



Memo

To: Students Finance Board
From: David Coletto, Alberta Graduate Council
Date: November 5, 2008
Re: Response to Government Announcement, Proposal on Graduate Scholarship Timing, Research Allowance; International Students

As always, the Alberta Graduate Council appreciates the opportunity to make presentations to and continue the dialogue with the Students Finance Board. Please find below the latest proposals and discussion points from the AGC on behalf of Alberta graduate students.

1. Government Enhancement of Graduate Student Scholarships

The AGC was very pleased with the provincial government's announcement on September 16th, 2008 regarding the expansion of graduate student scholarships. The AGC has long argued that to be competitive with other provinces, particularly Ontario, and to recognize the contribution of graduate students Alberta needed to offer more funding to graduate students. The expansion of the Queen Elizabeth II awards was a significant improvement to the provincial scholarship program. Not only will more graduate students be eligible for awards, but the increase in award value recognizes the increased cost of living and the contribution of graduate students to Alberta's universities; moving from 1 in 30, to 1 in 10 eligibility is a major step forward.

The AGC also welcomes the creation of the Graduate Citizenship Scholarship, the expansion of the Arts Graduate Scholarship, and the Graduate Student Scholarships. Each of these decisions will have a positive impact on graduate students who win these awards.

2. Research Allowance

On October 27th and 28th, graduate students from across Alberta met with twenty-one members of the Legislative Assembly. A major focus of these meetings was discussion of the AGC's proposal for a \$1,500 research allowance for all graduate students in the province. Response to our proposals were very positive, however budget concerns remain an issue.

The AGC once again thanks the SFB for recommending the research allowance proposal to Minister Horner and asks that the SFB follow-up with the recommendation. The AGC strongly believes that the research allowance will accomplish two important objectives for the Government of Alberta.

First, it will encourage graduate students to conduct better research. Often, financial considerations constrain the type and scope of research conducted by graduate students. An annual research allowance will provide graduate students with the means to conduct field work, to attend conferences, to purchase equipment or software, or to hire research assistants that they could not afford to do otherwise. This would give graduate students in Alberta an advantage over others in Canada.



Memo

Second, this advantage could be translated into a recruitment tool. By promoting this first-in-Canada graduate student support, Alberta universities would be in a better position to attract high-quality graduate students. It signals to prospective graduate students eager to work in a place that values innovation and “outside the box” thinking that Alberta is the place to complete graduate studies. With the research allowance, we are able to do research projects not possible without.

MLAs and Minister Horner support the idea in principle and the AGC would appreciate a follow-up from the SFB to continue the proposal’s development in the Ministry of Advanced Education.

3. International Students and Alberta Graduate Scholarships

At the last SFB meeting, the AGC was asked their opinion on whether international graduate students should be eligible for graduate scholarships funded by the provincial government. The AGC council believes that it is time for all stakeholders to begin to discuss opening up provincial scholarships to these students.

International students make-up approximately 20 to 25% of the graduate student population in Alberta. Like domestic graduate students, international students have to pay for food, rent, and other necessities. However, unlike their domestic colleagues, they pay more than double the tuition and are not eligible for provincial or federal scholarships.

The AGC believes that the easiest option is to open up the eligibility for provincially funded scholarships to international students. Although it means that domestic students will have to compete with their international colleagues for these awards, the AGC believes that it is the equitable and fair choice.

Apart from granting all graduate students the same opportunity at provincial funding, such a policy change would allow Alberta to compete for the best graduate students from across the globe.

Currently, the provincial government does not mandate that institutions charge international graduate students a differential fee. However, to date, no institution has waived this fee. Allowing international graduate students to compete for provincial scholarships will put Alberta ahead of other provinces who still do not allow international students to compete for awards.

The federal government has recognized the importance of attracting high-quality international students to Canada and taken steps to achieve this goal. The creation of the Vanier Graduate Scholarships (\$50,000/year) was the first government funded graduate scholarship eligible to international students. Its goal is to attract “the best doctoral students from here and around the world to study in Canada. The Vanier Scholarships will build on Canada’s existing strength in graduate education and help build the skilled workforce needed to face the challenges of the future” (Budget speech, Minister Jim Flaherty, February 26, 2008).

The AGC recognizes that such a change may be controversial and is willing to work with the SFB and the Ministry of Advanced Education to develop policies that are fair



Memo

and equitable to all graduate students in the province while recognizing the discretion that needs to be maintained when dealing with public funds.

4. Timing of Provincially Funded Scholarships

Graduate student recruitment has become a serious challenge for Alberta universities. As institutions in Ontario and British Columbia expand their graduate programs with financial incentives provided by their respective provincial governments, it has become difficult for Alberta's institutions to compete in recruiting the best graduate students.

Although the AGC was pleased with the expansion of graduate student awards in September 2008, graduate student leaders are concerned with the timing in which the awards are granted at institutions. Since decisions regarding the awarding of these scholarships are made internally, at the University of Calgary in late March, they are not much help in recruiting prospective students to Alberta. Many departments send out the first round of admission offers in mid-February, and cannot be certain whether the prospective students will win any of the internal awards. Although departments may budget for some of their students winning these awards, they cannot be sure of their students' success.

Therefore, the AGC recommends that the Students Finance Board consider how the provincial graduate student awards could be restructured or enhanced as to provide institutions and their academic units with an opportunity to use these awards in their recruitment strategies. One possibility is to develop a set of awards used exclusively as entrance scholarships. In past presentations to the SFB, the AGC has recommended creating new entrance scholarships for nursing students so as to increase the competitiveness of graduate nursing programs in Alberta.