Supervisors

In February and even early March, I never thought we would be embarking on this evolution of student-supervisory relations. In the current COVID-19 context, there are layers of personal and professional adaptation. As we move forward towards lessening of research curtailment, some level of resumed campus engagement and potentially the echo effect, there will be a need to look more openly, communicate expectations more effectively, and design scholarly activity more flexibly.

To support student success and strong supervisory relationships we recommend that all supervisors and their graduate students revisit their mutual expectations. To assist in this process, we offer suggestions below. We encourage you to take time to revisit our Supervisor-Student Expectations Document (see https://gradstudies.ok.ubc.ca/academics/student-supervisor-expectations/) and in collaboration with your students reframe them to address our current situation.

Perhaps more now than ever, it is important for graduate supervisors and committees to demonstrate ongoing commitment, support, and encouragement to their students’ program. This is a good time to acknowledge that there may have been, and continue to be, a slowing of productivity for students, postdocs and faculty due to increased family commitments, added stress, working environments, research curtailment, geographic location, and financial challenges.

As we approach the deadline for Annual Progress Reports which were extended to July 2, 2020 we encourage you to consider the following in your supervisory approach and documentation.

1) **Do no harm.** Respond empathetically to your students concerns as they are expressed, and try to be flexible in your approach to their work. Do not demand increased productivity at this time. While students may give the appearance of having more time due to research curtailment, many are dealing with increasing home-life complications. Additionally, many are experiencing a heightened period of stress (due to increased financial and academic uncertainty) that makes concentration very difficult at this time. Empathy and encouragement will lead to better outcomes for both student mental health and their ultimate research productivity.

2) **Be flexible and responsive to individual student needs.** Discuss options with the student and the supervisory committee, and adjust expectations accordingly. Build and outline a strategy for continued academic progress. Set up mutually workable timelines and build flexibility within them given the unpredictability in work and personal circumstances. Discuss any anticipated breaks, absences, and vacation times as you set up schedules.

3) **Understand that the threshold for a complete thesis or dissertation have likely changed.** This is particularly important for students currently nearing the completion of their research, but also for a number of months following return to research activities. For students whose research for their theses and dissertations are near completion, consider whether or not their projects are sufficient for completion as they currently stand. For students whose research is just beginning, consider whether it is worthwhile revising the nature of their research to one that is possible to undertake during this period of physical distancing, and any repeat occurrence through an echo effect. Given that these decisions may be based on the expectations for a given research area, there is no prescribed standard approach or policy to this issue. As a result, clear and consistent communication between student-supervisor and committee is needed.

4) **Communication amongst the supervisory committee.** Remember that the supervisory committee is in place to support students and to create solutions to ensure student success.
Capitalize on the Annual Progress Report for documenting challenges and approaches for success and outline support mechanisms and options for the student. Be compassionate and supportive if students request a supervisory committee meeting for any reason.

a. Discuss and address funding issues related to fellowships, scholarships, research and teaching appointments, etc. Provide clarity on what sources are continuing and consider how you and/or your program might replace or supplement any loss of funding sources among your students.

b. Discuss and address any equipment needs related to ongoing communication, research and academic progress. Develop a clear prioritized strategy of access for each student and across students, as research curtailment approaches are communicated from VPRI. Communicate this plan across trainees.

c. Discuss issues related to research curtailment and be creative with alternate processes and procedures. What adjustments need to be made in terms of research timelines, general approaches to proposed studies, ethics concerns and applications, methods of gathering data, etc. (Note: Additional information related to supporting graduate students and postdocs relative to research curtailment are forthcoming from VPRI.)

d. Discuss appropriate concessions related to program milestones and completion. Document these clearly in the progress report. Also, for students close to finishing, you might consider re-assessing thresholds for what defines a sufficient thesis without lessening academic integrity, as noted above.

5) **Be attentive to students’ mental health.** Reach out to all of your graduate students to ensure that they are not in crisis. If they are in crisis, refer them to the mental health care providers, identified on the CoGS COVID information page available to them during COVID-19.

6) **Maintain a sense of community.** In order to minimize student alienation and the impact of social isolation on their mental health, consider instituting regular group check-ins and virtual social gatherings. The purpose of such meetings at this time should be to foster group cohesion rather than drive productivity. Trust that healthier and happier students will naturally be more productive.

7) **Be attentive to your own needs.** It is important that none of the above guiding principles are exercised at the expense of your own wellbeing and mental health. Be sure to be attentive to your own needs and do not feel guilty should you need to occasionally prioritize yourself over other obligations, including the needs of your students. In fact, modelling such behaviour can ultimately be to the benefit for your students.