



The Show Must Go On: Canadian Academic Researchers Head Back to the Bench (COVID-19 & IP Update)

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University, hospital and research institute labs are a cornerstone of Canada's innovation and IP pipeline. When COVID-19 forced research labs to close, many projects were negatively impacted, leading to gaps in results and lost time. Although institutions typically allowed critically time-sensitive projects and COVID-19 related research to proceed, most 'hands-on' lab projects were put on hold. The situation has been stressful for faculty, graduate students and administration. Planning for safe lab reopening has also been extremely challenging, because institutions had to rapidly develop protocols, roll them out, implement physical distance markers and [barriers](#), and make [personal protective equipment](#) ("PPE") and sanitizers available. Fortunately, restrictions are slowly easing and universities across the country have been re-opening their laboratory doors. Reopening is half the battle – careful precautions to enable staying open are also key. The Canadian government has attempted to consolidate best practices into a very recently published [guidance document](#) to assist reopening of universities.¹

Status of University Research in Eastern Canada

Resumption of research on campus is accompanied by extensive new guidelines and safety protocols. For instance, the University of Toronto has implemented measures taking into account legal obligations, public health advice, and operational considerations. In a [17-page document](#), the UofT Environmental Health and Safety unit provides comprehensive guidelines outlining mandatory protocols in regards to reducing the risk of transmission, entering the research space for the first time, and PPE. The University effectively permitted reopening of all labs, at less than full capacity, subject to compliance with the guidelines. Principal investigators at UofT have the option to choose keep their labs closed for now. Other schools such as the University of Western Ontario, University of [Waterloo](#) and [Wilfred Laurier University](#) are taking a phased approach. Previously only research deemed critical or COVID-19 related was permitted at these schools. Western moved to 20% volume at the start of July. The research restart plan commenced with i) research that if not continued would result in significant loss of data or equipment was permitted, ii) research pertaining to grants or time-sensitive milestones, iii) graduate student research nearing the end of a degree, or iv) early career researchers. Researchers wishing to return to the lab who meet one of the criteria listed must submit a "return to laboratory research request form" along with a "laboratory research safety plan". A researcher told us that cell and animal experiments should be relatively easy to restart, but restart of experiments using human subjects are still [unclear](#).

In Atlantic Canada, which has avoided the worst of the outbreak to date³, research is also cautiously ramping up. A professor at an institution told us that it appeared the reopening in her province was lagging far behind the provincial alert level changes. At Dalhousie University, researchers and support staff began rejoining frontline workers on campus at Dalhousie University earlier [in July](#), under the guidance of [detailed protocols](#) created by their Environmental Health and Safety office. It appears that all labs are permitted to open, with reduced capacity. Memorial University in Newfoundland appears to be in a similar position as Dalhousie, after implementing its own phased approach, and is now [reopening](#) according to provincial [alert level 2](#). The University of New Brunswick doesn't appear to have a detailed, centralized reopening plan like Dal. Lab openings are being determined at the department level, but the labs there are reopening in compliance with provincial guidelines.

Safety protocols have already demonstrated their benefits. For example, it was reported on social media that a Toronto research institute had an asymptomatic [COVID-19 case](#) in a lab area, and the person's potential contacts were tested (all



negative). Continued caution in reopening is warranted.

Resources Available for Early-Career Scientists Impacted by COVID-19

The opening of research labs is a welcome change among graduate students and postdoctoral fellows whose degrees and careers have been put on hold. Students at reopened labs in some institutions have been assigned to individual shifts, which means that research productivity and efficiency lags in order to provide safety. A graduate student told us that the environment at his institution feels safe, and it was not a difficult adjustment to return to the lab because they are already trained to operate with [safety in mind](#).

Some financial relief for students was made available through the National Sciences Research Council (NSERC), who was allotted [\\$140 million](#) to address the financial challenges of research delays resulting from COVID-19. This relief, however, only applies to researchers with current NSERC grants. For others, the Canada Research Continuity Emergency Fund (CRCEF) announced this spring may be of some relief. The Fund is now [accepting applications](#) for Stage 2 grants that cover supplemental wage support for research-related personnel. To qualify, recipients must have received Stage 1 funding and not have any residual funds left over. Universities have also stepped up to help graduate students impacted by COVID-19. For example, the Faculty of Graduate Studies at Dalhousie University created a [Program Continuation Scholarship](#) to help thesis-based graduate students pay tuition fees for programs that were prolonged due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other University-Led Initiatives

In addition to restarting research, universities are allocating resources to engage university stakeholders, community organizations, and entrepreneurs. McMaster University for instance, has launched "[The Connection](#)", a program whose purpose is to foster partnerships between the Hamilton community and university to find ways to respond and adapt to COVID-19. Meanwhile, The University of New Brunswick's Summer Institute has launched its ⁷[annual intensive entrepreneurship program](#) with nine companies from across Canada – its largest ever cohort despite COVID-19.

While research will continue to look different for the foreseeable future, Canadian universities and their partners have risen to the challenge to make sure scientific advancement continues in a safe and supportive environment.

¹ Government of Canada. Guidance for post-secondary institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. July 24, 2020.

² Memorial University has restarted research with face-to-face participants subject to compliance and approval: <https://www.mun.ca/research/news.php?id=13441&type=news>

McGill updated its policy on human research about a month ago:
<https://www.mcgill.ca/coronavirus/resources/directives-resumption-research-human-participants>

Laurentian is set to start phasing human research back in starting August 12:
<https://www.thesudburystar.com/news/local-news/laurentian-moves-into-phase-2-of-its-return-to-campus-plan>

Some universities do not appear to have publicly announced a detailed plan.

³ Many Atlantic provinces have typically been reporting zero new COVID19 cases in July.

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