

EDUCATION FOR ALL

The COVID-19 Pandemic & the Post-Secondary Experience at the University of Guelph

**Striving Towards a High Quality, Accessible
Institution for Learning and Working.**



PRESENTED BY —

THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH CAMPUS COALITION

Who is the *University of Guelph Campus Coalition*?

This document was put together by various groups across the University of Guelph that comprise the Campus Coalition. The Guelph Campus Coalition is a group consisting of student and worker organizations and unions across campus coming together to share information and resources to enhance their collective experience at U of G.

These groups include: the **Central Student Association (CSA)**, **Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3913**, **Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1334**, **Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) Guelph**, **International Students Organization (ISO)**, and **Guelph Queer Equality (GQE)**.

SUPPORT FROM THE CAMPUS COMMUNITY —

The following groups have signed onto & support the demands of this document: **Guelph Black Students Association (GBSA)**, **Indigenous Students Society (ISS)**, **Guelph Resource Centre for Gender Empowerment & Diversity (GRCGED)**, and **the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/TARA)**.

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STATEMENT —

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Post-Secondary Experience at the University of Guelph

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought several challenges to the forefront in the world of Post-Secondary Education. Some of which are challenges that existed before COVID-19 but have now been further exacerbated by the pandemic. Other challenges have only recently emerged and pose important questions for the future of Post-Secondary and course delivery. In addition, this pandemic has also offered solutions to pre-COVID-19 challenges that institutions can work to implement long after the pandemic is over.

This document will be exploring the issues and concerns faced by students, workers, faculty, TAs and Sessional lecturers to the University of Guelph. It will also highlight the multiple impacts of these challenges on the larger campus community, while offering solutions and demands that the University of Guelph can respond to and implement. We invite the University of Guelph Administration to meet with and work alongside the Campus Coalition to explore and implement the demands outlined in this document.

SUMMARY —

Recommendations and Demands

The Coalition's Recommendations and Demands are:

1. Enhance the quality of post-secondary education for the U of G community:

- UofG to write a letter to the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to request additional funding for the purposes of tuition relief for students.
- Smaller class sizes and hire additional instructors and TAs.
- Adequate funding support for TAs, sessional lecturers, and faculty.

2. Make post-secondary education more accessible:

- Academic stipends for students and staff.
- Recorded lectures.
- Open course content.

3. Prioritize mental and physical health:

- Increased funding for mental health supports.
- Make mental health services intersectional and diverse.
- Student and worker consultation around plans to return to campus.
- Increased PPE and sanitation services.
- Invite student representatives to attend and give input at all Joint Health & Safety Committees.

4. Demands for a safe return to campus:

- Full consultation and clear communication to students & workers around the return to campus plans.
- Academic Accommodations for all students, TAs, faculty, and sessional lecturers.
- Invite student representatives to attend and give input at all Joint Health & Safety Committees.

DEMAND 1 —

Quality of Post-Secondary Education and Financial Cost *

The COVID-19 pandemic and digital post-secondary format has negatively impacted the overall quality of post-secondary education for both students and instructors. According to OCUFA's 2020 COVID-19 Study on COVID-19 and the Impact on University life and Education, 62% of all students and 76% of faculty surveyed in Ontario felt that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the overall quality of Education.¹ Through a CSA survey done at the University of Guelph (UofG), it was discovered that almost 80% of UofG students were dissatisfied with the current learning conditions (which includes online course content, remote lectures, etc.). The major factors that contributed to the dissatisfaction included: a lack of interaction with instructors and students; increased difficulty balancing work-life activities; fewer accessible learning resources; poor internet connection; simultaneous lectures not being recorded; and most importantly, financial stability.² The factors and concerns that contribute to the negative Post-Secondary experience during COVID-19 for instructors included: not being as effective/engaged/no interaction with students; more time needed/increased workload; no sense of community; hands-on/F2F required/labs/experiential; not being trained for online/technology not good/no support; no quality of education/reduced expectation; all online/asynchronous/no communication/discussion; large class sizes/higher enrollment; and no access to materials/time zone issues.³

1. Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), "https://ocufa.on.ca/Assets/OCUFA-2020-Faculty-Student-Survey-Opt.pdf," OCUFA.on.ca (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), November 2020), <https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/OCUFA-2020-Faculty-Student-Survey-opt.pdf>.

2. Sean Mitchell, "Default Report - Respondus and Online Learning Feedback Survey" (Central Student Association, January 29, 2021).

3. Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), "https://ocufa.on.ca/Assets/OCUFA-2020-Faculty-Student-Survey-Opt.pdf," OCUFA.on.ca (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), November 2020), <https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/OCUFA-2020-Faculty-Student-Survey-opt.pdf>.

A major recurring concern from students has been around having to pay such high tuition fees for a drastically lower quality of education. Students in Ontario pay some of the highest tuition fees in the country, making Post-Secondary Education not only unaffordable but also creating cycles of student debt that impede on the ability of young people to start their lives.⁴ With the backdrop of the global pandemic, students are left in a more precarious position with up to 70% of students being extremely concerned about financial impacts of COVID-19 (**Figure 1: Student concerns about financial impacts of COVID-19**).⁵ Post-Secondary students often use the summer months to save up for tuition for the year, and the job losses / reduction in job opportunities over the past summer months has resulted in many students having to rely on savings to pay for this year’s tuition.⁶ Financial precarity is even greater for international

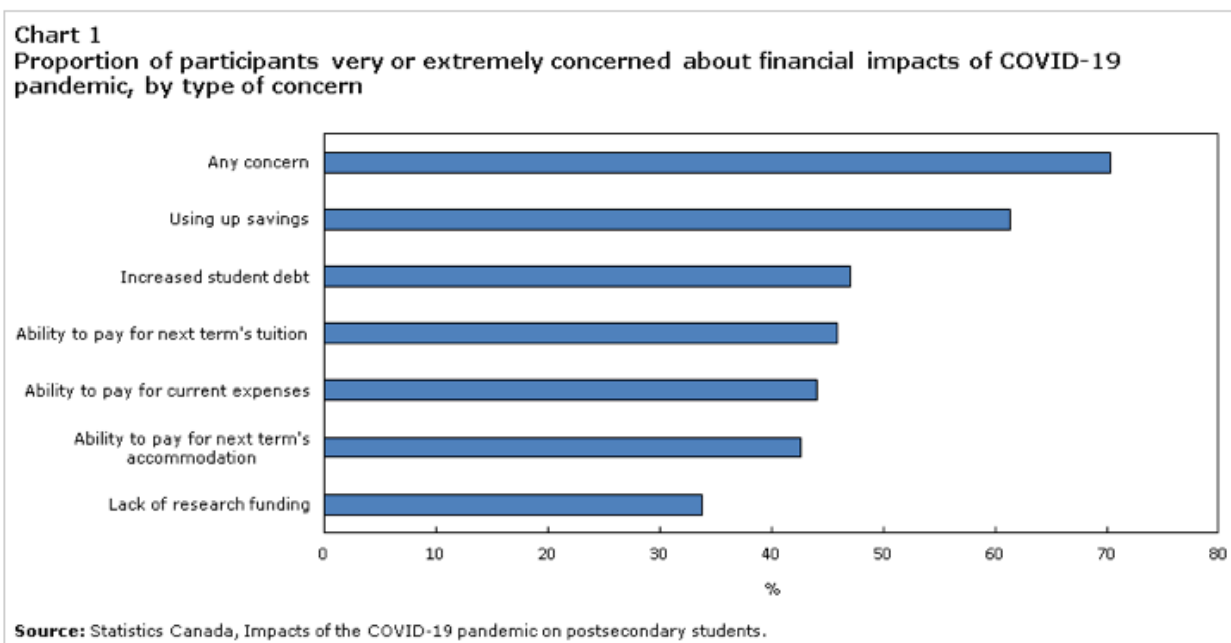


Figure 1: Student Concerns around Financial Impact of COVID-19 ⁷

4. “Provincial Lobby Document ”(Toronto , February 2020).

5. Katherine Wall and Tamara Knighton, “This Paper Provides Insight on How Postsecondary Students’ Financial Situation Was Impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Results Are Based on the Recent Statistics Canada Crowdsourcing Data Collection Completed by over 100,000 Postsecondary Students between April 19 and May 1, 2020.,” COVID-19 Pandemic: Financial impacts on postsecondary students in Canada (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, May 15, 2020), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00016-eng.htm>

6. Katherine Wall and Tamara Knighton

7. Katherine Wall and Tamara Knighton

students who have seen their fees increase this past year, while their access and quality of education has decreased substantively, even in comparison to that of domestic students (particularly due to different time zones).

Faculty, TAs and sessional lecturers have been working extremely hard throughout the pandemic to ensure students are supported in the best way possible, but are also having a difficult time with the negative implications of online learning. Some of the major concerns expressed by instructors around COVID-19 include the ability to perform outside roles and responsibilities (such as caregiving, etc.); fewer networking opportunities; ability to adequately teach students important course materials; mental health changes and challenges, health and safety concerns while on campus; financial situation as a direct result of COVID-19 (lack of research funding, cuts in teaching hours, etc.).⁸

Although there are no current viable alternatives to online learning during a pandemic that will work for everyone, the University of Guelph has the opportunity to respond to the needs of both students and instructors to enhance the overall satisfaction and quality of the Post-Secondary Experience at the University of Guelph. The largest challenge faced by both students and staff is the lack of interaction between students, TAs, and instructors. Reducing class sizes will greatly benefit both students and instructors, allowing the two to interact on a more regular basis. The drastic increase in class sizes has put a major strain on TAs, and instructors, impeding on their ability to give students the adequate support they need. Hiring additional TAs, faculty and sessional lecturers will relieve pressure, and make smaller classes possible. Lack of training and support for instructors has also been a major contributing factor in the reduction in the quality of education. Providing training and supports on how to use online platforms to both instructors and students would allow for a

8. Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), "<https://ocufa.on.ca/Assets/OCUFA-2020-Faculty-Student-Survey-Opt.pdf>," OCUFA.on.ca (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), November 2020), <https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/OCUFA-2020-Faculty-Student-Survey-opt.pdf>.

smoother Post-Secondary Experience. To tackle the issue of financial strains on students, a Post-Secondary Education at the cost of \$0 would not only make education accessible to all students, but will give a greater number of students the opportunity to pursue a Post-Secondary Degree, potentially finding creative solutions and enhancing the economy in our post-pandemic world.

Demands to Enhance the Quality of Post-Secondary Education:

UofG to write a letter to the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to request additional funding for the purposes of tuition relief for students: Now more than ever, we need post-secondary institutions to work alongside their students in demanding adequate public funding to sustain a high quality post-secondary education system that is accessible to all students. We request this letter be written in collaboration with the CSA.

Smaller class sizes & hire additional instructors & TAs: Online course delivery has posed many barriers to learning (such as: limited interaction with professors and TAs; inability to meaningfully engage with course content and peers/classmates; inaccessible course content; etc.). Smaller class sizes is one necessary solution to eliminating these barriers, not only during this time of COVID-19/online course delivery, but also a good solution moving forward when in-person learning resumes in the near future. Hiring more TAs and lecturers can help establish smaller class sizes and ensure instructors and TAs are not overworked.

Greater technical support and training for faculty & students: Not all students, instructors, and/or TAs, are tech savvy or have access to the tools/equipment required for online course delivery. It is vital that UofG provide both staff and students with the training, software tools and equipment required for a smooth online course delivery.

Adequate funding support for TAs, sessional lecturers, & faculty: In-person teaching at a post-secondary institution is very different from at home teaching. Teaching in-person at a post-secondary institution gives professors, TAs and sessionals access to all the tools needed for course delivery (ie, lecture hall, projectors, microphones, etc.). However, not much support has been provided to educators as they navigate the world of online learning. The University of Guelph can aid this situation by providing faculty, TAs and Sessionals a stipend (on a needs basis) to help cover the costs of online teaching.

DEMAND 2 —***Accessibility***

The COVID-19 pandemic has made accessing post-secondary education easier for some people while simultaneously erecting barriers for others. Those living in remote areas, those with mobility or commuting challenges, or those that might need to look after children or dependants can now access an education in the comfort of their own homes. This has previously been a huge challenge in the pre-COVID world, but the past year has proved that it is possible to accommodate people with accessibility challenges in a variety of ways that allow them to attain a post-secondary education in a remote delivery format. But while online learning is a solution for many, other issues such as insufficient internet infrastructure can also pose accessibility barriers for others. Those who lack the proper tools or equipment, are in different geographical areas/time zones, or lack access to course content likely won't be successful learning in a digital format.

Access to Tools & Equipment for Digital Post-Secondary Education:

In the pre-COVID world, with in-person course delivery, both staff and students were provided the tools and support needed to teach and learn (to an extent). Some of these tools and equipment included: a physical space/classroom (that is conducive to teaching and learning), projectors, webcam, wifi, etc. For students, access to computers, textbooks, other support tools provided by the library, etc. were provided in an in-person post-secondary world. However, with the changes to a digital format, many of these tools and supports are no longer provided and very little to no accommodation is being made by post-secondary institutions to ensure staff and students have the tools they need to learn and teach. Many students living in rural/remote communities have unstable internet connections that prevent them from fully engaging with course materials and attending all classes. Up to 14.51% of UofG undergraduate students indicated

lack of adequate access to the internet as a barrier to their learning.⁹ In some situations, people drive to wifi hotspots to attend classes/download school work out of desperation.¹⁰ In addition, not everyone is in a financial position to purchase expensive high quality internet services, or equipment (such as laptops, webcams, comfortable chairs, etc.) to fully transition to an online learning environment. Not everyone has a home environment that is conducive to teaching or learning. These are all gaps that have been largely left unfilled, with very little accommodations made for those who struggle to adapt to this new digital post-secondary experience.

Geography and Time Zone Differences:

Geography and time zone differences are another major factor contributing to a negative impact on students and instructors. This issue particularly impacts international students. The global pandemic and its “stay at home” has resulted in international students making the decision to go back to their home countries. Some have made that decision out of financial precarity and an inability to pay for living expenses, groceries, and the high cost of tuition, while others have made the decision out of fear of being homesick and isolated in Canada with little to no support. Synchronous classes, midterms, exams, and quizzes have made it difficult for international students to access their post-secondary education, largely due to differential time zones. Students have to wake up at odd times throughout the night to write exams or attend classes.

Access to Course Content / Materials:

In addition to increasingly unaffordable tuition fees, students are further financially burdened by having to purchase required course materials that are

9. Sean Mitchell , “Default Report - Respondus and Online Learning Feedback Survey ”(Central Student Association, January 29, 2021).

10. “Pandemic Making It Clear Ontario’s Rural Students Are at the Back of the Virtual Class | CBC News,” CBCnews (CBC/Radio Canada, January 11, 2021), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/rural-internet-ontario-1.5866518>.

almost always not included in their tuition. These materials are often expensive, costing potentially hundreds of dollars per course. Despite this cost, many of these course materials are often not used substantially in courses, and even when they are required, they are not always consistent with the material being taught in courses. Faced with the decision of whether to buy these materials, many students routinely are placed at a disadvantage when they forgo acquiring some or all of the course material that is recommended or required for courses that they are registered in. While this number fluctuates, the university's Fall 2020 survey data indicates that 39% of students do not purchase textbooks for some or all of the courses they're enrolled in.¹¹

While this issue is most identifiable when it comes to textbooks, there are other barriers to accessing course materials. Online quiz tool purchases are often required to complete some of the required assessments in a course, while other assessment tools, such as TopHat, are often used to reward bonus marks. In addition to the added financial burden of requiring these purchases, there are often imposed time-constraints that cruelly require students located in other time zones to complete assessments at odd hours, which could academically disadvantage them.

While many faculty members have developed affordable and accessible course content themselves, they often do this without additional compensation or even at their own cost. They also have insufficient time and support, both of which are necessary for them to produce and implement these materials in the course(s) that they teach.

11. Sean Mitchell , "Default Report - Respondus and Online Learning Feedback Survey "(Central Student Association, January 29, 2021).

Demands for making Post-Secondary Education More Accessible:

There are many ways the University of Guelph can make post-secondary education a lot more accessible to its students and workers, especially during this time of COVID-19.

Academic Stipends: Providing both students and staff a stipend (on a needs basis) is one way the University of Guelph can be of great support to those financially struggling with the digital course delivery format.

Advocate for Improved Broadband Access: While the university is singularly not able to ensure that all students have sufficient internet access, it can partner with governments and telecommunication companies to pressure and collaborate with them in pursuit of universal broadband access for the University of Guelph community, regardless of where those community members are located.

Recorded Lectures: Ensure all students (especially international students in different time-zones) have access to all lectures in a recorded format.

Open Course Content: Act with urgency to develop new open and affordable course material while taking advantage of existing open access course materials. Ensure that 50% of all U of G courses use materials that cost less than \$50 by 2025.

DEMAND 3 —***Mental & Physical Health and Safety***

Throughout the past year, students and workers have been facing unique challenges that come with not only transitioning to online learning but also working hard to keep up with academic work (despite the many barriers that come with it). Pre-existing stressors have been heightened by this pandemic, causing anxiety and overall negative implications on mental health. Some students and workers are dealing with the loss of family members, while others are battling depression and loneliness, increased workloads, lack of access to laboratories and research materials, burn out, food insecurity, financial struggles, racism, tenancy issues, uncertainty, and much more. During this difficult time, it is extremely important for the University of Guelph to not only increase their funding towards but to also diversify mental health support for both students and workers on campus.

In addition to mental health, the physical health and safety of students and workers must also be prioritized as we work to transition to in-person learning sometime in the future. The potential of contracting COVID-19 while at work or attending lectures/labs on campus is a fear most students and workers are grappling with as the University of Guelph makes announcements on future course delivery formats for Fall of 2021. It is important that the University of Guelph consult with all students' and workers' groups on campus as they plan for the future semesters. Each stakeholder group has unique challenges and accommodations that are required for a safe transition back to campus. In addition, it is also vital that students (who make up the largest stakeholder group on campus) be invited to attend and give input at all Joint health and Safety Committees.

Demands to Prioritize Mental & Physical Health:

Increased funding for mental health supports: The current mental health supports at the University of Guelph are not adequate in fully supporting the large number of students and workers who require mental health support. Mental health is a priority, and the University of Guelph needs to reflect that through its funding allocation.

Make mental health services intersectional & diverse: All mental health services provided to students and workers must be intersectional and diverse. U of G needs to hire BIPOC counsellors/mental health support workers

Student and worker consultation around plans to return to campus: All students' and workers groups must be included in plans and conversations around return to campus/in-person learning.

Increased PPE and sanitation: In order for students and workers to feel safe on campus, an adequate supply of appropriate PPE must be provided to all students and workers on campus. In addition, the University of Guelph needs to hire more CUPE custodial workers to ensure more frequent sanitation of all spaces on campus.

Invite student representatives to attend and give input at all Joint Health and Safety Committees: Students are the largest group at the University of Guelph, yet are often left out of conversations around safety on campus. A non-voting or guest student representative seat at Joint Health and Safety Committees is long overdue, and a global pandemic is the time to grant students a seat at the table to discuss the health and safety of our campus community.

DEMAND 4 —***Safe Transition to On-Campus Learning***

Undergraduate and Graduate students make housing, financial, and life planning decisions frequently during their time in their degree, and these pending decisions increasingly hinge on how and where they will be learning this fall. While students overwhelmingly would prefer face-to-face learning over the current online learning environment, other stakeholders are more hesitant.¹² Regardless of what we prefer, we will undoubtedly be at the mercy of the virus and the distribution of vaccines. This likely means that learning at the university will be unable to occur as it would have pre-pandemic.

While the university continues to make unclear statements about transition plans for the upcoming 2021-22 school year (Appendix A), the University of Guelph community deserves to have a clear understanding about what education at the University of Guelph will look like in the Fall 2021 semester. This is especially important for students who may be deciding between accepting multiple acceptance offers in multiple programs at different universities. They need to be able to make an informed decision about what their learning environment will look like so that it is consistent with their learning styles and needs.

The University of Guelph needs to ensure that all decisions that are made relating to the return to campus plan are public and transparent. This includes a timeline for when decisions will be made, how they will be made, and the benchmarks that will need to be met in order for specific activities to occur. As many have said before us, students, staff and faculty all deserve to be consulted and granted clarity regarding what types of activities will be able to happen in-person at the University of Guelph in the Fall of September 2021 under different scenarios. Specifically, the U of G community needs to understand what size of

12. Sean Mitchell , “Default Report - Respondus and Online Learning Feedback Survey ”(Central Student Association, January 29, 2021).

lectures will be permitted to occur under different scenarios, whether labs and seminars will be occurring on campus, and what activities (both academic, co-curricular, and extra-curricular) will or will not be occurring on campus in F21 that would have previously occurred in F19. This includes, but is not limited to, specific in-person activities and events, such as in person orientation week, club activities, faculty and TA teaching and marking activities.

Demands for a Safe Return to Campus:

Full consultation and clear communication to students and workers around the return to campus plans: Over the course of the past two semesters, consultation and communication between the university, workers, and students has not been clear or time appropriate. All plans moving forward need to be clearly communicated to students and workers, and an opportunity to give input must be granted to ensure everyone feels safe in their return to campus.

Course delivery alternatives for all students, TAs, faculty & sessional lecturers: For various reasons, the digital course delivery has benefited many staff and students. The option to continue to teach or learn courses through online formats must be granted to both staff and students who may not feel safe returning to campus or might have accessibility barriers that impede on their ability to return.

Invitation to student representatives in attending all Joint Health and Safety Committees: Students are the largest stakeholder group on campus and deserves to be included in all conversations around campus health and safety.

SUMMARY —

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Post-Secondary Experience at the University of Guelph

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has been very challenging for students and workers at the University of Guelph. Pre-COVID challenges and barriers to Post-Secondary Education have now been intensified by this pandemic. Students are struggling with the high cost of tuition (for a lower quality education), accessibility barriers, increased workloads, stress/anxiety, time zone differences, food insecurity, social isolation/loneliness, tenancy concerns, uncertainty, and more. Staff and instructors are grappling with large class sizes, increased workloads/challenges around work/life balance, reduced funding, etc. Although there are no easy solutions to coping with a global pandemic, the University of Guelph has the responsibility to take steps that can substantially enhance the experience of students and workers, both at home and on campus. We invite the University of Guelph administration to work collectively with the campus community to find solutions that will benefit the collective campus community.

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U OF G CAMPUS COALITION:

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC & THE POST-SECONDARY EXPERIENCE AT U OF G

The following groups support this document & it's demands:



Central Student Association (CSA)



Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1334



Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3913



Guelph Black Students Association (GBSA)



Guelph Queer Equality (GQE)



Guelph Resource Centre for Gender Empowerment & Diversity (GRCGED)



Indigenous Students Society (ISS)



International Students Organization (ISO)



Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) Guelph



Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF / TARA)