

# Results of the 2017 Graduate Student Experience in the Research University (gradSERU) Survey

Prepared June 2018



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## Introduction

This report, prepared through a collaboration between the School of Graduate Studies and the Office of Student Life, provides an overview of the University of Toronto (U of T) findings from the gradSERU (Graduate Student Experience in the Research University) Survey, which was administered between February and March 2017. This was the first time the survey was used by U of T and it was chosen because it was specifically designed for graduate students at research-intensive universities.

The gradSERU Survey is a comprehensive, longitudinal study initiated by the Center for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) and the University of Minnesota’s Office of Institutional Research to help answer questions about the potential relationship between graduate education experiences, program characteristics, and development outcomes of Master’s and doctoral students at leading research universities across the globe.

The intention of the gradSERU Survey is to examine how differences in the graduate/professional education experiences of students may relate to their intellectual, emotional, ethical, professional, and psychosocial development. The 2017 version of the core gradSERU Survey contained 12 sections: Your program, Entrance and Initial Experience, Financial Support, Advising, Research Experience, Teaching Experience, Program Climate, Career Plans, Obstacles to Degree Progress, Proficiency levels, Overall Satisfaction, and Demographics. Three modules—Health and Wellness, Professional Development, and International Student—posed additional questions.

### Communicating the Results

In most cases, this report on the 2017 gradSERU Survey distributes student responses among three categories: PhD and Doctoral, Master’s leading to a thesis (called “Master’s Research”), and Master’s course-based (called “Master’s Professional”). In some instances, where there is little variation in the student responses across these three categories, the report analyzes all responses together. As well, references in this report to “research students” include both doctoral and Master’s research students.

Secondly, the charts and tables in this report reflect responses to one of two question types: those that asked respondents to “check all that apply,” and those that asked respondents to “choose on a rating scale which best applies to you.” In the latter cases, negative and positive responses are grouped together. Throughout the report, legends and labels clearly indicate the chosen approach.

## Demographics & Responses

The 2017 gradSERU Survey achieved a 20.7% response rate, with participation from 3,521 graduate students – 1,350 Doctoral, 1,449 Master’s Professional, and 722 Master’s Research (note: the number of responses may vary by question). Below are responses by program category to some of the demographic and personal identity questions.

		Doctoral	Master’s Research	Master’s Professional	Total
Gender Identity	Woman	58%	59%	70%	63%
	Man	37%	38%	26%	33%
	Another Identity	2%	1%	1%	1%
	Prefer not to share	3%	2%	2%	3%

		Doctoral	Master's Research	Master's Professional	Total
Age	25 and under	16%	71%	50%	42%
	26 to 29	38%	15%	24%	28%
	30 to 34	23%	7%	12%	15%
	35 to 39	9%	3%	6%	7%
	40s	8%	2%	6%	6%
	50s	3%	1%	2%	2%
	60 +	1%	1%	1%	1%
Citizenship	Canadian	82%	87%	85%	85%
	Other	18%	13%	15%	15%
Stage of Program (choose any that apply)	I am taking courses	37%	72%	96%	68%
	I am working on my thesis/dissertation	74%	70%	12%	48%
	I have defended my thesis/dissertation	3%	1%	0%	2%
	I have an internship	2%	4%	21%	10%
Current year in program	1st	22%	66%	62%	47%
	2nd	17%	28%	29%	24%
	3rd	17%	4%	5%	9%
	4th	16%	1%	2%	7%
	5th	14%	>1%	1%	6%
	6th or more	11%	>1%	>1%	5%
Ethno-Cultural Identity (choose any that apply)	Arab (Saudi, Egyptian, etc.)	3%	2%	2%	2%
	Black	3%	2%	4%	3%
	Chinese	12%	18%	16%	15%
	Filipino	1%	2%	1%	1%
	Indigenous	1%	1%	1%	1%
	Japanese	1%	0%	1%	1%
	Korean	3%	3%	2%	2%

		Doctoral	Master's Research	Master's Professional	Total
	Latin American	4%	3%	3%	3%
	South Asian (East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.)	6%	9%	10%	8%
	Southeast Asian (Cambodian, Indonesian, Laotian, Vietnamese, etc.)	2%	2%	2%	2%
	West Asian (Afghan, Iranian, etc.)	3%	3%	1%	2%
	White	47%	41%	43%	44%
	Another Identity	6%	5%	4%	5%

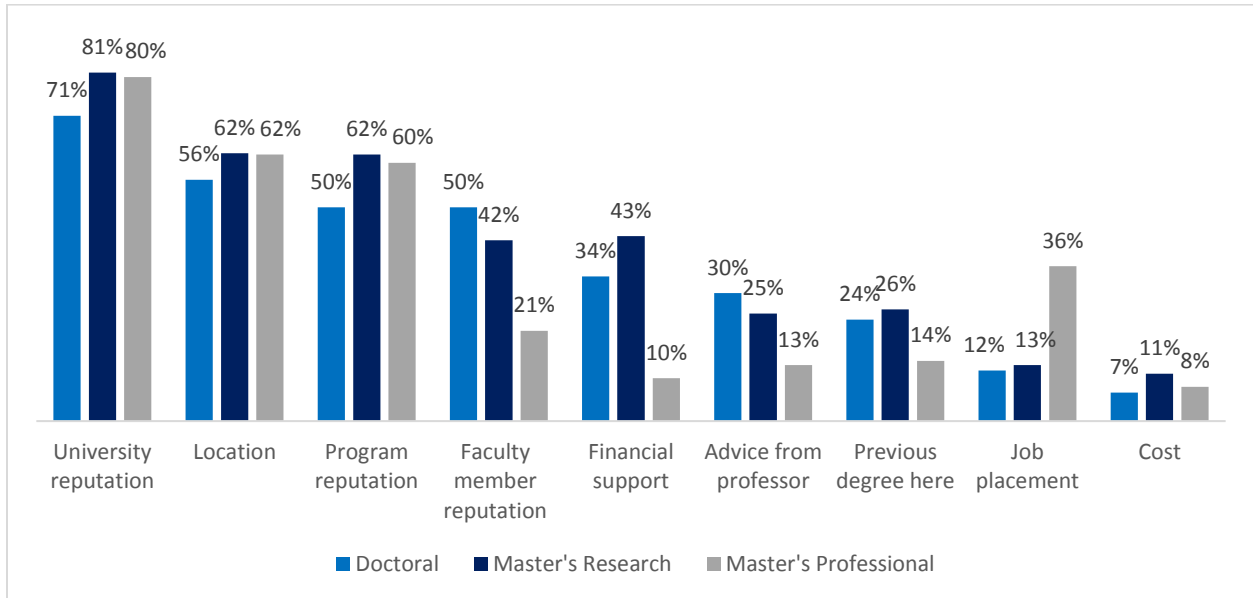
	Doctoral	Master's Research	Master's Professional	GradSERU Total	Enrolment Total
Applied Science & Engineering	16%	21%	12%	15%	13%
Architecture, Landscape & Design	0%	0%	4%	2%	2%
Arts & Science	39%	27%	7%	23%	25%
Dalla Lana Public Health	4%	4%	7%	5%	5%
Dentistry	0%	3%	0%	1%	1%
Forestry	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%
Information	1%	0%	12%	5%	4%
Kinesiology and Physical Education	1%	3%	0%	1%	1%
Law	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Management	1%	0%	7%	3%	9%
Medicine	14%	29%	9%	15%	14%
Music	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%
Nursing	1%	0%	3%	2%	2%
OISE/UT	14%	9%	23%	17%	14%
Pharmacy	2%	2%	0%	1%	1%
Social Work	1%	0%	8%	4%	3%
UTM Graduate Programs	0%	0%	3%	1%	3%
UTSC Graduate Programs	2%	0%	1%	1%	1%

The chart above highlights the respondents by Division and by program category. Comparing the “Total” and the “Actual U of T Total” column, response rates are fairly representative of the graduate student population in each program. Notable exceptions are Management (fewer responses), UTM graduate programs (slightly fewer) and OISE (slightly more).

## Selection & Admission

The second section of the core gradSERU Survey, “Entrance and Initial Experience,” explored why students chose their graduate program. Students could choose as many options as were relevant. This section highlights some of the most commonly cited responses by program category.

**Table 1: Rationale for choosing your graduate program**

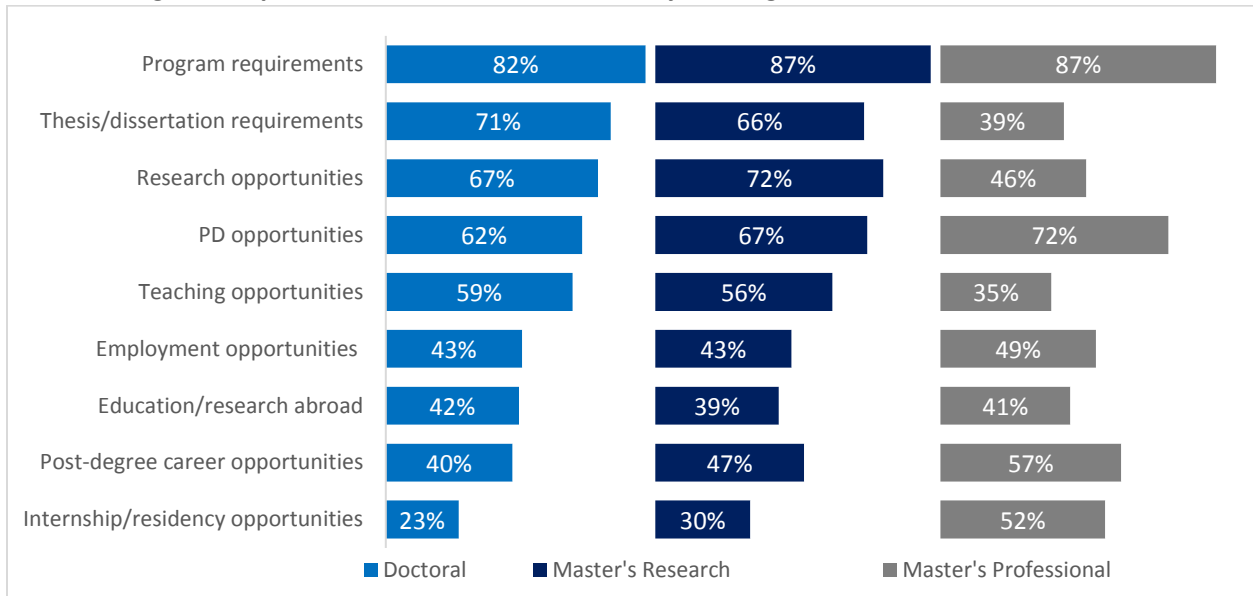


The chart above outlines that, in all program categories, the three most common responses to the question, “Why did you choose your graduate program?” were reputation (institution and program) and program location. Location and financial support were much more important criteria for research-based students, while job placement (36%) was more important for Master’s Professional students.

## Clear Communication

The gradSERU questions also probed how well students’ programs or departments communicated with them about key messages. The values indicated in the chart below represent the percentage of students who said that respective messages were communicated “clearly,” “very clearly,” or “extremely clearly.”

**Chart 2: Program/Departmental Communication of Key Messages**

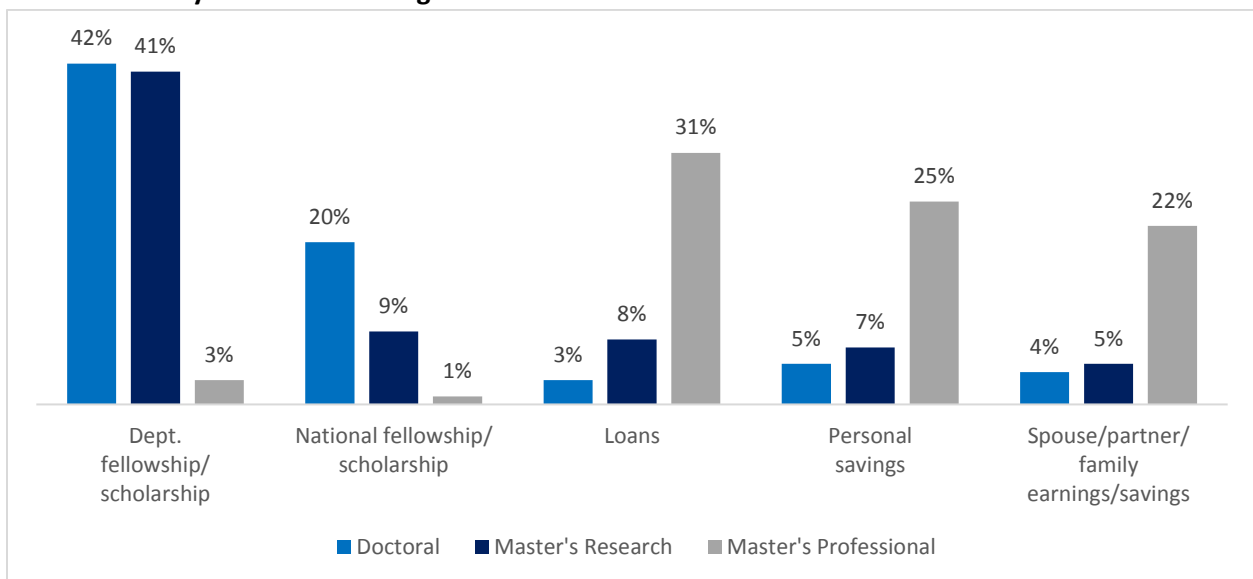


Research students reported that program, dissertation and research requirements were well communicated, but that employment and post-degree opportunities were communicated less clearly. Master’s Professional students felt that professional development and post-degree opportunities were communicated better overall.

### Primary Source of Funding

In section three of the core gradSERU survey, students were asked to identify the primary source of funding for their studies since the beginning of their program. Students were able to choose from 20 options.

**Chart 3: Primary Source of Funding for Graduate Students**

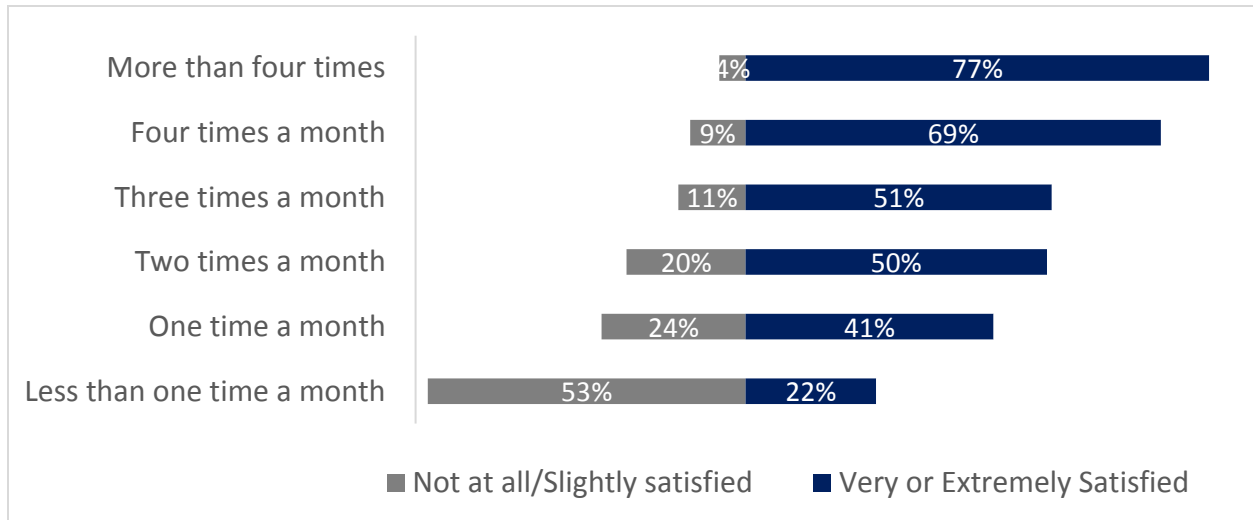


Responses indicated that research students are most likely to get funding from their department and through research assistantships, though a much larger percentage of doctoral students reported national scholarships as the primary source of funding. Professional Master’s students reported their primary source of funding to be loans, personal savings or family support.

### Advising and Satisfaction

Section 4 of the core gradSERU Survey addressed issues around student-advisor contact. (It is worth noting here that the term “advisor” was used throughout to indicate faculty involved in supervising research-stream students; no distinction was made between “advisor” and “supervisor.”) Students were asked how satisfied they were with the amount of time they typically spend with their advisor. The chart below merges positive responses (“very satisfied” or “extremely satisfied”) and less positive (“not at all satisfied” or “slightly satisfied”) with the neutral option omitted. The responses are limited to doctoral and Master’s research students.

**Chart 4: Time Spent with Advisor and Satisfaction with Advisor**



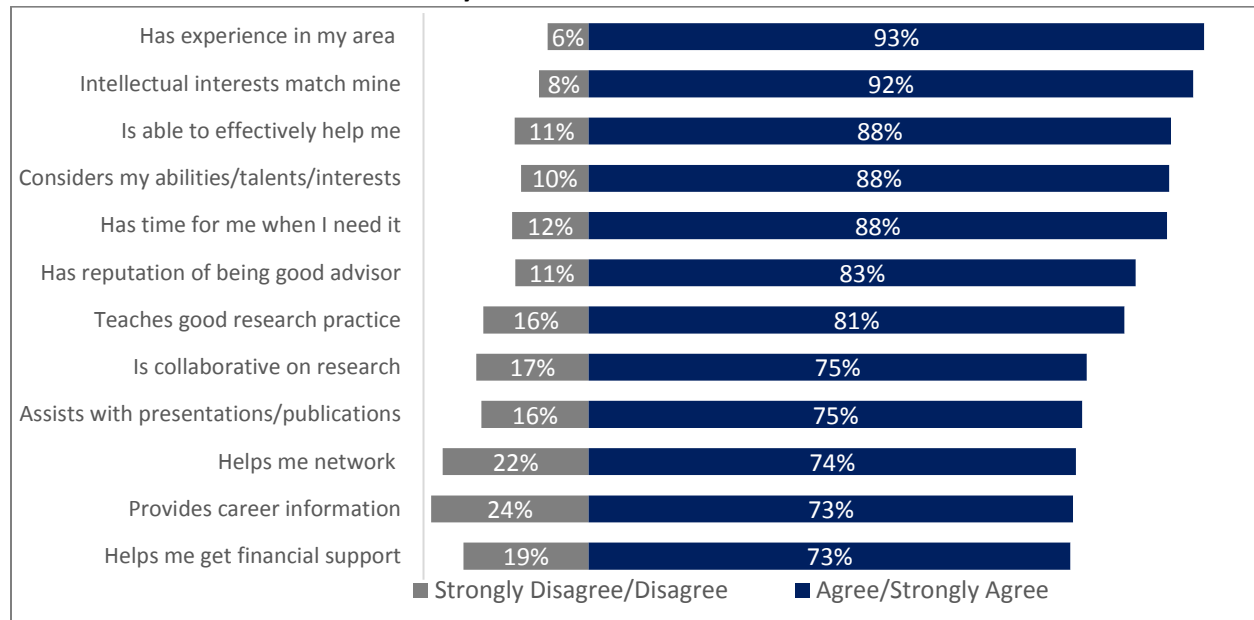
Unsurprisingly, the more frequently students met with their advisor, the more satisfied they were with the amount of contact they received. Only 22% of students who met less than once a month with their advisor were satisfied with this level of contact.

### Interactions with Advisor

The gradSERU Survey also asked research students to assess the quality of their interaction with their advisor. The chart below merges positive responses (“agree” and “strongly agree”) and less positive (“strongly disagree” and “agree”). There was no neutral option for this question.



**Chart 5: Interactions with Advisor. My advisor ...**

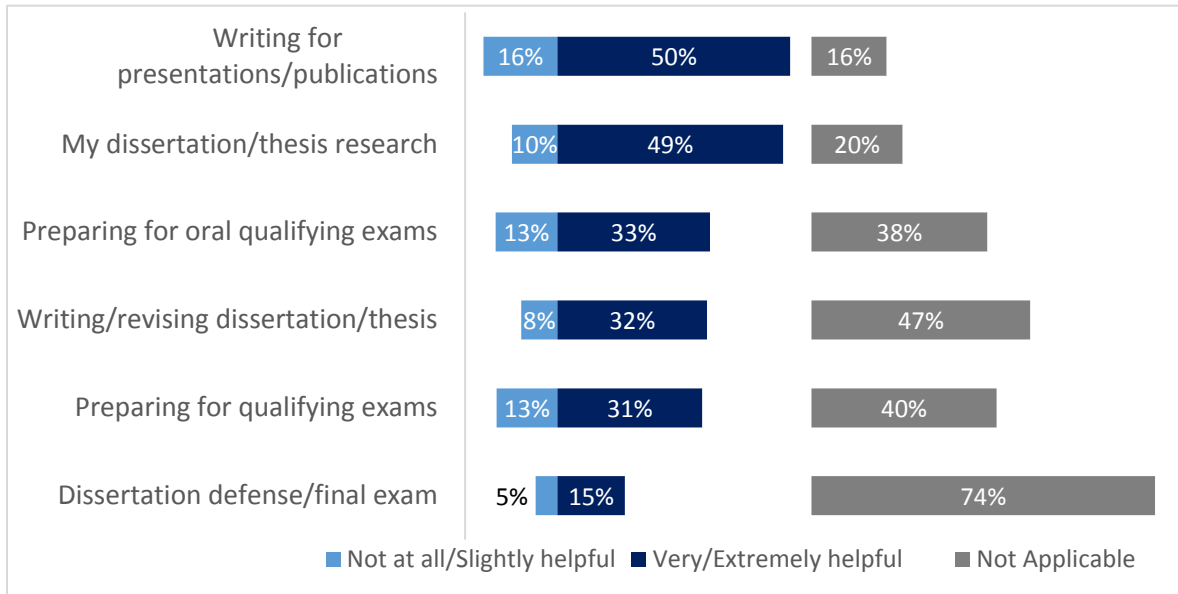


The large majority of students agreed that their advisor is experienced, aligned with their interest and can help and overall supported their academic and professional development, although close to 25% of the respondents expressed insufficient networking and career information support.

### Research Support

The chart below provides information on how doctoral students perceive the helpfulness of their advisors in a variety of support areas. A very large percentage of students within the Master’s Research category (and even more in the Master’s Professional category) chose “not applicable.” The data below groups the less positive and more positive responses together, omitting the neutral option.

**Chart 6: Interactions with Advisor**

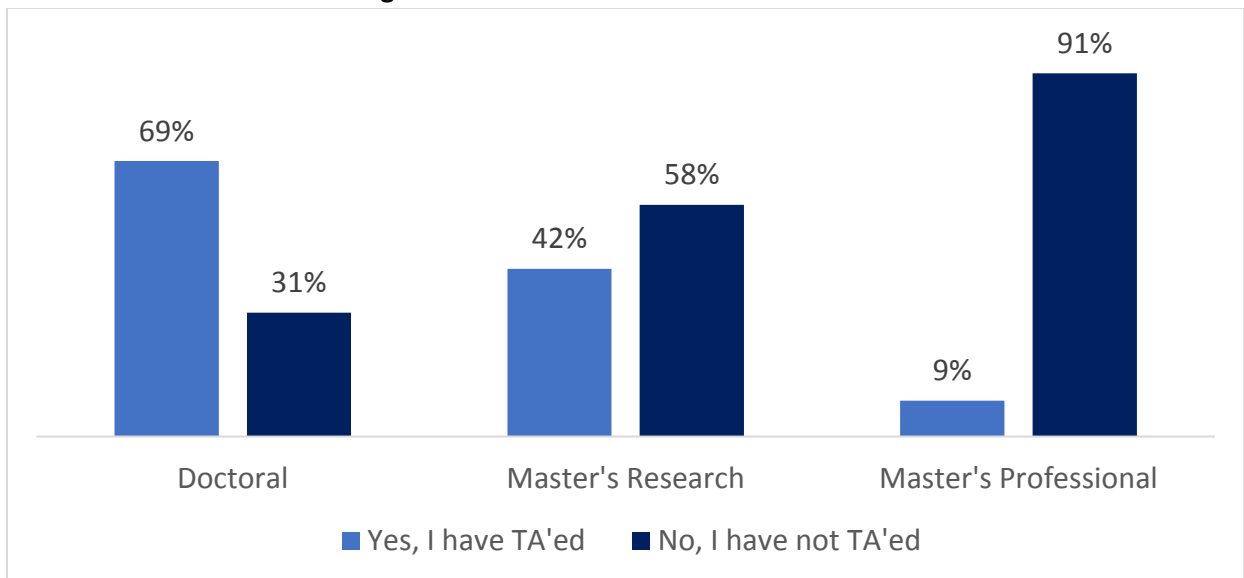


Most students with experience of the relevant program stages found their advisors quite helpful, especially around writing for presentations and publications or in their own dissertation/thesis work. The three areas in which more than 10% chose “not at all” or “slightly helpful” were writing, preparing for final defense and qualifying exams.

### Teaching

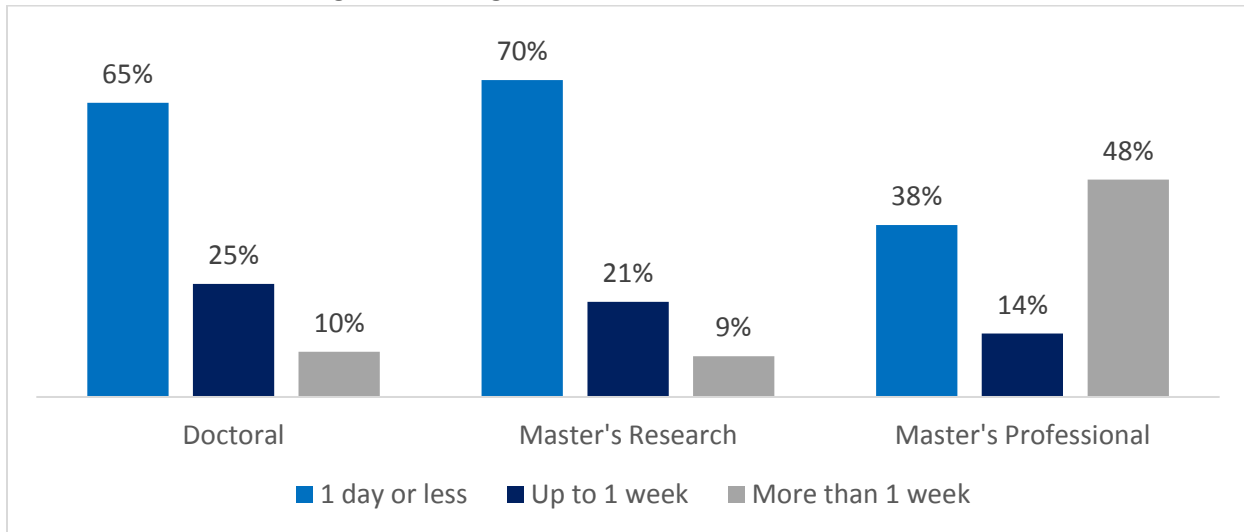
Teaching experiences of graduate students were explored in section six of the core gradSERU Survey. The first question identified the percentage of students who said they were teaching assistants during their program of study.

**Chart 7: Students with Teaching Assistant Positions**



The next question addressed the subset of students who had a teaching assistant position and asked how much training they had received.

**Chart 8: Amount of Training for Teaching Assistants**

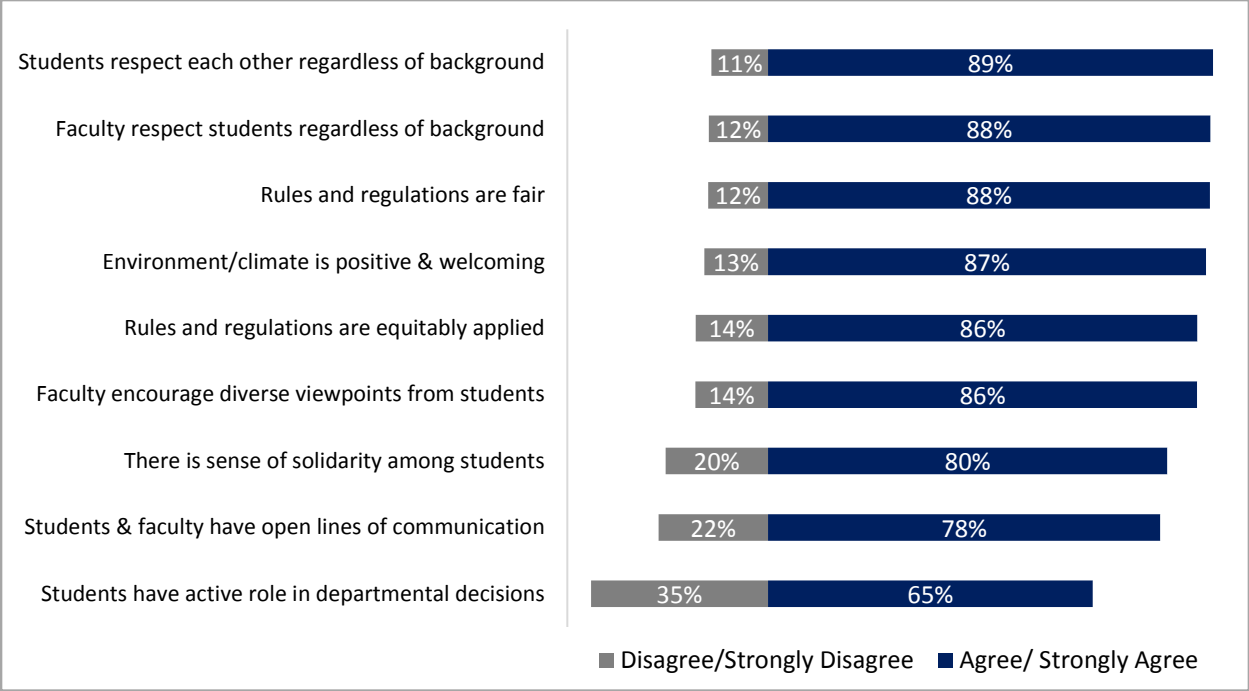


The chart above highlights that research students most commonly cited one day of training as a TA, with approximately 20% of students citing up to a week of training and 10% citing more than a week. A much larger percentage of students within the Professional Master's category said they had more than a week of training time as a teaching assistant (48%). This percentage may be driven by the fact that, of the 9% of Master's Professional students with TA positions, the majority of respondents are from OISE, where students have the option of taking a course in professional preparation for academic careers.

### Program Climate

In section 7 of the core survey, students were asked to consider their graduate experiences and perceptions of the climate in their program and at the institution. The chart below summarizes responses, grouping together "disagree" and "strongly disagree" as well as "agree" and "strongly agree." No neutral option was given.

**Chart 9: Student Experiences and Perceptions of Program Climate**

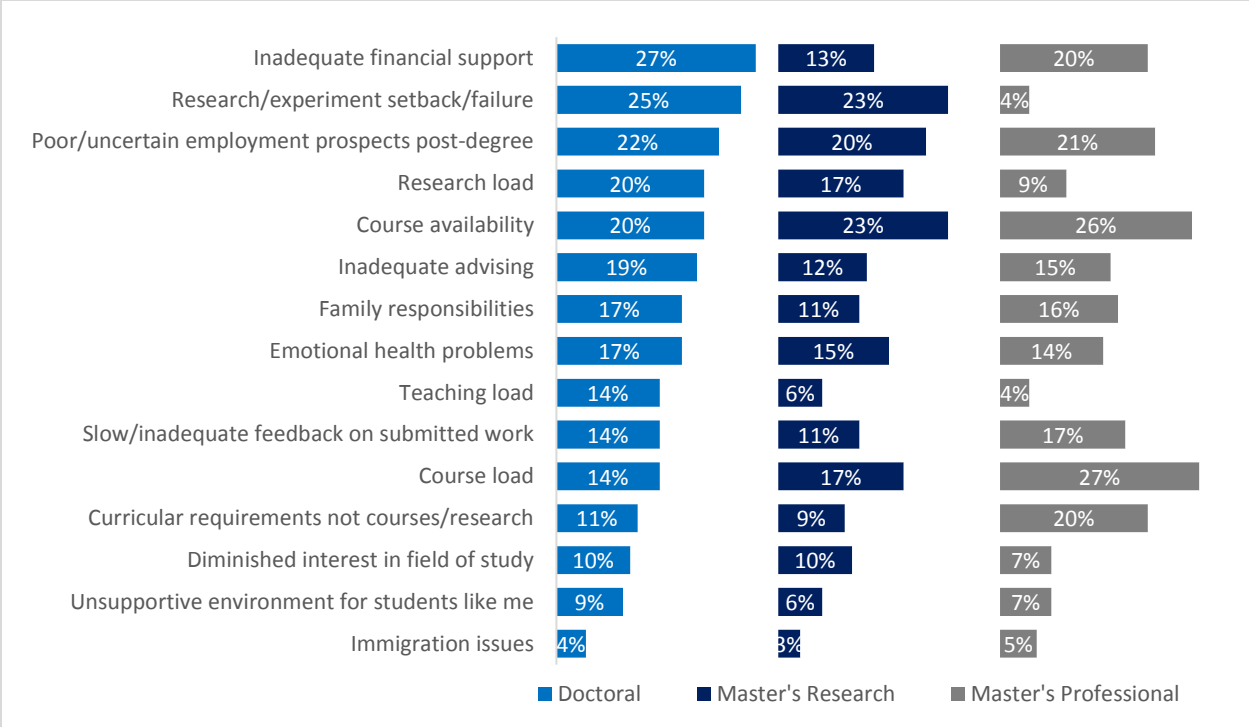


A large majority of students agreed or strongly agreed with these statements, suggesting generally positive climates across programs. The most negatively scored item was “students have an active role in departmental decisions.”

**Obstacles to Degree Progress**

Section 9 of gradSERU explored barriers to student progress in their degrees. Below are responses by program category. Students could indicate that a particular issue was “not at all” a barrier, or was a “small,” “moderate,” “large” or “very large” barrier. The chart highlights the percentage of students who chose “large” and “very large.”

**Chart 10: Barriers to Degree Progress**

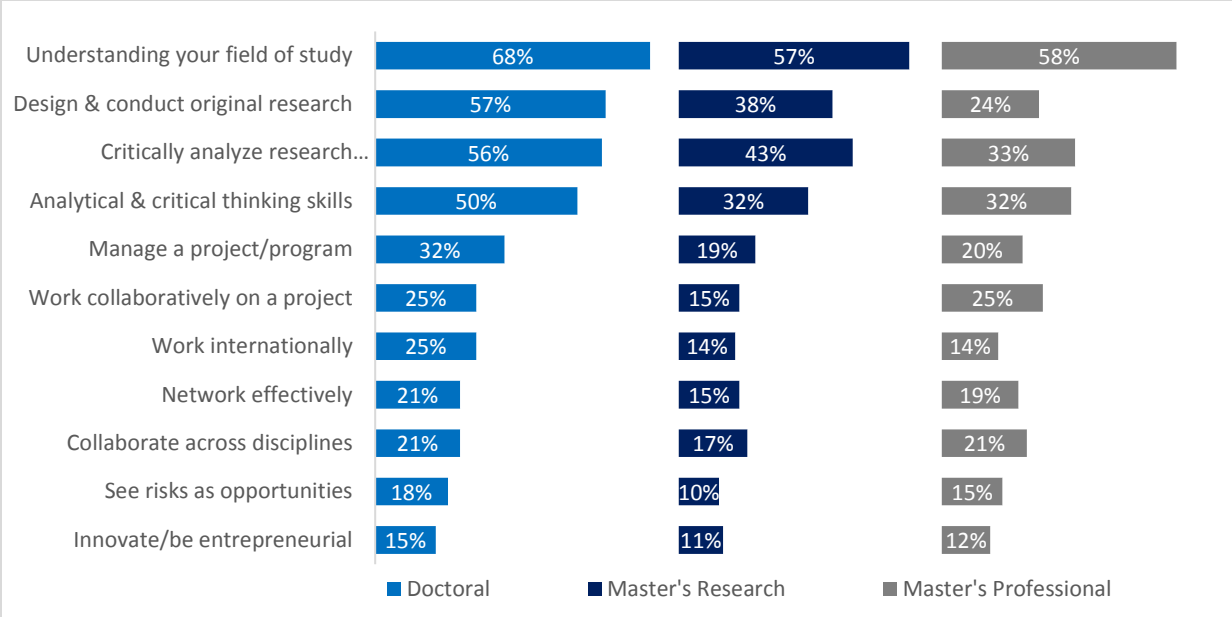


In the question above, financial support was identified as a bigger barrier for doctoral and Master’s Professional students than it was for Master’s Research students. Both groups of research students said research setbacks and research load were similar barriers. Students in Professional Master’s programs were more likely to indicate that course load (27%) and curricular requirements outside of coursework (27%) were bigger barriers. Students in all three program categories had similar responses regarding the degree to which uncertainty about employment prospects, course availability, emotional health and slow feedback on submitted work were barriers.

**Proficiency Gains**

This section assessed how students rate the development of their abilities and skills during their time in graduate school. For each skill or ability identified, students were asked to choose whether their skills had “not changed,” or had undergone a “small change,” a “moderate change,” a “large change” or a “very large change.” The chart below indicates the percentage of students who chose “large” or “very large.”

**Chart 11: Perceived gains from graduate study**

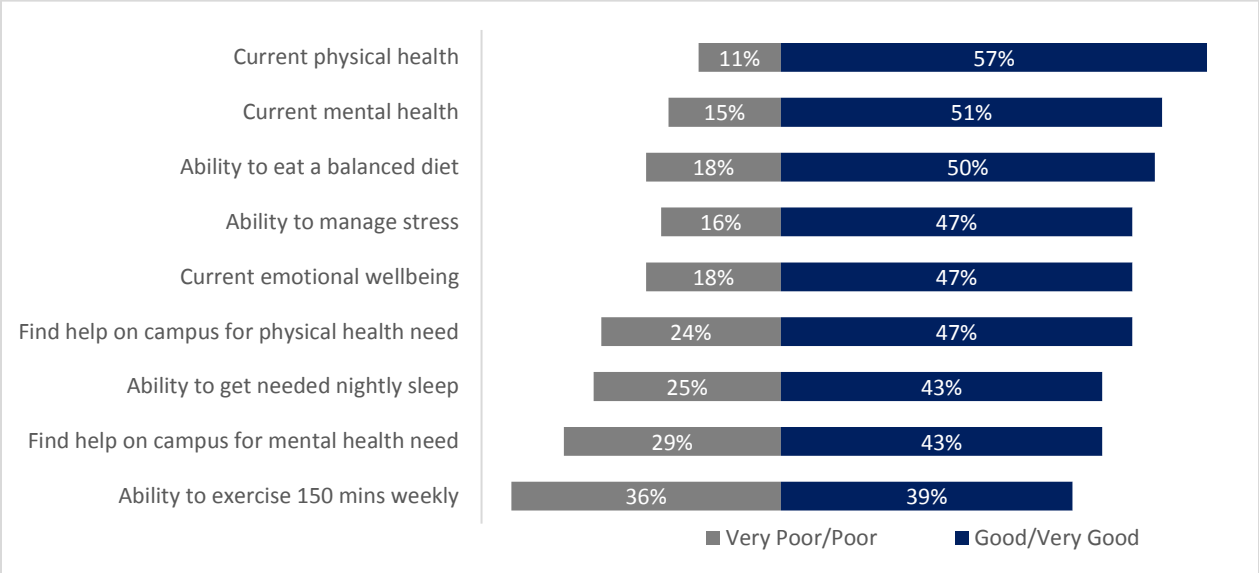


In the above chart, we see that students from all program categories chose understanding field of study, critical thinking, and analyzing literature as three of the most significant areas of growth. However, there was considerable variability in student responses.

### Health & Wellness

Graduate student perceptions of health and wellness were explored within a focused module outside the core gradSERU Survey. Participants were asked to rate their responses on a five-point scale (from “very poor” to “poor” to “fair” to “good” to “very good”). In the chart below, the “fair” responses are not shown and responses from all three program categories are displayed together.

**Chart 12: Perceptions of Health and Wellness**



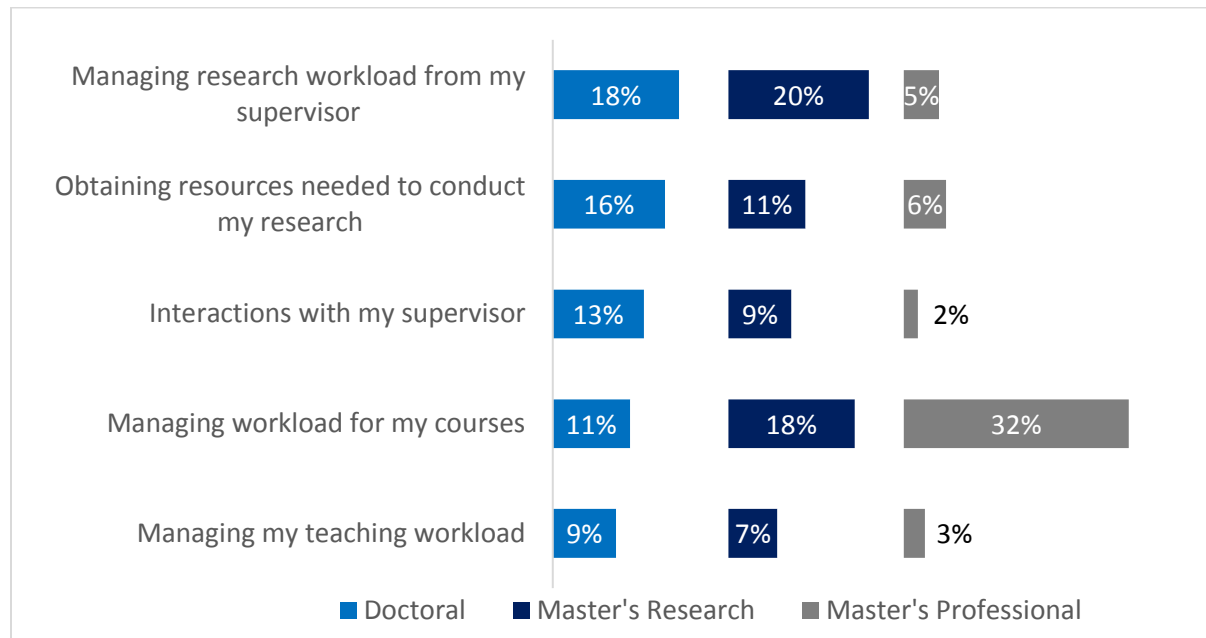
Students rated their overall physical health somewhat better than their mental health. Among respondents, 51% of students rated their mental health as good or very good, the two top options in the

survey. This compares to 70% of 18-34 year-olds in a general Statistics Canada population survey who chose the top two options “very good” and “excellent”. Notably, 29% claimed their ability to find mental health support on campus was “poor,” and 36% also reported a “poor” ability to get 150 minutes of weekly exercise.

### Sources of Stress

Within the Health & Wellness Module, graduate students were asked to rate how stressful the following areas of their academic programs were using a scale from “not at all stressful” to “extremely stressful.” The chart below groups the respondents who said “very stressful” or “extremely stressful.”

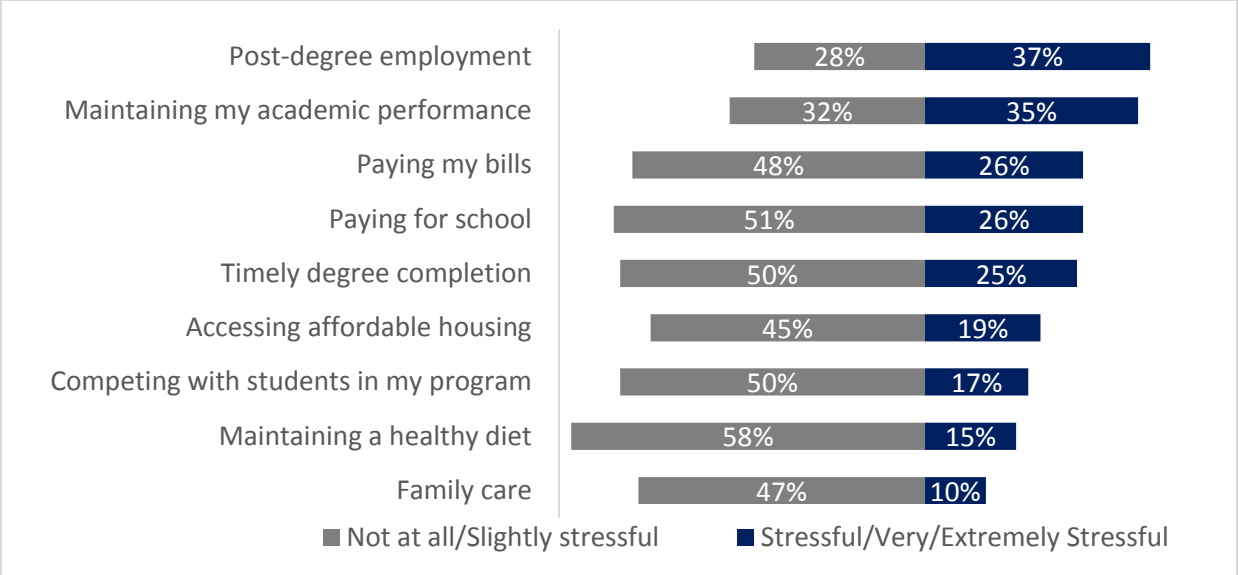
**Chart 13: Sources of Academic Stress**



Considerable variation was seen in the responses to sources of stress. Overall, PhD students cited managing research workload and obtaining resources as the most stressful elements of their program. Master’s Research students also cited the research workload as stressful, in addition to course workload. Master’s Professional students cited their workload for courses (32%) as by far the most stressful element of their program.

An additional set of questions focused on other sources of stress relating to various aspects of the graduate student experience. Students selected one of five responses, from “not at all stressful” to “extremely stressful.” Displayed below are two groups of student responses: those indicating that a particular item was “not at all stressful” or “slightly stressful” and those indicating it was “very stressful” or “extremely stressful.” Students who selected “neutral” or “not applicable” are not shown. Because the distribution of responses was very similar across program categories, results are aggregated.

**Chart 14: Sources of Graduate Student Stress**

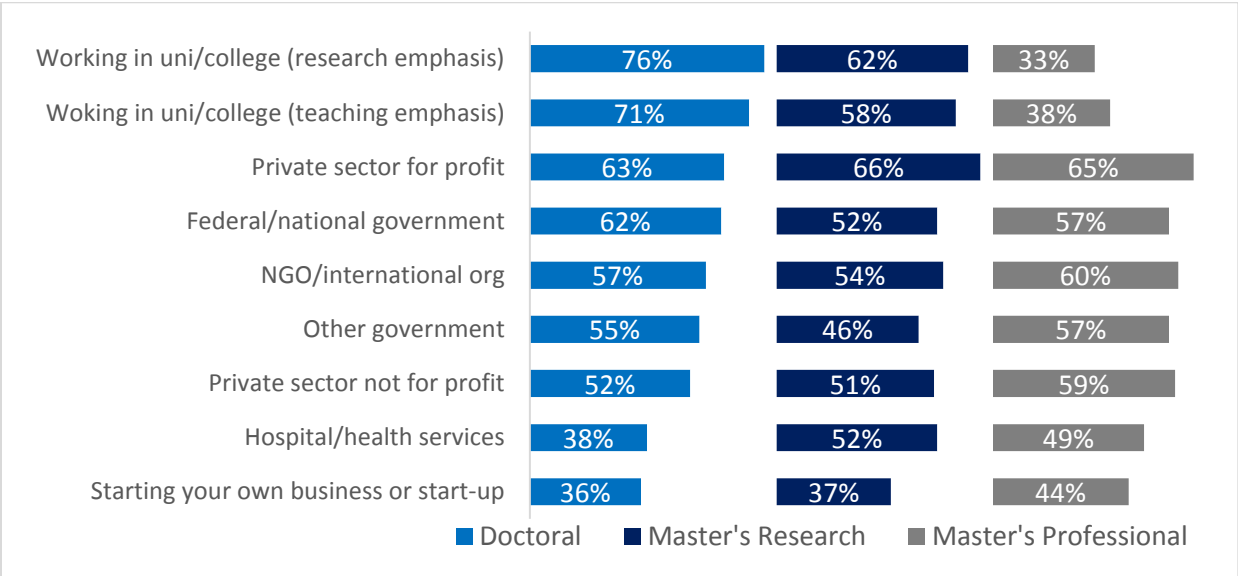


This chart highlights that post-degree employment and maintaining their academic performance were deemed to be the greatest sources of stress. Students reported less stress in terms of competing with other students in their program and maintaining healthy eating habits.

### Career Interests

Within the Professional Development module of the gradSERU Survey, questions explored potential career paths. Students were asked to what extent they viewed the possibility of working in various employment sectors using the scale “not at all” to “to a very large extent.” In the chart below, those who responded “to a moderate extent,” “to a large extent,” and “to a very large extent” are grouped together and displayed per program category.

**Chart 15: Interest in Potential Career Paths**



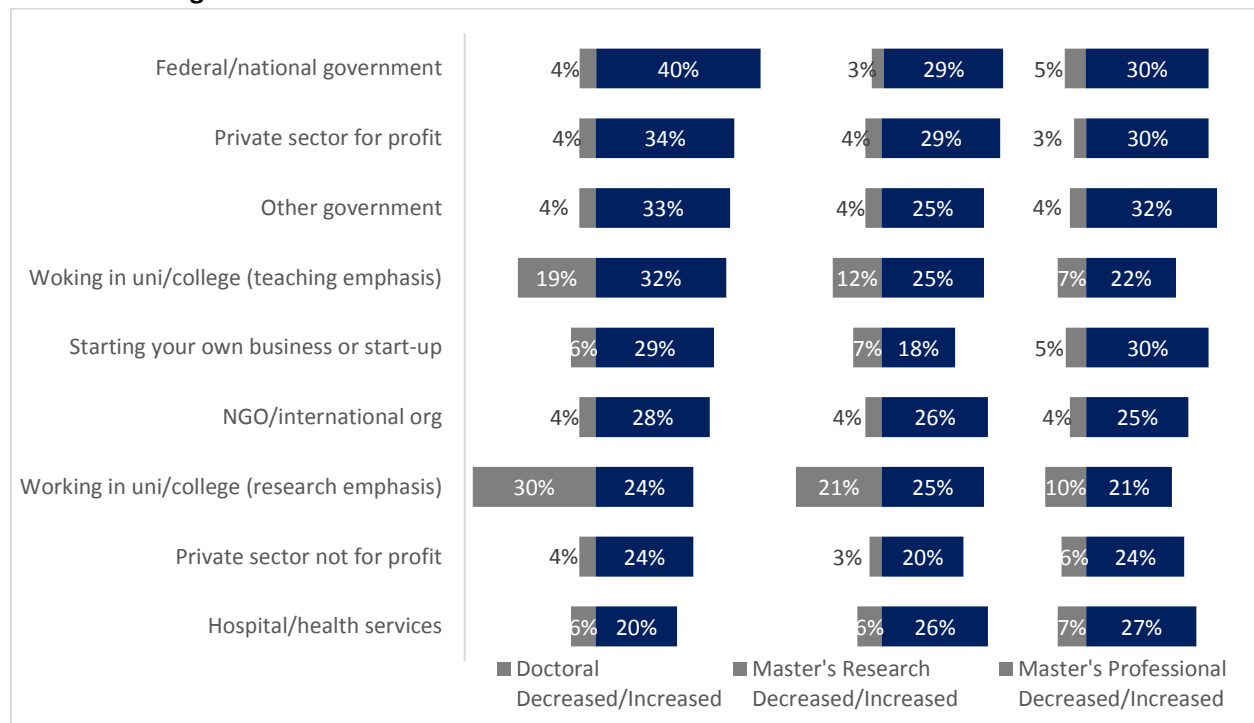


Research students have more interest in working in colleges or universities than students who are in professional programs. However, interest in working in the private sector was very similar among all three groups of students. There is less than 10% difference between the other responses (including private sector employment) in all other areas.

### Changes in Career Interest

Using the same categories, a follow-up question asked if students' interest in potential career paths has changed since beginning a graduate program. In the chart below, the percentage of students who said their interest decreased appears on the left; the percentage who reported an increased interest appears on the right. The percentage of students who reported "no change" is not shown.

**Chart 16: Change in Interest in Potential Career Paths**

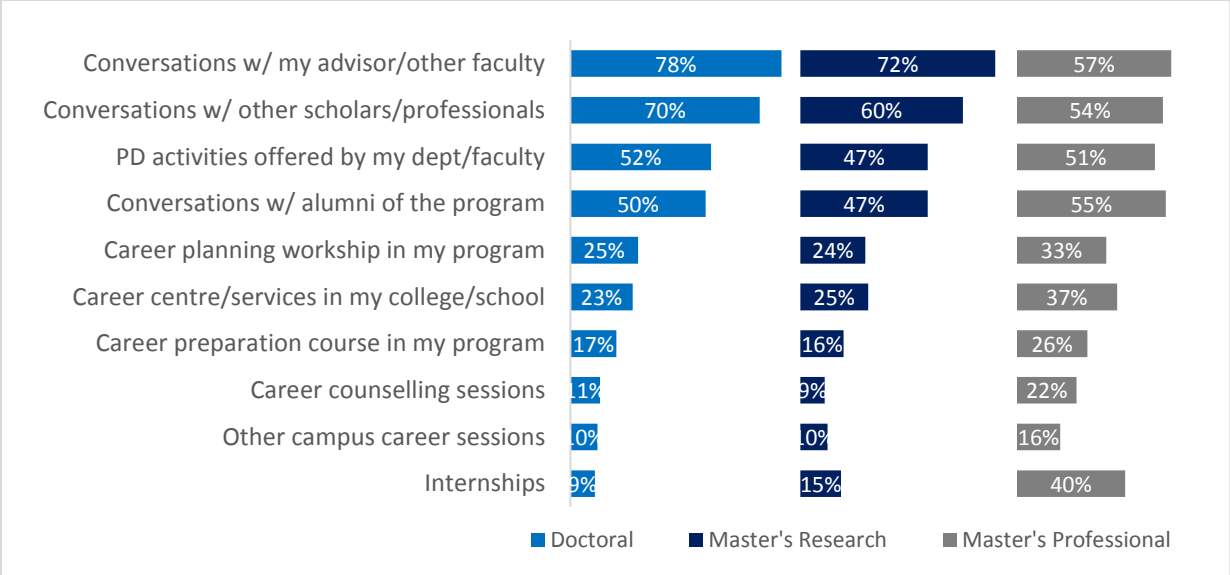


This chart highlights that, for students in each program category, graduate school seems to expand interest for all potential career paths. However, a significant percentage of doctoral students reported being less interested in working at a post-secondary institution in a teaching (-19%) or research capacity (-30%) than they were when they started.

### Career Development

Career development was also addressed within the Professional Development module of the gradSERU Survey. The chart below shows the percentage of students who indicated that they had participated in career development activities.

**Chart 17: Career Development Activities**

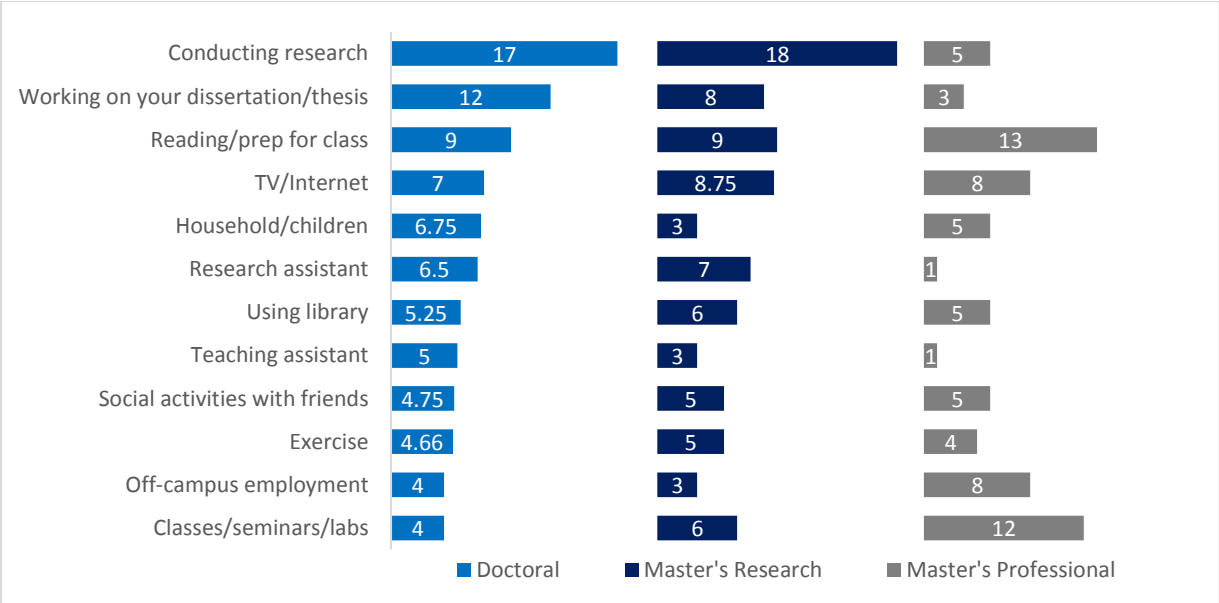


The chart highlights similar patterns for research students and Master’s Professional students. Students report that they are active with their advisors and faculty, and other scholars. A smaller percentage of them have participated in career planning and career services during their internships. A high percentage of Master’s Professional students (40%) reported doing an internship.

### Graduate Student Time Use

Students were asked to describe their use of time, indicating how many hours per week were devoted to various activities. Responses grouped by program category are displayed in the chart below, with figures rounded to the nearest hour.

**Chart 18: Weekly Graduate Student Time Use by Hours**



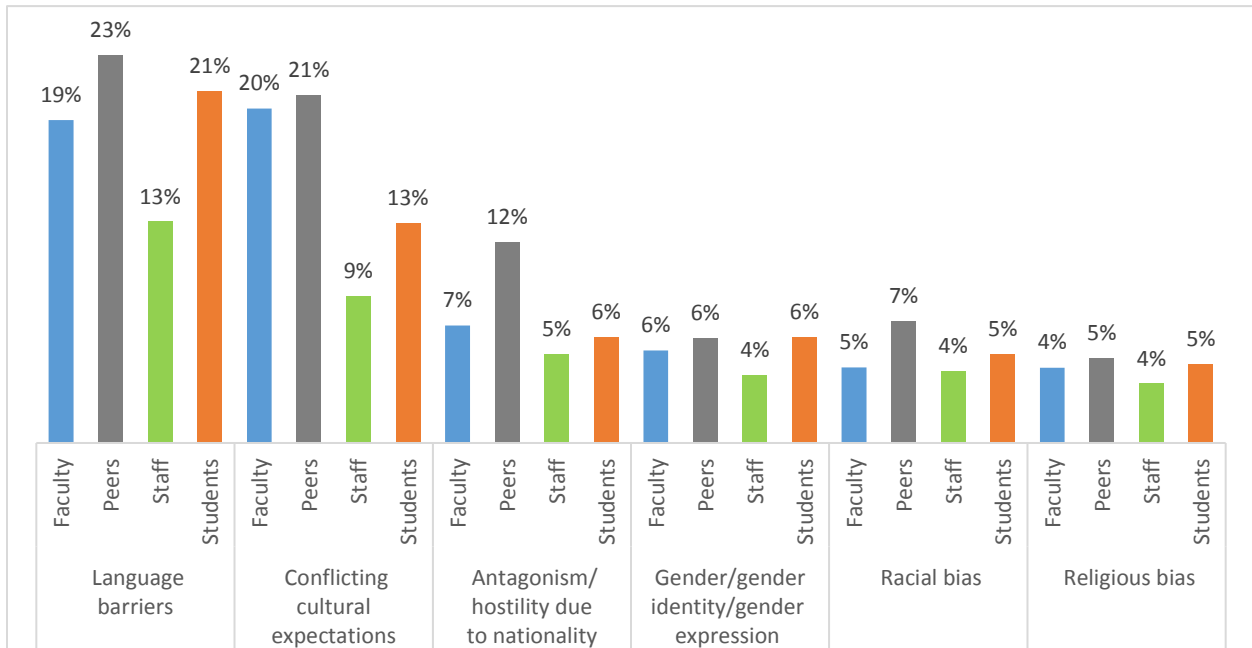
Clearly, research students spend much more time on research-related activities (conducting, dissertation, RA) and Professional Master’s students spend more time on preparing for classes,

attending classes and seminars, and working off-campus. Students in all program categories have similar responses in terms of social time, library use and exercise.

### International Student Barriers

Another module in gradSERU focused on the international graduate student experience. Those identifying as international students were asked to rate their experiences with and perceptions of faculty, peers, staff and students at U of T. The chart below summarizes the percentage of students who said that they had moderate, large or very large difficulties with a given topic or group of people. Because there was little difference in responses among students in the three program categories, all responses are aggregated in the chart below.

**Chart 19: International Student Barriers**

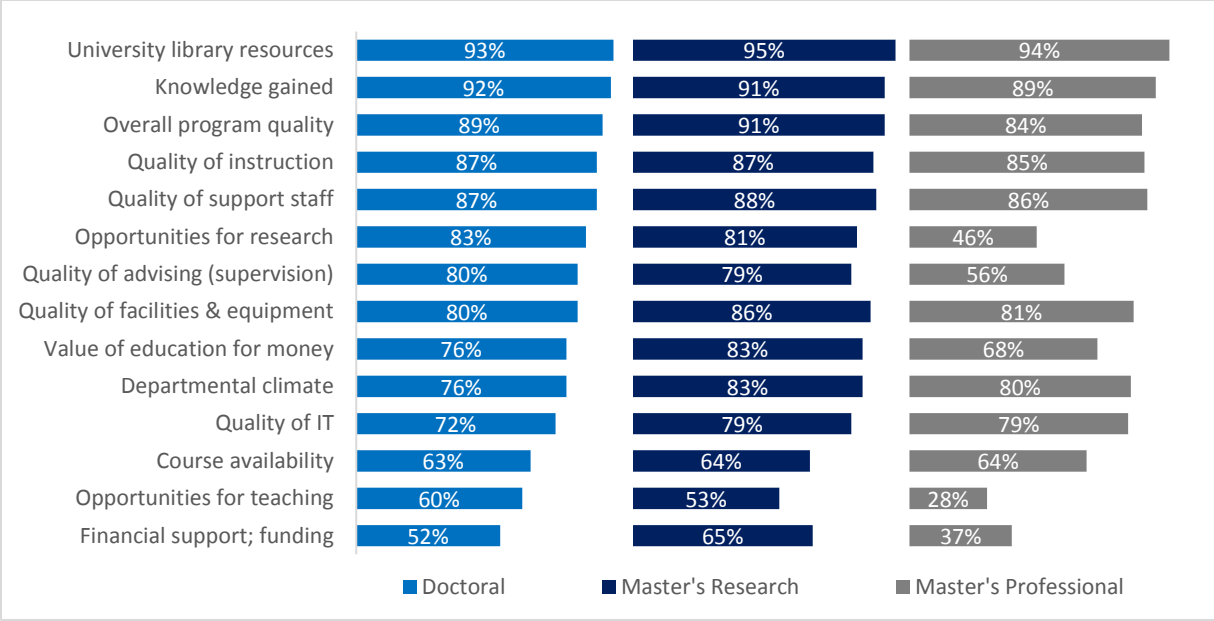


This chart highlights that language barriers were the most significant, followed by conflicting cultural expectations. Overall, the lowest barriers were with staff and students rather than faculty and peers.

### Overall Satisfaction

In tackling the issue of overall graduate student satisfaction, the core gradSERU Survey asked students to rate a variety of supports, resources, and program characteristics on a scale from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied.” The chart below displays the percentage of students who responded that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied.”

**Chart 20: Overall Graduate Student Satisfaction**



This chart highlights that students reported being highly satisfied with many elements of graduate student programs and resources such as libraries, program quality, supervision, instruction and support staff and faculties. There is lower satisfaction with course availability, opportunities to teach, and financial support.

**Conclusion**

This report provides some initial data based on the first time that the gradSERU Survey has been implemented at the University of Toronto. The questions within the survey instrument, especially around health and wellness and career exploration and expectations, provide valuable data not gathered in other graduate student surveys. The instrument also gathered data on a comprehensive set of personal, social and demographic questions. Over the next few months we will be releasing a series of short, focused reports that expand on the data shared above. Having a data set and survey instrument designed for a research-intensive university, such as the University of Toronto, will allow us to better benchmark against other similar institutions. As the University continues to analyze the data from this survey, there will be further consideration on fully participating in the international gradSERU consortium on a longer-term basis.

Additional data about the gradSERU instrument, including a full list of questions, can be found on the website <https://seru.umn.edu/grad>. Any questions about U of T's data and findings should be directed to [sgs.communications@utoronto.ca](mailto:sgs.communications@utoronto.ca)