



Learning Experiences Transition Survey (LETS) For Graduate Students

Elizabeth Elle, AVP-Learning and Teaching

Kiran Bisra, Director of LEAP

Nathan Roberson, Analyst

Alyssa Muzyk, Analyst

Learning Experiences Assessment and Planning Division
Centre for Educational Excellence

Executive Summary

In March of 2020, Simon Fraser University suddenly pivoted from in-person to remote instruction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the changing situation and resulting guidance from the Ministry, we are in the process of planning substantial return to in-person activities for Fall 2021. This report reflects our commitment to incorporate community feedback into our plans.

Graduate students are a unique part of the campus community as they engage with our community as learners, instructors, and researchers. The Learning Experiences Transition Survey for Graduate Students (LETS Grad) was envisioned as a way to gather graduate student views about transitioning towards more in-person activities. We also wanted to learn more about the student experience during remote instruction so any positive aspects of this experience could be retained. This survey is the counterpart to a survey we administered to undergraduate students in Spring 2021 (LETS), and was developed with input from the Dean of Graduate Studies and the Graduate Student Society.

The LETS Grad was deployed May 7th – May 20th. All graduate students enrolled at SFU during Fall 2020, Spring 2021, or both were invited to participate (5,831 students), and our response rate was 21% (1,202 respondents). We surveyed graduate students about different aspects of their university experiences, such as learning experiences, teaching experiences, and research experiences. Not all students engage in all elements (e.g., only some students taught), and so the survey was designed so only relevant questions appeared for the respondents.

Key findings:

- Preferences for future instruction:
 - 50% of students would prefer classes to be mostly or entirely in-person
 - 76% want to continue to do a portion of their learning online (similar to 80% of undergraduates).
 - 28% of respondents currently living outside of Canada prefer their courses be entirely in-person.

- Respondents want to prioritize access to libraries and study spaces (68%) and private offices and meeting rooms (53%) in the transition back to campus.
- 40% of graduate students (33% Domestic and 54% International status) anticipate delays to their planned time to completion as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 78% of graduates reported no change to their funding from SFU as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (14% of Domestic and 26% of International students reported a decrease).
- Regarding the student-supervisor relationship during the Covid-19 pandemic:
 - 72% of respondents were satisfied with the frequency of communication with their supervisor.
 - 82% of respondents agreed that they felt supported by their supervisor; 68% felt supported by their program.
 - 85% of respondents agreed that their supervisor prioritized their safety.
- For those who taught (Sessional Instructors or Teaching Assistants), commonly reported challenges included more intensive preparation and difficulty accessing an appropriate quiet space. On the other hand, respondents appreciated being able to teach without commuting, and using technology (recorded lectures, Zoom polls, Canvas, etc.) to enhance student engagement.
- Recommendations for safely transitioning back to in-person activities included clear and transparent enforcement of mask policies, increases in sanitization stations, better ventilation systems in buildings, and an updated sick leave policy.
- Graduate students reported many concerns about the onset or worsening of mental health conditions as a result of isolation and added financial pressures during the pandemic.

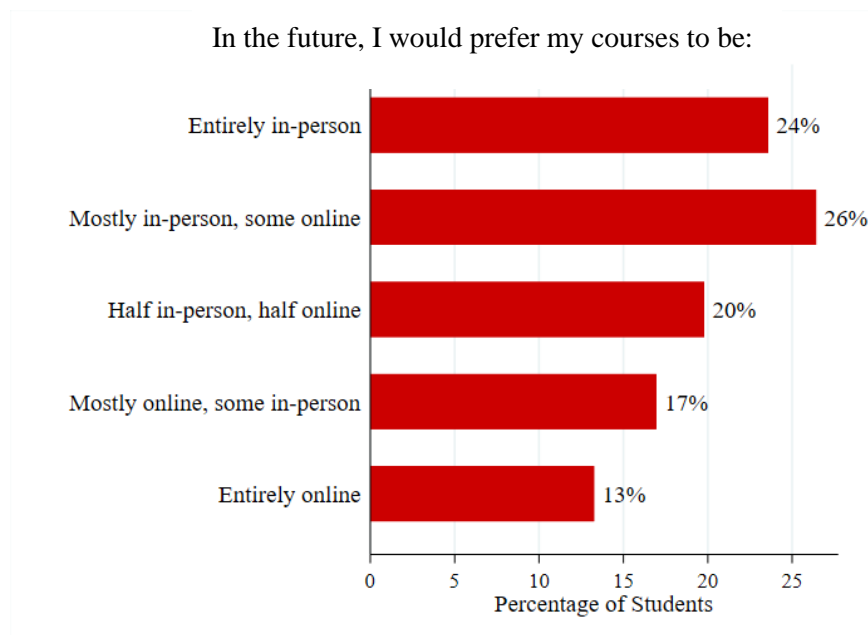
Who responded?

- 68% were domestic and 32% international students
- Currently living:
 - 82% Lower Mainland/Greater Vancouver
 - 8% Outside of Canada
 - 6% BC, but outside of Lower Mainland
 - 4% Canada, but outside of BC
- Program type:
 - 51% in a research-based program
 - 32% in a course-based program
 - 17% enrolled in a capstone project or extended essay
- The response rate for each faculty was close to the overall response rate of 21%, with two exceptions (15% Education, 27% Environment).

Faculty	Faculty Response Rate	Number of Respondents	% of sample
Applied Science	21%	152	13%
Arts and Social Science	22%	231	19%
Beedie School of Business	23%	250	21%
Communication, Art, and Technology	20%	85	7%
Education	15%	211	18%
Environment	27%	81	7%
Health Sciences	20%	37	3%
Science	22%	154	13%
SFU	21%	1,202	100%

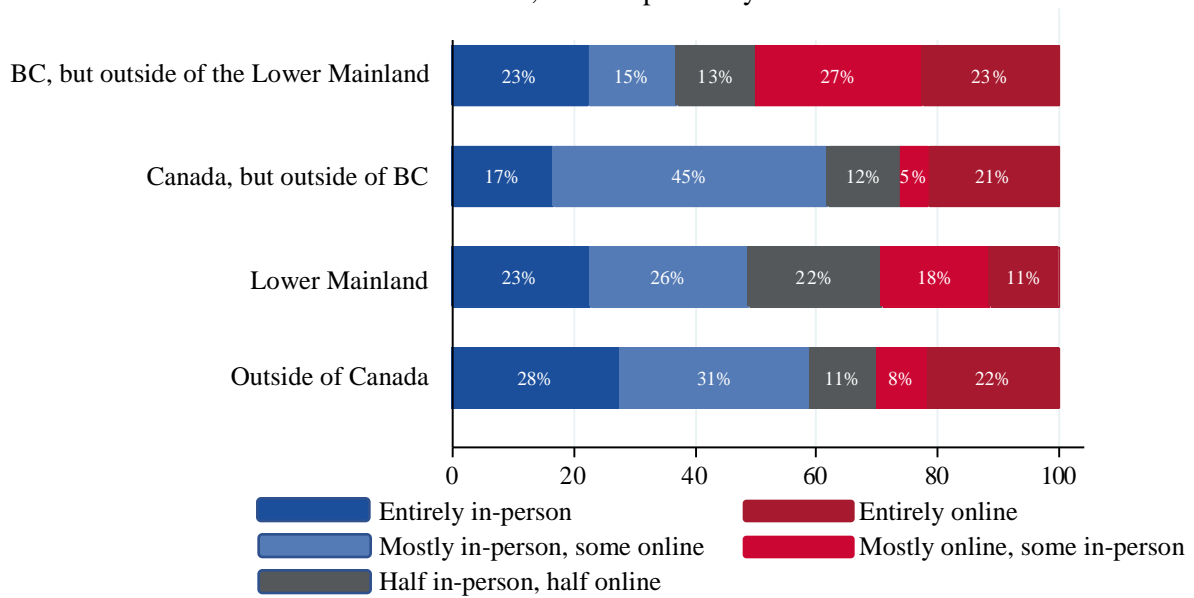
How do graduate students want to learn in the future?

Despite the difficulties students experienced during this past year and the desire of many (50%) to be mostly or entirely in-person in future, it is clear that there are aspects of remote learning that they appreciate and would like to continue. In the future, a majority (76%) want at least some amount of online learning, and this was similar for international and domestic students.



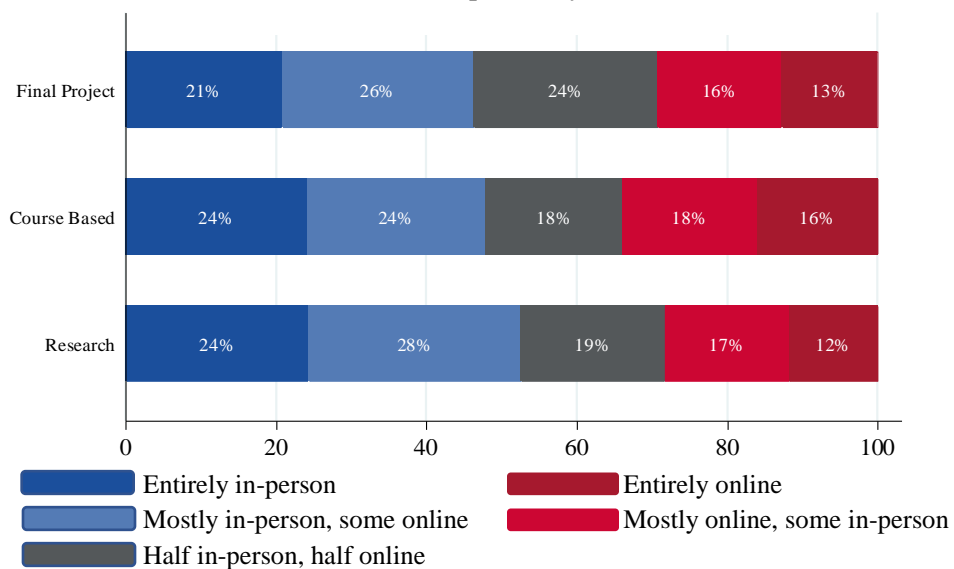
The preference for in-person learning varied depending on where the respondent is currently living. Respondents currently living outside of Canada, had the highest rates of preference for entirely in-person courses (28%) and students in BC, but not in the Lower Mainland had the highest preference for courses entirely online (23%).

In the future, I would prefer my courses to be:

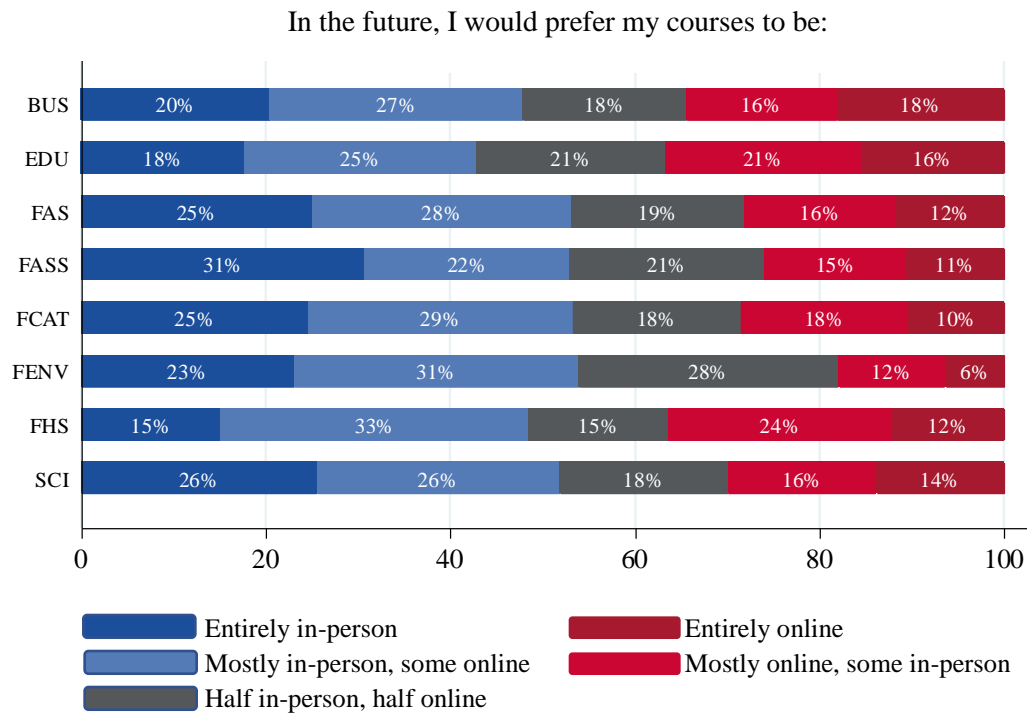


The preference for in-person learning did not vary significantly based on program type. Students conducting final projects (capstone or final essays), course-based programs, and research-based programs (dissertations, etc.) all had similar levels of preference, although there were minor preferences for in-person courses by students in research-based programs.

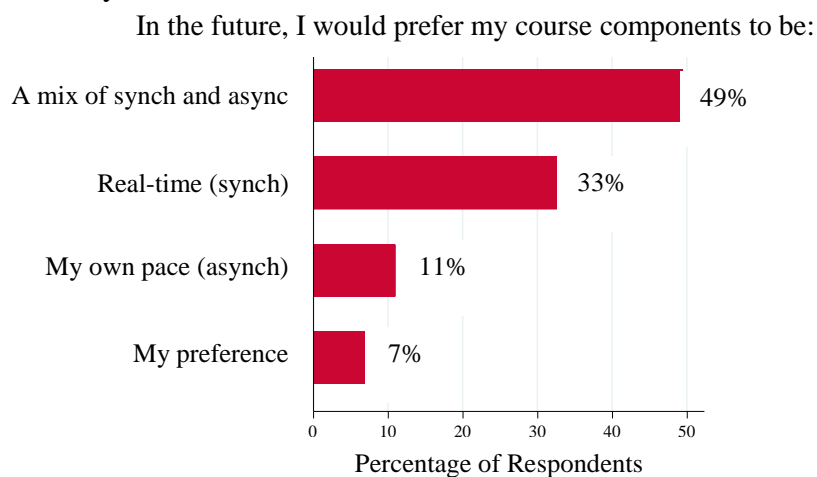
In the future, I would prefer my courses to be:



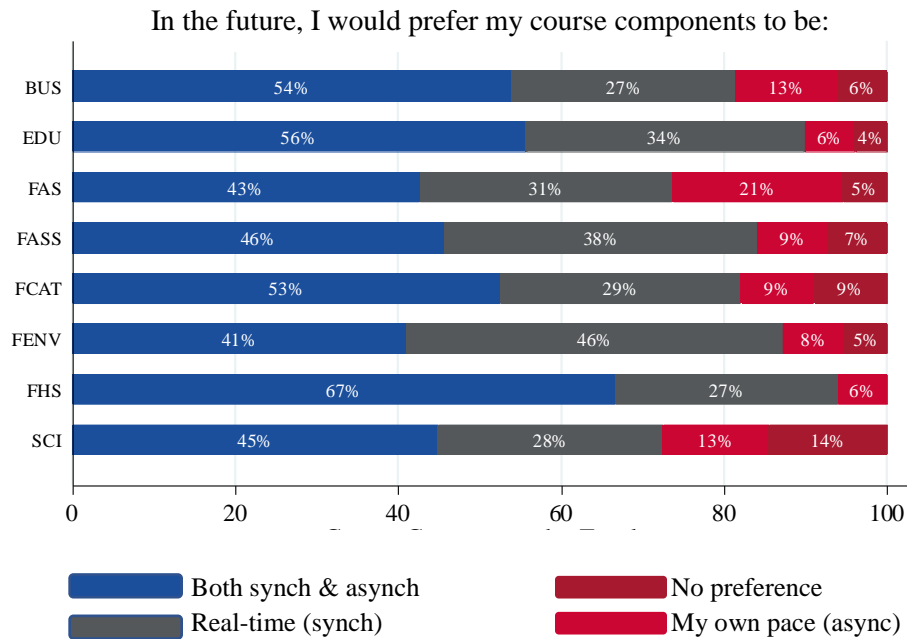
Preferences for online vs. in-person learning were mostly consistent across Faculties. One exception were students from the Faculty of Environment, who reported the lowest preference for mostly or entirely online courses at 18%.



For future online courses, students expressed a strong desire for mixed synchronous and asynchronous course component delivery (49%). Their preference was shared by undergraduate students; 53% reported a desire for mixed course components in the undergraduate Learning Experiences Transition Survey.



These preferences were almost identical for both domestic and international students, but there were differences among Faculties. Graduate students in the FENV and FASS had the highest preferences for real-time (synchronous) delivery at 46% and 38% respectively, while students in FAS reported the highest preferences for asynchronous course delivery at 21%.



What do graduate students think about returning to our campuses?

Some graduate students have already transitioned back to in-person activities (especially those performing research in the Science Faculties), although some (8%) are currently living outside Canada. Thus, there is considerable variation in the concerns graduate students harbour when considering the fall return.

Graduate student experiences when on campus

Twenty-eight percent of survey respondents have returned to campus since SFU transitioned to remote activities. Of those,

- 27% returned to conduct research
- 20% returned to meet a supervisor, instructor, or another student
- 10% returned to participate in course work

When on campus, respondents generally felt that the Covid-19 safety protocols were clear and adequate in keeping them safe. There was some concern that others may not always follow the rules.

When I was on campus, I felt that the Covid-19 safety protocols were...	Yes	Sometimes	No
clear to me	81%	15%	4%
adequate in keeping me safe	78%	18%	4%
being followed by others	66%	29%	6%

Participants who had reported being on campus were asked what SFU could do to make them feel safer while on our campuses. Several recommendations emerged:

- Students were concerned that safety protocols were not being followed by others. They suggest clear and transparent enforcement mechanisms surrounding safety measures.

“It felt like I was receiving safety protocols from individuals instead of from SFU...and it made me feel unsafe that this information was not coming straight from the institution. I did not receive all information at once, but rather I was getting pieces of information that I had to put together.”

- Need for more sanitization stations alongside the introduction of new ventilation systems.
- Updated sick leave policies, stating that moving forward there should be more flexibility when students are sick, and allowing them to work remotely when ill.

Graduate students returning to the Lower Mainland

Students who are currently living outside of the Lower Mainland/Greater Vancouver region represent 18% of respondents. Two-thirds noted that they anticipate barriers to their return and were then probed for more information.

The top three anticipated barriers are:

- Health or well-being concerns
- Travel or border restrictions
- Financial limitations or access to financial aid

Students who selected the “other” category cited in qualitative responses that the main barriers to a return were living costs in the Lower Mainland (accommodations, affordability, job insecurity, tuition increases). A few expressed concerns about SFU safety protocols, quarantine rules regarding travel to Canada, and challenges around their mental health.

Graduate student preferences for university spaces

Graduate students were asked to rank their top three auxiliary spaces that they would like access to first. The top spaces in order of preference were:

- Library or study spaces
- A private space, such as an office or meeting room
- Spaces with technology (computer labs, maker spaces, printers, etc.)

Graduate student concerns about the transition back to campus

Open comment analysis highlighted several concerns respondents had about the return to in-person activities.

- Respondents expressed concerns about health and safety, including references to vaccination rates on campus, following public health guidelines, and enforcing physical distancing.

“My biggest concern is safety – whether social distancing and provincial guidance on how to interact in-person safely is being followed. For example, SFU could share more information about how spaces are being sanitized and remind students and faculty to be aware of social distancing requirements.”

- The adjustment from social distancing to returning in-person was also brought up as a concern, with many fearing it could be overwhelming.

“I have a lot of anxiety about returning to in-person activities too soon... A lot of students rely on public transport which would be a very high-risk activity if vaccinations are not effective in preventing the spread of the variants.”

- Increased transparency and better communication about the return to campus was a desire vocalized by students in responses to numerous qualitative questions.

“I’m very concerned about the planned return to campus in September. The announcement to return to campus without clear communication about what that return will look like and how the university will keep people safe has undermined my trust in the university decision making body. I’m afraid that I will be forced to return/teach when it is not safe.”

The impact of remote teaching, learning, and research

Time to Completion

The majority of students (58%) reported that the pivot to remote learning will have no impact on their planned time to completion, and a large minority (40%) reported they anticipate delays. A small number (2%) suggested the online pivot might decrease their time to completion.

International students in particular anticipated delays for their program completion (54% International students vs. 33% Domestic students).

Anticipated delays also varied by students' faculties. Students in the Faculty of Science (59%) and Communication, Art and Technology (54%) anticipated the highest rates of delays in program completion, meanwhile students in Health Sciences (76%) and Education (71%) had the highest rates of students anticipating no impact on their time to completion.

Anticipated effect of Covid-19 on planned time to completion by faculty

Faculty	No impact	More time	Less time
Applied Science	52%	44%	4%
Arts and Social Science	56%	40%	4%
Beedie School of Business	69%	31%	0%
Communication, Art, and Technology	46%	54%	0%
Education	71%	29%	0%
Environment	51%	49%	0%
Health Sciences	76%	24%	0%
Science	40%	59%	1%

Funding

The majority of students (78%) reported no impact on their funding from SFU (i.e., research assistantships, teaching assistantships, bursary).

- Domestic students were more likely to report no impact compared to International students; 82% vs. 71% respectively.
- 54% of students enrolled in the Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology reported no impact on funding and 39% anticipated a decrease in funding.
- 8% of students enrolled in the Faculty of Health Sciences reported an anticipated an increase in funding.

Learning experiences

- Of those who participated in labs, 16% experienced them in-person. Similarly, of those who participated in fieldwork, 24% of them experienced it in-person as well.
- 45% reported experiencing synchronous lectures; which is almost double the percentage of undergraduate students (83%).
- Of those who defended their thesis, 98% reported doing so online.

In qualitative commentary, students expressed frustrations with the quality of the education that they were provided with remotely.

- Students in the Faculties of Applied Science, Science, and Health Science in particular cited challenges with remotely accessing necessary electronic resources and data in order to get the most out of their learning experiences.
- Students in the Faculty of Education commented on the impact on learning quality, noting that the shift to remote learning and tools that their instructors have employed to facilitate learning have not been of consistent quality.
- More generally, however, students emphasized that tools used during remote learning that enhanced their learning experience and allowed them to learn in new and helpful ways. This positive sentiment was particularly true of the use of recorded lectures, as well as

being reflected in students expressing gratitude in being able to take courses they would not have otherwise been able to.

“I have thoroughly enjoyed remote courses, and I think in the future there should be more courses that are offered online in this format. Remote courses have made learning more accessible, and wiping away all of the innovations that have come from remote learning would be extremely unfortunate.”

Teaching experiences

Roughly 35% of respondents were Teaching Assistants (TAs) or Sessional Instructors (SIs) for at least one term between Summer 2020 and Spring 2021. For TAs and SIs, 40% said their interest in online teaching increased during emergency remote instruction, and 33% said it decreased.

Benefits experienced included:

- The convenience of being able to teach all classes from one location without commuting.
- Ease of students being able to review lecture recordings to better synthesize the material.
- Zoom and Canvas features allowing for immediate feedback and peer interactions.
- Ability to enrich learning by inviting guest speakers to class from around the world.
- Gaining new skills (i.e., facilitating via Zoom, utilizing discussion boards, etc.) that could be relevant to future teaching postings.
- Greater accessibility for self-identifying as living with a disability

“Teaching online is the only method by which it is possible for me to teach due to a disability. The pandemic has shown that it is possible to successfully teach online, and I would love to do so in the future. I also received positive feedback from students regarding my ability to assist them as a TA, which increased my confidence about teaching online.”

Challenges experienced included:

- More intensive preparation for each teaching session without additional compensation.
- Barriers in identifying students who might need extra support.
- Difficulty accessing a quiet and appropriate space to teach.
- Accommodating time zones for all students, especially for international TAs.
- Perceived lack of support with from the university in navigating online teaching tools and pedagogical approaches.

- Difficulties engaging students, including challenges with getting students to participate by turning on their microphones or cameras and reduced session attendance

“Students’ engagement in online environments is down to the bare minimum and I have seldom gotten any interactions from my students at all. The gap between teacher and student was immense, and was likely detrimental to the students themselves.”

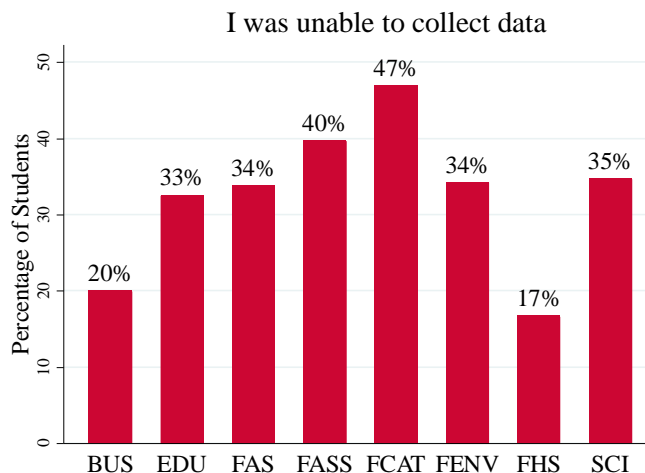
In further open comments, students discussed the difficulty in accessing opportunities to become a TA during the pandemic. Respondents wished for TA opportunities to return to pre-pandemic levels in the future, thus increasing their funding and teaching experience.

Research experiences

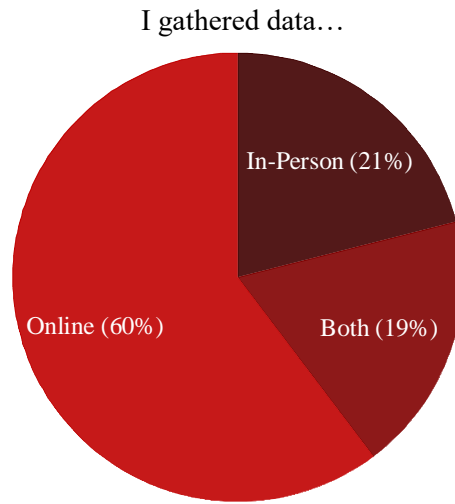
The majority of students (78%) reported that the Covid-19 pandemic had no impact on their research topic or focus. However, 22% of respondents reported a change and half of those were excited by the change, while the other half were disappointed. Furthermore, students were asked whether the Covid-19 pandemic impact their research plans (design, analysis, etc.).

- Yes, it has made a negative impact on my research plans (56%)
- No, it has made no impact on my research plans (37%)
- Yes, it has made a positive impact on my research plans (7%)

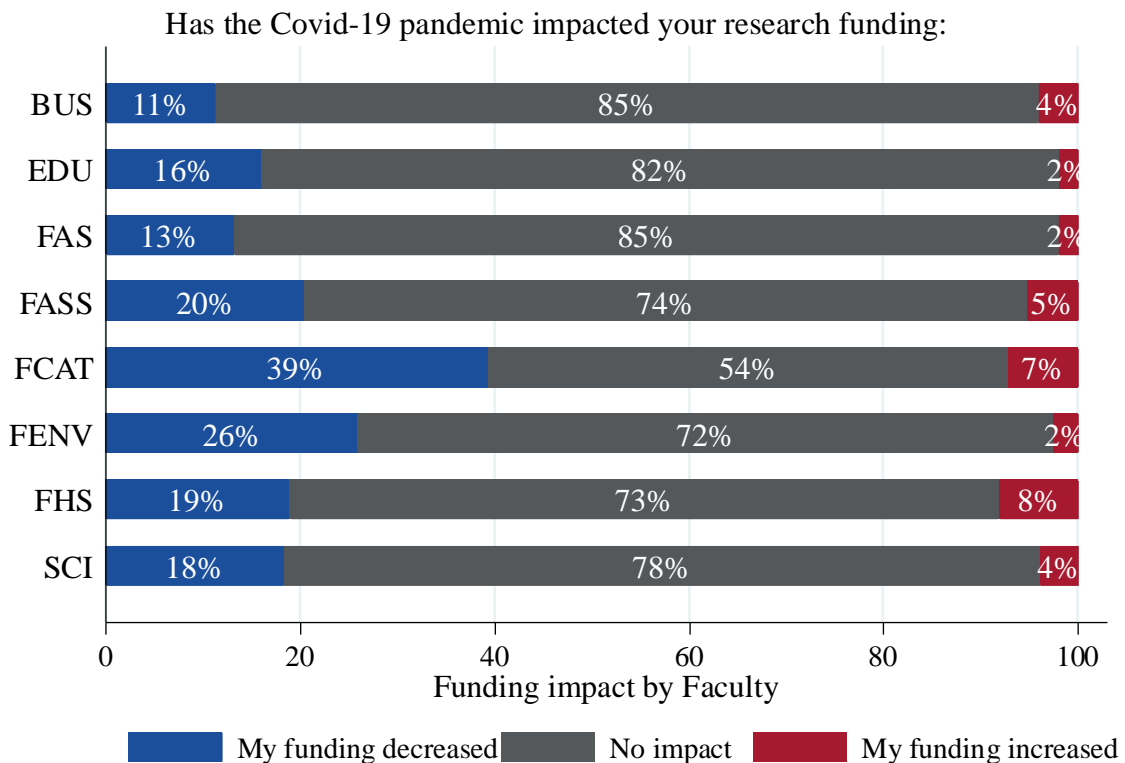
Due to various restrictions in place during the pandemic, some respondents reported difficulties in collecting data. Of those who had planned to gather data during this time, 64% succeed in doing so, while 36% were unable to gather data. Notable exceptions include students in FCAT (almost half) and FASS (two-fifths) who reported higher levels of being unable to collect data.



Of those who had succeeded in collecting data, almost 90% used online methods to gather all or a portion of their data. This may suggest new opportunities for data collection in the future.



Students were also asked whether the Covid-19 pandemic impacted their research funding. Although only 4% of respondents reported a decrease to their research funding, particular student groups reported were impacted at various rates.



The following groups reported a decrease in funding:

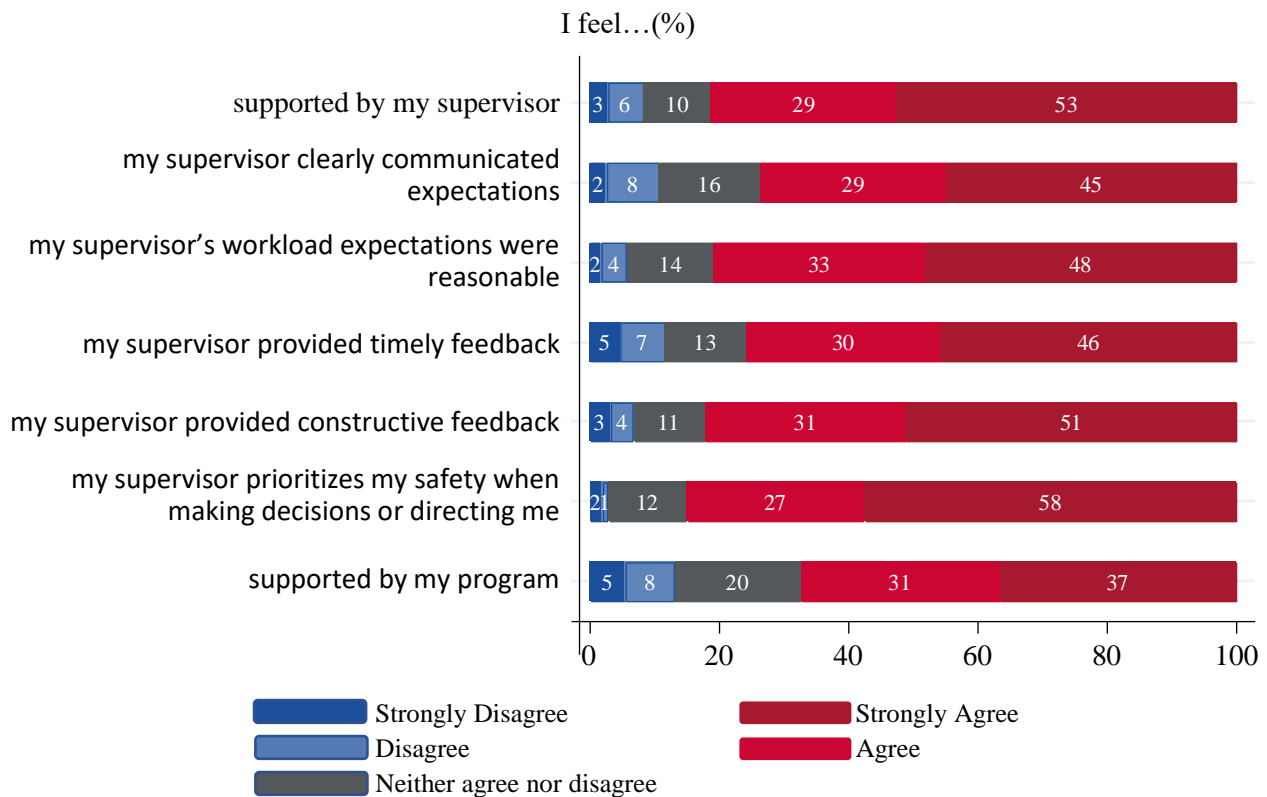
- 1/3 Beedie students reported
- 27% of Faculty of Environment students
- 17% of International and 14% of Domestic students

In contrast, 15% of Faculty of Health Science students reported an increase in research funding.

Supervisory experiences

Although not all graduate students have supervisors, for those that do, it is one of the most important relationships in a graduate student’s experience. Traditional touchpoints such as research group meetings, spontaneous office drop-ins, and so on were disrupted during the pandemic, but 72% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the frequency of communication with their supervisor since SFU’s transition. The remaining 27% would have preferred more communication and less than 1% would have preferred less.

Graduate students who had supervisors were also asked to reflect on other aspect of support and supervision, and generally felt well supported.



Additional Qualitative Findings

Mental health was the most common emergent theme amongst respondents, with the isolation of the pandemic intersecting with the intense workload of being a graduate student. Students across all Faculties were fairly consistent in pointing to the increased isolation as being directly linked to onsets or worsening of mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression. Students suggested additional mental health support from the university or training for instructors would be helpful to start to address this challenge. They additionally expressed that mental health challenges were already common before the pandemic.

“Remote learning meant I often did not sleep well, did not eat, and my mental health plummeted. Not once did our program check in with us and ask us how we were faring. At one point a peer developed COVID and was too afraid to ask for an extension for an assignment due to high stress and expectations. This highlights that graduate student mental health and student wellbeing were not prioritized by any means.”

“The last year has been the worst for my mental health. Lots of days have been a struggle to accomplish anything. Grad student mental health was already vulnerable before the pandemic, and I guarantee that most of us were smashed by this.”

It is worth noting that a small number of respondents’ comments highlighted how working from home, and the increased flexibility it provided, improved their mental health. It is clear that mental health is a nuanced issue that requires much care and consideration to address.

Social interactions were cited as a key missing component of the educational experience for many graduate students, but this was a particularly prominent finding amongst students in the Beedie School of Business. Beedie students were missing the networking interactions that are fundamental to these graduate programs. A broad desire for social interaction extends, of course, beyond any one Faculty, and many students are looking for the university to provide them more means to socialize, whether on or off campus.

Students also discussed the **financial support** necessary to facilitate a return to in-person activities, and particularly highlighted the necessity of re-introducing the UPass. Many students shared how critical the UPass was not just to their studies, but to their general budgeting and ability to get around the Lower Mainland.

“The UPass significantly impacts my ability and willingness to take part in campus life. I am likely to seek out only online teaching, TA and RA work...without access to the UPass program I likely won’t transition back to learning activities on campus.”

What's next?

As we continue to plan for the Fall 2021 term, SFU will consider how we can use these survey results to support graduate students. There are certainly results that can inform our future planning, beyond the immediate considerations of our return to our campuses. A heartfelt note of thanks to our students for helping us as we navigate this challenging time.

Acknowledgements

The Executive Leadership of the Provost office is grateful to Jeff Derksen, Dean of Graduate Studies, and the Graduate Student Society (especially Reese Muntean, Director of Academic Relations) for their input on the questions. We are especially grateful for the hard work and insight provided by the Learning Experiences Assessment and Planning Division (LEAP) of the Centre for Educational Excellence (CEE) for helping to operationalize our ideas about what we needed to learn from our students, and to analyze and interpret the data.

- Kiran Bisra for her leadership and for helping to co-create the report
- Nathan Roberson performed the quantitative analysis and wrote initial drafts
- Alyssa Muzyk performed the qualitative analysis
- Lana Newton, Mitali Pattani, and Isaac Leslie built, tested, and deployed the survey
- Shantala Singh of the Learning and Teaching Technology Division created the infographic