Summary of findings of the Department Head thought exchange in the Faculty of Arts and Science at Queen’s University on how the university can better support Department Heads during the COVID-19 pandemic.
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Executive Summary

Department Heads in the Faculty of Arts in Science at Queen’s University were invited to share their thoughts and rate other participants’ thoughts on how the university could better support them in their role during the COVID-19 pandemic. 31 Heads participated in the ThoughtExchange and shared 43 thoughts and provided 366 ratings. Of note was that 28% of the participants had been in their position for one year or less; 91% reported that they were working more hours since the pandemic started; 61% reported having less resources to support their faculty and staff since the pandemic started; 52% felt the communication was ineffective from FAS; 68% felt the communication was ineffective from the senior leadership team; 30% indicated that they were receiving less support now than before the pandemic; and 96% indicated that their mental health had been disrupted in the pandemic. After the ThoughtExchange was complete, we refined the themes generated from artificial intelligence software on the ThoughtExchange platform and used weighted averages to calculate thought ratings. The following themes emerged: operational considerations, effective communication, reduce the workload; support mental health; modify the merit process; equity concerns; and create resources to reduce workload. Implications and proposed actionable steps are presented based on these results.
Background and Context

With its discovery in Wuhan, China, and its subsequent spread around the world, COVID-19 pandemic has caused considerable concern and rapid change in our society. To manage the illness, governments have adopted extreme public health measures including shutting down all but essential services and industries; promoting hand hygiene measures; restricting travel and closing borders; and implementing social distancing, self-isolation and quarantine measures. These measures have created widespread disruption. Like other sectors, the education sector in Canada has been substantially impacted. Queen’s made a decision in March 2020, to cancel classes for a week and finish the winter term of 2020 online. Subsequently, the 2020 summer and the 2020-2021 academic year is primarily online. The goal of this work was to review how undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and staff were managing throughout the pandemic and to understand how the university could be effective in supporting its stakeholders throughout the pandemic. This report focusses on the ThoughtExchange results for department heads in the Faculty of Arts and Science.

Researchers have indicated that the effects of COVID-19 on mental health and well-being are likely to be profound and long lasting and will extend beyond those who experience the virus. Living through the pandemic is a stressful event, and for some individuals and groups, they may experience the stress more acutely. For example, research from University College London suggest that self-harm and suicide thoughts during the pandemic are higher among women, Black Asian, and minority ethnic groups, people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, and those with mental disorders (Lob, Steptoe, & Fancourt, 2020). Longitudinal studies have further indicated that mental health has declined in the early stages of the pandemic, as evidenced by elevated rates of anxiety, depression, stress, suicide risk, and post-traumatic stress (Pierce, Hope, Ford, Hatch, Hotopf, John, et al., 2020).

It is becoming increasingly apparent that that the mental health of employees is being negatively affected by COVID. For university employees the pandemic has obvious implications for their mental health, but also for their engagement in work and their work productivity. Managing the pandemic is adding significantly to this stress associated with work due to health concerns, the uncertainty, the lack of control over the virus, and the new
way of working and interacting with colleagues. These stressors are likely cumulating over time and having significant impact not only to the physical and mental health but also to their ability to do their work. COVID-19 is a chronic stressor that is novel, unpredictable, threatening, and individuals lack control over. Understanding these employees’ experiences is critical to developing harm reduction approaches to reduce and mitigate the risks associated with the pandemic.
ThoughtExchange Methods

The heads of all department in the Faculty of Arts in Sciences at Queen’s University were invited to participate in a thought exchange. These Department Heads were asked:

“How could Queen’s University better support you in your role as Department Head during the COVID-19 pandemic?”. 

Department Heads were initially emailed on November 25th, 2020 with an invitation to share their thoughts in response to the thought exchange question and asked to rate thoughts (between 0-5, based on how important or relevant the thought is) that were shared by other Department Heads in the thought exchange. Before participating in the thought exchange, the Department Heads were asked questions about the length of time they have been in their role, their ability to manage their workload compared to before the pandemic, and the resources and support they feel the Faculty of Arts and Sciences are providing them at this time. The thought exchange remained open for a duration of 13 days. The Department Heads received email reminders once during the duration of the thought exchange being open, and on the final day of the thought exchange.

Upon completion of the thought exchange, we used the themes generated using the artificial intelligence software on the ThoughtExchange platform to analyze the thoughts shared by Department Heads. Weighted averages were used to calculate thought ratings. The baseline rating of a thought is 3-stars.

We reviewed and revised the AI generated themes and the thoughts that were included within each theme. Thoughts that were incorrectly placed were recategorized. The themes were refined through an iterative process involving two separate coders to ensure reliability. The two coders and the research supervisor met after the initial theme generation to finalize the theme sets and categorize any remaining thoughts. We renamed the themes to reflect actionable steps Queen’s University can take to help support Department Heads during the COVID-19 pandemic.
PARTICIPANTS

In total, 31 Department Heads from various departments in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences participated in the thought exchange. These participants shared 43 thoughts and provided 366 ratings. A majority of the participants (52%, N = 13) reported being in their role as Department Head for more than three years, while 28% (N = 7) reported being in their role for one year or less. The remainder of the sample (20%, N = 5) reported being in their role for between two and three years.

RESPONSES TO SURVEY QUESTIONS

Before they shared their thoughts, the Department Heads answered survey questions about their experiences in their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. A majority of Department Heads (61%, N = 14) reported that they have less resources required to support faculty and staff compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. Most Department Heads (68%, N = 15) also reported having less resources to support students than before the pandemic. When asked about the number of hours per week they work, a majority of the Department Heads (91%, N = 21) reported working more than before the COVID-19 pandemic, with 9% (N = 2) saying they work the same amount, and no participants reporting working less than before. Additionally, the participants found their mental health disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated Queen’s campus shutdown, with 96% (N = 30) of the participants reporting the pandemic being at least a bit disruptive to their mental health. Department Heads generally felt supported by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, with 70% (N = 16) of the participants feeling about the same amount or more support from the FAS compared to before the pandemic. However, 30% (N = 7) reported less support from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences than before COVID-19. Regarding communication, most Department Heads (52%, N = 12) felt the communication between the faculty of Arts and Science and the departments has been less
effective than before the pandemic, with even more (68%, N = 15) reporting the communication between the Senior Leadership Team in the University (e.g., Provost, Vice Provost) and the departments has been less effective than before. Compared to before COVID-19, 77% (N = 17) of Department Heads reported that the timelines to complete tasks are less appropriate. Finally, 59% (N = 13) of Department Heads reported that they are as able or more able to address equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives in their department than before COVID-19. See figures below for the findings.

*How long have you been in this role?*
How disruptive has the COVID-19 pandemic and Queen's campus shutdown been to your mental health?

- Not at all disruptive: 96%
- At least a bit disruptive: 4%

Compared to before COVID-19, how many hours a week do you work?

- Less: 91%
- About the same: 9%
- More: 0%
Compared to before COVID-19, do you have the resources to support: Faculty/Staff; Students?

- Faculty/Staff:
  - Less: 4%
  - About the Same: 35%
  - More: 61%

- Students:
  - Less: 20%
  - About the Same: 23%
  - More: 68%
Compared to before COVID-19, to what extent do you feel:
Supported by the Faculty of Arts and Science; The communication between the FAS and the departments has been effective; The communication between the Senior Leadership Team in the University and the departments has been effective?
Compared to before COVID-19, to what extent: Are the timelines to complete tasks appropriate; Are you able to address equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives in your department?
Department Head ThoughtExchange Results

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Department Heads provided a variety of thoughts regarding how Queen’s University could better support them during the COVID-19 pandemic. We categorized these thoughts into seven broader themes. As can be seen in figure one, a majority of the thoughts related to themes of improving communication and addressing operational considerations. Department Heads shared a desire for clear communication regarding course delivery, undergraduate and graduate student tuition, and budgeting. Additionally, the Department Heads highlighted a need for more transparency regarding policies and more effective communication, with many reporting confusion surrounding meetings that occurred during the spring and summer. The second most common theme encompassed many operational considerations, such as purchasing, staff appointments, course and curriculum systems, and departmental planning. The Department Heads also emphasized areas for improvement in these categories.

A few other themes emerged from the thought exchange, with Department Heads expressing they would like the FAS to modify and/or abolish merit pay, to reduce their workload, to support their mental health, to create resources such as electronic signing systems and simplified OnQ systems, and to ensure equity, emphasizing the needs of all departments.

As seen in Figure 2, the themes with the highest weighted average ratings included Modify Merit Processes, Operational Considerations, and Reduce Workload, each of which received a score of 4.0 stars, demonstrating these themes are highly relevant and important. The Communicate Effectively theme was also highly rated, with a score of 3.9 stars. Generally, the weighted average ratings of each theme were close together, with the lowest rating (Create Resources) receiving 3.7 stars out of 5.
**Figure 1.** Frequency of Department Heads’ thoughts across themes

![Frequency of Thoughts by Theme](chart)

**Figure 2.** Average rating of Department Heads’ thoughts within each theme

![Average Ratings of Themes](chart)
We collected and visualized the most frequently used words in Department Heads’ thoughts as a wordcloud (Figure 3). The size of the word reflects the frequency that it was mentioned. We observed that many words reflected the Department Heads’ needs for better communication regarding operations and support with workload to optimize mental health.

**Figure 3.** Department Head Wordcloud
Department Head Themes

THEME 1: MODIFY MERIT PROCESS

Theme Summary:

- Department Heads shared that the merit assessment process is problematic, stressful, and excessively competitive, especially when productivity and workload are being affected so much by the COVID-19 pandemic. They encouraged Queen’s University to work with the Queen’s University Faculty Association to modify the merit process or abolish merit pay altogether. Below are some exemplar thoughts.

```
Please, please work with QUFA to modify merit. The idea of merit in this situation is absurd even if it reflects pre-COVID work. The merit system is demoralizing for all except the few "winners."

Get rid of merit assessments. Everyone is working flat out. Productivity affected by so much. Faculty don't need a competition for points to work hard. Merit rewards are especially inappropriate now & for years to come.
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THEME 2: OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Theme Summary:

- Department Heads brought up a variety of operational considerations for the university to address across a number of domains. For example, the participants discussed the need for clear deadlines, transparency regarding budgeting and purchasing, clear and improved course and curriculum systems, and better departmental planning. Department Heads want more support from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences regarding these operational concerns, and emphasize the need for more accountability and communication regarding what is happening within and between departments.
"Preferred suppliers" for goods has resulted in a monopoly situation with correspondingly exorbitant prices. Given our budget situation, these monopolies and correspondingly inflated costs, make no sense.

Provide more flexibility in purchasing (acquire takes far far too long)
We cannot replace computers in a timely manner (it takes 3 weeks as opposed to 3 days via a commercial supplier)

THEME 3: REDUCE WORKLOAD

Theme Summary:

- Department Heads explained that they felt overwhelmed with the tasks required of them during this time. Because of the increase in other responsibilities, such as familial duties, the participants would appreciate support and outside expertise when it comes to managing their workload. Furthermore, Department Heads feel undervalued and overworked, with the role becoming increasingly undesirable in many departments and causing a high turnover rate. Current inequalities are being exacerbated, with many staff and faculty feeling overwhelmed with health concerns, family crises, and caregiving duties interfering with their ability to work effectively. Department Heads encouraged the university to review the tasks being handled by the Heads and perhaps delegate certain administrative duties, as well as hiring front line learning specialists to help faculty with their courses.

The role of Head has become completely undesirable in many departments with consequence of high turnover rates. Pandemic conditions exacerbate this. Greater uncertainty in department; planning made more difficult; service in general undervalued.

Pandemic exacerbated workload inequalities. Staff and most faculty working overload. Worried for those also in caregiving roles, or precarious health, obvious.
THEME 4: COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

Theme Summary:

• Department Heads expressed a desire for clearer communication regarding course delivery, student tuition, and transparency regarding budgeting. They also highlighted a need for more consistent and effective communication, with one-on-one meetings with the Faculty of Arts and Science, and more organized meetings overall to ensure a full understanding of operations during COVID-19. Hectic meetings during the spring and summer caused confusion. By communicating clearly with Department Heads and prioritizing their viewpoints and experiences, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences can ensure the Heads are then able to relay this information to graduate, undergraduate, and international students and faculty members.

Provide clear communication on International graduate student tuition changes (equalization, ITAs, etc) Graduate student recruitment is already underway. We cannot respond to International student inquiries, or plan, without clear information.

there were too many chaotic meetings in the spring and summer. I missed a few voluntary ones. However i then missed important information. If the meeting is voluntary, and important topics are discussed, we need access to the info.

THEME 5: EQUITY

Theme Summary:

• Department Heads highlighted the lack of equity among departments, with certain departments being prioritized over others. To ensure diversity and representation of all voices, Department Heads would like to see all departments and their needs included.

The faculty has a long established practice of dividing the faculty into ‘strategic’ or ‘privileged’ departments, and the excluded rest.

The voices of excluded departments are seldom heard; this is contrary to the principle of diversity.

The needs of minority programs are seldom addressed. These issues may be small to the majority of departments, but crucial to the minority department. Small problems turn into big problems which be difficult to fix.
THEME 6: SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH

Theme Summary:

- Participants are feeling overburdened, mentally exhausted, and stressed due to the circumstances surrounding the pandemic. Department Heads require support and understanding to help them handle the additional stress and fatigue during this time. The participants suggested lowering expectations and delegating responsibilities as a way to reduce the mental health toll on the Department Heads and avoid burnout.

  Need advise on how to help fatigued faculty members. Too many emails increases workload and frustration

  I thought I was handling things well; then became mentally exhausted and suffered from lack of in person contact. Because I thought I had things under control and I didn’t.

THEME 7: CREATE RESOURCES

Theme Summary:

- Department Heads would like to see more resources available to help streamline technology such as OnQ or digital signing software. They would appreciate more resources to help faculty design courses on OnQ and simplify the process. Additionally, certain assessment tools such as Examity were suggested as options for the winter semester.

  Create all PDF forms (such as appointment data sheets) in a manner that lets us sign them electronically. Having to print data sheets and then scan and send seems like an unnecessary waste of time, and makes the challenges of working remotely more acute.

  OnQ has a VERY steep learning curve. The course building page is far too cluttered, with too many bells and whistles, redundancies, and customizations Faculty are really struggling to get their courses online. Simplify, and offer more course templates.
Department Head ThoughtExchange Implications and Recommendations

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING DEPARTMENT HEADS

The COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for everyone, and Department Heads have faced a variety of struggles while adapting to the situation. The Department Heads in this survey provided valuable feedback and identified several areas where Queen’s University could improve their systems and better support them in their role during the pandemic. To begin, Department Heads expressed concerns surrounding the continued use of merit-based pay during the pandemic, citing that the difficulties surrounding productivity working from home exacerbate the stresses of an already flawed system. The literature provides further evidence that merit-based pay systems are not beneficial for both individual- and organizational-level outcomes (Na et al., 2019; Kellough & Lu, 1993). Additionally, although some research has shown that performance targeting based on an employee’s desire for power and achievement may be associated with increased productivity (Holzer, 2018), the current global pandemic has amplified the already-existing inequities in academia (Malisch et al., 2020). With rapid changes in the division of household labour, and a lack of access to research resources, many Queen’s employees who face intersecting systems of oppression, including gender, age, race, class, and socioeconomic status, may have more difficulty balancing their work duties with other responsibilities (Malisch et al., 2020). Thus, alternatives for a merit-based pay system may be enacted to ensure equity in this time of high stress. Other equity issues were brought up. For example, Department Heads stated that some departments were prioritized over others. In times of high stress, including pandemics, decision-making often switches from an analytic approach to an intuitive one, resulting in less goal-directed choices that may increase inequities between departments (Yu, 2016). Therefore, more focus should be put on ensuring equity initiatives remain a priority during these times.

Department Heads also noted areas of operation that should be reviewed by the university. They stressed the importance of clear deadlines, transparency regarding budgeting and purchasing, clear and improved course and curriculum systems, and better departmental planning. Furthermore, regarding these operational considerations and more, participants emphasized the need for better communication between the Department Heads, staff, faculty, and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Being flooded with emails and other communications can
be overwhelming, but prior studies have shown that when messages are *distinctive* (messages that stand out, capture attention, and arouse interest), *consistent* (information in the messages remains consistent across contexts), and *consensual* (many individuals at the university are relaying similar information) employees are more likely to mobilize and attribute the messaging to higher management (Sanders et al., 2020). In turn, understanding their superior’s intentions is associated with an employee’s commitment to the institution, engagement, mental health, and productivity (Hewett et al., 2018).

To facilitate course delivery and provide tools for staff, faculty, and Department Heads such as digital signing software, exam proctoring technology, and external help for faculty in navigating and assembling courses on OnQ. The shift to online learning was difficult for students and professors alike, but through curating resources to help Department Heads facilitate this transition, the university may maximize student learning (Bryson & Andres, 2020).

Department Heads also expressed concerns about mental health and workload in the evolving workplace. Many participants felt overwhelmed and exhausted, and expressed a need for the university to help them manage their duties. Additionally, the transition to working at home and online schooling means that many Department Heads with dependents have new childcare and household duties that add to their daily tasks and exacerbate their stress levels. In the general population, public health crises may be associated with distress, emotional isolation, unhealthy behaviours, and noncompliance with public health regulations (Hamouche, 2020). Working from home may be associated with mental health problems, as it increases social isolation by taking the employee away from their colleagues (Tavares, 2017). Additionally, working from home may blur the boundaries between personal and professional, resulting in an increase in workload and stress (Hamouche, 2020). A majority of the participants reported working more than they had before the pandemic, with little resources being provided to help them. Thus, Queen’s University needs to consider the mental health and workload of Department Heads in order to mitigate the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their physical and mental wellbeing.

In considering the implications gleaned from the Department Head thought exchange, we give the following recommendations to help support Department Heads in their roles moving forward:
1. ENSURE EQUITY WITHIN AND ACROSS DEPARTMENTS

• Work with QUFA to modify or abolish the merit pay system to account for the challenges in productivity resulting from the pandemic.

• Support and empower the voices of minority departments and address their concerns to avoid small problems snowballing due to lack of attention.

• Consider how the stress of the pandemic may exacerbate existing inequities at the intersections of race, gender, age, class, ability, and socioeconomic status.

2. REDUCE WORKLOAD AND SUPPORT DEPARTMENT HEADS’ MENTAL HEALTH

• Review tasks that are being managed by Department Heads and assess if any can be dropped or delegated.

• Provide more front-line learning specialists to support faculty in getting their courses online.

• Foster an understanding environment that accounts for caregiving duties, mental wellbeing, and work-life balance.
  • Lower expectations for high performance to reduce the mental health toll.
  • Recognize the stress and the worsening mental health of Department Heads’ mental health during this time. Work with the university to advocate for more mental health support.

3. ENSURE COMMUNICATION IS EFFECTIVE AND CLEAR

• Communication needs to have clarity, be consistent, and Heads need to be involved in the conversation.

• Provide clear recommendations regarding course delivery in the 2021-22 school year to allow the Department Heads to schedule the curriculum and the faculty to plan their courses.
  • Indicate whether classes will be synchronous and whether participation will be evaluated.
  • Communicate plans for Fall 2021 semester.

• Work with the School of Graduate Studies to provide clear communications regarding international graduate and undergraduate student tuition.

• Establish one-on-one meetings with FAS leadership to address questions and concerns and keep lines of communication open.
• Ensure resources relayed in voluntary meetings are available for those unable to attend.

4. CREATE RESOURCES FOR FACULTY, STAFF, AND DEPARTMENT HEADS
• Create PDF forms that allow for digital signing, eliminating the need to print and scan forms.
• Assess the possibility of using timed exam services such as Examity.
  • Communicate with professors who have used certain assessment tools to assess their effectiveness and feasibility.
• Simplify OnQ by providing course templates and more support staff to guide faculty through course creation.

5. INCREASE TRANSPARENCY AND IMPROVE OPERATIONS
• Provide realistic deadlines for projects such as CPR and QNS.
• Advocate with central services to provide more flexibility in purchasing.
  • “Preferred suppliers” result in a monopoly situation that exacerbates budgeting problems.
  • Purchasing via Acquire is more time-consuming than alternatives.
• Encourage and support department-level planning.
  • Advocate to Human Resources to enable Department Heads to appoint staff members to permanent positions, to ensure morale, qualified candidates, and decreased workload.
  • Work with Department Heads to plan for retirement replacements.
  • Assign QNS and other positions to roll out over a number of years to decrease competition and save the time of appointment committees.
Thought Exchange Conclusions

PRIORITIES FOR SUPPORTING DEPARTMENT HEADS

Overall, this Thought Exchange unveiled ways in which Queen’s University can better support Department Heads during the COVID-19 pandemic. Department Heads shared a need for equitable procedures regarding merit pay and considering the needs of minority departments. They also emphasized the stress that their increased workload is causing on top of other responsibilities and encouraged the university to consider mental health initiatives and a more understanding approach in prioritizing which tasks are essential, and which can be dropped. The participants expressed a desire for clear, open communication to ensure greater transparency between the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Department Heads, the faculty, and the students. Department Heads suggested several resources to help facilitate administrative tasks and course delivery and brought up a variety of operational considerations for the university to address. By understanding and attending to the needs expressed by the Department Heads, Queen’s University can ensure that it is supporting them in their role and fostering an empathetic environment to prioritize mental wellbeing during this difficult time.
References


