Summary of findings of undergraduate and graduate student ThoughtExchanges in the Faculty of Arts and Science at Queen’s University on how the university can support students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
## Contents

- Executive Summary ........................................................................................................ 1
- Background and Context .................................................................................................. 2
- ThoughtExchange Methods ............................................................................................. 4
- Description of Undergraduate Sample ........................................................................... 5
- Description of Graduate Sample ...................................................................................... 7
- Undergraduate ThoughtExchange Results ........................................................................ 9
- Undergraduate Themes .................................................................................................... 13
- Undergraduate ThoughtExchange Implications and Recommendations ..................... 21
- Graduate ThoughtExchange Results ............................................................................... 27
- Graduate ThoughtExchange Implications and Recommendations .............................. 38
- ThoughtExchange Conclusions ...................................................................................... 43
- References .................................................................................................................... 45
Executive Summary

Undergraduate and graduate students 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. 317 undergraduate students and 350 graduate students participated in the ThoughtExchanges. The undergraduate participants shared 289 thoughts and provided 6,992 ratings. The graduate participants shared 383 thoughts and provided 11,665 ratings. 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.

For the undergraduates 13 themes emerged including: online learning requires significantly more time; make course delivery more consistent; reduce assignments and readings; provide clarity and flexibility in course; support student mental health, lower tuition and student fees; mitigate risks of extended screen time; improve the use of OnQ and other technologies; provide more synchronous learning; foster student connections; improve communication to students; and improve the quality of student learning. For the graduate students 13 themes also emerged including: lower tuition and student costs or raise funding; extent time and funding; improve commination; support students’ mental health; help students adapt to work from home mandate; increase access to workspace and resources; reinstate support for international students; increase professional development opportunities; increase access to resources; foster student connection; feedback on distant learning; and return to in person education. There were five overlapping themes for both sets of students: lower Tuition/Fees; support Students’ Mental Health; Increase access to workspace/resources; Improve communication to students, and foster student connections. Implications and proposed actionable steps are presented based on these results.
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 undergraduate and graduate students.

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 young people is being negatively affected by COVID. Managing university at the best of times is stressful but the pandemic is adding significantly to this stress due to health concerns, the uncertainty, the lack of control over the virus, and the new way of socializing and learning. For university students there is the stress associated with the living in a pandemic including: the physical and social distancing issues, the closures of campuses, social isolation and lack of connectedness and engaging in remote learning. These stressors are likely cumulating over time and having
significant impact not only to the physical and mental health but also to their academic functioning. The COVID-19 is a chronic stressor that is unpredictable. Understanding their experiences is critical to developing harm reduction approaches to reduce and mitigate the risks associated with the pandemic.

This report is part of a continuous improvement review process of Queen’s COVID-19 response. The goal of this project was to review the following areas:

1. Teaching and learning
2. Mental Health
3. Faculty and Staff working conditions
4. Diversity and equity
5. Organizational and system response
6. Connection with community

To date, a variety of activities have occurred including:

- A university wide survey for instructors on instructional practices
- ThoughtExchanges with undergraduate and graduate students, undergraduate and graduate chairs and their assistants, Department Heads, staff and embedded Teaching Support teams in the Faculty of Arts and Science
- ThoughtExchange with Educational developers across the university
- Environmental scan of teaching resources, practices, supports and services and procedures that have been developed across the university
- Mental health surveys for undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff

This report is presenting the results from the Faculty of Arts and Science undergraduate and graduate student ThoughtExchange.
ThoughtExchange Methods

A representative sample of both undergraduate and graduate students from all departments within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Queen’s University were invited to participate in separate ThoughtExchanges. Students were asked:

“How could Queen’s University better support you as an undergraduate (or graduate) student during the COVID-19 pandemic?”.

Students were initially invited on October 5th, 2020, via email to share their own thoughts in response to the ThoughtExchange question and asked to rate thoughts (between 0-5, based on how important or relevant the thought is) that were shared by other students in the ThoughtExchange. Prior to participating in the ThoughtExchange, students were asked survey questions about their demographics and ability to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ThoughtExchange remained open for a duration of 13 days. Email reminders were sent to students once during the duration of the ThoughtExchange being open, and on the final day of the ThoughtExchange.

Upon completion of the ThoughtExchange, we used the themes generated using the artificial intelligence software on the ThoughtExchange platform to analyze the thoughts shared by students. 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 re-categorized. Thoughts that were too dissimilar to other thoughts and were not able to be placed into any themes were not included in the analyses. 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. Themes were renamed to reflect specific actions Queen’s University can take to better support students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Description of Undergraduate Sample

PARTICIPANTS

In total, 1870 undergraduate students from 31 departments in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences were invited to participate in the ThoughtExchange. Approximately 17% (N=317) of the invited undergraduate students participated in the ThoughtExchange. Of the 317 participants, 43% (N=135) shared thoughts, and 67% (N=212) rated thoughts in the exchange. In total, 289 thoughts and 6,992 ratings were provided by the undergraduate students. Twenty-nine departments within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences were represented in our sample of undergraduate students. Most of the participating students (N=268, 91%) were domestic students. All years of study were represented within the sample (15% First Year, 25% Second Year, 32% Third Year, 28% Fourth Year and above).

RESPONSES TO SURVEY QUESTIONS

Prior to sharing thoughts, undergraduate students responded to survey questions about their experiences with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. A large proportion of undergraduate students reported that they are spending more time on remote coursework compared to in-person learning last year. Most of the students felt that they could manage the academic requirements this term slightly well, or not at all. Students also reported significant barriers to accessing both academic support (e.g., resources, instructors, TAs) and community support (e.g., mental health, clubs, social events) during this academic term. See figures below for the findings.
To what extent have you been able to access the academic support (e.g., resources, instructors, TAs) and community support (e.g., mental health, clubs, social events) you need?

Compared to the in-person learning you had last year, how much time are you spending on remote course work?

To what extent do you feel you can manage the academic requirements this term?

Academic Support
- Not at all/Somewhat easily
- Moderately easily
- Very/Extremely easily

Community Support
- Not at all/Somewhat easily
- Moderately easily
- Very/Extremely easily
Description of Graduate Sample

PARTICIPANTS

In total, 1625 graduate students from 31 departments in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences were invited to participate in the ThoughtExchange. Approximately 22% (N=350) of the invited graduate students participated in the ThoughtExchange. Of the 350 participants, 52% (N=181) shared thoughts, and 73% (N=254) rated thoughts in the exchange. In total, 383 thoughts and 11,665 ratings were provided by the graduate students. Twenty-seven departments within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences were represented in our sample of graduate students. Most of the participating students (N=268, 84%) were domestic students. There was relatively equal representation of both Master’s (N=152, 48%) and Doctorate (N=168, 52%) in the sample. Majority of graduate students were single, never married (N=219, 70%), and some were married or in a domestic partnership (N=88, 28%). Most graduate students reported having no children or dependents (N=286, 91%). About 9% of the sample reported having at least 1 child or dependent.

RESPONSES TO SURVEY QUESTIONS

Prior to sharing thoughts, graduate students responded to survey questions about how disruptive the COVID-19 pandemic has been on various aspects of their lives. Most of the graduate students reported that the pandemic and Queen’s campus shut down has been moderately or extremely disruptive to their research progress, their mental health, and their long term academic and job prospects. Many students also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has been at least somewhat disruptive to their financial situation. Graduate students also felt that the COVID-19 pandemic and university closure negatively affected their ability to stay in/finish school and their long-term academic/job prospects.
How disruptive has the COVID-19 pandemic and associated Queen’s campus shut down been to your:

Research
- Extremely: 17%
- Moderately: 24%
- Somewhat: 5%
- Not at all or N/A: 22%

Finances
- Extremely: 25%
- Moderately: 34%
- Somewhat: 30%
- Not at all or N/A: 27%

Mental health
- Extremely: 30%
- Moderately: 27%
- Somewhat: 38%
- Not at all or N/A: 23%

Ability to stay in/finish school
- Extremely: 28%
- Moderately: 15%
- Somewhat: 35%
- Not at all or N/A: 16%

Long term academic/job prospects
- Extremely: 25%
- Moderately: 34%
- Somewhat: 34%
- Not at all or N/A: 27%
Undergraduate ThoughtExchange Results

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Undergraduate students shared that this term has been overwhelming in terms of academic workload. Students shared that online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic takes more time than in-person learning prior to the pandemic, due to several different factors. First, students noted that the online learning format resulted in more frequent, lower-weighted assignments and longer assigned readings compared to in-person learning. Second, students shared that the inconsistency in how the OnQ platform was used for course delivery contributed to more confusion and time spent on logistical aspects of the course (e.g., figuring out assignment expectations, finding resources, determining due dates) than usual. Concerns related to the overwhelming time demands of online learning ("Online Learning Requires Significantly More Time"), the number of assignments and readings ("Reduce Assignments and Readings"), and the inconsistencies in the use of online learning platforms ("Make Course Delivery More Consistent") were the most frequently shared thoughts among the undergraduate sample, as seen in Figure 1. This figure shows the number of thoughts in each of the 12 themes drawn from the undergraduate sample. Furthermore, as seen in Figure 2, these themes also tended to be high in weighted average rating, indicating that students viewed thoughts in these themes to be highly relevant and important. Figure 2 shows the weighted average ratings of the total thoughts shared within each theme.

Students also shared that the online-learning format has been detrimental to their physical and mental health. Students noted that the increased screen time associated with online learning is negatively affecting their physical wellbeing ("Mitigate Risks of Extended Screen Time") and that the overwhelming academic demands and stresses associated with the pandemic and social isolation was harmful to their mental health ("Support Students’ Mental Health"). Students similarly rated these concerns related to the physical and mental toll of online, remote learning, as seen in Figure 2.

Undergraduate students reported other important ways that the university could improve how COVID-19 has impacted students’ university experience. Students shared that the university could provide financial support by lowering tuition and student fees ("Lower
Tuition and Student Fees”), increase students’ abilities to access workspaces on campus (“Increase Access to Workspace/Resources”), and provide opportunities to socially engage with the student community (“Foster Student Connections”).

Figure 1. Frequency of undergraduate students’ thoughts across themes
Figure 2. Average rating of undergraduate students’ thoughts within each theme

The most frequently used words in undergraduate students’ thoughts were collected and visualized as a word cloud (Figure 3). The size of the word reflects the frequency that it was mentioned. We observed that words that pertain to the online learning format and the workload were central to students’ university experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Figure 3. Undergraduate student word cloud
Undergraduate Themes

THEME 1: ONLINE LEARNING REQUIRES SIGNIFICANTLY MORE TIME

Theme Summary:
- Undergraduate students shared that remote, online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic requires significantly more time than in-person learning. Students reported that the number of hours per week that they spend on learning online far exceeds the time they spent on in-person learning before the pandemic. The time commitment needed to meet the learning expectations in each course far exceeds many students’ abilities to effectively manage. Students expressed various reasons how online learning takes more time than in-person learning; students need to spend time figuring out the logistical aspects of online learning (e.g., maneuvering through different learning platforms) in addition to spending time on actual learning and there are more frequent, lower weighted assignments and assessments that students have to account for in the new online learning format. Below are some exemplar thoughts.

I find that we are given a lot of work to do, each course gives about 8-12 hours of work a week and I am taking 5 courses so I feel very overwhelmed. Students are spending too much time on school work and not enough time on well-being.

The amount of coursework seems to be much greater than it normally would have been. The school should lessen the amount of coursework. This is crucial because students are staring at a computer screen for hours on end. It’s deteriorating our mental health.

THEME 2: REDUCE ASSIGNMENTS AND READINGS

Theme Summary:
- Undergraduate students feel overwhelmed with the number of assignments and readings in their online courses during the pandemic. They described how the online learning format has resulted in more frequent, smaller assignments compared to in-person learning. Students noted how the increased assignments and readings are not conducive to active,
deeper learning, as they feel overloaded with completing the assigned tasks in each of their courses. Students felt that because all their courses have increased in the number of assignments and readings, that overall, the workload for 5 courses in one academic term has been quite overwhelming. This directly contributes to students having to commit more time to online learning than they did with in-person learning.

There is way too much work assigned for each course. Myself and friends have so many assignments, quizzes, tests and discussion posts per class! Due to this we don't have enough time to fully comprehend all material because we are rushing to move on. Essentially we aren't learning anymore.

I think having less assigned content in every course would greatly help my experience. I believe that Queen's profs are assignment too much work for the average student to handle, and this has taken an extreme toll on my mental health.

THEME 3: PROVIDE CLARITY AND FLEXIBILITY IN COURSES

Theme Summary:

- Undergraduate students shared that they would appreciate more clarity regarding course demands and assignment expectations from course instructors, since opportunities to engage with teaching teams are more limited in the online learning format. Furthermore, students shared that they hope for more flexibility and understanding from their instructors regarding due dates, during an unprecedented global pandemic that is affecting students’ abilities to maintain a healthy work-life balance, and their mental wellbeing.

Standardized Flexibility on Due Dates These are difficult times financially and for those already sick Or struggling going into this pandemic. Be more flexible.

Assignment instructions need to be more clear. There are no opportunities in classes without lectures for the professors to explain the assignments. A rubric and a paragraph explaining is not good enough. Also we cannot be expected to look search through the syllabus for missing details.
THEME 4: MAKE ONLINE COURSE DELIVERY MORE CONSISTENT

Theme Summary:

- Students expressed that online course delivery is highly inconsistent across departments and across the different courses they are enrolled in. Students highlighted the lack of standardization in how courses utilize the OnQ platform and its’ functions as a major source of confusion and increased time spent online figuring out logistical aspects of online learning. Students identified that the inconsistent course delivery (e.g., different courses using different meeting platforms) are barriers to effective learning.

- Students identified that the utilization of the OnQ learning platform by their course instructors could be vastly improved. First, students noted that the user interface layouts across courses could be standardized across courses. Instructors use OnQ quite differently across courses, which causes confusion for students (e.g., using different widgets/functions to serve the same purpose). Students also expressed that closed captioning or transcripts for video lectures would increase accessibility of online learning. Students noted that having the synchronous calendar function and the timeline features are vastly underutilized by professors, despite these functioning being important organizational tools for students. Some students expressed frustration with online proctoring technologies (e.g., Examity).

100% Consistency in UI layouts. For example, timelines tab separate from all other content and notifications set for all deliverables. Too much time spent clicking and searching for info. Hiding the due dates inside directions found inside content modules adds to workload.

Queen's should be structuring/standardizing their course delivery online (to the extent possible) so that we don't have to search OnQ for materials Only one of my courses uses the calendar function of OnQ so that students know exactly what is expected each week, and all courses should use that

THEME 5: SUPPORT STUDENTS’ MENTAL HEALTH

Theme Summary:

- Undergraduate students shared that the ongoing pandemic, resulting social isolation, and importantly the heightened academic demands of this fall term has negatively affected their
mental health. Students reported that the academic demands have really shifted their work-life balance in a way that is detrimental to their mental health. They identified that addressing the academic workload would alleviate stress and anxiety. Some students also noted the need for more access to face-to-face mental health services through the school for students who need ongoing mental health care. Students identified the limitations of the current mental health care model in which students are seen on a one-time, same-day basis and refer to using self guided mental health apps and services.

We must keep in mind the mental toll that Covid has itself when considering stressors affecting students. Professors have amplified the work load emesnslly as students "have nothing else to do." However dealing with life itself right now takes a mental toll.

Improved or additional mental health supports. There was an enormous backlog and wait time on mental health access pre-covid crisis. Just recommending apps does not sufficiently constitute support.

THEME 6: LOWER TUITION AND STUDENT FEES

Theme Summary:

- Undergraduate students shared that the pandemic has placed them in precarious financial positions to support their education and identified that the school could provide support by lowering tuition and student fees. Students expressed their frustration about having to pay fully for their tuitions when they perceived the quality of online learning as not equivalent to the quality of in-person learning. Students also noted that they are being charged for services that they cannot access during the pandemic. Furthermore, students noted that raising tuition for international students during a global economic crisis clearly went against Queen’s University’s values regarding equity.

Reduce tuition costs. I can’t find a job this year as easily as I did last year, and so I can’t supplement my rent and groceries with a pay check like I did in previous years. I know I’m “still getting the same experience” but I’m not actually, and the global context has completely changed.
THEME 7: MITIGATE RISKS OF EXTENDED SCREEN TIME

Theme Summary:

- Students noted how the shift to online learning format has resulted in a significant increase in time spent in front of screens of electronic devices. Students expressed the physical tolls (e.g., fatigue, migraines, joint pain) associated with increased screen time. They noted the need for more balance in how they can engage with learning materials to reduce time spent in front of screens. However, due to the current learning format, students are forced to spend almost a full workday in front of a screen.

Try to do something that will lessen the screen time for students. My screen time for the past 2 weeks averaged 11 hours a day. Screen time is bad for one’s eyesight firstly (but not all have blue light lenses); it is bad for mental health; and it promotes sitting down all day.

Too much screen time I’m constantly getting headaches and migraines because I have to spend so much time looking at my laptop, even upwards to 7 hours per day.

THEME 8: INCREASE ACCESS TO WORKSPACE/RESOURCES

Theme Summary:

- Students described how the closure of the university due to the pandemic has resulted in them losing access to workspaces and resources on campus. Some students noted that they are not able to access workspaces that are conducive to productivity during the pandemic (e.g., reliable internet connection, quiet space) which affects their learning significantly. Students reported that there is a significant lack of workspaces that students can currently access to study and learn online. Library availability is limited for many students. They described the need to improve access to workspaces and resources on campus that are conducive to productivity and learning.
THEME 9: PROVIDE MORE SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

Theme Summary:

• Students expressed their desire for more opportunities to engage synchronously with their instructors and teaching assistants. Students noted that more synchronous learning opportunities (e.g., live lectures, live office hours) would help provide more structure and opportunities to interact with others involved with their learning (e.g., peers, instructors). Students described the importance of having Q&A sessions with their instructors to discuss questions about assignments and learning materials.

**We need the structure of synchronous classes.** It is a huge struggle to make the time for lectures, assignments, midterms, and studying without any structure - causing us to fall behind.

**Have more accessible office hours and engagement opportunities.** Having multiple office hours or increased accessibility for chances to engage with the professors directly to ensure stronger communication.

THEME 10: FOSTER STUDENT CONNECTIONS

Theme Summary:

• Students described feeling socially isolated from the student community during the pandemic. Students described feeling disconnected and without a sense of community due to being overwhelmed with schoolwork and not having adequate opportunities to engage in social events. Even in their courses, students described that discussion boards as being
inadequate in creating a sense of community and connection with peers. Students are seeking more opportunities to connect with each other during the pandemic.

I feel like it has been harder to engage in the community. I work one job and am in one club and I feel like I can't keep up. It is important for students and myself to feel like they don't have to choose between school and social outlets!

Finding a better way than discussion posts to engage students and make it feel like we are actually part of a class or community. It honestly feels like I'm just completing work and finishing assignments alone without engaging with anyone or the content it's very isolating.

THEME 11: IMPROVE COMMUNICATION TO STUDENTS

Theme Summary:

- Students described that the communication from the university to the students about the COVID-19 situation, its impact on students, and the decisions made by the university have been unclear, inconsistent, and unreasonable in timing. Students want earlier notice of when the university will decide on upcoming semesters will be remote, and advanced notice of upcoming course selections (e.g., Summer of 2021) to better prepare for their degree requirements. Students want updates of their graduations. Students also expressed a need for a mechanism through which students can provide ongoing feedback regarding concerns about online learning.

Increased communication from the Faculty on the remote semesters. Will help students prepare physically, mentally and emotionally for the semesters a head and have a better understanding of their academic experience.

Advanced release of Summer 2021 courses to be required of all departments. Most departments have not released this. Needed before Winter enrolment. Faculty encouraged us to reduce our course load to manage stress, but we then need confirmation that plan requirements can be completed in the summer.
Theme Summary:

- Undergraduate students also perceived that the overall quality of online learning could be vastly improved. Students expressed how the current format of online learning, such as: modules, self-guided readings, discussion boards often lack opportunities to meaningfully engage with materials and each other. Students felt that they are spending a lot of time reading, taking notes, memorizing content, and completing assessments. Mandatory discussion boards were also described as being ineffective in promoting deeper learning and collaboration.

*Classes seem to be low-effort video lectures supported by 150-250 pages of reading per class per week. Unrealistic expectations from teaching staff.* All of my lectures are pre-recorded, most of them have been taken from another university class, a PhD candidate, or another external source.

*Discussion posts don’t foster any collaboration* We have so many discussion posts but they do nothing! They don’t even help us keep track of the work we have to do! No one enjoys them!
Undergraduate ThoughtExchange Implications and Recommendations

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

The transition to online learning has been challenging to undergraduate students at Queen’s University due to various factors. Despite the university’s ongoing effort in shifting from in-person education to online, students identified several areas for improving the quality of online learning moving forward. Students noted that the content, format, and delivery of online learning could be improved to reduce student workload and improve the learning experience. Students stressed the importance of standardizing how courses are formatted and delivered through the OnQ platform to reduce time students spend on non-learning tasks (e.g., determining due dates, finding course information). Students also expressed that it was difficult to engage in deeper learning due to the greater frequency of summative assignments and assigned readings in the online learning format. Furthermore, students noted that the current online learning format lacks faculty-student interactions that foster deeper learning. These concerns are consistent with what has previously been documented as areas of improvement for online learning in higher education. In a survey of chief online officers from higher education institutions in the United States, the majority of respondents identified standardization of technology tools, increased faculty-student interactions, faculty training, enhanced student orientation, and introduction of quality standards as top areas of improvement in remote, online learning moving forward (Garrett et al., 2020). Improving how online courses are standardized and delivered by the faculty, and orienting students more effectively to the online environment should be important priorities for the university to improve the online learning experience for both faculty and the student body. This goal could be achieved by implementing an evidence-based online course evaluation framework to maintain and improve the quality standards of online courses being offered to students.

Undergraduate students expressed other challenges they face while learning remotely online during the COVID-19 pandemic. The social isolation, stress related to the physical dangers of the coronavirus, and the challenges of online learning were identified as key contributors to students’ negative mental health. Previous research demonstrates that young adults are particularly vulnerable to experiencing negative mental health during the pandemic. One study examining age-related differences found that young adults under 25 years of age
reported the highest levels of stress, depression, and anxiety compared to older adults (Nwachukwu et al., 2020). Consistent with thoughts shared by Queen’s University students, one study found that COVID-19 specific stress, lack of social isolation and emotional support were associated with negative mental health trajectories over time (Elmer, Mepham, & Stadtfeld, 2020). Our students described how feelings of isolation directly contribute to students’ experience of negative mental health and heightened stress regarding school. Queen’s undergraduate students described a lack of opportunity to build a sense of community this term with other students, which has negatively affected their mental health. Research shows that since the start of the pandemic, postsecondary students with no pre-existing mental health concerns have experienced significant increases in depressive symptoms, stress, and anxiety (Hamza et al., 2020; Hawke et al., 2020). Furthermore, Canadian young adults report experiencing disruptions in accessing mental health services (Hawke et al., 2020). Consistent with research, Queen’s undergraduate students described difficulties accessing adequate mental health care through the university during COVID. Students noted that the current same-day mental health care model is often not sufficient and too reliant on self-guided mental health mobile apps. Overall, the shift in students’ work-life balance this term has negatively affected some students’ mental health. Students noted that the school can better support them by addressing the impact of social isolation on their mental health and by providing more mental health supports.

Undergraduate students also reported feeling frustrated about paying full tuition rates and student fees this term as they perceived that they are receiving “lesser quality” education and less university services this term. Students reported feeling that the university is not in tune with the financial stressors that undergraduate students face, especially in the current climate when students and their families are experiencing financial hardship. Students also noted that increases to international student tuition rates at this time was inequitable to the international student body at the university.

In light of these implications drawn from the undergraduate student ThoughtExchange, we offer these following recommendations to better support the undergraduate students in the Faculty of Arts and Science moving forward:
1. IMPROVE AND STANDARDIZE ONLINE LEARNING CONTENT, FORMAT, AND DELIVERY

- Reduce time spent by students on non-learning tasks by standardizing and improving online learning across courses and departments.
  - Standardize the user interface layout and utilization of different function on the OnQ platform across courses and departments.
    - Enable automatic notifications for all course deliverables and make assignment due dates clearer and more noticeable on the platform.
    - Clearly distinguish use of different types of widgets on the platform and minimize the inconsistencies in how course information is delivered to students on the platform.
    - Automatically enable a synchronous calendar on OnQ across all classes to allow students to see all their assignment due dates in a central calendar on the platform.
    - Use the Timeline feature more consistently.
  - Improve course instructors’ capacities to maximize different functions on the OnQ platform (e.g., synchronous calendar, timeline functions). Provide instructors with IT support to better facilitate the use of the platform.
  - Standardize assignment due times for all courses in the university (e.g., 11:59 PM, EST).

- Provide closed captioning or written transcripts of video lectures to improve accessibility to academic materials.

- Integrate more synchronous learning opportunities to engage with instructors and TAs within the online course.
  - Facilitate synchronous faculty-student interaction opportunities for students to develop connections with faculty and to allow students to gain clarification by asking questions directly through synchronous faculty-student interactions.

- Improve how students’ learning is assessed in online courses.
  - Provide students with more information about the structure of each online course (e.g., number of readings, expectations about group work) prior to course selection.
2. FOSTER COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT STUDENTS’ MENTAL HEALTH

- Encourage the university to provide students with more opportunities to engage with each other and promote wellbeing (e.g., online fitness activities through ARC services).
- Increase the visibility and awareness of ongoing virtual initiatives to foster sense of community and connection (e.g., Virtual Fitness classes at the ARC) through targeted communications.
- Encourage and support diverse student initiatives focused on promoting student connections around different areas of interest.
- Provide students with learning strategies that minimize time spent online, in front of screens.
- Advocate to improve access to mental health services through the university by addressing limitations to the same-day, short-term mental health model of care, which includes receiving ongoing mental health care and being followed up.
- Advocate for students by communicating their concerns regarding the limitations of self-guided, app-driven mental health supports for certain students.
• Work with student leaders to communicate the AMS Health and Dental Plan coverage for psychological services (100%, up to $750 per policy year).

3. ADDRESS THE FINANCIAL BURDENS OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION DURING COVID-19
• Identify possible financial solutions to reduce mandatory student fees for services that students do not have access to during the pandemic. Consider making opt-out fees for services that are affected by the pandemic as opt-in fees.

4. INCREASE STUDENTS’ ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY WORKSPACES
• Consider possibilities of increasing number of work and study spaces available for students to use on-campus.
• Address issues of equity regarding students who face structural barriers (e.g., lack of quiet space, lack of reliable internet connection) to education.
• Advocate to increase the frequency that students can book library study spaces on campus.
• Consider creative solutions to support students who are studying in spaces in which they face structural barriers, including: unreliable internet connections and lack of quiet space.

5. IMPROVE TRANSPARENCY IN DECISIONS THAT AFFECT STUDENTS’ UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE
• Implement a feedback system through which undergraduate students can provide ongoing feedback regarding their educational experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, and through which the university can make informed decisions on supporting students.
• Provide students with timely, clear communication on matters (e.g., graduation, decisions on upcoming terms, course selections) that are important for students. These communications should provide students with sufficient time to make informed decisions about their education and finances (e.g., decisions on remote terms should be provided with sufficient time to allow students to make informed decisions about signing leases for housing).
• Work with central communication to provide more clarity and transparency in university-wide decisions regarding tuition and student fees. Students are frustrated feeling that they are receiving a “lesser” quality educational/university experience despite paying tuition and fees at rates that are equal to that of in-person education.
• Work with central communication to address students’ confusion surrounding the perceived inconsistencies in the university’s decisions on closing some parts of campus but not others (e.g., Intramural sports at the ARC are running programs while laboratory courses that are related to students’ learning remain closed).
Graduate ThoughtExchange Results

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Three-hundred and fifty graduate students shared 383 thoughts and provided over 11,500 ratings of other’s thoughts regarding how Queen’s University can improve support for graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our thematic analysis resulted in thoughts being organized into 13 themes representing the key areas where graduate students suggest the university focus their efforts and resources to positively affect their experience and mental health (see Figures 4 and 5).

Graduate students’ thoughts illustrate that financial instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to their worsening mental health. Of the 383 thoughts shared by participants, 28.7% (n = 110) commented on the need for financial relief through the lowering of tuition or student fees, or an increase in funding (“Lower Tuition/Student Costs or Raise Funding”). The fact that tuition and student fees have remained at pre-pandemic levels while graduate students’ access to campus workspaces and resources has been limited is commonly cited as a reason for the university to improve financial support to students. Similarly, many participants indicated that their homes are not suitable work environments (e.g., lack of quiet space, internet quality) and that financial support from the university would help offset the costs of improving these spaces (“Help Students Adapt to Work-From-Home Mandate”). The pandemic has also disrupted graduate students’ progress in their programs, raising a growing concern about the cost of completing their studies past their allotted funding packages (“Extend Time/Funding Due to COVID Disruptions”). Finally, participants’ raised concerns related to changes to financial support for international graduate students and would like to see their support reinstated (“Reinstate Support for International Students”).

Graduate students shared that they would like the university to provide more access to workspaces and resources to help students meet timelines associated with their degrees. Participants understand the current barriers to returning to pre-pandemic levels of access to campus workspaces and resources (e.g., access to designated lab space), however, they would appreciate the opportunity to work on-campus in a limited capacity (e.g., once per week) to offset a lack suitable work environment or resources at home (“Increase Access to Workspace/Resources”). This includes increase access to library workspace and resources for graduate students at key stages of their degrees (e.g., comprehensive exams) (“Increase Access to
Library Resource”). Some participants felt that the university should allow smaller graduate courses to proceed in-person (“Return to In-Person Education”).

Thoughts from graduate students also illustrated that Queen’s University could better support them by improving communication, mental health supports, and social/professional development opportunities. Participants expressed a desire to receive more transparent and timely communication from the university, which would help them make more informed decisions related to their academic pursuits (“Improve Communication with Graduate Students”). There is also a need to continue to improve access and information related to mental health supports available to graduate students (“Support Students’ Mental Health”). Relatedly, the pandemic has also an adverse effect on graduate students’ mental health because they lack social connection with other graduate students, and they would like to see the university make more of an effort to facilitate these connections (“Foster Student Connection”). Lastly, graduate students raised concerns about job post-graduation job prospects during the pandemic and would like to see the university facilitate career development/networking events in support of these concerns (“Increase Professional Development Opportunities”).

Graduate students also provided feedback on their distance education experiences. From their perspective as students, participants highlighted inconsistencies in course organization and delivery as areas for improvement at the university (“Feedback on Distance Learning – Student”). From their perspective as teaching assistants/fellows, participants felt that they were dedicating more time to marking than in the past due to an increase in the number of assignments and online marking processes (“Feedback on Distance Learning – TA/TF”).
Figure 4. Frequency of graduate students’ thoughts across themes

Figure 5. Average rating of graduate students’ thoughts within each theme
Figure 6. Graduate student word cloud
THEME 1: LOWER TUITION AND STUDENT FEES

Theme Summary:
• Many graduate students are in precarious financial situations and the stress is contributing to a decline in their mental health. They feel that they are paying fees for services and resources that they cannot access to the same degree as before the pandemic, such as the Athletics and Recreation Centre (ARC) and laboratory space. Similarly, graduate students feel that they are paying tuition for an inferior training experience compared to before the onset of the pandemic. Graduate students would like to see costs of education (e.g., tuition) during the pandemic to decrease or for funding to increase.

I don't understand why tuition and student fees can't be adjusted We are not on campus, have mostly online or no classes, and cannot use most of the things the student fees cover, yet we are expected to pay. 4.7 ★
Ranked #2 of 371

Reduce Tuition or raise funding levels Financial strain is high; there are extra costs associated with the pandemic, and the federal government dropped the ball for students. 4.7 ★
Ranked #9 of 371

THEME 2: INCREASE ACCESS TO WORKSPACE/RESOURCES

Theme Summary:
• Graduate students expressed a need to access on-campus workspace and resources to offset inadequate home/work/study environments. Participants feel that the opportunity to work on-campus at least once per week would help improve productivity and mental health. Further, graduate students would be able to access research equipment (e.g., wet labs, computers, storage) that necessary for them to progress in their programs.

Potential staggered and physically distanced access to designated desk/office space. This would provide a some normalcy, and would improve productivity for graduate student work. 4.2 ★
Ranked #115 of 371

Provide spaces to act as temporary offices Most students do not have access to their offices or an adequate work space. This is a necessity to study and to meet safe work standards. 4.4 ★
Ranked #74 of 371
THEME 3: IMPROVE COMMUNICATION WITH GRADUATE STUDENTS

Theme Summary:
- Participants do not feel that the communication between Queen’s University, graduate students, and their representatives has been meaningful or effective. They have experienced meaningful dialogue representing an understanding of their needs given the current situation. Students felt that many of their concerns have already been raised at different points during the pandemic and that there has been limited response or change. Trust in the institution has deteriorated because graduate students perceive a lack of transparency and timeliness in the communications coming from the university about their COVID-19 related decisions (e.g., costs for services/facilities that most cannot access, announcing online classes after leases for year have already been signed). Students feel that they can make better decisions about their future if communication with the university is transparent and timely.

THEME 4: SUPPORT STUDENTS’ MENTAL HEALTH

Theme Summary:
- The pandemic alone has created stressful living and working environments throughout the population. This is an experience shared by graduate students, but they have also experienced increased stress associated with their productivity and financial well-being. The pandemic may also be impacting BIPOC students differently, specifically those of East Asian backgrounds. Participants' hold the opinion that mental health resources are inaccessible or inadequate to meet the current needs.
THEME 5: EXTENDED TIME/FUNDING DUE TO COVID DISRUPTION

Theme Summary:

- Graduate students feel that the pandemic has disrupted their progress because of delays in their ability to conduct research. Students are concerned that these delays could delay the completion of degree requirements, resulting in increased costs (i.e., enrollment in additional terms). This concern appears to reflect a lack of clarity regarding when students’ research will resume. Furthermore, their funding packages may not be extended to compensate for this increased time in the program. Finally, the findings indicate that graduate students found the process of deferring summer enrollment to be arduous.

  Extensions to complete degree without ongoing tuition fees for those who are finished PhD coursework and working on dissertations. My research ( archival) has been sidelined for months by the pandemic. Paying tuition for extra years when I am past my funding period is onerous.

  Extending degree-completion schedules. For many of us, research got interrupted. The financial burden that awaits us if we don’t complete our degrees on time is not fair.

THEME 6: FOSTER STUDENT CONNECTIONS

Theme Summary:

- Graduate students are feeling a lack of connection with each. Students new to the university appear to find it especially challenging to make new connections with fellow graduate students. The quality of social connection seems to be declining as graduate students have less interaction with each other. Further, this appears to be eroding a sense of community
within the university. When social events are organized, they tend to be student initiated, with limited input from departments, faculty, or the graduate school.

**A mentoring system within departments** As a first year MA student new to Kingston, I’ve had a hard time acquainting myself with others and the city.

4.0 ★
Ranked #217 of 371

**By finding away to foster social connections for new grad students outside of class.** Because simply meeting people in teams or over zoom leaves us with little unmediated opportunities to connect with cohort. It’s isolating.

4.3 ★
Ranked #94 of 371

**THEME 7: FEEDBACK ON DISTANCE LEARNING - STUDENT**

Theme Summary:
- Participants indicated that although most courses are now conducted online, many have not been adequately adapted for the online environment (e.g., detrimental effects of increased screen time; structure and nature of assignments; access to resources such as the library). Graduate students feel that some of their instructors have opted to transfer their in-person teaching approach to online platforms (i.e., uploading lecture videos, sharing PowerPoint presentations), without understanding how engaging material is in these different contexts. Participants also cite a lack of consistency in instructors’ use of online platforms. The consequence is that students must learn how to navigate multiple platforms and in some instances their instructors do not have the knowledge/experience to provide support.

**Adapt course structure to fit an online environment.** In-person classes and online classes are not the same, therefore should not be taught and structured in the same way.

4.1 ★
 Ranked #152 of 371

**Standardize the e-learning experience.** It’s difficult navigating different classes with different ways that tech is being used

4.0 ★
Ranked #166 of 371
THEME 8: HELP STUDENTS ADAPT TO WORK-FROM-HOME MANDATE

Theme Summary:

- Students have experienced an increase in costs associated with working from home. They have had to purchase equipment (e.g., desks, chairs, extra computer monitors) and better internet to complete their work. Some software that had been purchased for use on laboratory computers is not available for use at home on personal computers. A second concern related to working from home is the availability of time, workspace, and environment to complete work. For many students, working from home during a pandemic has many demands including lack of childcare, private space to work, or limited hours to work space (such as working at the dining room table).

**Offset work-from-home costs** The work from home initiative is not being adequately financed by the university, which previously provided offices, computers, etc for work  
3.8 ★  
Ranked #282 of 371

**More support with the little things like making sure we have access to high-speed internet, certain softwares etc** Assumed that most Queen’s students are “well off”, making sure students who are unable to work on campus are set up to be as successful as possible  
4.2 ★  
Ranked #125 of 371

THEME 9: INCREASE ACCESS TO LIBRARY RESOURCES

Theme Summary:

- Access to campus’ libraries has implications for students’ ability to do their work, acquire resources they need for their research, and complete their degrees on time. Students feel that the pick-up and borrowing times are too limited considering challenges associated with getting to campus for students who do not have access to personal vehicles and live further from campus. They feel that access to these resources is crucial to completing degree requirements and that their access should be prioritized in some way. The suspension of interlibrary loans has also affected students’ access to material necessary for their research.

**Prioritize graduate students for Library access** If you’re writing a paper/thesis or studying for a comprehensive, a change in work environment is crucial for productivity  
4.1 ★  
Ranked #162 of 371
THEME 10: INCREASE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Theme Summary:

- Participants perceive that there will be a lack of post-graduate job opportunities during the pandemic. Graduate students would like the university to provide online job fairs, career networking, and professional development opportunities that can help them navigate finding a job during the pandemic. Students also expressed an interest in helping Queen’s University to adjust to the pandemic, through being involved in COVID-19 related research or helping instructors with their online course development.

  - **Reinstate program to hire students to help faculty put courses online**
    Initiative to do this disappeared back in the spring, and we see the result now in the abject failure of many profs to go online. ASO is overwhelmed.
    
    - **Making a greater effort with post-graduate job recruitment**
      Good job placements were a promise Queen’s made to incoming students, yet there’s been little effort put into helping students with deadlines and info

  - **4.0 ★**
    Ranked #213 of 371

THEME 11: REINSTATE SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Theme Summary:

- Participants highlighted the additional financial strain placed on international students because of high tuition costs and lack of teaching/research assistantship opportunities during the pandemic. Students feel that the decisions related to teaching/research assistantship opportunities were discriminatory and poorly communicated.

  - **Allow International TA/RA Work**
    This decision is discriminatory and was communicated poorly. The university should lobby the government on behalf of students to create opportunities.
    
    - **4.0 ★**
      Ranked #224 of 371

  - **We need a tuition fee reduction for international graduate students to domestic rates**
    Financial concerns of international students have exacerbated due to ineligibility for CESB and precarious studying and working conditions.
    
    - **4.0 ★**
      Ranked #220 of 371
THEME 12: RETURN TO IN-PERSON EDUCATION FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

Theme Summary:

- Some faculty/departments are able to return and have in-person classes while others are not. It is not clear how and these decisions are being made, which is leading to distrust in the institution and perception that some programs are more valued than others. Lastly, the decision-making processes is not clear such that elementary and high school students can return but graduate students cannot despite having smaller classes. These discrepancies need to be addressed.

**In person classes** How can they justify having all these facilities open and then saying small graduate classes with the same people meeting twice a week are dangerous?

3.5 ★
Ranked #322 of 371

**Acknowledge that, for many students, remote learning is not the same quality of education as in-person learning.** Many of us feel this way yet the university believes that there is no difference and shows this by charging us accordingly.

4.3 ★
Ranked #99 of 371

THEME 13: FEEDBACK ON DISTANCE LEARNING - TEACHING ASSISTANT/FELLOW PERSPECTIVE

Theme Summary:

- Graduate students shared thoughts about how their teaching assistantship workload increased to meet the need for support from undergraduate students. Further, a greater number of assignments/quizzes/exams combined with the online format required more time for marking that may have been allocated. Teaching fellows would like earlier access to the employee NetIDs to begin early preparation for their courses.

**I think asynchronous e-teaching should continue to be refined and improved. It is here to stay. But consideration has to be given to not overloading with a full course load, undergrads could be facing 5 asynchronous submissions every week. too heavy.**

3.5 ★
Ranked #128 of 371

**More time on marking duties for TA.** Around 30% increasing number of student, more and harder questions especially on open-book quiz and tests means much more marking time as a TA.

4.1 ★
Ranked #155 of 371
IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING GRADUATE STUDENTS

The transition to “working-from-home” has had a detrimental effect on graduate students’ experiences as both learners and employees at Queen’s University. This section will summarize graduate students’ perceptions of how the university can better support their needs during the pandemic before providing evidence-based recommendations tied students’ feedback.

Domestic and international graduate students indicate that they would like Queen’s University to provide financial support to help offset the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 75% of our participants shared that the pandemic has impacted their finances and put them in a position where continuation in their programs is uncertain. Generally, graduate students support Queen’s University’s adherence to public health guidelines limiting access to campus. However, limited access to facilities and resources has contributed to student beliefs that their current training experience is inferior to an in-person graduate student experience. Furthermore, they feel that the university is taking advantage of their commitment to graduate school by charging for services and resources that are inaccessible. Disruptions to students’ progress further compounds these issues because students anticipate there will be additional costs associated with enrollment past their expected graduation date with an uncertain economic recovery (i.e., job prospects). These concerns are consistent with recent studies examining the effects of COVID-19 on university students. For example, in a sample of more than 15,000 university students, concerns about the economic consequences (r = 0.342, p < 0.001) and academic delays (r = 0.326, p < 0.001) were among the COVID-19-related stressors contributing most to participants’ anxiety (Dhar et al., 2020).

Working from home also poses unique challenges for the graduate student population. Participants cited inequities in their work environments at home (e.g., lack of quiet space, inadequate workspace) as significant barriers that have negatively affected their experiences and mental health. Online learning has affects graduate students on two fronts – as students and teaching assistants. Like the experiences shared by undergraduate students, the graduate student sample believes that there is room for improvement related to online course delivery at Queen’s University. Participants highlighted specific areas for improvement including (a) faculty training and professional development related to remote course design and delivery,
(b) standardization of online platforms/tools, (c) increase interaction with faculty, and (d) introduction of quality standards/assessment – all of which are consistent with recently empirical recommendations (e.g., Garrett et al., 2020). Graduate students also discussed increased workloads (e.g., instructors assigning more assessments than in-person delivery) associated with their teaching assistantships as a stressor associated with working from home. These barriers are not easily addressed due to financial constraints and commitments to rental agreements. Graduate students have tried to adapt their homes to make them more conducive to full-time work and they have incurred additional costs in doing so (e.g., new furniture, better internet).

Participants would also like Queen’s University to improve their communication with the graduate students. Graduate students would like decisions that directly affect them to be communicated in a more consistent, transparent, empathetic, and timely manner. Consistent messaging that integrates empathic communication and evidence-based health information has been recommended for universities to help manage the current pandemic (Mackert et al., 2020). Participants expressed a willingness to take responsibility for the difficult decisions related to their academic pursuits but feel that they are being prevented from making informed decisions because the university is not providing clear communication.

The pandemic has contributed to stressful living and working conditions for graduate students. In our sample, 95% of participants reported that the pandemic has had at least somewhat of a negative effect on their mental health. Participants’ highlighted issues accessing mental health support through Queen’s University, such as long waitlists to schedule a session with a counsellor and lack of continuity with who they speak with. This may be attributed to an increase in the number of students trying to access these networks. University students with no previous history of mental health concerns have shown greater declines in mental health during the pandemic, when compared with students with pre-existing diagnoses (Hamza et al., 2020). Further, isolation from social networks, lack of social interaction and emotional support have contributed to the negative mental health trajectories of university students during the pandemic (Elmer et al., 2020). Graduate students feel that they are lacking social connection with their peers, and this is especially true for students’ who are new to the university. Perceptions of connectedness with whom you share an identity has been shown to improve mental health and well-being (Graupensperger et al., 2020). Graduate students would like their departments to find innovative ways to develop a greater sense of community among
graduate students and take the onus off students to organize given the increase workload in other areas.

Considering these implications drawn from the graduate student ThoughtExchange, we offer these following recommendations to better support the graduate students moving forward:

1. ADDRESS THE FINANCIAL CONCERNS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS
   - Work with the School of Graduate studies to identify possible financial solutions to reduce tuition and/or mandatory student fees for services that students do not have access to during the pandemic. Consider making opt-out fees for services that are affected by the pandemic as opt-in fees.
   - Work with the School of Graduate studies to advocate for graduate students who require extra time to complete degree requirements because of disruptions caused by the pandemic.
   - Work with the School of Graduate Studies to advocate for international students to have teaching assistantship positions so they have an opportunity to earn income to offset costs of graduate education. upcoming terms and consider the equity and ramifications of increased international student tuition rates during a global economic crisis.
   - Work with the School of Graduate Studies to potentially re-evaluate deferment process for graduate students who face hardships during the pandemic. Forcing students to withdraw and reapply in these circumstances ignores inequities within the graduate population.

2. INCREASE STUDENTS’ ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY WORKSPACES
   - Address issues of equity regarding students who face structural barriers (e.g., lack of quiet space, lack of reliable internet connection) to education.
   - Advocate for students to increase the frequency that students can book library study spaces on campus.
   - Support graduate students who may have creative solutions to support students who are key stages of their graduate studies (e.g., comprehensive exams, thesis/dissertation writing).
   - Development of a COVID safety plan that would allow interested graduate students to access their laboratories/work areas at least one day per week.
3. IMPROVE TRANSPARENCY, EMPATHY, AND TIMELINESS OF COMMUNICATIONS

- Implement a feedback system through which graduate students can provide ongoing feedback regarding their educational experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, and through which the university can make informed decisions on supporting students.

- Work with the School of Graduate Studies to provide students with timely, clear communication on matters (e.g., graduation, decisions on upcoming terms, course selections) that are important for students. These communications should provide students with sufficient time to make informed decisions about their education and finances (e.g., decisions on remote terms should be provided with sufficient time to allow students to make informed decisions about signing leases for housing).

- Work with the central communications to provide more clarity and transparency in university-wide decisions regarding tuition and student fees, return to in-person education, access to resources (e.g., mental health support, library access).

- In collaboration with the School of Graduate Studies address students’ confusion surrounding the perceived inconsistencies in the university’s decisions on closing some parts of campus but not others (e.g., Intramural sports at the ARC are running programs while laboratory courses that are related to students’ learning remain closed).

- Facilitate more open dialogue between graduate students, the Faculty of Arts and Science, and the School of Graduate Studies.

- With the School of Graduate studies provide faculty with support to ensure reasonable and clear expectations related to degree completion (e.g., when will in-person research resume, access to wet labs).

4. FOSTER COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT STUDENTS’ MENTAL HEALTH

- Advocate for improved access to mental health services through the university by addressing limitations to the same-day, short-term mental health model of care, which includes receiving ongoing mental health care and being followed up.

- Communicate to Student Wellness limitations of self-guided, app-driven mental health supports for certain students.

- Work with the School of Graduate Studies to improve visibility of the AMS Health and Dental Plan coverage for psychological services (100%, up to $750 per policy year).
• Advocate for increase mental health support for graduate students (e.g., better access to counsellors, ongoing sessions with the same counsellor).

• Specialized supports for BIPOC in the FAS.

• Provide students in FAS with more opportunities to engage with each other and promote wellbeing (e.g., online fitness activities through ARC services).

• Increase the visibility and awareness of ongoing virtual initiatives to foster sense of community and connection (e.g., Virtual Fitness classes at the ARC).

• Encourage and support diverse student initiatives focused on promoting student connections around different areas of interest.

• Work with Centre for Teaching and Learning to provide students with learning strategies that minimize time spent online, in front of screens.

• Encourage Departments to provide opportunities for graduate students to meet and connect with one another, preferably in person with COVID-19 safety guidelines.

• Encourage and support the establishment of departmental peer support programs.

5. CONTINUE TO FINE-TUNE ONLINE LEARNING

• Standardize online platforms within departments.

• Provide quality assurance checks within courses to ensure both faculty and students are able to navigate the technology and deliver the course in an accessible manner.

• Encourage faculty could have regular check-ins with their TAs to ensure that the work hours are being respected and the demands are reasonable with respect to workload.

• Advocate for and provide teaching fellows with earlier access to Employee NetIDs so that they can begin preparing earlier for their courses.
ThoughtExchange Conclusions

PRIORITIES FOR SUPPORTING UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE STUDENTS

Comparisons in undergraduate and graduate student ThoughtExchange results revealed several key areas in which the university can better support both samples of students (Figure 6). Both undergraduate and graduate students shared that lowering tuition/student fees, providing better supports for student mental health, increasing access to the university workspaces, improving communication between the university and students, and fostering student connections as ways that the university can better support students moving forward during the pandemic.

Undergraduate students provided important feedback on the importance of improving the format and delivery of online learning. Students currently feel overwhelmed and frustrated with the amount of work required to navigate online learning. The university can improve students’ online learning experience by standardizing delivery of online learning, reducing the time spent by students on non-academic tasks, and lowering the number of assignments and summative evaluations.

Graduate students were mainly concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their finances, degree completion, and research progress. Graduate students expressed that the university can better support them by addressing the impact that the COVID-19 disruptions have had in terms of their research/degree completion timelines, and the downstream financial impact that research/degree completion delays may cause. Students reported feeling that the university could do more in supporting their research work during the pandemic, by helping students work from home more effectively, or by prioritizing return for graduate students to access their research spaces and resources on campus.
Figure 6. Comparison of weighted theme ratings across undergraduate and graduate samples.

Undergraduate and Graduate ThoughtExchange Comparison

- LOWER TUITION AND STUDENT FEES
- SUPPORT STUDENTS’ MENTAL HEALTH
- INCREASE ACCESS TO WORKSPACE/RESOURCES
- IMPROVE COMMUNICATION TO STUDENTS
- FOSTER STUDENT CONNECTIONS
- ONLINE LEARNING REQUIRES SIGNIFICANTLY MORE TIME
- MAKE COURSE DELIVERY MORE CONSISTENT
- REDUCE ASSIGNMENTS AND READINGS
- PROVIDE CLARITY AND FLEXIBILITY IN COURSES
- MITIGATE RISKS OF EXTENDED SCREEN TIME
- IMPROVE USE OF ONQ AND OTHER TECHNOLOGIES
- PROVIDE MORE SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING
- IMPROVE QUALITY OF ONLINE LEARNING
- EXTENDED TIME/FUNDING DUE TO COVID DISRUPTION
- HELP STUDENTS ADAPT TO WORK-FROM-HOME MANDATE
- REINSTATE SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
- INCREASE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES
- INCREASE ACCESS TO LIBRARY RESOURCES
- FEEDBACK ON DISTANCE LEARNING - TA/TF
- FEEDBACK ON DISTANCE LEARNING - STUDENT
- RETURN TO IN-PERSON EDUCATION

Weighted Average Rating

Graduate | Undergraduate
References


