

Postdoctoral Fellows Virtual Town Hall

Monday, June 29, 2020

9:00 AM – 10:40 AM

via Zoom

Attendees: Dr. Gail Murphy – Vice President, Research & Innovation
Dr. Susan Porter (Dean and Vice-Provost, Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies)
Karen Vaughan (Director, UBC Child Care Services)

UPDATES FROM GUEST SPEAKERS

Dr. Gail Murphy (Vice President, Research & Innovation):

Dr. Murphy recognizes that the stress experienced by Postdoctoral Fellows is magnified due to the nature of their appointments.

On March 19, 2020, UBC had to take the difficult step of announcing the curtailment of on-campus research, which included not only labs but fieldwork and clinical and behavioural research studies. This curtailment went into effect on March 24, 2020. During this curtailment period, 387 exemptions have been granted, with approximately 80 of these exemptions being directly related to COVID-19 research.

Following consultation across both campuses, the University announced a staged approach to research resumption in early May. At this time, 10 Faculties have submitted and had approved research resumption plans. More information about research resumption can be found at research.ubc.ca.

The funding of postdocs at UBC is a complex issue. The government of Canada has recently established the Canada Research Continuity Emergency Fund (CRCEF), a \$450-million support fund to research personnel supported by non-industry and philanthropic organizations. The CRCEF provides up to 75% of the wages that would have normally been paid for up to 12 weeks. Additionally, Canada's tri-agencies have announced upcoming funding extensions for research personnel supported by tri-council grants. Information about these programs will be provided at research.ubc.ca as it becomes available.

Dr. Susan Porter (Dean and Vice-Provost, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies)

Dr. Porter recognizes that this is a very stressful time for all, but especially for Postdoctoral Fellows, who are at a pivotal time in their careers. It is extraordinarily challenging not only to keep up with research, especially when coupled with concerns and uncertainty around childcare and housing. The PDFO has worked to provide supports to the postdoctoral community during this time, including transitioning professional development opportunities to an online format while also developing new content, creating dialogue through events such as this Town Hall, and ensuring that information is being provided to the postdoc community through a new COVID-19 portal on the PDFO website.

Dr. Porter has received data from a COVID-19 survey conducted by the UBC Postdoctoral Association (PDA) Survey, and thanks those who participated as well as the PDA for conducting the survey.

Karen Vaughan (Director, UBC Child Care Services)

On April 1, 2020, UBC Child Care Services entered into a temporary emergency funding agreement with the Province of BC. This temporary agreement required that UBC Child Care Services agree to several conditions including providing priority childcare access to essential service workers and guaranteeing a return to placement for existing families who had to remove their children from Child Care Services due to COVID-19. This temporary emergency funding agreement will be in place until August 31, 2020.

Under the emergency funding agreement with the Government of BC, Child Care Services must reserve spots for all families who had pre-COVID-19 spaces until September 1, 2020. All families will be contacted in the next week about this return to regular operations. Additional spaces may become available should these families decline their spots.

Childcare is a highly regulated industry, and Child Care Services has to meet many legislative requirements, including specific educator : child ratios and certification for every age level. Child Care Services currently has approximately 20 educator positions to fill, in part due to some staff members being unable to work during COVID-19 and in part due to regular staff turnover.

POSTDOC Q&A PERIOD

Funding and Partnerships:

1. Is there emergency funding available for postdocs?
This is largely dependent on how your Postdoctoral Fellowship is funded. If this is a concern, please contact the PDFO with additional information about your specific situation.
2. Is there the possibility that postdocs in their fifth year whose projects have been severely interrupted can have their postdoc appointments extended beyond the 5-year limit?
The PDFO will look into this enquiry further.
3. How should postdocs frame disruptions due to COVID-19 on grant applications?
UBC is currently working with Canadian federal agencies about how researchers will be able to explain the impact that COVID-19 has had on their research. There is no 'uniform' effect on how the pandemic may have impacted postdocs; some people may have had limited impact, while others may have had significant disruptions or challenges. Try to start framing the impact that COVID-19 has had on your research now so that you can build upon this in future applications.
4. Do you have any suggestions as to how to best advance academic-industry partnerships?
There was concern at the beginning of the pandemic that sponsors would step away, but they have seen sponsors remain quite involved. As you approach industry, try to come with the knowledge of how a partner may be supported by grant/funding assistance programs.

Remote Work:

1. Are postdocs allowed to work remotely from outside of Canada?
This question is largely situation-specific. Please contact the PDFO directly for additional information if in this situation.
2. Are there any resources available to assist with home office setup?
Unfortunately, we are not currently aware of any funding support or resources for home office setup at this time.

Return to Work:

1. When will we be able to get back to our offices (even just 1 or 2 days per week)?
Unfortunately, there is no uniform answer available. This will depend on your faculty, department/unit, and building, and will be based on how your faculty decides to approach the return to research and work.
2. Can a rotating approach to on-site work be implemented together with the staged research resumption approach?
This will largely be dependent upon where the research spaces are located, and what else may be happening in the research locations. In the first stage of on-campus research resumption, Faculties have been asked to target a building occupancy of approximately 1/3 of occupants. Faculties have come up with several proposals, and it will be up to the faculty to determine how a return to on-campus research will be implemented.
3. Are there any considerations for high risk individuals (or those living with high risk individuals) in the coming phases of returning to campus?
The University is currently working with public health officials, WorkSafeBC, and colleagues across the country in order to create a safe return-to-work plan that can accommodate faculty, staff, students, and postdocs. We are aware of these concerns and are having these conversations, but we do not have these answers yet.

Housing and Benefits:

1. Are postdocs eligible for EI?
Postdoctoral Fellows who are paid from a Supervisor/PI's grant (the 'REG' earnings code) **are** eligible for Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and EI. Postdoctoral Fellow Award Recipients (the 'PFL' earnings code) and Postdoctoral Fellows who have funding paid by an external funding source (the 'NUF' earnings code) **are not** eligible for CPP or EI. Please contact your department administrator for information about your eligibility for EI.

2. Why are postdocs not included in the Rent Geared to Income program at Village Gate Homes?

Our understanding is that it was a very small pilot. We have reached out to the Housing and Relocation Services Office for additional information, and they have provided the following information:

- The PDFO has reached out to the Housing and Relocation Services Office for information regarding this question. They have indicated that this initial pilot program was very small, with only 10 spots available for incoming tenure-stream faculty with children that are relocating from outside the Lower Mainland, and with 100 spots for UBC full-time staff.
- While Postdoctoral Fellows are not eligible for this pilot program, postdocs are currently eligible for the restricted Faculty Staff Rental Housing managed by Village Gate Homes that is discounted approximately 25%. A new building is leasing for September 1, 2020, with 135 units.

CLOSING REMARKS

We know that it is a challenging time for postdocs. The UBC environment is very complex and may not always feel transparent when things are in development, but we encourage postdocs to reach out to the PDFO with questions as many are so situation-specific. We are so grateful to the postdoctoral community, as you are essential not only to research but to our society as a whole.