



“A Student Perspective on Graduate Student Funding in Canada”

Submission to the Standing Committee on Science and Research

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In Canada, graduate students face significant financial barriers. Only approximately 33% of graduate students are funded directly through Tri-Council awards, from CIHR, NSERC and SSHRC. The remaining research stream graduate students, either do not receive a stipend, are required to work as a Teaching Assistant, or are funded indirectly through their supervisor’s research grants or departments. Additionally, graduate student pay has remained unchanged in Canada since 2003. This has created significant barriers of entry for scientists who belong to historically excluded communities, including those who have a low-income, or are Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour, to pursue graduate education.

In December 2021, I led the [Ottawa Science Policy Network](#) as we launched a [National Graduate Student Finance Survey](#) to investigate the financial status of graduate students in Canada. Over the last four months, we have met with Graduate Student Associations across Canada, listening to **countless stories of struggles, inequity, and crippling debt**. Our survey closed in April 2022, with over 1,300 responses. While the results are still preliminary, our immediate findings are striking.

We found that: 45% of our survey respondents don’t have enough to get by and struggle financially every single month. On top of this, 87% reported stress and anxiety about their finances, and more than half of our survey respondents are living with no savings at all.

While other young adults are starting families or careers, and building wealth, graduate students are just struggling to get by. The average take-home graduate student income (listed to the right) is not even enough to cover the [cost of rent in most major cities in Canada](#), let alone other costs of living.

Additionally, as mentioned, award values have not changed in [almost 20 years](#). With inflation at a [30-year-high](#), it only takes one trip to the grocery store to understand how much this has impacted the cost of living. Since the value of Tri-Council awards have not been adjusted with inflation, students are being left behind. Adjusted with inflation, the average income of a PhD student should be about \$30,000, and about \$25,000 for a Master’s student (using the [Bank of Canada Inflation Calculator](#)). This concern is further echoed by trainees. In fact, a [2018-9 survey of over 1100 students and postdoctoral fellows from the Science and Policy Exchange](#), showed that 89% of students want to see an increase in the value of Tri-Council awards, and rank this as the highest priority item.

Average PhD Student Income:
\$21,000/year - \$8500 (*tuition + ancillary fees*) = **\$12,500/year**
(*take-home salary*)

Average Master’s Student Income :
\$19,000/year - \$8500 (*tuition + ancillary fees*) = **\$10,500/year**

This is not the way to build successful research infrastructure in Canada. Preliminary results from our survey at the Ottawa Science Policy Network show that 32% of graduate students have considered dropping out of their program due to financial concern. The financial reality is that many students struggle with focusing on their studies while bearing such a significant burden. Additionally, a [study](#) out of the Université de Montreal, shows that students who are well-funded, perform better and are more likely to graduate.

Graduate students are the life force of discovery and innovation, providing the critical ideas, talent, and labour necessary for the majority of postsecondary research being conducted in Canada. If research exists off of the [backs of graduate students](#), shouldn't we provide them with the financial freedom to focus their energy on research and innovation?

At the moment, we expect graduate students to live below the poverty line, and then move on to Post-Doctoral Fellowships that pay an [average of only \\$45,000/year](#). Additionally, these PhD students graduate with significant debt. According to the Council of Canadian Academies' [Degrees of Success Report](#), 45% of PhD graduates carry significant debt, while more than half of these have debt valued over \$20,000.

In comparison to other countries, our investment into graduate students falls significantly short. While we continue to have increased numbers of PhD graduates, there are [not enough academic and non-academic jobs](#) in Canada for them to pursue. All of these factors contribute to the fact that only [19% of PhD holders work in academia](#), and hold tenured and tenured-track positions. Many students can't wait for the promised stability of an academic career. Additionally, this contributes to a loss of Canadian talent to other countries or industries, a concept better known as brain drain. The prospects of higher pay, reputation and breadth of work all draw graduates to other countries, most commonly to the United States.

In conclusion, there are four key recommendations that remain a top priority for graduate students in Canada :

1. **Increase and Standardise the Value of Federal Awards** - Federal awards should be adjusted to *at least* \$21,000 for Master's and \$35,000 for PhD's.
2. **Match Awards with Inflation** - The value of Tri-Council Awards have not changed since 2003. This results in significant loss in income in light of inflation, especially with inflation at a 30-year high. Other countries, [such as Australia](#), adjust their stipends yearly with inflation.
3. **Adjust the Value of Elite Awards to Match Other Federal Awards**– [Science and Policy Exchange's survey](#) indicated that 89% of respondents believe that elite scholarships (such as Vanier and Banting Awards) should be reduced. By reducing these values, additional funds can go to increasing and standardising the base PhD and Master's awards. Additionally, these awards can be prioritized for international students, the original purpose of these awards, and attract top talent from across the world. Currently, only [13% of awardees](#) of the Vanier Scholarship are international scholars.
4. **Support Student Management of Debt Post-Graduation** – Student debt remains a significant barrier to pursuing a career in research in Canada. Finding a way to mitigate debt (e.g., through extended repayment schedules or grace periods) for these students could significantly impact their ability to continue on in these careers.

At the Ottawa Science Policy Network, we will be completing the analysis of our report in the coming months. We hope to reconnect and share our findings with this committee in order to better inform its options in supporting the next generation of researchers in Canada.