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# Submission to the Standing Committee on Science and Research

## Study on the Government of Canada's Graduate Scholarship and Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programs

June 2023

# INTRODUCTION

HealthCare*CAN* is the national voice of action for health research institutes, hospitals, and healthcare organizations across Canada. We advocate in support of health research and innovation and enhanced access to high-quality health services for people across Canada, and we empower health professionals through our best-in-class learning programs. We welcome the opportunity to make this submission to the Standing Committee on Science and Research as part of its study on the Government of Canada's Graduate Scholarship and Post-Doctoral Fellowship Programs.

Health research and innovation drive health outcomes and health system transformation while playing a crucial role in helping Canada respond to medical and health system challenges. Past investments in areas such as genetics, medicine, and personalized health research has improved our understanding and ability to diagnose and treat diseases today such as cancer. Moreover, research on the socioeconomic determinants of health has helped to further advance health system transformation and improve the health outcomes for underserved people. Ultimately, the health outcomes for Canadians have improved because of these research advances, which have also enhanced the quality of care and the efficient use of healthcare resources.

Graduate students and post-doctoral fellows play an important role as members of research teams and are vital to Canadian research and innovation. We must be doing more as a country to support their learning, training and development, ensure that the next generation of researchers reflects Canada's diversity, and make a career in research in Canada an attractive and viable one.

This submission outlines considerations and recommendations as they relate to graduate scholarships and post-doctoral fellowship programs provided by the federal government, as well as the broader funding structure for graduate students and post-doctoral fellows pursuing research in Canada.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendation 1: Increase federal funding for graduate scholarships and post-doctoral fellowships available through the Tri-Council and tie them to increases in inflation/cost of living.

According to the recently released *Report of the Advisory Panel on the Federal Research Support System*, the value of scholarships and fellowships provided through the Tri-Council have not increased since 2003.[i] With increases in the cost of living and tuition, this has resulted in many graduate students and post-doctorates living at poverty levels.[ii] Graduates and post-doctorates are crucial members of research teams doing important work and they must be compensated accordingly.

It is suggested that all federal Tri-Council scholarships be standardized and increased to a minimum of $25,000 for master's students and $35,000 for PhD students, ensuring equitable financial support across disciplines.

Such an increase will help ensure liveable wages for graduate students and post-doctoral fellows, which can ultimately reduce the financial burden that they face in embarking on a career in research in Canada. It will also foster more inclusion and diversity in the field as presently inequities exist in who is financially able to pursue an education and career in research. A research workforce that reflects Canada's diversity is a stronger one as a variety of experiences and views enrich the quality of Canada's research endeavours.

By increasing federal funding for students, the federal government can also play an important role in making advanced education and a career in research more accessible and attractive to a wider range of individuals. Currently, the cost of pursuing a career in research means that only certain individuals can do so, namely those who are in a financial position to do so. Furthermore, given the better funding opportunities in other countries, many Canadians, and Canadian-trained researchers – several of whom are contending with debt following their studies – leave to pursue their research abroad where a career in research is financially viable.

Greater scholarship supports will help address both shorter-term and longer-term concerns for students and for Canada's future prosperity. Increasing the value of scholarships and fellowships will reduce barriers to entry to an education and career in research, attract and retain talented individuals, and promote diversity and inclusivity within the research ecosystem.

## Recommendation 2: Increase the number of scholarships and fellowships available through the Tri-Council.

A recent study, *Analysis of financial challenges faced by graduate students in Canada*,[iii] found that despite the number of graduate students in Canada doubling in the last two decade, the number of scholarships available through the Tri-Council has decreased.[iv] The report concludes by recommending that the number of scholarships available through the Tri-Council should be increase by 50 per cent, and we suggest the number of scholarships be adjusted annually to reflect the level of enrolment in graduate programs.

Increasing the number of scholarships available will enable more students to be funded, augmenting both the accessibility and attractiveness of an education, training, and career in research. This will only benefit Canada as it continues to shift to a knowledge-based economy, and the skills of scientists who can solve the world's most pressing concerns become increasingly valued.

Similarly, boosting the number of federal scholarships will help reduce the financial burden on supervisors and principal investigators who rely on grant funds to pay students on their teams. In some cases, supervisors may be able to use some of those savings to top up the financial support students receive, placing students in an even better financial position.

## Recommendation 3: Double the current funding to the Tri-Council and commit to an annual increase that keeps pace with inflation and global benchmarks

The recent study *Analysis of financial challenges faced by graduate students in Canada* found that most students – 67 percent – are funded through grants received by their supervisors.[v] This aligns with the experience of HealthCare*CAN*'s members who are researchers and principal

investigators (i.e., supervisors) in health research institutes, hospitals, and health authorities across the country.

Grants provided through the Tri-Council must cover both research and the costs related to conducting research, including salaries for staff and students. Despite investments in recent years, Tri-Council budgets have not kept pace with funding available in other countries. Canada lags in the proportion of total health spending allocated to research at 1.5% compared to Australia at 3.3% and the US at 5.9%.[vi] When looking at total research and development spending across all sectors, Canada is the only OECD country whose investment in R&D has steadily decreased over the past 20 years.[vii] In 2019, the last year for which comparable data is available, Canada invested 1.76% of its total GDP on research, compared to Australia at 1.79%, the UK at 2.71%, and the US at 3.17%. The OECD average was 2.56%.[viii]

This failure to keep pace with Canada's peers impacts students. While the cost of living and tuition increase, supervisors are contending with the shrinking value of their grants, meaning they have less money to cover the same, rising costs of conducting research. Students are impacted because while their stipends may remain constant, their value decreases. As costs continue to increase without a boost to Tri-Council funding, an education and career in research in Canada becomes less feasible and attractive to the next generation of talented researchers.

It is crucial to ensure sustainable research funding is available and can effectively address the evolving needs of the research community, while also enhancing the competitiveness of Canada's research community on a global scale. By doubling the current funding to the Tri-Council and committing to an annual increase to match inflation and keep pace with international benchmarks, researchers can be provided with the necessary resources to pursue innovative projects, Canada can attract and retain the next generation of top talent, and Canada can drive impactful discoveries that have the ability to benefit society as a whole.

## About HealthCare*CAN*

HealthCare*CAN* is the national voice of health research institutes, hospitals, and healthcare organizations across Canada. Our members are part of the more than 1,200 healthcare facilities that support over two million direct and indirect jobs, account for nearly 12% of Canada's GDP, and stimulate local economies through research and development, commercialization of discoveries, and infrastructure projects.

HealthCare*CAN* membership is diverse and made up of a variety of organizations, including research institutes, hospitals, long-term care and home care providers, health authorities and health sector associations.

These organizations are crucial in furthering our understanding of diseases, developing treatment solutions for patients, delivering high-quality care, and contributing to addressing the most pressing issues facing Canada.

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[i] Frédéric Bouchard, Yolande Chan, Gilles Patry, Janet Rossant, Laurel Schafer, Baljit Singh, and Vianne Timmons. 2023. Report of the Advisory Panel on the Federal Research Support System. Retrieved from: https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/panel-federal-research-support/sites/default/files/attachments/2023/Advisory-Panel-Research-2023.pdf.

[ii] Sarah Jane Laframboise, Thomas Bailey, Anh-Thu Dang, Mercedes Rose, Zier Zhou, Matthew D. Berg, Stephen Holland, Sami Aftab Abdul, Kaela O'Connor, Sara El-Sahli, Dominique M. Boucher, Garrett Fairman, Jacky Deng, Katherine Shaw, Nathaniel Noblett, Alexa D'Addario, Madelaine Empey, and Keaton Sinclair. 2023. Analysis of financial challenges faced by graduate students in Canada. Biochemistry and Cell Biology. e-First https://doi.org/10.1139/bcb-2023-0021.

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Canadian Institute for Health Information. 2020. National Health Expenditures Trends. Retrieved from: https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/nhex-trends-2020-narrative-report-en.pdf; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2021. Health expenditures Australia 2019-20. Retrieved from: https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/f1284c51-e5b7-4059-a9e3-c6fe061fecdc/Health-expenditure-Australia-2019-20.pdf.aspx?inline=true#:~:text=Using%20the%20current%20estimates%2C%20the,on%20research%20(Figure%2011; Research America. 2020. U.S. Investments in Medical and Health Research and Development. Retrieved from: https://www.researchamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ResearchAmerica-Investment-Report.Final_.January-2022.pdf.

[vii] OECD Data. 2021. Gross domestic spending on R&D. Retrieved from: https://data.oecd.org/rd/gross-domestic-spending-on-r-d.htm.

[viii] Ibid.