



THE UNIVERSITY
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

UBC Vancouver Graduate Student Listening Session Report

September 2024

2024/25 Winter Term 1

Prepared by the VP, Students Office



This report is a summary of the in-person Graduate Student Listening Session at the Vancouver campus on September 26th, 2024.



A message to students

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to every graduate student who participated in the September 2024 UBC Vancouver Graduate Student Listening Session. We have heard from graduate students that the university's understanding of their experiences can feel limited and inconsistent, that they have unique educational requirements, and thus that their needs differ from undergraduate students. This feedback led us to host this session with the goal of better understanding the graduate student experience, identifying opportunities for improvement, and advancing our efforts to build an exceptional and inclusive experience for all students to access all that UBC has to offer.

We do recognize that graduate students face unique challenges, and we appreciate the time you took to share your thoughts, experiences, and concerns with us. In the months ahead, our commitment is to continue to engage with graduate students. Based on what we heard from you at the September listening sessions, one of our first tasks will be to host a listening session for students in family housing to better understand the unique challenges faced by graduate students with families, and how we can best support them.

The insights and feedback you shared, and continue to share, will inform priorities and initiatives across the VPS Portfolio, the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, and the university. We will also continue to collaborate with student leaders and our campus partners to address these concerns. We are dedicated to fostering an environment where all graduate students' voices are heard and supported, and we look forward to your ongoing involvement as we continue to work together to identify issues and find effective solutions.

We welcome your comments, ideas, and feedback on this report.

[Connect with Ainsley Carry](#)

[Connect with Michael Hunt](#)

With respect and appreciation,

Dr. Ainsley Carry, Vice-President, Students

Dr. Michael Hunt, Dean *pro tem*, Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies



Participants

Approximately 80 graduate students participated in the UBC Vancouver Graduate Student Listening Session held at Thea Koerner House, on September 26, 2024. The participants represented a diverse group of international and domestic graduate students, at both the masters and doctoral level. The event was co-hosted by Dr. Ainsley Carry, Vice-President, Students and Dr. Michael Hunt, Dean *pro tem*, Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

Graduate students shared their perspectives on the five guiding questions:

1. What is working well?
2. What is not working well?
3. What should we keep doing?
4. What should we stop doing?
5. What questions are we not asking?

An analyst from the UBC Planning and Institutional Research (PAIR) attended the session, took notes, and analyzed the data from the session. This report provides a summary of the aggregate data from the September 2024 Graduate Student Listening Sessions.

Results

A summary of the key themes and our plans to address issues raised are provided below. These challenges are complex, and solutions will require broad consultation. The intent here is to share the broad themes that emerged so we can work together on more detailed solutions.

What is Working Well

Graduate students expressed their appreciation for multiple funding opportunities through on-campus work or fellowships, graduate students value opportunities for continued professional development and support for their financial wellbeing and seek further enhancement in these areas. Also, graduate students in course-based programs expressed gratitude for the opportunities to work with wellbeing initiatives at UBC as part of their graduate student practicum.

Lastly, graduate students appreciated having more accessible class options (e.g., evening and hybrid classes, etc.), which give them flexibility in making work and childcare arrangements.

Opportunities for Enhancement - Key Themes

Accessibility

Graduate students expressed dissatisfaction with the length of time it takes to secure an appointment with the Centre for Accessibility, leaving some without accommodation at the



start of their studies. Additionally, they shared that certain accessibility needs are not being met through the Centre due to rigid guidelines.

UBC's accommodations for disabilities are guided by Provincial and National legislation on Human Rights. Our definitions of disability and qualified medical assessors are also aligned with those used by the Ministry of Skills and Advanced Training. The university has unique legal obligations to students with disabilities and because we recognize that people with disabilities face systemic, persistent, and historical marginalization and unique barriers, universities develop institutional policies outlining the structure and processes related to accommodation within a given institution.

At UBC, this policy is LR7. LR7 explains the role of the Centre for Accessibility (Vancouver) and the Disability Resource Centre (Okanagan) in ensuring our collective responsibilities are met. These centres determine a student's eligibility as per human rights legislation and determine appropriate accommodations to ensure full and equitable participation. Accessibility Advisors have significant professional and educational experiences and backgrounds in working with neurodivergence and mental health, which is integral to the job description for these roles. The accommodations, however, are implemented collectively by faculty, staff and other campus units that inform the student's experience. The Centre for Accessibility is in the process of developing training for all staff on trauma informed approaches to student advising and interactions and developing standardized information about the scope and limitations of their service so that students receive more transparent and consistent information about the boundaries of their work.

The [UBC Accessibility Committee](#) was established to provide ongoing guidance and advice to the university on identifying and preventing barriers to accessibility, and membership includes student, faculty, and staff from both campuses. Currently, UBC community members can [share feedback](#) on accessibility planning and disability equity issues at UBC with the Committee.

Health and Wellbeing

Graduate students raised concerns about the limited coverage provided by [the Alma Mater Society \(AMS\)/Graduate Student Society \(GSS\) Health & Dental Plan](#) for health expenses such as medication and eye exams. The fixed coverage amount is considered by some to be insufficient, leading to high out-of-pocket costs for students. Students also expressed the need for the university to engage more with graduate students, both in communicating available resources and encouraging faculty to support student wellbeing.

[The AMS/GSS Health & Dental Plan](#) was designed by students to cover expenses not included in basic healthcare plans like British Columbia's Medical Services Plan (MSP), equivalent provincial plans, and private basic coverage. Although there are opportunities for renegotiating the current plan, graduate students can access short-term financial assistance, including emergency medical costs not covered by the AMS/GSS extended health plan or Indigenous Health Authority coverage, through the university's [emergency bursary](#).



Graduate Student Funding

Graduate students expressed concerns about reduced departmental graduate stipends due to receiving a scholarship or working full-time while completing their studies. Additionally, students noted that travel awards often fall short of meeting their needs.

[Improving student funding](#) is one of the strategic priorities of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, and leadership is constantly advocating to UBC leadership, the Province of BC, and the Tri-Agencies to improve financial support for graduate students – the recent [increase](#) in the amounts of masters and doctoral scholarships is a positive step. There will be a focus on effectively communicating funding guidelines to faculty. UBC has a [minimum stipend policy for PhD students](#) and we understand that working professionals may be a distinct case.

Effective September 2024, all full-time students at UBC will be provided with a [minimum funding package](#) equal to \$24,000 for each of the first four years of their PhD. Of note, full-time PhD students in the year 1-4 at UBC-V currently receive an average stipend of approximately \$36,000 per year. The funding package may consist of any combination of internal or external awards, teaching-related work, research assistantships, and graduate academic assistantships.

Regarding the [travel stipend](#), there is now more flexibility in how funding allocations are used, and we aim to optimize the use of available funds.

Time to Milestones and Completion

International graduate students highlighted the need for clearer timelines on advancing to PhD candidacy, especially for those applying for Permanent Residency. The absence of a defined schedule for milestone completion complicates the immigration process for these students.

We recognize that immigration status for international students is contingent on the completion of respective milestones. We are committed to consulting with the international graduate student body, as well as various departments, to find a sustainable solution that supports students' academic and immigration goals.

Post-PhD Career Pathways

PhD students have expressed concerns about the perception that UBC does not hire its own PhD graduates for faculty roles. Additionally, while some graduate students are interested in pursuing industry careers, they feel that their PhD training does not adequately prepare them for those opportunities.

While there are significant benefits to gaining experience at different institutions, hiring decisions depend on the specific needs and capacities of individual academic units. We always encourage our scholars to apply their research globally. UBC values the contributions of its students in academic settings but also encourages graduates to apply their expertise across a wide range of professional contexts.



The [UBC Career Centre](#) offers a dedicated track for PhD students to explore non-academic employment opportunities. We aim to introduce these pathways early in students' academic journeys, providing practical skills for diverse industries and reducing the pressure of solely pursuing academic roles after graduation.

To further support students, the [Graduate Pathways to Success](#) program is designed for graduate students who are considering a variety of career options, helping them expand their options and prepare for careers both inside and outside of academia.

Housing and Childcare

Graduate students shared their challenges in finding suitable and affordable childcare and housing options, expressing frustration with the limited availability of residences intended for graduate students with families.

The University, in partnership with the BC government, [announced](#) a transformative partnership that will bring 1,500 new student beds to UBC Vancouver. The project will feature five new student residence buildings on the Lower Mall Precinct of UBC's Vancouver Campus, currently the site of St. John's College. The complex will include 1500 student housing beds with a focus on graduate students, as well as childcare spaces, dining facilities, common amenity space, and academic and administrative office spaces.

Addressing cost of living challenges – particularly housing and childcare – remains a priority and is one of the recommendations of the [Student Affordability Task Force \(SATF\)](#). Through the work of the SATF implementation committee, the UBC Vancouver Childcare expansion plan has been completed and every center caring for both infants and 3–5-year-old is now \$10 a day on the Vancouver campus (except for the newly opened Heron's Landing Childcare Centre). The province requires new facilities to operate under the regular rate during their first year.

Onboarding Processes and Requirements

Graduate students reported experiencing duplication in onboarding processes when beginning research at external organizations, noting that the administrative training they received at UBC is often like that of the partnered organization.

We are proud of our students for pursuing opportunities with our global and local partners and recognize there is often overlap between UBC administrative protocols and other organizations. However, different organizations have unique specifications in their training programs. Also, there are different governance groups (for example, provincial health authorities) that decide what training is to be administered at their sites depending on the nature of each role.

Equity Diversity, and Inclusion

Some graduate students are dissatisfied with the lack of diversity amongst UBC faculty and staff and lack of representation. Additionally, some international graduate students shared that they



are facing difficulties with their transitions to Canada and find it challenging to compete with domestic students who are already accustomed to the Canadian system.

An institutional priority at UBC is to have a faculty and staff population that reflects the diversity of the student body, and multiple hiring initiatives have been launched to accomplish this. The [Black Faculty Cohort Hiring Initiative](#), for instance, aims to recruit 23 Black scholars over 4 years, across various disciplines. This initiative is part of the broader [Strategic Equity and Anti-Racism \(StEAR\) Framework](#) that is a community-engaged, data-informed, action-oriented, and accountability-driven framework to guide the implementation of equity and anti-racism priorities, and the cyclical evaluation of progress over the next three to five years.

We recognize the challenges that international students face when transitioning into UBC, whether it be for linguistic or cultural reasons. UBC offers support through Global Connections, our in-person [international students support group](#), the online [Graduate Student Community forum](#), and identity-affirming programming and spaces such as the [Black Student Space](#), to connect students with the people and resources they may need to make their adjustments easier.

Moving Forward

As we continue our work together, multiple initiatives are either in development or already being executed to address some of the concerns raised by graduate students.

As part of the [Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies Priorities](#), three working groups composed of students, faculty, and staff, were launched in fall 2024 focused on enhancing the graduate and postdoctoral experience with focus on the following areas:

1. Enhancing Research Supervision. The focus of this working group is to update current policies and guidelines related to supervision at UBC, identify gaps in the support provided to supervisors and trainees, and create an overall roadmap towards enhanced trainee-supervisor relationships.
2. Graduate Student Experience. This working group focus is to examine the non-academic needs of graduate students at UBC along with current supports and resources to identify opportunities for enhancement and improvement in this key component of graduate student life.
3. Reimagining Graduate Student and Postdoc Funding. The focus of this working group is to examine the current funding landscape for graduate students and postdocs at UBC and identify pathways forward to best support ever-changing needs.

There are also multiple institutional initiatives that stem from the implementation of existing institutional plans and actions such as:

- [Student Strategic Plan](#)
- [Student Affordability Task Force \(SATF\)](#)
- [Strategic Equity and Anti-Racism \(StEAR\) Framework](#)



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- [Indigenous Strategic Plan](#)

We look forward to engaging with you in future Graduate Student Listening Sessions. Your input is invaluable as we work together to co-create actionable steps to address the issues raised, ensuring you feel supported both academically and in your non-academic experiences. Your commitment, involvement, and diverse perspectives demonstrate how exceptional the graduate student community at UBC is.