

July 19, 2023

Standing Committee on Science and Research
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6
SRSR@parl.gc.ca

Re: Government of Canada's Graduate Scholarship and Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programs

Dear Members of the Committee,

The Alliance of Canadian Comprehensive Research Universities (ACCRU) is pleased to contribute to the Standing Committee on Science and Research on the Government of Canada's Graduate Scholarship and Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programs.

ACCRU is the national voice in Canada's research ecosystem for more than 40 small and mid-sized comprehensive research universities (SMCRU). These institutions enroll a significant number of Canada's graduate students in an exceptional breadth master and doctoral programs. The majority are located in regions outside of Canada's large metropolitan areas. Compared to major research universities, they attract and train graduate students that represent a more diverse student body in terms of age, ethnicity, and indigenous ancestry. Additionally, they attract a significant number of first-generation learners from varied socioeconomic backgrounds from across Canada with a high proportion coming from rural and remote regions of the country.

Canada's SMCRU's provide critical research training opportunities to graduate and post-doctoral fellows

Within the Canadian research ecosystem, SMCRU's are crucial to Canada's research training system. These types of institutions account for approximately 80% of Canadian academic institutions.

SMCRU's provide a gateway for Canada's learners to attend post-secondary education in their region within institutions that prioritize access and that provide wrap-around supports to ensure their success. Their location, offerings and supports attract a diverse set of learners allowing them to begin and complete their research training. Their investigations are often aligned with regional priorities and involve a diverse range of community partners.

Graduate students and post-doctoral fellows at SMCRU's often encounter unique challenges

As highlighted in the recent Report of the Advisory Panel on the Federal Research Support System, support for Canada's next generation of researchers is woefully inadequate. The amounts of scholarships

and awards have failed to keep pace with investments made in other countries and with the rising costs of living or inflation. While these have created significant hardships for all graduate students and post-doctoral fellows in Canada, those who attend SMCRU's often face additional issues. For example, students from rural and remote regions of Canada or Indigenous learners must relocate to attend university. The costs associated to finding housing and traveling to maintain connections with family and community can be significant.

Recommendations

That strategic investments are made to support the next generation of Canadian researchers by 1) increasing award levels to address inflation and to attract top talent, 2) revising the formula for distribution of scholarships, 3) enhancing tri-agency program funding to leverage training opportunities, 3) elevating supports for postdoctoral fellows, and 4) recognize the costs borne by graduate students from rural and remote regions.

1. Increase support to reflect inflation and revisit the formula for distribution of scholarships

Since 2015ⁱ, graduate students have been taking on increasing levels of debt whereby 41% of Master's students and 54% of PhD students are graduating with a large debt of \$25,000 and above. The average Master's student is graduating with a debt of \$28,000 and PhD students \$33,000. According to Statistics Canada data the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Councilⁱⁱ, federal scholarship amounts for Canadian graduate students in the sciences (for single individuals living in an urban area with a population of 500,000) have not changed since 2003 and postdoctoral researchers only saw one increase in 2015. ACCRU strongly supports the Committee's recommendation for increased federal investment in the Government of Canada's graduate scholarship and fellowship programs and the Universities Canada briefⁱⁱⁱ that recommends raising the value of the Canada Graduate Scholarship awards and Post-doctoral Fellowship Awards by 50% and adjusting these awards for inflation on a regular basis.

2. Revisit the formula for distribution of scholarships

The number of awards allocated are insufficient to address accessibility and as such, ACCRU supports the recommendation of Universities Canada to double the number of Canada Graduate Scholarships and Postdoctoral Fellowship awards. Additionally, the formula used to distribute these scholarships among universities is biased to advantage large universities as it is calculated base don the amount of funding received by each of the councils to the university. For example, NSERC categorizes universities into three, large, medium and small groups. For the 2020 competition, large universities received approximately \$67M in funding, while small universities received \$5.8M. This is a ratio of about 11.6. So on average, large universities receive 11.6 times the number of master's scholarships than small ones. However, the number of professors funded in 2020 is 1697 for large universities and 198 for small universities. The ratio of funded professors is approximately 8.6. As a result, the formula ensures that funded professors from large universities have an advantage in terms of the number of scholarships from the Grand Councils.^{iv}

ACCRU recommends that a new formula for the distribution of master's scholarships be established and that it takes into account not only the overall amount of funding obtained by each institution, but also the number of professors funded and the number of students enrolled in research type master's programs.

3. Increase support for trainees in Tri-agency funding programs

As highlighted in the Advisory Panel on the Federal Research Support System, a crucial aspect of trainee support in Canada is delivered via research grants. A significant portion of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows are paid through stipends or salaries out of grant funding awarded to professors as opposed to through scholarships. According to the report, roughly 35,000 trainees are supported indirectly this way which is almost three times the current annual spending (\$726 million annually) by the granting councils for direct support via their scholarship and fellowship programs. Focusing on the dedicated student and postdoctoral fellow funding streams is by a very wide margin the sub-optimal way of improving support for students and postdocs. Graduate student support needs to be increased to reflect inflation over the past 15-20 years and research mentors/supervisors must be part of the solution in supporting a living wage for trainees. ACCRU endorses the recommendation of the Advisory Panel on the Federal Research Support System^y on the need to provide competitive and sustained support for Canada's research talent by increasing grants to an internationally competitive level and to address the insufficient funding in research grants to support competitive salaries for trainees. ACCRU supports the recommendation of Universities Canada to increase funding for the core budgets for the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research council, the Canadian Institutes for Health Research and the Canada Foundation for Innovation by 10% per year over the next 5 years to address the weakening of Canada's competitiveness in R&D internationally.

4. Elevate support for Postdoctoral Fellows

As postdoctoral fellows have moved from being treated as research trainees to term employees across Canada, there has not been a commensurate change in the approach to funding, contracts, supports, access to resources, and programming that is necessary to advance knowledge and innovation drivers of the economy. The 2016 Canadian National Postdoctoral Survey Report recommended that Canada must adopt a globally competitive postdoc salary scale comparable to those in the UK and USA and introduce a salary structure that includes yearly salary increases to accommodate for inflation and experience. Additionally, it is important to note that not all postdoctoral fellows will (or want to) become academics. Many will contribute their ideas, motivation, and vision in ways that support civil society and economic development. Revisiting the bias towards academic careers in our programs may lead to diverse partnerships and funding opportunities for postdoctoral fellows. One of the key challenges for postdoctoral fellows is related to parental leaves. While postdoctoral fellows are permitted to take such leaves, their employment environment/contracts at host institutions (i.e., the way they are paid by federal agencies) may leave them without health, dental, and paramedical benefits during their leave. ACCRU supports the recommendation by the Canadian National Postdoctoral Survey Report to adopt a competitive postdoc salary scale and introduce a structure that includes yearly

increases, and that the academic career bias and needs for parental leave be addressed in the development of postdoc programs.

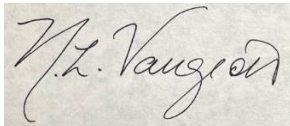
5. Recognize the costs borne by graduate students from rural and remote regions

Despite the pledge of the Canadian Government in 2002 to ensure that “one hundred percent of high school graduates have the opportunity to participate in some form of post-secondary education” access to advanced education remains disproportionately challenging for students from across the country. Students in rural areas have been shown to have lower participation and attainment than students originating from urban contexts and Statistics Canada data^{vi} and studies have shown that they are under-represented in institutions of higher education^{vii}. Whereas urban students are exposed to a wide range of postsecondary options, none of which requires them to leave home, for rural students the decision to continue is typically aligned with the decision to leave the family home and community of residence^{viii}. Graduate students and post-doctoral fellows who originate from Canada’s rural and remote regions must bear costs associated to relocation and travel that can be considerable. This prevents some from investing in further education and places considerable burden on them and their families (often from lower socio-economic backgrounds). This is particularly important to support Indigenous early career researchers. Rural regions bear the consequences as their intellectual talent needs to relocate, usually permanently to urban areas to participate in university. ACCRU recommends that a rural and remote classification and stipend should be added to graduate student scholarships/awards to enable greater participation in graduate education by rural graduate students. Where feasible, incentives should be created to encourage research talent return to work in rural and remote regions thereby helping to address the brain drain associated to migration to attend university.

Canada has the potential to leverage its considerable intellectual talent and invest in future talent to lead critically important research in all its regions. The main goal must be to build a research ecosystem that is inclusive, innovative, and impactful. This can only be achieved through strategic investment in early career researchers to provide access to training through graduate scholarships and postdoctoral awards in universities across Canada’s regions.

Our members appreciate the opportunity to convey our collective perspectives to the Standing Committee on Science and Research on how Canada can enhance Graduate Scholarship and Postdoctoral Fellowship Programs and we welcome further consultation to create an ecosystem where our research talent can thrive.

Sincerely,



Nicole L. Vaugeois, PhD

Chair of the Alliance of Canadian Comprehensive Research Universities

ⁱ [Student debt from all sources, by province of study and level of study \(statcan.gc.ca\)](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/95-009-x/2019001/article/00001-eng.htm)

ⁱⁱ Statistics Canada data

ⁱⁱⁱ [Table of contents \(ourcommons.ca\)](https://ourcommons.ca)

^{iv} ^{iv} https://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/doc/DGP2020_f.pdf

^v [Report of the Advisory Panel on the Federal Research Support System \(canada.ca\)](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/95-009-x/2019001/article/00001-eng.htm)

^{vi} [Postsecondary Education Participation among Underrepresented and Minority Groups \(statcan.gc.ca\)](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/95-009-x/2019001/article/00001-eng.htm)

^{vii} Andres, L. and E.D. Looker, Rurality and Capital: Educational expectations and attainments of rural, urban/rural and metropolitan youth. Canadian Journal of Higher Education, Vol. XXX1, No.2, 2001 and Looker, E.D., & Dwyer, P. (1998) Education and Negotiated Reality: Complexities facing rural youth. Journal of Youth Studies, 1(1), 5-22.