BUDGET SUBMISSION
BUDGET 2021
ABOUT US

WE ARE THE GRADUATE STUDENTS’ ASSOCIATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY.

We are the official voice of graduate students at the University of Calgary and to all levels of government.

The Graduate Students’ Association of the University of Calgary (GSA) was established in 1967, and has approximately 6,500 members including full-time and part-time Master’s and PhD students. The GSA supports the social, academic, and practical well-being and growth of UCalgary graduate students. The GSA oversees and promotes workshops, special events, the provision of financial aid and support as they progress through their university programs.

The GSA is governed by a five-person Executive board of full-time graduate students – who are then, in turn, responsible to the Graduate Representative Council (GRC) as a governing and policy-developing body. Over time, the GSA has worked to become a key member of the University of Calgary community via ongoing communication and dialogue with university administrators on pertinent issues.

The GSA represents the collective interests, but not individual opinions, of graduate students to governing bodies of the university, all levels of government and the surrounding community of Calgary.

www.gsa.ucalgary.ca
INTRODUCTION

The Graduate Students’ Association (GSA) at the University of Calgary represents more than 6,500 graduate students.

The GSA serves all University of Calgary graduate students through responsive programs and initiatives, as well as advocacy on student issues to support their success during and after their academic endeavors.

The GSA supports a strong, robust, and consistently funded post-secondary system for Alberta. Graduate students are the innovators of today and the leaders of tomorrow. As the Government of Alberta looks to diversify Alberta’s economy, graduate students can lead this work but the need the support to do both during their research and studies as well as while the work to commercialize their research or enter the job market.

The GSA has several recommendations for government as it consults on Budget 2021.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Student Mental Health
As COVID-19 cases continue to rise, students are presented with additional challenges beyond the usual mental health stresses of student life. Limited in-person connections, increasing cost of living, increasing tuition, and more difficulty accessing student services during the pandemic all play a role in adding anxiety and stress to lives of graduate and undergraduate students alike.

The GSA recommends that the Government of Alberta:
• Maintain per institution student mental health funding at current levels and ensure delivery of mental health supports is done by the institution.
• Agree to a longer term funding commitment that allows post-secondary institutions to plan their mental health programs more adequately. A two or three year funding commitment would allow for this planning.

Student Aid
Alberta’s student aid model focuses largely on loans and debt over grant-based aid compared to other major provinces. With compounded increases to tuition and fees over the next few years combined with reduced Campus Alberta Grant funding students are feeling a crunch.

In addition, many students are struggling to find work opportunities and when they do they are often paid less due to the economic downturn and pandemic economy. While the University of Calgary has increased its scholarships and bursaries significantly over the last number of years, the Government of Alberta has not.

The GSA recommends that the Government of Alberta:
• Initiate a review of the student aid system, potentially as a part of the Alberta 2030 system review and look at models in other major provinces.
• Shift the current system towards grant-based financing for students with a recognition that student loans are necessary but should not be the most prevalent funding model.
• Work to ensure that student loan interest rates remain low.

Professional Development
Now more than ever, students are struggling to find employment during their research, studies, and immediately after graduation. The sustained low energy prices combined with the pandemic has led to fewer opportunities for graduate students to find work and develop their skills.

Programs such as Mitacs provide support for internships and the GSA is pleased to see government provide financial support to such programs. However, this program leans
heavily towards STEM students and internship opportunities for Arts or Humanities students remain very limited.

Internships and skills development are integral but a better balance across all disciplines is necessary.

In addition, while graduate students are subject experts in their area of research, not all graduate students possess the skills to commercialize that research. Programs that help them acquire these skills while remaining in the post-secondary environment would be invaluable to student development and help push innovative research to market.

The GSA recommends that the Government of Alberta:
- Renew the Vision for Innovation Grant which provided cost-effective internships and professional development opportunities for graduate students.
- Work with post-secondary institutions to offer programs that allow students to gain the skills they need to commercialize their research and become entrepreneurs.
- Continue support for Mitacs and other internship programs while pushing for more equity across disciplines when it comes to internships and professional development.

International Student Quarantine Support
The GSA would like to thank the Government of Alberta for its work in re-opening the borders for international graduate students to attend the University of Calgary and other institutions. These are difficult times but they do not need to cost us innovative research and work done by all graduate students, including international students. However, some graduate students have struggled once they arrive in Canada to find accommodations to isolate or quarantine for the 14 day period. Many have used hotels but there is a steep cost to this that many students simply cannot easily afford. Accommodation and food costs are forcing many students to dip further into their own pockets or further into debt before their studies or research have even started in Canada.

The airport rapid testing currently being piloted may mean that students can quarantine for less time and, therefore, a reduced cost. However, provincial funding to students either directly or through institutions with a pandemic quarantine plan for international students would go a long way to deferring these costs.

The GSA recommends the Government of Alberta:
- Create a small fund to cover some of the costs students are bearing during their first two weeks in Canada including transportation to hotel or residence, meals, and accommodations.
- Work with institutions to better support newly arrived international students to quarantine safely on campus and provide immediate meal plans and support for short-term needs of these students.
Micro-Credentials and Stackable Certificates

Micro-credentials and stackable certificates are a way to prepare graduates for a new economy. These programs can also attract mid-career professionals looking to learn new skills for the jobs of tomorrow.

Micro-credentials can be granted to graduate students who gain skills, knowledge, or expertise while working on extra-curricular but post-secondary related projects. Beyond their graduate research and the eventual degree, micro-credentials can be used for prospective employers to see what hard skills a student or new graduate may have.

Stackable certificates allow for graduate students and professionals to take on ‘bite-sized’ chunks of classes as they continue to work. This is key for many working professionals who may not want or be able to leave their job entirely to complete a degree program. It also allows flexibility for those who may choose to complete a single certificate of a program rather than complete several which would lead to a degree.

This may also help graduate students acquire skills form other disciplines that they may not otherwise learn. This can help them with starting a business or how to commercialize their research. As an example, stackable credentials in the business school for an engineering graduate student could help acquire these skills while allowing the student to target what they want as an outcome.

The GSA recommends the Government of Alberta:

- Assess the benefit of micro-credentials to help graduate students acquire certain skills beyond the learning and research.
- Explore new models of credentialing that appeal to mid-career professionals.
- Determine where certain skills fit into the economic diversification mandate and encourage universities to offer programs that train students with these skills.
- Encourage universities to implement stackable certificates to encourage mid-career professionals and graduate students to upgrade their skills for the new economy.

Commercialization and Entrepreneurship

The Government of Alberta’s economic recovery plan strongly emphasizes the need to diversify our economy. Research universities and graduate students are well-suited and well-placed when it comes to cutting edge research and opportunities. Our institutions and our students need support in order to take these ideas to market or build a company around them. While graduate students and their supervisors are certainly subject matter experts in their field, they may not have the skills to commercialize their research, discovery, or project.
As a result, some groundbreaking research may be utilized elsewhere, outside of Alberta, and the economic opportunity would be lost.

The GSA is pleased to see the investment of more than $200 million “to support and accelerate research, innovation and entrepreneurship through post-secondary institutions” and other areas. However, some funds need to be directed to support graduate students to commercialize their research when necessary. It also should help students acquire the skills to act as entrepreneurs after leaving campus.

The Life Science Innovation Hub (LSI) is an example of this work. The University of Calgary acquired the space for the use of small startups to rent research space and have access to materials that may not otherwise available to a new business. They would be in close-quarters with other similar startups which can foster networking and the sharing of ideas. The University hoped to fill this space by the end of 2021 but it was filled mid-way through 2019 demonstrating the strong interest and need for collaboration in the innovation ecosystem, especially where innovation can be supported by academic institutions with graduate students.

The University of Calgary, through its Growth through Focus plan has acknowledged the need for transdisciplinary innovation which could provide researchers with the skills they need to commercialize their research or launch a start-up business after their graduation. This doesn’t just apply to research-based graduate programs but to course-based programs as well including those in the social sciences and humanities. The direct research conducted in some of these programs can be applied in the world of business. The University of Manchester showcases the business start-ups coming out of its humanities programs. Businesses supported by research and courses completed at that university include a business working with oil and gas companies such as British Petroleum (BP) to provide training for senior management on the topic of “changing project management culture in the energy sector.” Commercialization of research and entrepreneurship should not only focus on STEM but on the arts and the humanities as well. Valuable business ideas can come out of both.

The GSA recommends that the Government of Alberta:

- Assist professors and graduate students to commercialize their research.
- Support graduate students to acquire the skills needed to become a successful entrepreneur and commercialize their research.
- Develop a framework with Alberta Innovates to support ideas and inventions of promise developed at post-secondary institutions.

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1 Alberta’s Recovery Plan. https://www.alberta.ca/recovery-plan.aspx#economy
2 Growth Through Focus. https://ucalgary.ca/president/growth-through-focus
3 University of Manchester. https://humanities.manchester.ac.uk/connect/business-engagement/case-studies
Recruitment and Talent Acquisition
If Alberta is to diversify its economy and become a hub for industries of the future it must lay the groundwork to attract faculty, researchers, and students. The micro-credentials and stackable certificates mentioned earlier may appeal to some as an innovative education model but it cannot be done in isolation. If Alberta and its post-secondary institutions, especially its research intensive institutions, are to become destinations of choice for students around the world then more must be done. Alberta and its institutions must ensure that compensation packages offered to academics are highly competitive. Further, compensation received by graduate students must be standardized and ensured to be competitive both across Canada and globally.

The University of Calgary has several discipline-specific institutes or hubs that are doing integral work that can be used to attract top talent, including both students and faculty. Beyond growing these hubs and institutes along with raising awareness of them, there is a strong need for more work-integrated learning to prepare students for life after graduate school.

The Government of Alberta must review its student aid model as part of the Alberta 2030 review. The model, while generous, relies primarily on debt and student loans with limited availability of grants. The average Alberta student received $14,000 in student aid but $12,000 of this were loans. That is not a sustainable model as tuition, fees, and living expenses continue to rise.

Most other provinces strike a better balance when it comes to student aid. Alberta should explore these models and work to strike a better balance between loans and grants. New graduates would be better placed to contribute to the economy if they are not loaded with debt due to their education.

The GSA recommends that the Government of Alberta:
- Ensure that research universities can attract and retain top academic talent from across the world.
- Reform the student aid model to focus on grants and scholarships rather than loans and debt.
- Standardize compensation for graduate students and their research.
- Improve access to work integrated learning opportunities for graduate students.
CONCLUSION

The GSA recognizes the unprecedented economic crisis our province is facing and the impending fiscal reckoning. Students and those working on campus are already feeling the affects due to the cuts to the Campus Alberta Grant and other funding.

As a result, the University has been making difficult choices when it comes to staffing, tuition, and fees. The government is considering deregulating tuition which, without proper oversight, will make the current tuition increases both last year and this year the new norm. While the tuition freeze made such increases inevitable without proper government funding, post-secondary education must remain affordable and attractive for students. The recommendations made above are intended to do that and ensure we can attract and retain top talent to Calgary and to Alberta.

The GSA would like to thank the Government of Alberta for its interest in consulting for the 2021 budget. Our organization would be happy to meet with the Ministers of Finance and Advanced Education to discuss these ideas and recommendations further.