Universities, 50% provided family-specific housing; however, none of them were subsidized. Another issue is associated with the availability of university family housing. Galton (2019) describes that when she was looking for a graduate housing unit, all of the units reserved for families were full.

(f) International student issues

International graduate student parents are perhaps the least studied subgroup of students. They face many restrictions, which include: limited scholarship options and financial recourses (such as Canada Student Grant for Full-Time Students with Dependents), restriction on how much they can work, limited daycare subsidy options, and increased social isolation (Williams 2019).

Perception of the resources by master and Ph.D. students

The study performed by Theisen et al. (2018) suggests that master and Ph.D. students do not significantly differ when their opinions, on available recourses for graduate student parents, are compared. Therefore, master's and doctoral students can be considered as one group when the policies addressing graduate student parents are prepared.

Effects of gender on students' perceptions of potential resources

Theisen et al. (2018) also report statistically important gender differences in the perception of potential recourses helping graduate student parents. This study shows that graduate student mothers put greater importance on potential recourses than graduate student fathers. This is due to the patriarchal family structure, in which a woman is seen as the primary parental figure.

Policies for successful graduation

Literature suggests that the policies for successful graduation tailored for the needs of graduate student parents should include the topics of time restrictions, and previously shown aspects (i.e. supportive work atmosphere, daycare, health insurance, assistantships, and family housing). Theisen et al. (2018) show that the policies that address time restrictions can provide the ability to become part-time graduate student without consequences (or extend the help, so a student can remain with the full-time status), deadline extensions (course work, comprehension exams, theses, and dissertations). The existing policies should be evaluated on a regular basis.

The survey conducted at the University of Waterloo

The review of the issues of graduate student parents discussed in the available literature helped to design a survey and get preliminary insights on the situation amongst the University of Waterloo graduate students. The survey consists of three sections: (i) background questions, (ii) issues of graduate student parents, and (iii) selection of the most critical problems. The background questions included the enrollment and immigration status (to observe a difference seen by international students), and family structure (structure, number children and their age, and a daytime care type for children). In the second part of the study, graduate students had a chance to provide their opinion on the following aspects: financial support, daycare options, health care, accommodation during classes, social isolation stress, transportation, spousal support, resources on campus, and housing options. Finally, they ranked five as the most critical issue for them. The survey questions can be found in the appendices section of this document. A group of students, mainly living in the Columbia Lake Village (CLV, graduate family units), was asked to participate. This study was voluntary; therefore, the sample is low (n=6), and the generalization of this survey may be limited. Nevertheless, it can give a reasonable addition to the literature review and can be treated as a first step to a more comprehensive and campus-wide study.

The background section of the survey shows that the survey participants (further called participants) represent the whole spectrum of students, including both full and part-time enrollment and both international and domestic status. Most participants come from a traditional family structure (both males and females were graduate students), and a single-parent family (mother) is also represented. The number of children ranged from one to three, and the children's age ranged from three to fifteen. All children attended either childcare or school. The issues reported to the following categories will be discussed next: financial support, daycare, health care, accommodation during classes, social isolation, stress, transportation, spousal support, resources on campus, and housing option (both on and off-campus).

- Financial support

One participant reported a guaranteed TA position each term. A continuity of assistantship provides a great relief to family budget and planning. However, guaranteed teaching assistantships are not university policy, which means that students are not treated uniformly. The issues related to finances are more affecting international students. Limited financial support for international students was reported. Additionally, time constraints on federal and provincial child benefits affect international students (18 months of residency is required to be eligible for the benefit).

- Daycare

Daycare represents one of the main issues for graduate student parents. The availability of daycare spots is limited and represents a real issue. Only one daycare centre offers priority to UW students and faculty; however, the same centre is known for an extremely long waitlist. The high cost of daycare was also reported (in comparison to a TA salary), and provincial subsidy is only available for the domestic students (and permanent residency applicants).

- Health care

The main concern regarding the offered health care is related to a limited amount of doctors in the family clinic at the UW. Moreover, there are no walk-in appointments for family members. Additionally, dental coverage (offered through the Studentcare plan) is very limited.

- Social isolation

Most participants did not report isolation issues. However, the new coming international students are more prone to social isolation. It also has been reported that most of the social events in the CLV are organized in evenings, during children's bedtime, which could exclude student parents from participating.

- Stress

The most stress-related issues reported in the survey are finances (lack of continuity of teaching assistantships, and restricted planning). Additionally, limited options for with parents with sick kids were reported (a program threatened a student to fail from a course) and highly stressful and inhumane perception of the situation by the student. More flexibility when problems arise within family units is expected.

- Transportation

The issues related to transportation included parking options (important for parents who have to drop a child to daycare/school and would like to use a UW's parking lot [the CLV permit do not include main campus parking]), and sidewalk winter maintenance (extremely important for parents with strollers).

- Spousal support

Most students are not aware of any spousal support.

- Resources on campus

A need for more elevators (and instructions on how to find to them), changing stations (practically not available), and lactation rooms was expressed in the study. Study rooms designed for parents with special needs children are also desired.

- Housing

Most students were satisfied. However, these students are CLV residents; therefore, this conclusion can be biased.

- Key issues

The sample is too small to select the key issue that should be addressed. However, the common issues amongst the surveyed students were: daycare, housing, accommodating students with families to ensure their success (general sense, looking for systematic changes), parking options (allowing to use all parking places within the same parking pass), financial support (mainly for international students)

Finally, there was a number of issues related to the CLV housing. These issues are not directly related to the matter of this report; however, they represent important concerns of graduate student parents. The major issues are related to snow removal service, maintenance service, and lack of dishwasher and AC unit.

4. Key Considerations

In this section of the report, currently available resources, addressing the key issues found in the survey, are discussed.

- Daycare

The University of Waterloo has only one centre that could be considered as a daycare facility. The Psychology Department runs a research facility called the Early Childhood Education Centre (ECEC, <https://uwaterloo.ca/psychology/early-childhood-education-centre>). However, the offered programs include only morning and afternoon sessions for children 30 months to 4 years of age. Therefore, there is no continuous care throughout the whole day, and there are no programs for infants. Assuming the fees, the combined cost of five mornings and four afternoons is not competitive with the regular daycare centres. Additionally, only one private daycare centre offers priority for the University of Waterloo community (<http://brightstartsearlylearning.ca/registration/>). However, that includes faculty, staff, and students, which means that students will have the lowest priority. At the same time, the Bright Starts is known to have an extremely long waitlist.

Region of Waterloo offers financial help paying for childcare (<https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/living-here/help-paying-for-child-care.aspx>). However, this is only available for domestic students and permanent residency applicants. International students can apply for Graduate Student Day Care Bursary (<https://uwaterloo.ca/forms/graduate-studies/daycare-bursary-application>). However, this option is only available for full-time students (therefore, the part-time students are penalized), and the program is subject to change each year and is determined by available funding. Therefore, it does not provide a necessary sense of stability for those in need.

- Housing

The University of Waterloo offers two family-housing options; however, only one is directly run by the university. Columbia Lake Village-North (CLVN) offers a couple of units for graduate students with families. Only the full-time students are eligible for the CLVN unit (so again, part-time student parents are penalized). The number of units is limited, and the Fall term is known to have a long waitlist.

The other option is available through St. Paul's University College (further referred to as St. Paul's). St. Paul's offers 1 and 2 bedroom apartments. However, the rent is not very competitive, with \$1,297 for a 1-bedroom apartment and 1,633 for a 2-bedroom apartment (<https://uwaterloo.ca/stpauls/suites-private-rooms-grad-apartments/rents-fees/apartment-rents>).

- Financial support

Financial support is viewed through two aspects: availability of assistantships and international students' support options. Regarding the availability of assistantships, a lack of universal rules was observed. The author of this study knows that sometimes students are guaranteed with continuous TA positions while others are not. An increase of TA rate or a supplement pay for student parents was postulated in the survey.

International students, in general, have less financial support options. They are not eligible for OSAP, Tri-Agency Canada Graduate Scholarships, and are eligible for only a very limited number of OGS scholarships. Additionally, they may not be eligible (or the eligibility can vary) for childcare subsidy. Additionally, international graduate student parents will see time constraints for the federal and provincial child benefit and are not eligible for the Canada Student Grant for Full-Time Students with Dependents (which again, penalizes part-time students).

- Parking options

Finally, for those living in the CLVN, they are only allowed to buy the parking permit other than the CLVN lot (due to the limited parking spots around the main campus). This creates an extra problem when these students have to drop-off/pick-up their children from daycare/school.

Additionally, a strategic plan for accommodating students with families to ensure their success was postulated in the survey and seems to be necessary for the future.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the literature review and the survey prepared by the author, the following recommendations can be offered for the GSA.

- (a) Postulate and collaborate with Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs (GSPA; and other University of Waterloo entities such as Department of Psychology) on the preparation of a University-wide, comprehensive study on the needs and issues of graduate student parents.
- (b) Develop a University-wide strategic plan for accommodating students with families to ensure their success.
- (c) Have regular (e.g. annual) meetings reviewing the policies ensuring the success of graduate student parents
- (d) Have a GSA section dedicated to graduate student parents
- (e) Work with Waterloo Residences on the strategic plan guaranteeing more family units in the future. Review the rent subsidy options for graduate student parents.
- (f) Work with the Early Childhood Education Centre on how to extend the program and offer full daycare service, or develop an independent University-operated daycare centre. Work with the Region of Waterloo on offering more priority for graduate student parents.
- (g) Work with the GSPA on having more transparent rules and increased support for international students through improved Graduate Student Day Care Bursary
- (h) Postulate University-wide assistantship standards, an increase of TA rate, or a supplement pay for student parents.
- (i) Work with the GSPA on providing an equivalent of the Canada Student Grant for Full-Time Students with Dependents for international student parents
- (j) Review the current resources (elevators, ramps, changing stations, lactation rooms, etc.), provide better labelling for increased accessibility (elevators, changing stations, lactation rooms, etc.).
- (k) Work with UW Parking Services on providing a campus-wide parking pass available for graduate student parents
- (l) Work with Campus Wellness to provide extended service by the family health clinic (more doctors available so students can choose their family doctor, and offer walk-in appointments for family members).

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Appendix (Survey questions)

1. Background questions

A group of general questions that might help to group and characterize the problems that are discussed in section 2.

- Enrolment status (full-time/part-time)
- Working while enrolled (yes: full-time/ yes: part-time/ no)
- Immigration status (international/domestic)
- Family structure
- Who is a student in the family
- Number of children in the family
- Child/children age
- Please indicate if each child attends daycare/school or stay home

2. Issues of graduate student parents

Please comment on each item that is listed (e.g. if this is a problem for you if so, how important it is. If you can think about a possible solution, please share). If there is anything else that you would like to be addressed, please add it to the list.

- Financial support (scholarships are less available for international students, child benefit)
- Daycare (availability, cost, distance from home/university, daycare for hours, subsidy)
- Health care (cost, flexibility)
- Accommodation during classes
- Social isolation
- Stress
- Transportation (winter-related issues [e.g. snow plowing])
- Spousal support (group support/activation)
- Resources on campus (e.g. changing stations, elevators, etc.)
- Housing options (on-campus, off-campus)

3. Rank the five most important issues for you (number 1 is the most critical problem that you would like to be solved)

1. ...
2. ...
3. ...
4. ...
5. ...

Do you have any further comments?