

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



CHEMISTRY GRADUATE STUDENT SOCIETY

Minutes for January 13, 2016 Graduate Student Forum

Time: 14:30

Location: D215

1. Agenda

- i. Recap from Mike Fryzuk
- ii. Continuation of RA stipend increases to cover cost of living in Vancouver
- iii. Reduction of median graduation times
- iv. Standardization of 540 seminar classes
- v. Improvement of adherence to and understanding of the CUPE 2278 collective agreement/ Improvement of teaching assistant scheduling system
- vi. Other

2. Discussion

i.) Recap from Mike Fryzuk:

Mike's term as Head is due June 30, so this is his last forum, but he will encourage the next head to continue the forums, as he believes that it is good for communication of grad student needs and departmental views, and it usually has good attendance.

We are represented by Ese on the new Head selection committee. A profile is generated and candidates volunteer from the department (they must be full professors). The committee determines if they are viable candidates, and then they give an open presentation where they describe their vision of the department, etc. They then meet with different groups, such as the faculty, staff, and students, and finally the Dean appoints a new Head for July 1.

Last term we had the external review, and have not yet received the report (likely the Dean still has it). Once we receive it, the Head writes a response, and that is the review for 2015.

Since and due to past forums, a fourth year meeting has been established. Grad students are being encouraged to talk with their guidance committees more, partly in the form of a meeting prior to the comprehensive exam where they can discuss recommended areas of study for the comp. Chem 540 changes are/will be made by the curriculum committee (our representative is Andrea). An online inventory has been established,

although it is not yet perfect. Workshops for grad students have started to happen in the form of the Create program.

Mike's priority as Head has been research, and he thinks that if we continue to focus on that, then any issues can be sorted out. Mike is there for his students even after they graduate from UBC, and that should be the same for all professors.

ii.) Continuation of RA stipend increases to cover cost of living in Vancouver:

There are no plans to stop the increases that usually happen, but grants do not increase, so there is a limit to how much RA pay can increase at any time. It's expected that this issue will be a part of the external review report, and so will be recommended to the new Head. A 2% increase per year follows the department policy of a cost of living increase, and is done automatically.

Some students feel that the cost of living has become more and more expensive and should be taken into account more. It was suggested that there might be other sources of income for grad students (such as but not limited to tutoring and TA training facilitating), and that perhaps the department could suggest or create some opportunities in the form of mentoring or paid outreach, etc. Perhaps opportunities could be communicated to grad students or made more well-known and connections could be made, especially if it connects with chem work. Maybe grad students could TA for other departments? Mike Fryzuk doesn't know of many other opportunities but he is willing to share if he hears of any, but he also wants to keep the focus on research (to reduce length of degree time).

An e-mailed in question stated that it can be difficult to finish in the 5th year when one needs to also find financial support (get RA stipend for 5 years, but tuition is not covered for 5th year). Mike Fryzuk replied that it can be an issue of a money source. The RA stipend is all from grants, and so there is a limit, so he suggests grad students plan ahead for the 5th year (save some money to cover tuition for that year). There was a comment that it can be difficult to save when living pay cheque to pay cheque, and the Mikes sympathize but aren't sure what can be done. Mike Wolf stated that the minimum stipend is not mandated but is approx. \$18 500, and the chem department is above that. Mike Fryzuk stated that NSERC grants are typically \$50 000, and are too over RAs and research, so it can be difficult to cover all expenses. One student stated that it's almost impossible to live on \$19 000/year (which is below the poverty line), and it can be hard for international students even with family help. Mike Wolf suggests that the GSS rep for chem grad students be asked to bring this issue up, since it rarely is, but that it might help. Mike Fryzuk said that it was also a recruitment issue, so it would be good to solve the issue, but it is difficult. It was asked if the issue was the monthly stipend or the 5th year tuition, and several students agreed that it was the monthly stipend. It was asked if the RA stipend and tuition come from two different sources, and the answer was yes, the RA stipend is from grants but the tuition coverage is from grad studies (faculty of science), so the chem department can't change the tuition coverage.

It was asked if the department's position was to pay grad students all the same, and the answer was yes, depending on category, because otherwise pay would have to be negotiated with the supervisor (difficult for new profs), there would need to be a

minimum, there would be a cost associated with recruitment, and there would be differences in pay between groups and group members.

iii.) Reduction of median graduation times:

The average PhD in the chem department is 5.67 years, and the Masters is 2.5 years (data from grad studies). The targets are for under 5 years for a PhD and under 2 years for a Masters. It is Mike Fryzuk's opinion that the longer degree completion times are due to students not getting into the lab early enough in their first year because of a culture of focusing on classes and TAing.

It was asked if these times for degree completion are common, and if not, if there are strategies that have been shown to keep the times lower? Other places seem to have these kinds of time lengths except for outside of North America, where they are lower but are generally a PhD following a Masters. Several comments were made that trying to reduce the times could result in a sacrifice in work quality, and that extra time spent in the lab in first year may not be very productive as time does not equal efficiency, but that the time does need to be spent including on weekends, as a PhD is not a 9-5 job.

The idea of courses being spread out over two years (for the PhD) was brought up as possibly helpful, along with a change in class scheduling to free up more hours in the day for lab work. Courses being spread out over two years depends on grad studies. Classes could be scheduled in blocks to create larger blocks of free hours in the day, and classes could also be scheduled for evenings.

iv.) Standardization of 540 seminar classes:

A plan was made by a sub-committee of the CGSS for changes to be implemented to Chem 540s, but it hasn't been popular in the curriculum committee because it can be difficult to implement when the faculty member in charge changes every year. The curriculum committee needs to agree on a plan before it is presented at a faculty meeting, and a plan hasn't been presented yet.

Comments were made about having some courses that discuss ethics and green chemistry, which can be brought to the curriculum committee as ideas. These topics could also be discussed at LMCs or in other seminars.

v.) Improvement of adherence to and understanding of the CUPE 2278 collective agreement/ Improvement of teaching assistant scheduling system:

Jane is working on a new online TA scheduling system which will hopefully be up by spring. Peter Chung working on it also as a programmer.

One main violation is in gaining consent from grad students for being scheduled for hours outside of the CUPE agreement, and it was stated that time can be a factor for the department, so hopefully the online scheduling system will help. The department must also schedule exams fairly for undergrads, meaning the exams must be scheduled in the evening. An issue for grad students is that if they disagree (which the department and CUPE says they can), then the solution can seem spiteful, and being informed of scheduling from the department doesn't always allow for a timely response from grad

students. It was suggested that a dialogue may need to be opened up between TAs and the department to discuss these issues and find a solution.

ix.) Other:

- a.) Question: PI sometimes disappears without telling anyone in group. Is there a central calendar where they could schedule absences so group knows?

The faculty are supposed to inform Mike Fryzuk when they are going to be away so that he can tell Judy, as it is a safety issue. Profs have been told this at faculty meetings, so it shouldn't be an issue, but Mike will speak to Judy about it.

- b.) Question: Is there a way to get a desk chair that fits ergonomics?

PIs sometimes get chairs for their whole groups, but it is at their discretion. Is there a fund for it? Not sure, but Mike Fryzuk will speak to Nancy about it.

- c.) Question: Some supervisors may not agree to pay for their students to attend conferences to present their work. Can there be guidelines for minimum conference attendance and funding from PIs?

This largely depends on the PI and the funding they have available. Mike Fryzuk tends to like sending students to 3-4 conferences over the course of a PhD. For incoming students, they should ask the PI and grad students in the group about this to set expectations before deciding on a supervisor.

d.) Mental health:

Many grad students have mental health problems with the focus on results and papers, and the lack of tolerance for failure. What does success look like? Is mental health part of that? Work-life balance is not always easy due to time spent working and low income. Mike Fryzuk encourages student input on projects and flexibility and knows that publishing isn't easy.

Motivation can be difficult and an emotional toll is taken. Perhaps PIs could be more sensitive to this? Support systems are important as well as detection, and solutions can be difficult. Students also need to be proactive about themselves, and are always welcome to go to see either of the Mikes. A suggestion was made for a resource to help recognize the signs of mental health issues, but could be a burden to that person, so it's best if people try to recognize the signs and speak to someone (PI, resources on campus, etc.) for either themselves or for someone else.

3. Conclusion

The dialogue in the forum is good and so are the different perspectives. Attendance by grad students should be highly encouraged.

Forum adjourned: 16:30