

Supporting Graduate Student Mental Health

The Ontario Graduate Caucus (OGC) of the Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario alongside the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), the Ontario University Workers Coordinating Committee (OUWCC) of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and 13 graduate students' unions engaged in a two-year research project to identify and document the shared experiences of graduate students in Ontario universities. The Federation launched *Not in the Syllabus*, a graduate student mental health campaign aimed at addressing the negative effects of bullying and harassment on graduate students' mental health.

2,001 graduate students from across the province were asked about their experiences on their respective campuses and the resulting impacts on their mental health and well-being.

Bullying and harassment are serious behaviours that have negative impacts on graduate students' academic environment.

Students described how experiences of bullying and harassment along with other stressors negatively impact their mental health and increases the likelihood of low self-esteem, poor school performance, anxiety and depression.

The Federation is proposing five recommendations to improve the mental health and well-being of graduate students on campus. The intent of our recommendations is to be used by graduate students' unions to influence and inform the development of campus resources to confront bullying, harassment and mental health issues faced by graduate students. This factsheet will outline the primary survey results as they pertain to the OGC recommendations for graduate student mental health resources on campus.

What impacts graduate students' mental health?



Time to completion anxiety



Anxiety of failing or appearing weak



Paying tuition fees and other institutional costs



Not feeling properly supported by their academic institution

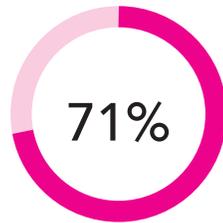


Anxiety around seeking and/or affording mental health support

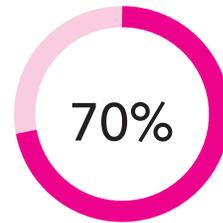


Graduate students in Ontario have reported that they have witnessed and/or experienced many instances of bullying and/or harassment that have been damaging to their mental health from administrators, faculty, instructors, students, colleagues, supervisors and even support service staff.

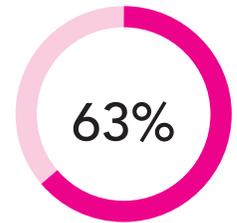
Survey respondents identified the following experiences of bullying and harassment as having negative impacts on their mental health:



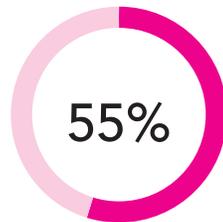
Verbal abuse



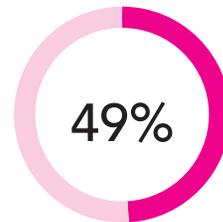
Pressure to overwork



Behaviours seeking to undermine



Sexism



Racism

Graduate students described their experiences in graduate school in the following statements:

“A supervisor yelled at students, threatened to kick students out of the lab, give them poor letters of reference and not continue collaborations.”

“My supervisor said that my written skills in my second language were atrocious, and wanted to contact the dean to try to get me removed from the program.”

“The pressure to overwork puts me in a terrible position where I have to balance my academic integrity with my personal sanity, and time spent with my family. We deserve to be paid overtime. I don't like being expected to do this work, but not be paid for it.”

“As a T.A. I have experienced angry students harassing me for marks, which has included being yelled at.”

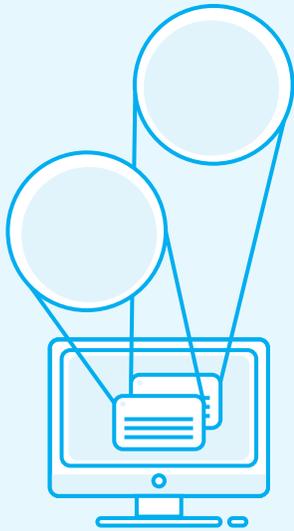
In their own words, graduate students described how these experiences impacted their mental health:

“Overwhelmed and anxious; it also stressed me out quite a bit because I can't neglect my research assistantship. My funding depends on that.”

“There is no end to feeling stressed unless you leave academia. If you take any time off, people glare at you as if you are not working hard enough.”

“I felt very helpless and felt as though myself and others are being taken advantage. Graduate students are expected just to take this type of treatment.”

“It killed my self-confidence and my grades started slipping.”



What's keeping graduate students from getting support?

Students face a unique challenge accessing campus support services because they often do not want their supervisors, administrators or mentors to know that they are struggling and have sought help.

Graduate students have stated that they are reluctant to access mental health resources for fear of personal, funding and career reprisals.

Further, graduate students are wary of running into their undergraduate students and mentees when they do ask for help from service providers, because, often times, graduate students can only access the same service providers as undergraduate students.

Based on the content analysis, the four largest issues keeping graduate students from seeking support are:



Fear of reprisal



I feel depressed and fearful, that I will not get a job if I brought issues forward.



Reporting to academic and administrative professionals who are part of the problem



My experience with the academic administrator happened multiple times, and I have actively avoided going to them for advice.



Not knowing who to turn to



I felt, insulted, belittled, harassed and humiliated. In particular, because when I went to complain, no one took my complaints seriously.



Inability to commit the time or effort to navigate the formal complaints process



It was difficult... it had a huge impact on my confidence, and it has taken a while to get back into my work whole-heartedly. Burnt-out is probably the best description.

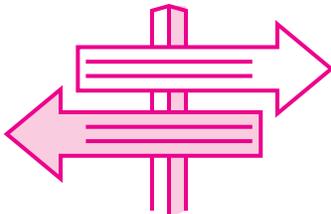
Graduate Students' Recommendations

The Federation has researched the influences, environmental factors and effects bullying and harassment have on graduate students. The Federation recommends that institutions improve support of graduate students by implementing the following recommendations:



Flexible counseling hours

Ensure that graduate student mental health services offer flexible hours, including evening hours. This is necessary to accommodate graduate students' schedules, which often involve being on campus in the evenings and on weekends, while also taking classes, facilitating labs and teaching during regular business hours.



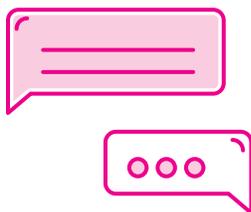
Private and separated space for graduate student counselling services

Choosing an appropriate location is important for maintaining student confidentiality so that graduate students are not in the same place as the students they may teach or facilitate labs for.



Comprehensive training of graduate-specific issues

Hire an on-campus counselor who will be available exclusively to graduate students and is familiar with the unique challenges that graduate students face. Additionally, provide all workers with training on graduate-specific issues and provide mandatory equity, anti-oppression and anti-stigma training.



Access to and promotion of e-health technology

A 24-hour mobile or chat line would allow students to have easy access to mental health professionals. Although this cannot directly replace traditional counseling, it is a useful first point of contact that would provide students with alternate methods of seeking assistance.



Building graduate student issues into a campus-wide mental health initiatives

Institutions should embed graduate student mental health and development into the institutional vision and strategic goals of the campus. Doing so will increase knowledge, reduce stigma and expose the roots of the problem. Raising awareness helps encourage members' commitment to take action and foster change on campus.