

Enhancing Canada's ability to train the next generation of scientists

Improving financial support for graduate students

Brief submitted by the Université du Québec à Rimouski to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research for its study of the Government of Canada's graduate scholarship and post-doctoral fellowship programs

The Université du Québec à Rimouski (UQAR) believes that swift action must be taken to increase the level of support that Canada provides for training the next generation of scientists and highly qualified personnel through its graduate scholarship programs. For this reason, it unreservedly supports the recommendations made by the Université du Québec. **Canada needs to increase the annual value of graduate scholarships by 50% and index them annually to inflation in order to maintain a high standard among graduate candidates.**

Issues surrounding the number of scholarships and the accessibility of scholarships are particularly crucial for UQAR. The university offers 16 master's programs (research profile) and eight PhD programs. As a result, it is making a significant contribution to training highly specialized talent in various fields, including human and social sciences, natural sciences and engineering, and health. UQAR's graduate students also contribute to the socio-economic development of eastern Quebec, especially in the Bas-Saint-Laurent and Chaudière–Appalaches regions, by advancing knowledge, research and innovation. However, the number of scholarships awarded each year to UQAR by the three federal agencies does not reflect that contribution.

Since 2018–2019, NSERC has kept its quota of master's scholarships at four per year (except in 2020–2021, when the quota was set at five). Yet every year, an average of 18.6 applications were received for this competition. Data on the SSHRC master's scholarship program reveal the same problem. Whereas the quota of scholarships awarded to UQAR since 2018–2019 has remained static at three, the average number of applications for the program is actually 9.3 per year. CIHR scholarships are just as difficult to obtain as the research grants, as only one scholarship per year has been awarded to UQAR since 2018–2019.

Since UQAR's financial situation prevents it from offering a universal entrance scholarship program for graduate students, the considerable disparity between the scholarship quotas and the number of applications is impeding the university's ability to recruit new students to our programs and can become a hindrance to their studies. If adequate financial support is not available, students often have to make up the difference by working several hours a week (often more than 20 hours) in order to make ends meet. This situation has severe repercussions for students' progress and unnecessarily prolongs the time it takes to complete their degree.

At the post-doctoral level, the number of fellowships allocated is even lower – between one and two a year – from both NSERC and SSHRC (UQAR does not yet offer a health sciences PhD program). The number of applications is lower (an annual average of 7.3 applications to NSERC

and 4 applications to SSHRC), but it is worth noting that many professors choose to support their PhD students themselves, out of their own research grants. This practice is particularly common in the field of natural sciences and engineering. Since scholarships from government agencies are patently insufficient in both number and value, professors prefer to use this financial support to recruit top candidates. For this reason, the number of PhD students registered at UQAR who are receiving financial support from federal agencies is absurdly minuscule (0.01% of total registered students).

We are therefore joining the Université du Québec in calling for **Canada to double the number of graduate scholarships that it offers to master's and PhD students, ensuring that this increase promotes accessibility for greater diversity of student profiles**. New admissions at the master's level, and more importantly, at the PhD level would no longer be contingent on the professors' ability to financially support their students using their research funding.

It has been demonstrated that the quota system instituted several years ago by the federal granting agencies puts smaller universities at a disadvantage, especially if they are located in the regions. It replicates existing imbalances, making them worse in some cases, and fails to stimulate the development of new research and training niches that are associated with external funding or that are not factored into the agencies' calculations, stemming from research partnership agreements with and for the community or from the creation of new training programs geared towards meeting regional economic needs. The Canada Research Chair (CRC) Program did take those diverse realities into account and created "special chairs" reserved for the universities that receive less funding from the major federal agencies, the universities that tend to be smaller, in order to promote original research programming. Why should the graduate scholarship program not adopt a similar method? **In addition to doubling the number of scholarships, as recommended above, Canada should also institute a new allocation system in which 25% of the scholarships available in each program are first distributed equally to each establishment regardless of the results of previous grant competitions. The remaining scholarships could then be distributed according to the existing system.** This proposal would ensure that scholarships are distributed more fairly between the large universities (U15) and other Canadian universities. The universities would then be able to offer more scholarships, which would surely be beneficial for fostering innovative research niches.

Merit scholarships evidently promote perseverance and academic success among graduate students, but the duration of the scholarships can also have a positive effect. UQAR's master's programs are all designed to be completed over a minimum of two years (first year dedicated to classes and second year dedicated to research and thesis writing), and its PhD programs are designed to be completed over a minimum of four years. However, the master's and PhD scholarships awarded by the federal agencies are for a duration of 12 months and 36 months respectively. That is manifestly insufficient, and even if a student manages to secure a scholarship that allows them to concentrate on their studies full-time during the first year or years, the student will then have to find other ways to make ends meet, which is bound to prolong their studies. We therefore recommend **extending the duration of Canada's graduate scholarships from 12 months to 24 months for master's students and from 36 months to 48 months for PhD students, to correspond with the expected duration of most master's and PhD programs**.

UQAR is part of the Université du Québec university network and is renowned for its research excellence. Since 2011, the Université du Québec à Rimouski has placed among the top three Canadian universities in its tier 10 times as ranked by the independent firm Research Infosource Inc. UQAR combines research excellence with highly successful graduate training programs that attract high-calibre candidates from across Quebec and the entire Francophonie every year. It is essential to provide more support to these students so they can contribute to the scientific and

socio-economic development of Quebec society without ending up in a financially vulnerable situation that can rapidly become intolerable.

Recommendations

1. Increase the annual value of graduate scholarships in Canada by 50% and index them annually to inflation.
2. Double the number of graduate scholarships that Canada offers to master's and PhD students, ensuring that this increase promotes accessibility for greater diversity of student profiles.
3. Institute a new allocation system in which 25% of the scholarships available in each program are first distributed equally to each establishment regardless of the results of previous grant competitions.
4. Extend the duration of Canada's graduate scholarships from 12 months to 24 months for master's students and from 36 months to 48 months for PhD students, to correspond with the expected duration of most master's and PhD programs.

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