Supporting PhDs for a post-pandemic future

Faculty Matters, March 15th, 2021

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Looking ahead to a Post-Pandemic Future

Recovery is on the horizon, but the pandemic’s effects on the higher education sector will be with us for years to come.

As researchers and educators, we will be contending with:

- Long-term effects of research disruptions and delays
- Shifts in research priorities at federal and provincial levels
- Reduced international mobility
- Instability and uncertainty in the labour market graduates will be entering
Checking In

HAVE YOU NOTICED THAT YOUR PHD STUDENTS’ NEEDS HAVE CHANGED OVER THIS PAST YEAR? IF SO, IN WHAT WAYS?

Tell us in the chat
Surveying Grad Student Needs in 2020

May 2020: Covid-19 Student Impact Survey
  o What capacities did students have at the shift emergency remote instruction, and how did the shutdown impact them?

July 2020: Planning for a Remote Fall Semester
  o What supports were students seeking for a remote Fall 2020?

October 2020: Checking-In on your Remote Semester
  o What needs was McGill meeting in Fall 2020, and what needs remained unmet?
What have we learned?

By spring 2020, most students had the basic capacities for remote study

**MAY 2020**

- 90% had sufficient access to a reliable computer
- 89% had sufficient access to videoconferencing software

**JULY 2020**

- 97% have access to a computer
- 78% have fast reliable internet
- 90% feel comfortable using Zoom for classes
As on-campus research ramped up, some students returned

- October 2020 = 76% of respondents were living in Montreal, 59% had visited campus

Of the Graduate Students living in the Montreal area:

- 41% have not been to campus
  - 30% prefer not to commute during the pandemic
  - 32% prefer not to participate in in-person activities during the pandemic
- 59% have been to campus
  - 52% visited 5 times or fewer
  - 80% feel comfortable / very comfortable
  - 44% for Research
  - 16% to attend an appointment
Structural barriers to PhD research are easing, but **motivation & focus** remain crucial barriers to progress

<table>
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<th>May 2020</th>
<th>July 2020</th>
<th>October 2020</th>
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<td><strong>70%</strong> want help to get and stay motivated</td>
<td><strong>60%</strong> concerned about Social / Physical Isolation</td>
<td><strong>63%</strong> found getting and staying motivated challenging</td>
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<td><strong>73%</strong> experienced personal stress</td>
<td><strong>49%</strong> were concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on the health of their family and friends</td>
<td><strong>50%</strong> found balancing learning and personal responsibilities challenging</td>
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<td><strong>66%</strong> had difficulty focusing and paying attention</td>
<td><strong>Career Development (56%)</strong> was the most requested support resource (ahead of remote counselling sessions at 38%)</td>
<td><strong>61%</strong> had difficulty focusing on remote instruction</td>
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PhDs & Motivation

Do you talk with your PhD students about why they are pursuing their degrees and what comes next?
Motivation & Wellbeing in PhDs

By Stage

- Early stage PhDs have more clarity about expectations and more predictable tasks and feedback
- Later stage PhDs have less structure, experience more isolation and receive less feedback, leading to uncertainty about whether they are fulfilling expectations

Needs (Autonomy / Relatedness/ Competency)

- PhDs who complete have higher perceived competence
  - Connection with academics (esp supervisor) + self-directedness = higher perceived competence

Emotional distress, stress and depression

- ~50% graduate students report high levels of distress
- Sources include: academic pressure, financial issues, work life balance, and career uncertainty

(Ali & Kohun, 2006; Lovitts, 2008)
(Litalien and Guay, 2015)
(see review (Sverdlik et al, 2018))
Interviews with PhD alumni who graduated between 2008-2018

PhD Grads share what they valued about their PhDs, and what supports they wished they'd had
If you could go back to before your PhD, what would you tell yourself?

I think the main thing I would have done differently would be to consider non-academic paths for myself from the beginning.

There were several points in my life when I thought I might not be continuing in academia and there was sort of a mourning process. I just wish that I had considered non-academic careers not just as a plan B.

For my psychological health that would have been helpful. I wouldn’t have had to mourn the death of my academic career because I would have gone in thinking that, yes, academia is one thing I could do, but I could also do all these other things.
Career & Professional Development

Career Uncertainty

• At McGill 48% of students are doing a PhD because they want to pursue a career as an academic (other surveys show up to 70%)
• 23% McGill PhDs end up in TT roles
  • → Uncertain return on investment (do other employers need people with PhDs?)
• Perceived pressure to stay in academia + unclear career options = decreased motivation and difficult transition.

Competencies for success

• Explicitness of professional development: Skills Gap vs Communication Gap
• Ad-Hoc / Self-directed → lack of intentional approach to professional skills development means that students only notice a skills gap when they go on the job market
• Skills for academic progress vs. skills for post-degree careers

[CCA Report, 2021; CGPSS Survey, 2019; TRaCE, 2020]

If you could go back, what would you tell yourself?

I would try to think a little bit more business-like, and learn more about human resources, team management skills, project management, and leadership.

I would have taken tons of stuff around leadership: like learning about how to be a good leader, manage change and people, etc.

Then I could bring this knowledge with me on top of my research skills. That would have helped me a lot where I am right now and would have made me more competitive in the job market.
What are the challenges?

UNSTRUCTURED
AMBIGUOUS EXPECTATIONS
ISOLATION
UNEVEN SKILLS DEVELOPMENT
What helps?

STRUCTURE
CLEAR EXPECTATIONS
COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCIES
Structure & Expectations: The Tools

**DEPARTMENT**
- myProgress
  - Department is clear about academic milestones by year

**SUPERVISOR**
- Letter of Understanding
  - Supervisor & Student establish working relationship and overall expectations
- Progress Tracking Form
  - Research objectives are specific, transparent and agreed upon

**STUDENT**
- myPath (Individual Development Plan)
  - Student identifies priorities and creates a plan for achieving goals
Recommended Steps for Students

1. Identify milestones
2. Create an IDP
3. Letter of Understanding
4. Complete Progress Tracking
Competency & Community: The Services

Wellness Hub
Local Wellness Advisor

Campus Life & Engagement

Peer Support
PGSS
PGSA

Professional Development & Career

SKILLSETS
myPath
Career Planning Services
Going forward

WHAT SUPPORTS ARE WORKING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL?

IDEAS & TROUBLESHOOTING

Tell us in the chat