



## Policy Statement

### UCGSA.02 Alberta Graduate Students Travel Incentive

Policy ID: **UCGSA.02**

Category: **Professional Development**

Jurisdiction: **Provincial**

Adopted: **Sept. 2023**

Last Reviewed: **Jan. 2024**

#### ***GSA Principles***

*The Graduate Students' Association of the University of Calgary believes in creating an educational experience that is engaging, fulfilling, and accessible to all.*

#### **Concerns**

##### **History of the Alberta Graduate Students Travel Incentive**

The *Alberta Graduate Students Travel Incentive* was originally one of many scholarships made available to students—specifically, in this case, graduate students—by the Government of Alberta. Its purpose was to “support travel related expenses ... for graduate students to participate in academic events such as conferences, contributions (presentations) and research trips” related to a student’s research and academic program.<sup>1</sup> Students would be eligible for up to \$3,000 in funding, administered through their institution’s Enrollment Services, so long as they were a full-time student, attending an event that was directly related to their research and program, and were in good standing with their graduate program.<sup>2</sup> Students were eligible for one award per year.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the Travel Incentive program was “suspended until further notice,”<sup>4</sup> no doubt because public health restrictions removed graduate student’s conference and research-related travel. Those public health restrictions have been lifted and graduate students have resumed traveling to academic events. The Travel Incentive, however, has not yet been reinstated by the Ministry of Advanced Education.

##### **The Importance of Academic Travel**

Conferences, research trips, and other forms of program-related travel are essential components of the graduate student experience. Indeed, the impacts of the COVID-19 travel restrictions show just how important academic travel is to a university’s research output. The Canadian Association of University Professors conducted a large scale (N=4,325) survey of its members and found that 50% of respondents

<sup>1</sup> See this Concordia University of Edmonton application form: <https://concordia.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Alberta-Graduate-Students-Travel-Incentive-Application-fillable.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> <https://studentaid.alberta.ca/resources/covid-19-student-aid-supports/>.

blamed a reduction in their research output on an inability to host or attend conferences and an inability to access field sites (Fig.1.)<sup>5</sup> Graduate students were particularly affected, as travel restrictions prevented them from completing their data collection, accessing professional development training, and networking—thus stalling their research output *and* their academic careers.<sup>6</sup>

**Fig.1. Reasons for COVID-related reductions in Academic Staff Research Output (CAUT)**

<i>Reason for Reduction in Research</i>	<i>% of Respondents</i>
<b>Not able to hold / attend conferences</b>	<b>45</b>
<i>Dependent Care</i>	33
<i>Not able to access labs / office</i>	28
<i>Not able to conduct interviews / in person</i>	21
<i>Not enough time / focus on teaching / more</i>	19
<b>Not able to travel / access field sites</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>Other</i>	4
<i>Don't know / unsure</i>	3

The mechanism underlying academic conference’s impact on research productivity is that research requires engaging in with a community of scholars. The importance of engaging with a community of scholars stems from the transdisciplinary nature of innovative research: novel ideas require exposure to diverse thinking and ideas from other fields. A researcher that has a larger variety of conferences to choose from—thanks to travel costs being subsidized—has a greater ability to contribute, or be exposed to, novel research programs. A community of scholars also allows a researcher to have their work checked and critiqued by experts and peers. For instance, more specialized researchers also require feedback on their work that, frequently, is only available from other colleagues in their field. Academic conferences, by design, gather these experts together with the expressed intention of sharing, critiquing, and modifying each other’s work. As such, academic conferences remain the best and most efficient means of expanding and supporting a community of scholars.

More fine-grained research on graduate student’s valuation of conferences confirms the importance of academic travel for the graduate student experience. A study by Campbell et. al. looked at survey data of graduate student experiences with conferences and noted the positive impact conferences had on student attitudes towards their research, long-term academic prospects, and their ability to engage with already established scholars.<sup>7</sup> A study by Jacobsen et. al. noted that graduate students overwhelmingly saw in-person conferences—and, particularly, conferences requiring travel—as essential for engaging in “an international community of scholars.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> CAUT, “The Impacts of COVID-19 on Post-Secondary Education Staff,” retrieved from:

[https://www.caut.ca/sites/default/files/the\\_impacts\\_of\\_covid-19\\_on\\_post-secondary\\_education\\_staff.pdf](https://www.caut.ca/sites/default/files/the_impacts_of_covid-19_on_post-secondary_education_staff.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Sedivy-Haley, K. 2020. “Impacts of COVID-19 on Graduate Students,” *Canadian Science Policy Centre*. Accessed online: <https://sciencepolicy.ca/posts/impacts-of-covid-19-on-graduate-students/>.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, A. Wick, D., Marcus, A., Doll, J., and Hammack, A.Y. 2021. “I Felt Like I Was Not Just A Student,” *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 12(3): 321-337.

<sup>8</sup> Jacobsen, M., Johnston, S., Paquette, A., and Shandro, T. (June 28, 2023). “To Conference or Not to Conference? Reflections on the Value and Costs of Academic Conferencing for Graduate Students,” *Michele Jacobsen, PhD*. Accessed online: <https://michelejacobsen.ca/value-costs-academic-conferencing/>.

This same research from Jacobsen et. al also notes, however, the large explicit and implicit costs involved in engaging in conference-related travel. As the authors note, graduate students

often have to commit to attend months before they know whether travel funds will be available to support their attendance. Even when funds are promised, a graduate student may have a lengthy time gap between putting expenses on their credit card and getting reimbursed. For in-person conferences ... a cost to be considered is time away from home, especially for graduate students who are parents and caregivers, who may be missing paid work opportunities. Travel to an in-person conference may be well beyond the financial and time possibilities for graduate students ...<sup>9</sup>

Predictable and accessible funding, as was once provided by the Alberta Graduate Students Travel Incentive, would help mitigate the costs associated with academic travel. The returns on this investment would be a more engaging graduate experience, which translates to better research networks among young scholars, better support for innovative field research, greater program retention, and expanded accessibility as financial standing has a lessened impact on a students' academic-related travelling.

Previous governments have endorsed this argument, as in 2006 the *Transforming the Advanced Education System Subcommittee* recommended funding supports "for professional development activities, such as conference travel or research development" in order to increase the number of graduate students in the system and meet the province's Innovation, Research, and Technology Framework commitments.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, then, reintroducing the Graduate Students Travel Incentive would expand graduate student's freedom to attend academic conferences: they would be able to choose a wider variety of conferences to attend. As academic conferences remain essential for producing innovative research, Albertans as a whole stand to benefit from this Incentive, given the impact of innovative research on economic growth and social well-being.

### **Cost of the Incentive**

While the Travel Incentive program appears to have been cancelled because of COVID-related travel restrictions, the program's indefinite suspension may be for financial, rather than public health, reasons. The Ministry of Advanced Education stated, in 2020, that universities had to cut back on travel-related expenses as part of the Ministry's system-wide budget cuts.<sup>11</sup> The continued suspension of the Travel Incentive may be part of that attempted cost-saving measure.

The necessity of academic-related travel, and the explicit and implicit costs of travel as described above, suggest that cutting travel support has a detrimental impact on graduate student education. An additional worry is that individual institutions lack the capacity to make up for the loss of the Travel

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Alberta, Transforming the Advanced Education System Subcommittee. "A Learning Alberta: Recommendations from Transforming the Advanced Education System Subcommittee," pg. 12. Accessed online: <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/98505f16-651e-4df5-bd77-fca47967a63c/resource/85bc5a93-86ce-48cf-9e83-2685bce78ff4/download/transforming-the-advanced-education-system.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Bennett, D. (Jan 16, 2020). "Alberta says universities over budget; need to freeze travel, hiring, hosting." *The National Post* (via *The Canadian Press*). Accessed online: <https://nationalpost.com/pmnn/news-pmnn/canada-news-pmnn/alberta-says-universities-over-budget-need-to-freeze-travel-hiring-hosting>.

Incentive. In the 2017/18 budgetary period—two years before the Minister for Advanced Education announced that universities had to cut back on travel-related expenses—the Alberta post-secondary system spent the smallest portion of their operating budgets on travel out of any Canadian jurisdiction (**Fig.2.**)<sup>12</sup> If Alberta institutions did not spend a disproportionate amount of resources on financing academic travel before the loss of the Travel Incentive, then the continued suspension of the program has limited Albertan graduate students’ opportunities to engage in conferences, field research, and professional development—all of which are essential to the graduate student experience and the consistent generation of quality research from the graduate level.

**Fig.2. Spending on travel as a percentage of university’s operating budget (2017/18)**

<i>Province</i>	<i>% spent on travel</i>
<i>Manitoba</i>	2.59
<i>Nova Scotia</i>	2.32
<i>New Brunswick</i>	2.31
<i>Newfoundland &amp; Labrador</i>	2.20
<i>British Columbia</i>	2.19
<i>Prince Edward Island</i>	2.10
<i>Quebec</i>	1.96
<i>Ontario</i>	1.94
<i>Saskatchewan</i>	1.85
<b>Alberta</b>	<b>1.81</b>
Canadian Average	2.00

**Recommendations**

Therefore, we urge the provincial government to take the following actions to address the issues presented above.

**Be It Resolved That**

- UCalgary GSA calls upon the Provincial Government to restore the Alberta Graduate Student Travel Incentive program.

<sup>12</sup> Fletcher, R. (Jan 23, 2020). “In the 2000s, Alberta invested heavily in its universities. In the 2020s, that’s about to change.” *CBC News*. Accessed online: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-university-spending-revenue-analysis-1.5436236>.