June 8th, 2020
The UVSS wrote this letter on the unceded, unsurrendered territories of the Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ peoples.

Dear President and Vice Chancellor Jamie Cassels, Associate Vice Presidents, and affiliated staff and faculty:

On May 11th, 2020, UVic’s administration announced that Fall 2020 courses will be offered predominantly online. While this shift was necessary for the safety and wellbeing of our members, new barriers for educational equity have gone unaddressed, resulting in many UVic students being left behind.

We recognize ongoing broader global movements for equity and justice, and stand in solidarity with Black and Indigenous folks and People of Colour. We acknowledge that access to education is inextricably tied to issues of colonialism and racism. We are making internal changes and advocating externally in support of these movements. In order to provide precise recommendations, this letter is limited to addressing equity in UVic’s COVID-19 response. We look forward to future conversations with you all about UVic’s anti-racism efforts.

We respectfully request the following changes to UVic’s COVID-19 response:

- Immediate partial tuition refunds and for BOG to consider partial tuition reductions for 2021;
- Improved accessibility of virtual classes;
- The introduction of physical resources for students;
- More frequent and transparent communication from UVic’s administration to students; and,
- Dedicated student representation on COVID-19 response committees or consultation on decisions impacting students.

Our members have expressed dissatisfaction with UVic’s online education experience. UVic students did not receive the educational experience they paid for at the beginning of the Spring 2020 term and are not receiving the level of education previously delivered under normal conditions. Our members were also not given reimbursements for parking or athletics fees.

On March 30th, the UVic Board of Governors set the 2020-2021 tuition fees, an increase of 2% for domestic students and 4% for international students from last year, despite President Cassels’ March 11th announcement that classes would no longer be taking place in-person
and that the summer session would also be online. The UVSS is calling for a partial refund of Spring 2020 tuition and parking/athletics fees for all students. We are also advocating for UVic’s Board of Governors to enact partial tuition and parking/athletics reductions for 2021 courses.

The UVSS is advocating for increased accessibility measures, including the implementation of Universal Design for Learning for virtual classes. This includes, but is not limited to, subtitles for all online classes and lecture recordings. Zoom has emerged as a popular platform for holding lectures, but has imposed accessibility challenges for many students.

Subtitles and lecture recordings help those with diverse abilities, learning styles, and language barriers. Subtitles would remove many barriers for students who are hearing-impaired, while recording lectures can allow for repeat viewings if students have unreliable Wi-Fi, and/or are in unfavourable learning environments.

In addition, not all students reside in British Columbia or Canada. Thus, pre-recorded lectures solve the issue of time differences that impair students from attending class.

Digital resources such as a subsidized wifi program and laptop distribution support online learning. In a recent survey sent out to our members, 25% of the 652 respondents reported unreliable internet access, particularly when multiple students from the same household are on frequent Zoom classes. Additionally, 17% of our members do not have reliable access to a laptop, leaving them with no way of adapting to the abrupt change in course delivery. We call on UVic to extend laptop loan times from McPherson Library, and explore partnerships with laptop and internet providers.

With 62% of UVic undergraduate students residing in lower Vancouver Island, many students would benefit from an extended laptop loan program through the McPherson Library. Potentially, this could look like there being a window of time, for example a two week period, in which students can sign out laptops from the library. They would then need to return them at a later date, possibly the end of the semester, at which time they would be disinfected.

We’ve been hearing that students feel excluded from key discussions surrounding UVic’s COVID-19 response initiatives. Notably, UVic stopped providing additional funding towards the separate COVID-19 emergency bursary after the UVSS advised against this. The UVSS made a significant donation to this fund based on the understanding that it would serve as a direct response to the ongoing financial barriers caused by the pandemic. To give students a voice in these decisions, the UVSS demands increased meaningful student representation on COVID-19 response committees and consultation on decisions affecting students.

We understand that COVID-19 has resulted in unprecedented changes to UVic’s regular operations, and that adapting to online course delivery cannot be done overnight. Adopting our recommendations would make our learning environment more equitable and accessible for all students.
With care, on behalf of the UVSS Board of Directors:

Sarina de Havelyn (she/her/hers)
Director of Outreach and University Relations

Caleb Burd (he/him/his)
Director of Finance and Operations

Emily Lowan (she/her/hers)
Director of Campaigns and Community Relations

Dalal Tubeishat (she/her/hers)
Director of Student Affairs

Dipayan Nag (he/him/his)
Director of International Student Relations

Sebastian Franco-Monroy (he/him/his)
Director of Events