

SUBJECT: Omicron Variant and the Graduate Community

From: SGS Dean Joshua Barker

December 16, 2021

Dear Graduate Community,

On December 15th, the University leadership announced [new measures](#) to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in response to the emergence of the Omicron variant of concern. These measures will result in a sharp reduction in on-campus activity—effective today and continuing through January—in order to keep our community safe. I strongly advise you to read that [memo](#), if you have not done so already. In this message, I highlight how these changes will impact the graduate community.

Graduate Classes and In-Class Exams

As of today, Fall term graduate in-person exams will not be proceeding. Instructors or programs will be reaching out to confirm arrangements in affected courses.

Winter term graduate and undergraduate classes are expected to start as scheduled in January; however, a vast majority of these **will be delivered online until January 31, 2022**. A small number of graduate courses may continue to require in-person meetings, placements, or practica, so please watch for updates from your instructor or program administrator on a particular course.

Departmental Examinations

Departmental graduate examinations (e.g. qualifying exams, comprehensive exams, thesis proposal defenses, etc.) will be solely online until January 31, 2022.

Final Oral Examinations for Doctoral Students

Final oral examinations for doctoral students that are scheduled to take place prior to January 31, 2022, and which were approved to be in an in-person or hybrid format, will now be transitioned back to an online format. SGS will continue to schedule in-person and hybrid final oral examinations for dates starting January 31, 2022. For any questions, please contact: sgs.doctoral@utoronto.ca.

Placements, Internships and Other Experiential Program Elements

Please refer to your graduate program for further information regarding placements, internships, and other experiential program components for the month of January.

Graduate Research on Campus

Our on-campus laboratories continue to operate but those who can work remotely should do so until January 31, 2022. For graduate students, the decision to conduct research activities in-person or remotely is ideally a joint decision with your supervisor, but ultimately the decision to be in-person rests with the student. It is imperative that we continue to use appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and follow all public health guidance.

All in-person research with participants who are from vulnerable populations must stop now until January 31, 2022. Vulnerable populations include for example, the unvaccinated, undervaccinated (e.g. have not had two COVID-19 vaccines), immune compromised, long term care residents and Indigenous communities. Questions about whether your population is vulnerable should be directed to: f2f.research@utoronto.ca. All virtual research may continue.

Any research that can be moved virtually, should be moved now to those alternative methods.

For all other in-person research that is not with vulnerable populations and which cannot be moved virtually or paused, emergency stop and contact tracing plans must be reviewed and researchers should continue to monitor local public health guidance and travel advisories.

All researchers should monitor the [OVPRI website](#) for updates as the situation evolves.

Working Remotely – Teaching Assistants and Employee Postdoctoral Fellows

With the latest provincial announcement, **all employees, including Teaching Assistants and Postdoctoral Fellows, should work remotely until Monday, January 31, 2022**, with the exception of those who must work on campus, such as employees who provide in-person student support, or who are needed for specific in-person research activities.

If you are a teaching assistant, please reach out to your course instructor for further information. If you are a postdoctoral fellow, please reach out to your supervisor/principal investigator.

If you have not already done so, please ensure you have uploaded your proof of vaccination to [Ucheck](#); this is required for all employees, even those working remotely.

Students and International Travel

Given that the federal government has issued a [global travel advisory](#) advising Canadians to avoid non-essential travel outside of Canada, as of December 15, 2021, all university sanctioned activities outside of Canada are cancelled for U of T students, until further notice.

If you are a PhD student looking to conduct thesis related research outside of Canada – if you can defer your travel, please do so at this time; otherwise, please contact safetyabroad@utoronto.ca to discuss your options.

If you are considering personal travel over the winter break, please be aware that restrictions around travel including requirements for return to Canada may change without any notice. There is the possibility that you will have difficulty returning to Canada including significant delays and being required to quarantine when able to return.

For additional information please refer to the frequently asked questions by students on the [VP Students COVID-19 FAQ page](#).

SGS Student Services

SGS operations will continue with minor modifications in how we deliver our services. We will now only offer virtual and phone appointments in lieu of in-person appointments, until January 31, 2022.

We understand this period may particularly be stressful for graduate students who will be joining the University of Toronto for the first time in January. We look forward to welcoming you and answering your questions. We hope you will attend our Virtual Winter Orientation.

I will be in contact again as the University continues to monitor the latest announcements from the provincial and federal governments. In the meantime, I hope you can make the time to rest and connect with your loved ones safely. It has been a challenging year, and you deserve a break.

Please remember that help is available if you need it. We have put in place health and mental health supports for members of our community. If you need to talk, do not hesitate to reach out (see resource list below).

Sincerely,

Joshua Barker, PhD

Dean, School of Graduate Studies and

Vice-Provost, Graduate Research and Education

Supports for graduate students:

[SGS Grad Hub](#)

[My SSP](#) (support available 24/7/365)

[Good2Talk Student Helpline](#)

[Student Mental Health Resource Website](#)

[Navi](#)

[St. George, Health and Wellness Centre](#)

[UTSC, Health and Wellness Centre](#)

[UTM, Health & Counselling Centre](#)