

A Community-wide Approach to Improving Graduate Funding at U of T

Considerations and Recommendations for Enhancing Graduate Funding Practices

SGS Graduate Funding Working Group
Fall 2023



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

DEFY
GRAVITY

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I. Introduction

In the Fall of 2022, the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) struck the SGS Graduate Funding Working Group. Chaired by Dr. Joshua Barker, Vice-Provost, Graduate Research and Education and Dean of SGS, the working group was formed to collectively enhance understanding of the graduate funding landscape at the University of Toronto (U of T) and identify a series of funding considerations and strategic recommendations that academic divisions and graduate units could employ to attract and retain talented students and engage in best practices to support students throughout the course of their graduate programs.

The SGS Graduate Funding Working Group membership included senior academic and administrative leadership, University counsel, graduate students, and institutional administrators across the three campuses:

- Joshua Barker (Chair), Dean, School of Graduate Studies, Vice-Provost, Graduate Research and Education
- Dwayne Benjamin, Vice-Provost, Strategic Enrolment Management
- Suzanne Cadarette, Associate Professor, Leslie Dan Faculty of Pharmacy
- Rachael Ferenbok, Associate University Counsel
- Jessica Finlayson, Financial Officer, Graduate Operations, Faculty of Arts & Science
- Dionne Gesink, Associate Dean, Academic Affairs, Dalla Lana School of Public Health
- Antoinette Handley, Vice-Dean, Graduate Education, Faculty of Arts & Science
- Mindy Harris, Director, Academic Programs & Operations, OISE
- Sarfaroz Niyozov, Acting Associate Dean, Programs, OISE
- Normand Labrie, Associate Dean, Programs, OISE
- Rene Harrison, Vice-Dean, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, UTSC
- Tina Keshavarzian, Graduate Student, Temerty Faculty of Medicine
- Kelly Lyons, Acting Vice-Dean, Research and Program Innovation
- Jeff Packman, Associate Dean, Graduate Education, Music
- Ajay Rao, Vice-Dean, Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs, UTM
- Mike Snowdon, Manager, Academic Planning & Analysis, Planning and Budget
- Julie Audet, Vice-Dean, Graduate Studies, Faculty of Applied Science and Engineering
- Craig Steeves, Acting Vice-Dean, Graduate Studies, Faculty of Applied Science and Engineering
- Alexie Tcheuyap, Associate Vice-President and Vice-Provost, International Student Experience
- Annabel Thornton, Graduate Student, Economics
- Justin Nodwell, Vice-Dean, Research & Health Science Education, Temerty Faculty of Medicine

The working group met five times over the course of the 2022-2023 academic year and engaged in a variety of measures to strengthen understanding of graduate funding and inform proposed recommendations, including: reviewing current policies and practices in graduate student funding across the institution; exploring student experience data, current issues, and associated implications for all stakeholders; assessing U of T's funding support in relation to peer institutions in Canada and abroad; and identifying the existing institutional levers for improving graduate student funding levels. Through the review of data, synthesis of institutional knowledge, and subsequent discussions on funding practices, members of the working group were provided with an opportunity to reflect, develop strategies, and share best practices to improve graduate funding at the University. Throughout their discussions, working group members shared their deep concerns on the current state of graduate

funding and emphasized the importance of building infrastructure to support coordination among academic divisions and graduate units.

To capture the institutional knowledge of graduate funding at U of T created through the working group and provide a framework to guide funding-related decisions and practices moving forward, the working group developed three key outputs:

- (1) A comprehensive educational report that provides an overview of the current state of graduate funding in Canada, outlines policies and practices within U of T, and identifies the challenges and opportunities for graduate funding in a decentralized context.
- (2) A set of institution-wide funding considerations to facilitate alignment and interdisciplinary collaboration, where possible, and frame future graduate funding decision-making processes.
- (3) A list of recommendations that explore solutions, address ongoing issues related to graduate funding within graduate units and across the University more broadly, and identify the stakeholder responsible for stewarding the recommendations to fruition.

The funding considerations and recommendations developed by the working group are designed with each stakeholder in mind and serve as a coordinated strategic approach to improving the infrastructure of graduate support.

II. Key Terms

For the purpose of the report, funding considerations, and recommendations documents, the following key terms are defined as follows:

- **Academic Divisions:** The University’s academic programs are organized into 18 faculties and divisions (i.e., Academic Divisions). Within each Academic Division, there may be departments, colleges, centres, and institutes that provide further support for study and research in focused areas. A list of the 18 faculties and divisions can be found at the following website: [Academic Divisions](#).
- **Graduate Units:** An administrative entity headed by a graduate chair who has been appointed under the PAAA and housing graduate programs that:
 - provides the central structure to house and support graduate programs; and
 - includes graduate faculty members, who may be drawn from multiple academic units, as well as graduate students, and administrative staff.

Every graduate unit is assigned a specific budgetary academic unit (“budgetary home”) to act as its administrative and governance home. For a list of programs by graduate unit, visit the following website: [Programs by Graduate Unit](#).

- **SGS Divisions:** The School of Graduate Studies allocates graduate units into four broad categories: Division 1 – Humanities, Division 2 – Social Sciences, Division 3 – Physical Sciences, and Division 4 – Life Sciences. To determine which programs fall under each category, visit the following website: [Programs by SGS Division](#).
- **Base Funding:** refers to a graduate unit’s minimum funding commitment to each student per year, including tuition costs and annual living stipend, during the funded portion of the program.
- **Funded cohort:** refers to a group of students enrolled in a graduate program for whom there is an institutional commitment to provide funding packages throughout the duration of their published program length.
- **Top-Ups:** When a student receives an award, it can either augment or replace some or all of the base funding commitment from the graduate unit, usually dollar for dollar. To reward students for their achievement, some units offer additive funding – referred to as top-ups – to students whose external awards might replace all or a portion of their funding. The practice of offering top-ups to students who receive awards varies across academic divisions and graduate units.

III. Themes

There are several overarching themes that emerged from the discussions of the Graduate Funding Working Group that may assist in framing the funding considerations and recommendations:

- Graduate funding is an **increasingly complex issue that requires urgent attention and a collaborative spirit by all stakeholders across the University** to improve funding practices and provide appropriate and sustainable financial support to graduate students. Improvement of graduate funding is imperative to ensuring equity and access to graduate education and attracting the brightest, most talented students worldwide to our graduate programs.
- There are significant constraints to improving graduate funding, but there are also **existing institutional levers and resources that can be leveraged to strengthen financial support for graduate students**. Academic divisions and graduate units must assess current funding practices to identify and optimize the resources available.
- The determination of **funding levels and accountability for meeting funding commitments should remain the responsibility of graduate units and academic divisions**, however, it is recommended that steps be taken to increase alignment and coordination on graduate funding practices across the University.
- It is necessary to **enhance clarity, transparency, and “truth-in-advertising”** about graduate funding through a variety of activities, including the provision of annual SGS-led education related to funding practices for all stakeholders (i.e., students, academic leaders, administrators) and clear, ongoing departmental and divisional communications.
- Academic leadership and institutional administrators must **prioritize timely, high-quality academic progress and support lower time-to-completion rates** for graduate students to ensure students are funded to the completion of their research-stream graduate degrees.

IV. Graduate Funding Considerations

The following graduate funding considerations are not ranked. Instead, all considerations should be interpreted as equally important, and each consideration will be applied in different magnitudes across the recommendations of the working group.

- Providing support to enter and complete program.
- Enhancing institutional competitiveness.
- Promoting equity, access, and inclusion.
- Recognizing merit.
- Protecting academic freedom and integrity.
- Encouraging academic progress toward degree completion.
- Providing continuity and predictability of funding.
- Considering student needs and personal financial circumstances.
- Increasing transparency in funding practices for students and academic divisions.

V. Graduate Funding Working Group Recommendations

1. Affirm decentralized approach – framed within an overarching coherent and holistic university-wide funding policy – to setting graduate student funding package levels and graduate unit accountability for meeting its funding commitments.
2. Reaffirm the principle that PhD programs need to be funded for the minimum program length.
3. Affirm principle of equity of access to funded programs (i.e., no direct or indirect self-funding) and affirm financial need is not a condition of graduate funding.
4. Review the Governing Council policy on *Student Financial Support* to determine if any updates are required.
5. SGS should conduct an environmental scan of the funding practices and associated communications of other universities to assess the competitiveness of U of T funding packages compared to peer institutions.
6. With guidance from SGS, academic divisions should review all master's programs and assess the programs' funding status, taking into account the conversion rate from master's to PhD.
7. Fold regular review of research master's funding by program type into the UTQAP process and update the list of research-stream programs in the Governing Council financial aid policy document. (The extant list is from 1998.)
8. SGS should undertake a review of the flex-time program status: Institute a working group to better understand the nature of the program, its rationale, uptake, and student and program outcomes. Ensure the working group includes people who have had experience with the flex-time PhD model.
9. Move away from monitoring graduate student income and toward a focus on academic progress to improve time-to-completion.
10. There should be a concerted and continuous effort by all academic divisions and units to ensure that students are making timely academic progress and completing their studies in an appropriate time frame as a means of enhancing funding available in years 1-5.
11. Academic divisions should review funding packages annually with consideration of core principles and available resources.
12. SGS should provide data and best practices advice to support these reviews and support improved communication about funding packages and top-ups.

13. SGS should hold an annual coordinating meeting for graduate/associate deans to report on academic divisional funding levels and top-up practices.
14. SGS, in collaboration with the University Registrar's Office and Planning & Budget, should review Graduate Tuition Fees Assessment Practices and develop recommendations to explore per term billing and to address and clarify minimum degree fees and balance of degree fees issues and practices.
15. SGS should reinforce existing best practices and develop a set of guidelines for administrators regarding the disbursement of graduate funding, including the development of internal practices to review students' funding upon completion to ensure stipend and tuition amounts disbursed are proportional to the period of registration and final tuition invoiced to the student.
16. SGS should work with Student Receivables & Accounting Office, Planning & Budget, and other stakeholders to develop a formal tracking mechanism to allow for increased transparency and accurate reporting when students have funding issued by a third-party sponsor (paid to Student Receivables) or by an external funding source (paid direct to student).
17. SGS, OVPRI, Government Relations, and Advancement should develop a coordinated approach to increase core components of graduate student funding (scholarships, grants, industry, etc.) and academic divisions and Advancement should determine targeted fundraising strategies to increase support for graduate research and education in their graduate units.
18. SGS and Planning & Budget should create an ad-hoc support team to assist academic divisions in optimizing the resources they have available for graduate student funding (e.g., restricted funds, PI contributions). Other offices across the University (e.g., University Registrar's Office) should be consulted, as needed.
19. Academic divisions, in collaboration with SGS, should strengthen incentives for students to seek out award opportunities by developing a more principled approach to top-ups and enhancing education on the professional benefits and pedagogical purposes of external awards. Students should feel they are adequately rewarded for the successful attainment of external funding.
20. Academic divisions, in collaboration with graduate units, should examine their restricted funds and utilize available funds (or redeploy existing funds) to expand financial award opportunities for international students.
21. Academic divisions, in collaboration with graduate units, should continue to foster the University's commitment to inclusive excellence and equitable access to graduate education by expanding financial award opportunities for graduate students from underrepresented groups.
22. SGS, in collaboration with an expert panel, should examine the SGS Tri-Agency algorithm and associated processes to increase standardization in application procedures, ensure a fair and rigorous assessment of applicants, and enhance competitiveness of U of T graduate students.

23. Affirm principles related to industry funding and ensure components of units' funding packages are connected to students' training and progress through the program. Contingency plans should be created by graduate units and academic divisions to ensure continuation of funding for individual students with external support, if issues or challenges arise that jeopardize their funding sources.
24. SGS should create a set of principle-driven and transparent criteria to assess eligible external funding sources. Criteria should include a review of factors such as the value and duration of support, demonstrated history of student support, potential risk to the institution, alignment with university's academic mission/freedom, and principles of EDI.
25. SGS should review the current admissions policy, with attention to conditional offers based on securing funding from external funding sources.
26. SGS should enhance its communications about graduate student funding and provide an annual workshop on graduate funding for decision-makers.
27. SGS should collate best practices, develop templates, and offer guidance on funding-related communications to support graduate units. Graduate units should clearly communicate their funding and top-up practices on their websites, in their graduate student handbooks, and through an annual funding letter.
28. SGS should play a convening role in creating best practices/guidelines for all graduate funding-related communications, including template communications units can use.
29. SGS should create a working group to better understand and communicate the funding opportunities available for students in professional programs, as well as advise on the development of recognition programs and opportunities for students that honour their achievements and help them strengthen their CVs.