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Bailey and Holland: Ontario must step up to properly fund the next generation of researchers

The province needs to act if it wants to be at the forefront of today's breakthroughs, tomorrow's innovation and an advanced economy.

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Tabaret Hall at uOttawa. The Ontario government has not increased investment in post-graduate training since the early 2000s. PHOTO BY PAT MCGRATH /POSTMEDIA

Graduate students are part of the next-generation of researchers helping form the backbone of Canada's scientific community and the skilled workforce of tomorrow. Most graduate researchers rely on government

funding, from both the federal and provincial level, to conduct full time research — often spending more than 40 hours a week in the lab.

In the 2024 federal budget, the contribution of these researchers was recognized with an investment of \$2.6 billion in scholarships and research grants. This enables Canada to provide globally competitive financial support to more graduate researchers. This follows over two decades of stagnant funding despite 50-per-cent inflation over that period. Consequently, more graduate students have the opportunity to escape poverty and see a future for themselves in Canada.

Despite the federal government's recognition of past insufficient support for these researchers, the issue continues to be ignored at the provincial level. As the province with the most graduate students in Canada, Ontario plays a dominant role in the national research ecosystem. But it has not increased investment in post-graduate training since the early 2000s.

Ontario provides graduate student scholarships through two programs: The Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS) and the Queen Elizabeth II Graduate Scholarship in Science and Technology (QEII-GSST). Both have a value of \$15,000 each year (with only \$10,000 coming from the province) and students must re-apply every academic year. Currently, 3,500 of these scholarships are awarded annually, supporting fewer than one in 20 graduate students. These numbers have not changed in nearly 10 years (and in fact have fallen since 2012) despite an increase in graduate enrolment by more than 30 per cent.

The value of these awards is also utterly insufficient. The average tuition for a graduate student in Ontario is more than \$7,500. Without any other funding source, this leaves the student with less than \$7,500 to pay rent, utilities and groceries for the year, clearly unrealistic. For graduate students conducting full-time research, having another job is simply not a viable option.

Graduate students are also deeply impacted by the other funding universities receive — both for the provision of research facilities and the ability of the university to provide internal scholarships, teaching assistant positions and other financial support. Recently, a blue ribbon panel on “Ensuring Financial Sustainability for Ontario's Postsecondary Sector” highlighted glaring concerns with the lack of funding for public universities. Notably, Ontario funding provided to each student is less than half of what other provinces provide their students.

This has led many Ontario universities to become increasingly financially constrained. These financial constraints often result in cuts to internal graduate scholarships, tuition waivers and the number of teaching assistant positions. This directly impacts graduate researchers, sending them further into poverty.

The problem is only going to worsen given the recent federal cap on international students, as universities had become reliant on the unregulated and higher tuition fees they were able to charge these students.

The Ontario government recently provided a cash injection of \$1.3 billion to post-secondary institutions. However, this will simply have a stabilizing effect: helping to prevent institutions from collapsing and limiting the extent of budget cuts. There has been no attention paid to the deep financial struggles faced by

next-generation researchers, with the blue ribbon panel report lacking input from graduate student representatives.

The federal government has recognized this, and following the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Science and Research, is committing to invest \$2.6 billion in the future of science and innovation. It is time the Ontario government did the same by increasing the value and number of provincial scholarships and providing better support to post-secondary education. Ontario needs to do this to produce the research for today's breakthroughs, tomorrow's innovation and the skilled personnel who will drive our advanced economy.

Thomas Bailey and **Stephen Holland** are PhD candidates at the University of Ottawa. They serve on the executive of the Ottawa Science Policy Network (OSPN), an organization aiming to introduce more students to science policy. OSPN has been at the forefront of discussions between the federal and provincial level advocating for improved support for next-generation researchers. For more details, follow us on X: @OttawaSciPolNet