



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

# GRADUATE STUDENT PULSE SURVEY

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## SUMMARY REPORT

MARCH 2021

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## Context

Since March 2020, the University of Toronto has been actively responding to the impact of a global pandemic. The pandemic has presented numerous challenges for all students at the University of Toronto, but there have been specific challenges for graduate students. To better understand graduate student experiences, the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) conducted a “Graduate Student Pulse Survey” to assess needs, challenges, and successful initiatives related to supporting the quality of the student experience and student success during the pandemic.

## Purpose

The SGS Pulse survey was designed to gain a sense of graduate students’ main challenges experienced in advancing academic work; the current status of their health and well-being; sense of community within the university, department, and peer group; and resources and supports that have been helpful for advancing the quality of the student experience and academic progress during the pandemic. The data will be used to develop, assess, and maintain programs and initiatives that respond to the needs of graduate students.

## Survey Design and Distribution

The SGS Pulse Survey was designed by SGS and reviewed by administrative research groups and graduate student groups. The survey was designed to be completed online, anonymously, and requiring no more than 10 minutes. There were two versions of the survey, one for research-stream students and one for professional-stream students. Both surveys were comprised of 12 questions with ten closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions. The surveys were distributed in November 2020 and data collection closed after 2 weeks.

The survey link was emailed directly to all enrolled graduate students. The research-stream survey was sent to graduate students who are currently enrolled in PhD and research master’s programs. The professional-stream survey was sent to graduate students who are currently enrolled in professional doctoral programs (SJD, EDD, DMA) and professional master’s programs.

## Response Rates

The SGS Pulse Survey was sent to 21,192 graduate students and 10% (2,030) students completed the survey. Of the 10% of graduate students who completed the survey: 62% identified as female and 36% identified as male; 81% were domestic students and 19% were international students; and 51% were in professional-stream programs and 49% were in research-stream programs. By division, 39% of respondents were in the Social Sciences, 28% were in the Life Sciences, 21% were in the Physical Sciences, and 11% were in the Humanities. This distribution mirrors the current enrollment data for the total graduate student population.

## Findings

### Challenges

As seen in Table 1, the top challenges identified by research-stream and professional-stream students included academic progress/time-to-completion, social isolation and mental health. The qualitative data aligned with these challenges as respondents described experiences with academic stress, feelings of isolation, challenges with mental health, and the impact of increased family responsibilities.

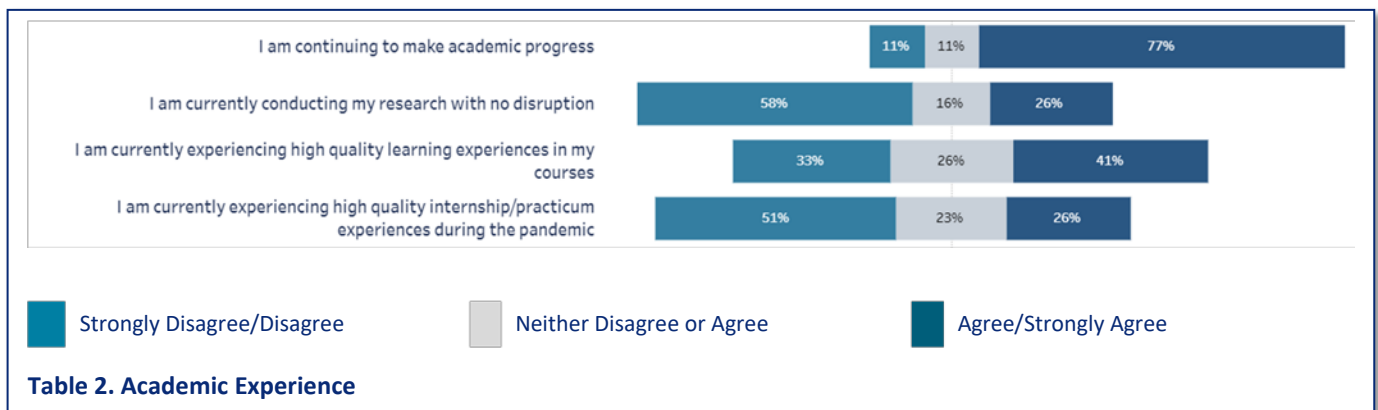
#### TOP CHALLENGES

Academic progress/time-to-completion
Social isolation
Mental health

**Table 1. – Top Challenges**

### Advancing Research in the Context of Disruptions

Although most of the respondents (77%) reported making academic progress during the pandemic, progress has not been without disruptions, contributing to concerns about the pace of progress and time-to-completion. Research disruptions have resulted from having limited or no access to lab facilities, field locations, or archives; restrictions on travel for research; and restrictions on research involving human participants. Professional students reported disruptions to their internship/practicum opportunities and diminished abilities to work from home.



Qualitatively, respondents reported various challenges related to working from home, including difficulties working and concentrating in small spaces, often without proper workspaces or technology, and surrounded by other family members or roommates.

### Social Isolation and Mental Health

**“I feel stressed and constrained physically with having to be in a small space with everyone at home. Consequently, I am struggling to concentrate and make progress in my thesis writing. This, in turn, is causing me anxiety and sleeplessness, which further disturbs my ability to concentrate during the day.”**

Making academic progress under difficult working circumstances, coupled with other pandemic-related stressors and associated social isolation, may be having an impact on graduate student mental health as evidenced by the consistent ranking of mental health as a top challenge across degree type.

In response to questions about graduate student mental health and well-being, 41% of all respondents reported that their mental well-being was ‘very poor’ or ‘poor’. Higher percentages of research-stream respondents (44%) and female respondents (43%) reported that their mental health was ‘very poor’ or ‘poor’ compared to respondents enrolled in professional-stream programs (37%) and male respondents (39%) (Table 3).

My mental well-being right now is			
Overall	41%	37%	22%
Female	43%	37%	21%
Male	39%	36%	25%
Domestic	42%	36%	22%
International	39%	38%	23%
Research-stream	44%	36%	20%
Professional-stream	37%	37%	26%

Very Poor/Poor	Fair	Good/Excellent
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**Table 3. Current mental well-being**

The survey also asked about students’ awareness of mental health resources and whether they used resources to advance their mental health and well-being.

The majority of respondents, 65%, ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that they are aware of health and mental health resources and 41% of respondents reported that they were using resources that advance their mental health and well-being (Table 4). Slightly fewer male and international students reportedly used resources to advance their mental health and well-being.

I have/I am using resources that advance my mental health and well-being	No	Yes
Overall	59%	41%
Female	56%	44%
Male	65%	35%
Domestic	58%	42%
International	63%	37%
Research-stream	58%	42%
Professional-stream	60%	40%

**Table 4. Using Resources**

Qualitative responses also indicated that certain populations are more significantly impacted by specific issues. For example, female respondents reported greater stress related to increased family responsibilities, with children not going to school, adults working from home, and elderly parents needing care.

“I identify as a queer Asian woman with anxiety/depression, and the pandemic has been especially hard on my mental health. I am also living with family who have quite different sociopolitical views than me, and I have limited contact with friends.”

“As an international student, the pandemic has affected me in the sense that traveling to my home country is risky since incidents and mortality there are high. That will not allow me to see my family until the situation improves. It is hard to be far knowing that they are facing a more challenging situation. Uncertainty sometimes makes the experience more stressful and it's harder to focus on academic progress.”

## Helpful Strategies

The survey asked graduate students to identify the top things that have helped with their student experiences. The findings indicated that support and flexibility were key strategies to helping graduate students make academic progress and stay well (Table 5).

### Flexibility

When ranking the top things that have helped during the pandemic, respondents listed flexibility as fundamental to making academic progress. This includes flexibility in expectations, processes for meeting program requirements, and when and where work is conducted.

### Support

Approximately 65% of the respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that they feel supported by their supervisor/program director. Respondents selected *Support/guidance from my supervisor/program director* and *Support from my academic peers* as most helpful during the pandemic (Table 5).

### TOP THINGS THAT HAVE HELPED

- Flexibility in **when** I conduct my academic work
- Flexibility in **where** I conduct my academic work
- Support/guidance from my supervisor/program director
- Support from my academic peers
- Support for working remotely
- Flexibility in program requirements and/or length

Table 5. – Top Things That Have Helped

**As a full-time, female frontline healthcare worker, it has been more than challenging over the last year. Very responsive and supportive sessional instructors, and supervisor have helped me to navigate this experience and for that I am forever grateful.**

	I feel supported by my supervisor/program director			I feel supported by my peers		
<b>Overall</b>	14%	20%	65%	16%	24%	60%
<b>Female</b>	14%	21%	64%	16%	23%	61%
<b>Male</b>	14%	19%	67%	16%	27%	57%
<b>Domestic</b>	15%	20%	65%	15%	24%	61%
<b>International</b>	12%	23%	65%	19%	28%	54%
<b>Research-stream</b>	10%	14%	75%	18%	28%	54%
<b>Professional-stream</b>	21%	31%	48%	13%	17%	69%

Table 6. Supported by supervisor/program director

Table 7. Supported by peers

Strongly Disagree/Disagree
  Neither Disagree or Agree
  Agree/Strongly Agree

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## Words of Advice

The final question in the survey asked graduate students for any words of advice they would give to a graduate student colleague about how best to adapt to the pandemic and continue to make academic progress while staying well. While there were a range of responses, some common themes included developing or maintaining social connections, prioritizing self-care, managing expectations, creating a schedule, and asking your supervisor for advice and support.

“Put your mental health first and listen to your needs. You are not alone - even though we are apart, we are all going through this together. And we are ALL going to get through this.”

“I find it helpful to create a routine and build time into my day that would move me closer to achieving my goals.”

“Lower your expectations of yourself! Working during a pandemic can be taxing in subtle ways. Ease the pressures you apply to yourself and your productivity.”

“Open communication with your supervisor to see if one or more of your projects can be adjusted to fit the pandemic.”

“Connect with peers, friends, and/or family regularly even if it is via e-mail, social media, and/or video conferencing. Attend events like webinars, online conferences, meetings for academic/professional/social development.”

“If you are an international student who cannot go back home due to the pandemic, keep connected to your loved ones, remember that you might be far but not apart. “

1. Make time to walk outside.
2. Do something like a 5-minute journal or gratitude journal every morning.
3. Call one person a day who you admire and respect, a family member or elder.
4. See if there is a small side hobby you can take up, skill-based, hands on, that will help you use a different part of your brain.”