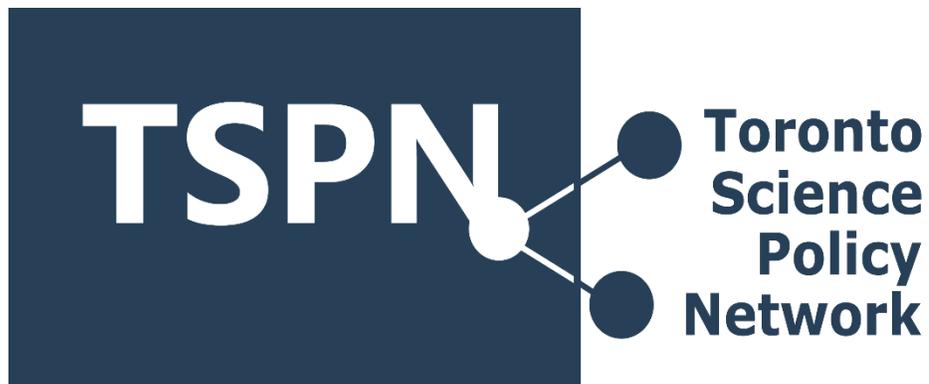


# The House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance 2021 Pre-Budget Consultation

Submission by:

Toronto Science Policy Network



*The Toronto Science Policy Network is a student-run science policy group based at the University of Toronto, which provides a platform for students (graduate & undergraduate) and post-doctoral researchers to learn more about and engage in science policy.*

### **Recommendation 1:**

Increase the level of funding allocated to federal graduate scholarships and awards.

### **Recommendation 2:**

Continue the extension of student loan repayments through to the end of 2021, and increase the proportion of funding provided as grants, rather than loans.

### **Recommendation 3:**

Continue to invest in the creation and subsidization of work experiences to help graduate students prepare for an uncertain job market.

## Background

Graduate students are the life force of discovery and innovation, providing the critical ideas, talent, and labour necessary for the majority of post-secondary research being conducted in Canada.<sup>1</sup> These vital contributions promote economic growth and development, while also strengthening the knowledge-based economy at both a local and national level.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, graduate students are leading COVID-19-related efforts, for instance, in vaccine development and the production of personal protective equipment for frontline-workers.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, the Toronto Science Policy Network, launched a national bilingual survey to understand the early impacts of COVID-19 on graduate students across Canada, including the impact on their graduate studies and future prospects.<sup>4</sup> This survey was open between April 22<sup>nd</sup> to May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, and received 1,431 responses. Using this data, we identified critical opportunities for action to better support graduate students, and therefore promote Canada's knowledge-based economy.

To date, the Government of Canada has invested over one billion to support Canada's COVID-19 research response, including some considerations for graduate students, such as the ability to request a funding extension for expiring federal scholarships through the Canadian federal funding agencies (CIHR, NSERC and SSHRC).<sup>5,6</sup> We deeply appreciate this effort to invest in research. By funding graduate students, Canada is building the leading innovators of tomorrow.

While these investments are critical, they are short-term reliefs which alone are not sufficient because only a small proportion of graduate students can access these funds.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the impact of COVID-19 on the academic community in Canada will be felt long after the pandemic subsidies.

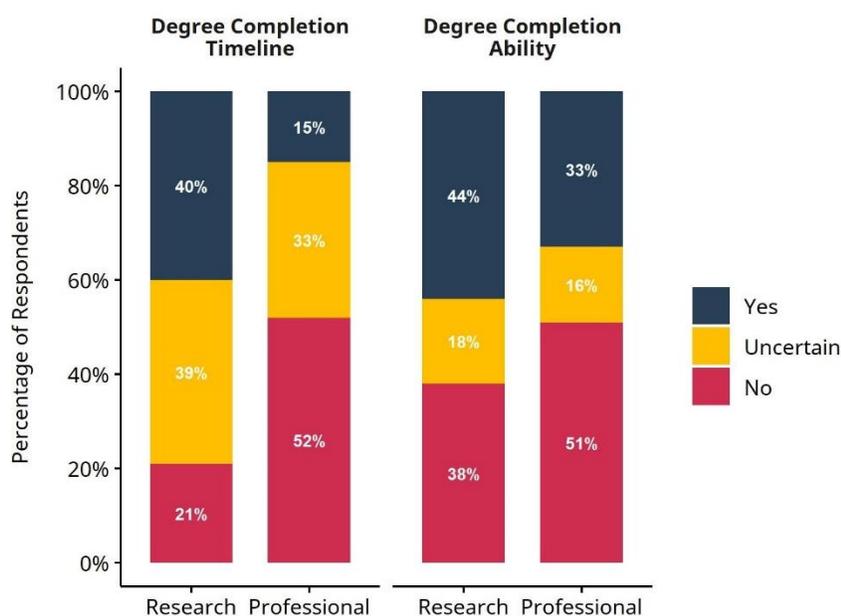
In order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on this critical demographic, we propose the following recommendations to support graduate students in the 2021 federal budget.

### **Recommendation 1: Increase the level of funding allocated to federal graduate scholarships and awards.**

In the 2019 budget, the Government committed a \$114 million investment over five years, starting in 2019/2020, to create an additional 500 master's and 167 three-year doctoral scholarship awards through the Canada Graduate Scholarship (CGS).<sup>8</sup> While these are commendable investments, they continue to fall short of the amount recommended in the Fundamental Science Review (FSR).<sup>1</sup> In addition, the Government's recent COVID-19 related research investments only reach a subset of graduate students — specifically, those who currently hold an expiring federal award, are supported by federal research grants, are conducting research in COVID-19 priority areas, or have the availability to seek full- or part-time work.<sup>6</sup> Many graduate students in research-stream programs are not able to seek work during their studies due to the amount of time they must invest into completing their research

and/or program guidelines. This limited and exclusive funding means that graduate students continue to face challenges in obtaining funds to pursue and complete their graduate studies.<sup>9</sup>

In our survey, around three-quarters of graduate students reported that COVID-19 had negatively impacted their ability to conduct research. We also found that only 27% of research-stream graduate students had guaranteed funding until the end of their degree. Finally, around 40% of research-stream graduate students reported that COVID-19 had negatively affected their time to degree completion, and their ability to complete their degree (**Figure 1**). These students may not have sufficient funding to complete their degree – funding extensions will be necessary.



**Figure 1:** The percentage of graduate students in professional and research stream programs who think COVID-19 has changed their degree completion timeline and their ability to complete their degree.

Here, we recommend increasing the level of funding allocated to graduate students through scholarships and awards offered by the three federal funding agencies. Specifically, we recommend an increase of \$140 million over four years, as recommended by the FSR, which can be allocated to creating needs-based financial awards for graduate students and increasing the number of smaller awards (e.g. additional master’s and three-year doctoral scholarships through the CGS). This will reinvigorate the current federal scholarship and awards ecosystem, allowing graduate students to successfully complete their degrees and contribute their specialized knowledge and skills to the Canadian economy.

It is also important to note that the pandemic is disproportionately impacting graduate students belonging to equity-seeking groups, with women in academia reporting negative impacts on their research productivity.<sup>10</sup> In our survey, there was a 16% increase in graduate students considering a long-term leave of absence from their graduate studies, for reasons including additional caregiving responsibilities, from home-schooling children to taking care of a loved one who is ill.

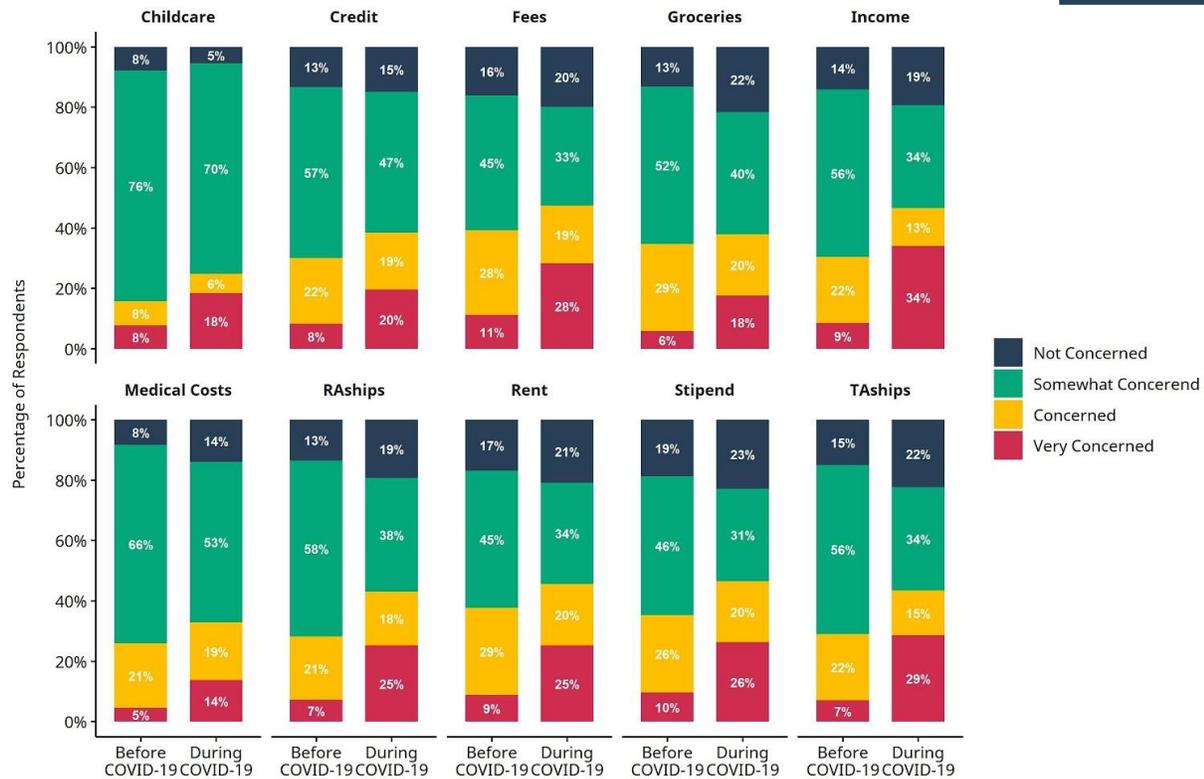
We recommend that the Government prioritize equity, diversity and inclusion when allocating funding to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on graduate students across Canada. This can include introducing federal grants to offset the costs of childcare, and allocating specific funding for equity-seeking groups, such as students belonging to Black and Indigenous communities.

## **Recommendation 2: Continue the extension of student loan repayments through to the end of 2021, and increase the proportion of funding provided as grants, rather than loans.**

At the time of graduation, 46% of master's students and 36% of doctoral students owe about \$30,000 in student debt.<sup>11</sup> This financial burden is being exacerbated by the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Canadian economy is estimated to contract by 5.9%.<sup>12</sup> With a perilous job market ahead, it is critical to reduce the financial burden faced by graduate students.

In our survey, graduate students reported an increase in concern regarding almost all of their possible sources of income and ongoing expenses, including tuition fees (a 21% increase in concern) and credit (9%) (**Figure 2**).

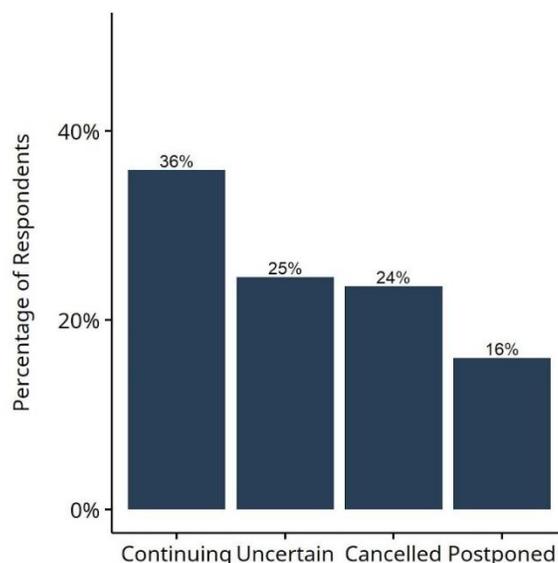
The Government has already introduced measures to address student loans, including a suspension of repayment and interest accrual until September 30, 2020, doubling of Canada Student Grant amounts, and an increased cap on Canada Student Loans.<sup>13</sup> These are necessary measures, but they must not be temporary. In order to address the financial burden faced by graduate students, we recommend a continued extension of student loan repayments through to the end of 2021, and an increase in the proportion of funding provided as grants, rather than loans. These changes will be critical for students in professional-stream programs, where there is often little financial support. These efforts will also assist students who may need to pursue graduate studies on a part-time basis as a result of COVID-19.



**Figure 2:** Changes in the level of concern among graduate students before COVID-19 and during COVID-19 related to childcare, credit (including credit cards and loans), fees, groceries, income, medical costs, RAsHips (research assistantships), rent, stipends, and TAsHips (teaching assistantships).

### **Recommendation 3: Continue to invest in the creation and subsidization of work experiences to help graduate students prepare for an uncertain job market.**

In professional-stream programs, work experience from internships or practicums is critical to career success. In our survey, 40% of graduate students in professional-stream programs reported that their internships in the summer and/or fall 2020 semesters had been cancelled or postponed (**Figure 3**).



**Figure 3:** Changes to practicums, internships, and/or work terms in the summer or fall semesters for professional stream graduate students.

The Government's recent \$40 million investment has allowed Mitacs to create 5,000 new internship opportunities for students, including those supporting Canada's small- and medium-sized businesses.<sup>14</sup> This is an important investment which will help graduate students contribute to Canada's economy and gain critical experience, a necessity to navigate today's job market. We recommend that the Government continue to invest in creating or subsidizing work experiences to help graduate students prepare for an uncertain job market. This can include investing in existing partnerships, such as Mitacs and the Canada Summer Jobs program.

## Conclusions

We commend the recent investments made by the Government which have directly, and indirectly, supported graduate students. The graduate students of today are the leading innovators of tomorrow. But in order to fully realize this potential, it is critical to mitigate the different impacts of COVID-19 on graduate students across Canada, and provide targeted funding to help students recover and thrive after the pandemic. To do this effectively, it is critical that graduate students, and student groups, like the Toronto Science Policy Network, are consulted throughout the pre-budget consultation process, including oral testimonies.

It is important now, more than ever, that the Government continue investing in the next generation of researchers and budding professionals, as science will be critical in the recovery of the Canadian economy. We look forward to continued engagement with the Government to ensure that graduate students' voices are included in budget consultations, and that training the next generation of researchers and professionals remains a priority.

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