
FGA SCHOLARSHIPS AND THEIR CHALLENGES

DOCUMENT PREPARED BY VICTOR DIONNE, POLICY ADVISOR, AND REVIEWED BY GABRIELLE CREVIER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
AND NICOLAS DIONNE, DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, AT THE REGROUPEMENT ETUDIANT DE MAITRISE,
DIPLOME ET DOCTORAT DE L'UNIVERSITE DE SHERBROOKE (REMDUS)

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1. Increase amounts to keep up with the times

The student community is familiar with financial insecurity. The cost of living has been increasing steadily for months on end. The cost of housing, food, transportation and other goods and services has increased significantly. Like everyone else, students are feeling the pinch. However, since most of the student community has a lower than average income, they feel the pinch even more.

This is especially true of recipients of research grants from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). Indeed, with scholarships of a mere \$17,500 annually at the master's level and from \$20,000 to \$35,000 at the doctoral level, research students can easily end up in difficult financial circumstances. Given that individuals need between \$27,047 and \$37,822 net to live with dignity and above the poverty line in Quebec in 2023,¹ the scholarships awarded by the federal granting agencies (FGAs) are not in line with reality today.

In Quebec, the CAQ government recently increased the amounts of the Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQ) scholarships and now provides \$20,000 a year to master's students and \$25,000 a year to doctoral students. Although these amounts still do not meet the expectations of the student movement, it is worth noting. It is high time for the Government of Canada to do the same and take steps so that research students in Canada can have a better quality of life.

The scholarships offered by FGAs have not increased since 2003. If they had been indexed to inflation, a master's student and a doctoral student would receive \$26,839 and up to \$53,678,² respectively. These amounts would be more in line with today's reality and would ensure that the research student community could focus on research projects instead of

¹ IRIS, *Le revenu viable 2023 : dans la spirale de l'inflation et des baisses d'impôt*, 2023, as of 28/07/2023, URL <https://iris-recherche.gc.ca/publications/revenu-viable-2023/>.

² Inflation Calculator, Bank of Canada, as of 28/07/2023, URL <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator/>.

having to spend so many hours working another job to get paid.

The research community agrees on this point. In 2022, 7,100 petitioners called on the federal government to increase funding to account for 20 years of inflation. “I have an undergrad student who is interested in doing a master’s, but she can make more money tree planting in the summer than she could all year, even with a prestigious grant,” said Jeannette Whitton, Professor at the Department of Botany at the University of British Columbia, in an interview with *La Presse canadienne*.³ Stories like this one are very common.

Increasing FGA scholarships and indexing them to inflation is essential to the well-being of research students. This investment would encourage students to pursue higher education and ensure that Canada can improve its knowledge retention. Since we are experiencing social, economic and environmental crises simultaneously, it is more important than ever to provide members of the student research community with the resources they need to complete their research.

³ Bergeron, Émilie, “Des scientifiques réclament plus de financement dans une lettre de 60 mètres,” *La Presse*, August 11, 2022, as of 28/07/2023, URL <https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/sciences/2022-08-11/des-scientifiques-reclament-plus-de-financement-dans-une-lettre-de-60-metres.php>.

2. Extend to reflect reality

Research students cannot receive FGA scholarships indefinitely. At the master's level, the grants cannot be renewed, while at the doctoral level, they can be renewed twice. In other words, a master's student who receives \$17,500 cannot renew it for their second year of study. At the doctoral level, students can receive between \$20,000 and \$35,000 during their first three years of study.

These FGA funding periods do not reflect the reality experienced by the research student community. The University of Sherbrooke maintains that a research-based master's requires a full-time commitment of at least two years,⁴ and that a doctorate requires at least four years of full-time study.⁵ As a result, the FGA scholarships do not cover the entirety of their studies.

Under the current system, many research students no longer have access to grants toward the end of their program. This lack of funding can discourage them from completing their studies. Therefore, extending the grants and adapting them to the true duration of master's and doctoral programs would encourage students to continue their studies and would build our knowledge today and in the future.

⁴ Understanding the types of master's, University of Sherbrooke, as of 28/07/2023, URL <https://www.usherbrooke.ca/admission/2e-3e-cycles/types-maitrises>.

⁵ University of Sherbrooke, *Règlement facultaire des programmes de maîtrise et de doctorat*, 2015, as of 28/07/2023, URL https://www.usherbrooke.ca/flsh/fileadmin/sites/flsh/documents/Reglements/reglement_facultaire_programmes_maitrise_doctorat_novembre_2015.pdf.

3. Continue payments and reduce pressure

Like anyone else, research students may encounter difficulties in their personal lives. Whether for medical leave, family obligations or something else, interrupting their studies is sometimes necessary for the well-being of the researcher and their loved ones. However, interrupting their studies automatically cuts off their grants.

Suspending grants causes extra stress for the recipient. Their reasons for interrupting their studies, no matter what they are, are likely already overwhelming. The added pressure of being cut off from the grants only makes the person more vulnerable. It may lead to financial difficulties, which is “a predictor of mental stress, depressive symptoms, and emotional exhaustion.”⁶

Continuing grant payments when a research student interrupts their studies provides them with socio-economic stability and helps ensure their physical and mental well-being, conditions that are essential to development on both a personal level and a professional one.

⁶ Union étudiante du Québec, *Enquête “Sous ta façade,”* 2019, as of 28/07/2023, URL <https://unionetudiante.ca/Media/publicDocuments/d222c80b-b4db-43a9-ad7a-bccbcde18c25.pdf>.

4. What REMDUS is calling for

The Canadian government must provide more funding to the FGAs and ensure that research students benefit from these investments. The Canada of today and tomorrow is facing significant social, economic, health and environmental challenges. It is important to develop Canadian knowledge and expertise so that we can excel locally and internationally.

Technological discoveries and advances made by the scientific community are key to Canada's economic development. This student community is the research and innovation workforce.

To build the Canada of the future over the decades to come, research students need adequate funding and personally and professionally fulfilling working conditions. For that, REMDUS is calling for an increase in the FGA grant amounts to ensure a decent standard of living for student researchers and is calling for the grants to be indexed to inflation.

Furthermore, REMDUS would like grants to be extended to cover the entire length of a master's or doctoral program. Lastly, it is calling for payments to continue to be made during an interruption in studies, no matter the reason.

"It is only with science and virtue that we can achieve great things."

- Ernest Renan

About REMDUS

The mission of the Regroupement étudiant de maîtrise, diplôme et doctorat de l'Université de Sherbrooke (REMDUS) is to advocate for the rights and interests of students in graduate programs at the University of Sherbrooke. In total, it represents nearly 9,000 members on all the campuses.

Since 1987, REMDUS has been ensuring the well-being of its members. It coordinates action and calls from University of Sherbrooke graduate students. It defends the rights of its members and advocates for their interests, while also working to improve students' quality of life.

REMDUS also encourages graduate students to participate in University of Sherbrooke campus activities. It raises awareness among its community on current issues affecting both students and society.