

Engineering Graduate Student Lab-Reopening and TA Concerns FAQ

GECoS – Engineering Graduate Student TA Survey

Major Findings/Concerns:

- **Concerns about student and TA mental health working online**
 - Response: Identify Assist and Refer (IAR) has been made mandatory for TA training. The hope is this will help students refer other students to the appropriate resources already available at UofT.
 - FASE TA mentorship program will provide TAs additional support from experienced TAs across FASE
- **TA's would like training on how to effectively engage and deliver tutorials in an online setting**
 - Response: a new TA training course is being developed which lets students select training modules relevant to their work. Additionally, returning TAs can request training hours if their role has significantly changed due to a shift to online lecturing. One recommendation is for the module to deliver content in a modified and meaningful way whether that be informing instructors on ways to modify content delivery or TAs.
- **Concern about availability of TA positions**
 - Response: In most Departments extra TA positions are being made available for moderation of online lectures. The situation for international students abroad is much more complicated and will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis by Labour Relations.
- **Concerns about TA hours not accurately reflecting actual working hours**
 - Response: it is understood that many TAs had to work extra hours because of the sudden shift from in person to online in the Winter 2020 term. There is a good chance that TA positions may take more or less time than anticipated for Fall 2020, students are encouraged to use the mid-term review to make sure that TA hours are accurately reflected in their contract/ Duties and Allocation of Hours (DDAH) form.
- **Majority of students would be comfortable with OPTIONAL in-person duties such as labs or office hours, provided adequate safety measures are taken**
 - Response: some departments may offer the OPTION of in-person duties if they feel it is important for student learning in the course. In that case, they must file an application that includes description of COVID-related safety measures put in place and obtain approval from the Faculty.

GECoS – Engineering Graduate Student Survey on Lab Reopening

Graduate Student concerns

- Better reinforcement of the COVID-19 guidelines for all (researchers, contractors, security guards, custodians)

- Student recommendations include establishing some sort of anonymous tip line on effectively communicating this issue, and also pushing for training of supervisor or lab managers on the guidelines. The university has a process in place for reporting non compliance (<https://www.provost.utoronto.ca/planning-policy/utogether2020-a-roadmap-for-the-university-of-toronto/>)
- Lack of oversight on supervisors and what they are pushing their students to do
 - Reassessment of research priorities for grad students due to limited lab access
 - Just like for graduate students, SGS sent out supervision guidelines to principal investigators that still apply for most issues. The Faculty of Engineering is considering various strategies to address this concern.
 - A recommendation is to have a check-in form for PIs, maybe add to committee meeting report an update on COVID approach and comfort level by student and committee.
 - Lab capacity determined by % - professors estimate numbers, lab spaces are overcrowded? CCBR - capacity not based on square footage. Divisional research re-start plans must include procedures to ensure the ability to maintain physical distancing more generally in the rooms. There are several tools developed by the University to monitor overall occupancy on floors and buildings, including classroom use. Read more [here](#) on capacity assessment.
- The restrictions regarding lab access outside the 7am-1pm and 2-8pm time slots and weekends
 - More autonomy in organizing student lab allocations
 - The faculty's random safety inspections of the engineering labs have shown that a good percentage of them, especially during the early morning or late evening schedules are underutilized. This offers an opportunity to provide more access to students who wish to improve their progress.
- Mental health and wellness concerns:
 - Anxiety about restarting wet-lab experiments, future funding, timeline to completion, future employment, university outbreak response
 - How understanding is the department when it comes to graduate students not being able to complete certain projects due to factors out of their control (i.e. lab shut down due to the pandemic)? Timeline to completion? These concerns are very appropriate. Their resolution encompasses discussions from the department, faculty and SGS. The faculty is in communication with SGS and the individual units.
 - Future funding: Scroll below for Tuition Waiver details. Recommendation from our graduate students: Emergency funding for students who will be outside of funded cohort because of COVID.
 - Future employment: One recommendation is for engineering can reach out to employers for more virtual internships through Mitacs and such.

- Regarding the university outbreak response: [Read more here](https://hub.engineering.utoronto.ca/research-services/research-continuity-covid-19-information/) <https://hub.engineering.utoronto.ca/research-services/research-continuity-covid-19-information/>
- **Feeling Distressed?** A list of UofT and Community mental health resources and contacts. One recommendation is for easy access (one-on-one appointments) with SGS.
- Difficulties staying motivated while isolated
 - For SGS Programming and student services, please go [here](#).
 - Student Life is offering workshops online. You can see their offers [here](#).
 - Events include: Mindful Moments, productivity workshops, de-stress events
 - Academic Success
 - Accessibility Services
 - And more!
 - Check out events from your student association and GECoS. Check out the Graduate Engineering Student Community Resources Quercus page for events. GECoS continuously updates this course page to create a transparent and accessible way to connect to students. It was designed to have pages dedicated to Relevant Student Events, FAQs, Resources for students in Mental Health and Wellness, and Discussion board to engage students in fun conversations. If you do not have access to this page, please contact David Duong at d.duong@utoronto.ca
 - Additional resources can be found on the [UofT COVID-19 website](#).
- Feeling pressured about returning to the lab
 - We are not sure where this pressure is stemming from for this concern to be addressed. GECoS will continue to ask for feedback at their AGM, Grad PACS appointments, anonymous tips, etc.
- Lack of support/concern for student mental health by supervisors, department
Recommendation from our grad students: Prepare and share guidelines for supervisors on how maintain mental wellness in the laboratory. The faculty will continue to look into this item.
- Lack of concern for those who don't necessarily need lab access but have poor working conditions at home
 - The faculty has agreed to provide office space for graduate students on case-by-case basis. Access to office space to perform computational research is possible at this time.
 - GECoS has discussed creating raffle and funding for students to apply to get "discounted" work from home equipment.
- Addressing the mental struggles of international students
 - **My SSP** | 1-844-451-9700. Outside of North America, call 001-416-380-6578. Culturally-competent 24-hr mental health and counselling services in **146 languages** for all U of T students. Chat about school, health, general life concerns for free.

- The Centre for International Experience - addressing the needs for International Students
- Facility Access (for research activities)
 - Other engineering buildings: You will need to fill out the Visitor Access Form and follow the submission prompts listed. ([Research Continuity: COVID-19 Information](#) > Forms/ Templates > Visitor Access Request Form) This form enables you to access other engineering buildings than your own for research collaborative purposes. Other types of activity have a different approval process (based on GATs form)
 - Other UofT buildings: To access research facilities that are not within a FASE controlled building, be sure to check their official websites to learn more. You may also contact our Vice-Dean Research, Professor Ramin Farnood, to work on a protocol for streamlining access to that facility.
 - Workspaces on campus (libraries, office, classrooms)
 - University of Toronto Library (UTL) will be opening up some study spaces (following all the appropriate protocols for social distancing). Gerstein library has currently some technology space (only 15 seats) for students who need access to a wired computer or WIFI:
<https://onereach.library.utoronto.ca/news/curbside-pickup-now-includes-gerstein-and-downsview-books-and-technology-access-services#Tech%20Access> UTL is working on opening up study space soon.
 - GECoS is in communication with ECF library to advocate for graduate student library access in a meaningful capacity.
 - The faculty is still in Stage 1 of reopening. Only access to labs is granted to grad students/research personnel.
 - Here are two helpful guides for [research stream](#) and [course based](#) students on coping with working from home and resources developed by a faculty member, research associate and PhD student. This document is always updated so please check back for new resources.
- More coordination with caretaking staff for cleaning of labs & common areas. Is there any installation/maintenance of air filtration systems to limit potential recirculation of viral particles? Greater access to hand sanitizer at each building entrance. Tcard access to GB and SF is very limited. [The faculty will look further into this concern.](#)
- Better communication on
 - The procedure when working alone in the lab (buddy system): From [Research Readiness Manual for Principal Investigators, Postdoctoral Fellows, Research Staff and Students](#): “A safety assessment can also be performed on a research space to help determine and mitigate safety risks. Where and when the scheduling of research cohorts requires it, Campus Police can provide the following two services at the request of individuals:
 - Work Alone Program - designed to create a safer environment for U of T students, staff and faculty who are working alone in isolated areas on the campus and for individuals with ongoing personal safety concerns.

Register by calling Campus Police at 416-978-2323 or by visiting 21 Sussex Ave, 1st Floor.

- TravelSafer service - encouraged when travelling around campus at night. A Special Constable or Security Guard will meet a requesting individual(s) at their building location and escort them to their residence, another U of T building or abutting TTC Subway station. This is a 24/7 service but recommended more often when it's dark. Call 416-978-SAFE (7233) to arrange an escort.
- The University has Working Alone Guidelines that include resources available to support members of our community while on our campuses.
- Tuition Waivers:
 - The Vice-Dean, Graduate Studies, Professor Julie Audet, has worked with the grad coordinator group and some grad administrators on a template for graduate units to inform graduate students about eligibility and on how to apply for the SGS tuition waiver for the fall. Some units have a more formal process than others since they expect more requests. In that case, in addition to the SGS guidelines and SGS form, the department must have provided more specific instructions to verify that the request meets the criteria outlined by SGS (i.e. who should endorse the request). Some grad units have an internal deadline around the 3rd week of August (to waive fall tuition) because of the review process and volume expected. Some department units are doing this case by case. Students can only apply for one term when they are no longer in the funded cohort, so this waiver will be available for future terms (e.g. a student will be able to apply for fall 2021 if they are still in the funded cohort in the 2020-2021 academic year).
 - The faculty will look into this item for additional support.
- TA-ships: Some TA related concerns have been addressed at the first section of this document. Guidance from the university has been very recently communicated to hiring units. Better communication from CUPE is needed regarding the attendance on campus issue and concerns with international students getting paid if not in country.