



University of Victoria  
Graduate Students' Society

**2021-2022 Strategic Plan**

*Prepared by the Executive Board and presented to the Graduate Representative Council on  
September 28, 2021.*



**GSS 2021-22 Board of Directors**

Left to right: Nicole Kent, Director of Communications; Adair Ng, Director of Services; David Foster, Chair; Nahid Safari, Director of Student Affairs; Ryan Khan, Director of Finance.

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# GSS Board Strategic Plan 2021-22

## Introduction

This document outlines the priorities and goals of the 2021-22 University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society (GSS). For each goal, specific strategies and outcomes are described, to enable the Executive Board to measure progress in advancing its members' interests. The annual strategic plan was conceived with the overall purposes of the GSS in mind, as stated in our Constitution.

## CONTEXT

### External

The COVID-19 global pandemic has profoundly affected the University of Victoria and the lives of graduate students. In March 2020, the University transitioned abruptly from primarily in-person delivery of courses and programming to fully online delivery due to public health requirements. The disruption caused by the change to online studies was accompanied by border restrictions that resulted in many international students studying remotely outside of Canada.

Graduate students were impacted financially by the pandemic as their ability to supplement their income through employment was decreased by business closures and a declining economy. Access to healthcare and childcare services were reduced. The anxiety caused by the risk of contracting COVID-19, isolation experienced during lockdowns, and for some, the illnesses and deaths of family members and loved ones led to worsening student mental health.

On the positive side, some students were able to access financial support from the federal government's emergency student benefit and the University's COVID-19 emergency bursary. However, these programs were cut off midway through the pandemic while students continue to experience the effects of lost income and associated stress.

As of July 2021, the BC government plans to remove public health restrictions by the start of the new school year in September, and the University plans a full return to in-person classes. While widespread vaccination against COVID-19 provides cause for cautious optimism, it is unlikely that herd immunity will be reached before the start of classes. The spread of new and more contagious COVID-19 variants may result in further closures and a return to online learning at some point during the school year. Furthermore, many countries continue to experience the brunt of the pandemic without access to vaccines, resulting in travel restrictions that are likely to impact some international students.

The effects of the pandemic have led to a significant increase in requests for GSS support by graduate students dealing with the University. Some of these issues are academic in nature while others are focused on service delivery, particularly international student services. The GSS has heard concerns from medically vulnerable students and international students, in particular, regarding accessibility and accommodations during the return to in-person classes.

### Internal

In March 2020, due to public health restrictions the GSS pivoted from an organization centred on in-person services with approximately 20 employees, to an organization providing entirely remote services

with four employees. The Grad House restaurant space, which was a primary means of attracting interest from graduate students, has been closed for over a year. This resulted in cost savings, since the restaurant operated at a loss, but now raises the question of what to do with the space.

Due to the pandemic, all meetings, events and interactions between GSS members have shifted to online rather than in-person format. The GSS' ability to engage its members was significantly impacted, as opportunities were lost to connect with students who drop into the Grad House or attend in-person events around campus. However, this has been balanced with an increase in engagement with distance students, who comprised approximately 30% of the GSS membership even prior to the pandemic. Students located outside Greater Victoria have served on Grad Council, participated in committees and been elected to the Executive Board. This has created unique challenges but has also made the GSS more representative of its membership. The long-term goal will be to entice students back to in-person events when it is safe to do so, while ensuring distance students continue to be engaged.

Another major event impacting the GSS is the departure of its long-time Executive Director and the transition to new management. This coincided with the loss of a second manager, who was laid off due to the restaurant closure. The GSS experienced a significant period in Fall 2020 with no management staff, which delayed the progress of several initiatives as well as routine matters. A backlog of work was created for the new Executive Director at the same time that individual student advocacy requests, which have traditionally been handled by the Executive Director, were increasing. Due to the Executive Director's workload, the GSS has begun the process of bringing back the second manager position.

This year, the GSS is committing to work on improving graduate student representation and engagement, revitalizing our policy framework, advancing graduate student priorities through advocacy campaigns, developing our internal organizational resources and working toward COVID-19 business recovery to better serve the needs of our members, both on-campus and remotely.

The GSS Board has identified the following areas of focus to achieve our goals:

#### Key areas

1. Advance Advocacy Campaigns
2. Improve Internal Governance Structures and Representation
3. Increase Community Engagement
4. Enhance Visibility and Communications
5. Develop Internal Organizational Resources
6. COVID-19 Business Recovery

## Advocacy Campaigns

### Priority 1: RA Legal Status as University Employees

In 2012, the GSS began to advocate for graduate students employed as grant-funded research assistants (GFRAs). Under University Policy HR6305, these students are not recognized as UVic employees, but only as employees of the individual faculty member who holds the grant. Some GFRAs have experienced

problems such as not being paid for their work or being paid incorrectly. These employment issues led the GSS to seek legal advice in 2013 on GFRA's employment status.

Based on the concerns raised by students and the legal advice received, the GSS lobbied the University to change its policy so that GFRA's would be recognized as UVic employees. In 2016, the GSS formed a task force to work with the Faculty of Graduate Studies Council and other stakeholders to bring forward a proposed policy change to the University Board of Governors and Senate. This led to a working group with representation from the GSS, FGS and UVic administration. However, the working group could not agree on a course of action and disbanded in 2017 without recommending any policy changes.

While UVic has so far resisted changing their policy, in 2017 to 2019 Simon Fraser University conducted a review of its policies on research assistants and concluded that most GFRA's should become university employees. SFU began the transition to university employee status in 2020.

GFRA's have continued to report employment-related problems to the GSS. While the GSS provides what individual support it can to these students, the fact that the University does not consider itself to be the employer can make employment issues difficult to resolve. As a result, the GSS will continue to work toward a change in the status of GFRA's to be recognized as UVic employees.

## Priority 2: Compensation for Students on Time-Intensive University Committees

Student representation on UVic committees provides an important avenue for consultation and ensures that the best interests of students are considered in important policy and operational decisions. Senate standing committees, advisory committees, awards adjudication committees and hiring committees are among the venues where students are provided a voice.

However, participation in the more time-intensive committees, such as search and hiring committees, awards adjudication and appeal committees is challenging for many students due to the required time commitments. Student representatives are the only members on these committees who are not compensated for their time, as University faculty, staff and administrators incorporate committee duties into their working hours. Therefore, the GSS will work with UVic to develop a university policy that would provide stipends to student representatives on the most time-intensive committees to recognize their work.

## Priority 3: Elimination of International Student MSP

In 2019, the BC government announced that Medical Services Plan (MSP) premiums would be eliminated by January 2020. However, while nearly all BC residents no longer pay MSP, the premiums were retained for international post-secondary students, who actually saw an increase in cost from \$37.50 to \$75 per month. The GSS wrote a letter to the Ministry of Health in fall 2019 opposing the continuation of MSP premiums for international students, but so far, the fee has not been changed. The GSS will continue to campaign for the elimination of international student MSP in collaboration with other student societies.

# Governance and Representation

## Priority 1: Policy and Governance Improvements

Under the Society's traditional policy governance structure, policy development was allocated to the Bylaw and Policy Committee, rather than being distributed among the committees and bodies that are

most appropriate for each type of policy. Many existing policies are outdated and include procedural material. The transition to an improved policy governance structure includes creation of an over-arching Policy on Policies and Procedures; division of policies into the categories of governance and operations with appropriate development and approval authorities; separation of policies and procedures; and creation of a cross-organizational policy oversight mechanism whereby policy implementation is monitored, issues with existing policies are identified for review and recommendations for new policies from Executive Board, GRC and staff are sent to the appropriate development body.

## Priority 2: GRC Structure and Elections

Currently, the GSS does not conduct or oversee elections to GRC. In some cases, this is done by associations of students in each academic unit, which are not formally part of the GSS. In many cases, however, these elections (which are GSS elections, since GRC is a decision-making body of the GSS) are conducted by UVic departmental administrative staff. Complaints have been made to the GSS in the past regarding the integrity of GRC elections, but the GSS had no mechanism for redress.

The GSS will work to create capacity to conduct GRC elections via Webvote, which would also enable changes to GRC composition and electoral system. A funding proposal for a GSS elections office will be developed for referendum. If this referendum does not pass, the GSS will implement oversight of GRC elections through a complaints-based system. This would set minimum requirements to be met by the parties conducting GRC elections and give the GSS the ability to annul an election if there was a substantial departure from these requirements.

A significant disparity exists in GRC seat allocation due to the current structure of one seat per academic unit, regardless of the number of students in each academic unit. This has resulted in disparities such as a faculty with one seat having more students than a faculty with nine seats. Moreover, some departments are so small that they cannot reliably elect someone to GRC, resulting in a significant number of vacant seats that compromises the ability of GRC to provide enough volunteers for GSS committees and events as well as representation on university committees.

These issues will be addressed through consultation and development of a bylaw amendment that would add additional seats to GRC. The new structure would increase the number of graduate students who can become engaged through GRC as well as increasing the GSS' volunteer capacity.

## Community Engagement

### Priority 1: Student Wellness

Graduate school can often be stressful, isolating and overwhelming to students, who must balance the demands of schoolwork, research, teaching and other employment to supplement their incomes. The additional mental, emotional and financial toll of the COVID-19 pandemic has further impacted graduate student well-being. The GSS aims to provide a variety of events and services to enhance the overall wellness of its members and address their diverse needs. In addition, the GSS will advocate for increased supports and services for graduate students from UVic.

## Visibility and Communications

### Priority 1: Increase Contact Between Board and Society Membership

Prior to the pandemic, the GSS's communication strategy relied on in-person interactions. From orientation and welcome events to Wednesday Coffee and Board office hours, the GSS was primarily focused on face-to-face service delivery. Since moving online in 2020, we have seen a sharp decrease in our member engagement and especially in our contacts between Board members and our general membership. The GSS will examine the successes and failures of online engagement over the last 18 months and provide more opportunities for all graduate students to meet their representatives.

The barriers to our online engagement strategies have included:

- A restrictive privacy memorandum of understanding with the University of Victoria which limits how we can contact members electronically
- Zoom and online event fatigue throughout the pandemic
- Some in-person events (e.g., Wednesday Coffee) were not successful once moved online and needed significant formatting revisions

The opportunities we will utilize to increase engagement this year are:

- Providing informative and engaging orientation events for new students
- Holding focused online events with a specific purpose in mind (e.g., Townhalls instead of drop-in events)
- Partnering with other campus resources like UVic Global Community to host joint socials where members can meet their Board representatives in a low-barrier, low-stress setting
- As it becomes safe to do so, hosting in-person events

## Resource Development

### Priority 1: Human Resource Development

With the service changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the GSS transitioned from having around 20 employees to only four employees, of which one is full-time. The loss of the second manager position along with an increase in some areas of work such as individual student advocacy resulted in a higher workload for the Executive Director. The GSS needs to increase staffing levels in order to provide the level of operations and services that is required to effectively support our membership. This includes bringing back the second manager position; hiring Work Study students to assist in GSS campaigns and policy research; and re-evaluating the level of unionized staffing. To ensure all staff are able to develop their skills and perform effectively, the GSS is committed to supporting talent alignment, acquisition, development, engagement and retention.

### Priority 2: Repurpose Student Advocate Fund

The Student Advocate Fund was established by referendum of the GSS membership in Spring 2019 with a new student fee to be directed to this fund.

The original intention of the Student Advocate Fund was to hire a full-time staff person (Student Advocate), funded by the UVSS and GSS, who would be responsible for supporting students in individual advocacy regarding issues with university policies and procedures, e.g., in complaints, appeals, hearings

or judicial reviews. However, the staff position was not created because the UVSS membership voted against paying the fee, resulting in a much lower level of funding.

In October 2019, new Terms of Reference for the Student Advocate fund were approved by the GSS membership. According to these Terms of Reference, the fund would be used to cover costs of individual advocacy for students regarding issues with university policies and procedures (such as complaints, appeals, hearings or judicial reviews) on a case-by-case basis. While it was assumed that all revenue from the Student Advocate Fund would be spent annually, no expenditures from the Fund occurred from 2019 to 2021. This raises the concern that the GSS membership is paying a fee but not seeing any benefits provided by that fee.

The GSS Executive Director spends a significant amount of their time on individual advocacy which involves supporting students who have concerns or problems with the University. This work was intended to be taken over by the Student Advocate if the UVSS had approved the fee.

It appears that the Student Advocate Fund is not being used because the individual advocacy conducted by the Executive Director does not usually progress to the point where the GSS would be involved directly in a complaint, appeal or hearing. Rather, students' problems are handled by providing information, holding informal meetings or referring students to other resources.

Given that individual cases justifying intervention through use of the Student Advocate Fund appear to be rare, it would benefit the GSS membership if the fund could be used more broadly for systemic advocacy to improve university policies and procedures, as well as the delivery of information, referrals and education to graduate students on university policies and procedures and student rights. This will be enabled by the development of new fund Terms of Reference for approval at the March 2022 Semi-Annual General Meeting.

### Priority 3: Revenue Strategic Plan

The GSS has been described as a medium-sized organization with the budget of a small organization. Compared to most Canadian graduate student societies, the GSS collects significantly less in membership fees. In order to provide the level of governance, operations and service provision that our members expect, the GSS will explore strategies for revenue creation such as new student fees or external funding via grants from other organizations. This process will begin with an evaluation of the GSS' current financial position.

## COVID-19 Business Recovery

### Priority 1: Create and Implement Hybrid Service Delivery Model

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all GSS services have been provided remotely since April 2020. With the return of many graduate students to in-person classes and activities, the GSS needs to evaluate its services to determine what can be feasibly and appropriately delivered in-person and what should continue to be delivered online. For any services delivered in-person, a COVID-19 safety plan will be in place to meet public health and WorkSafe BC requirements and ensure the safety of GSS members and staff. The goal will be to provide the option for some services to be accessed in person while maintaining remote delivery of all services. The GSS will work toward a full return to in-person services (with continued online service options) after April 2022.

## Priority 2: Determine Use of Restaurant Space

The GSS traditionally operated a restaurant and café in the Halpern Centre. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the restaurant space has been closed, allowing for a re-evaluation of the best use of the space. The Grad House is surrounded by numerous food outlets which make it an uncompetitive location for a restaurant. Prior to its closure, the GSS Restaurant Fund was running significant annual losses which were subsidized through transfers from the Operating Fund, a use that was not in keeping with the Operating Fund's original purpose. The GSS plans to move forward by developing financial estimates for alternative use of the restaurant space and asking students in a referendum whether they would like to pay a new fee to cover the costs required to resume operation of a restaurant, or convert the space into a venue for studying, meetings and GSS work. The referendum will be held by the end of the 2021-22 fiscal year to guide a reopening of the space in 2022-23.