

The Honourable Danielle Smith
Premier of Alberta
Office of the Premier,
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cc: The Honourable Rajan Sawhney
Minister of Advanced Education

cc: The Honourable Nate Glubish
Minister of Technology and Innovation

April 30th, 2024



Dear Premier Smith,

We, the elected representatives of nearly 20,000 graduate students in the province, write you to convey our immense concerns regarding the Albertan government's *Provincial Priorities Act*, also known as "Bill 18." As tabled, Bill 18 grants Cabinet unprecedented discretion to interfere with funding deals between the federal government and multiple provincial entities, including post-secondary institutions. This bill consequently casts a shadow over federal research grants and scholarships for graduate students, an area that just saw major investments, after decades of erosion against inflation. Comments you have made [to the media](#) and [in the Legislature](#), suggesting that academia has a left-wing bias and must be "balanced" by the Albertan government, only adds to our growing unease. At a time when [multiple voices](#) are [sounding the alarm](#) on Canada's [lagging productivity growth](#), investments to R&D and human capital—two areas where graduate students play an essential, front-line role—have never been more important. And yet the language of Bill 18, the content of your comments, combined with a history of repeated cuts to the operating grants of Albertan universities risk making our province a thoroughly unattractive place for graduate scholars. Each of the items discussed below would merit a strong response on their own. But all three combined suggest a stark lack of critical thinking by present leadership, and concerns for the future of Alberta more broadly.

Academic freedom is not some frivolous perk of higher education, but fundamentally essential for high-quality research. Students, professors, and instructors must be free to pursue research topics without fear of censure, especially from powerful bodies like the government. At present, Bill 18 empowers Cabinet to set the guidelines and mechanisms for reviewing all funding deals between the federal government and provincial entities, like municipalities and post-secondary

institutions, and to regulate “any other matters considered necessary or advisable to carry out the intent and purposes of this Act.” The mere possibility that a government will be empowered to review, and potentially block, research grant proposals is enough to greatly erode academic freedom: now, researchers will be focused more on the ideological vicissitudes of politicians than evidence or theoretical rigour. Indeed, this is truly a staggering insertion of partisan politics into the research and innovation ecosystem. For comparison, the [enabling legislation](#) of each of the Tri-Council agencies only grants the federal cabinet the power to appoint Council members; all guidelines for selecting and funding research projects are otherwise solely determined by procedures set out by the agencies themselves. [Assurances that academic freedom will be “protected”](#) ring utterly hollow in light of these considerations. Indeed, the message you are sending is that political conformity is a more important value in Alberta than academic freedom.

For prospective researchers, including the scores of graduate students considering their offers of study this month, the risk of having funding blocked because their research does not align with the government’s perception of “Albertan values” will drive them into more welcoming (and already better funded) provinces or countries. Bill 18 will also invariably clog up the granting process. Many research projects are time sensitive, [and as your government should be well aware](#), bureaucratic red tape and time-sensitive innovations are mortal enemies of one another. Research and innovation are the lifeblood of a dynamic and productive economy. And as business groups like the [Calgary Chamber of Commerce](#), the [Business Council of Alberta](#), and [industry witnesses and numerous federal committees](#) have attested, graduate students are one of the most important sources of technology transfer between post-secondary institutions and wider society. Any piece of legislation that may threaten our funding, or drown us in red tape, thereby threatens the innovation ecosystem, and Alberta’s economic advantage, as a whole.

Your government may retort that Albertan graduate students receive sufficient funding from the province already, and so federal grants and scholarships are unnecessary. But this is simply false. Your government has systematically—and as a matter of explicit public policy—starved the post-secondary system of operating funding *and* student financial aid, and it’s hard to see the province’s plan to attract or retain either vibrant talent or maintain the Alberta Advantage. Data from the [University of Calgary Graduate Students’ Association’s Policy Library](#) shows how deep those cuts to operating funding have been felt, especially when adjusted for inflation; it also reminds us how funding for [non-repayable student financial aid has in fact declined](#), in real terms, since 2020 as well. One need only look at the [near collapse of the Ontario post-secondary system](#) to see the dangers of where Alberta is trending. For graduate student researchers, these budget cuts have already had a deep felt impact; no need to make it worse.

To date, we have yet to meet with a member of your Cabinet, despite the multiple invitations we have sent over the past year. We do not mean that we have yet to meet about this bill: we have not been granted a meeting *period*. So far as we can tell, the bill was tabled with little to

no consultation amongst major stakeholders in the post-secondary sector: the first time many of us were informed that the Cabinet could review university funding deals was your press conference, where you appeared to single out the [Social Science and Humanities Research Council \(SSHRC\)](#).

Part of your stated justification for the bill is to ensure there is ideological “balance” in research funding. But in addition to our concerns over academic freedom, we strongly reject the notion that there is anything there to “balance.” As [Ping Lam Ip and Andrea DeKeesredy](#) have already thoroughly demonstrated, the actual distribution of federal funding favours ideologically neutral disciplines, with business and management receiving more Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funding than most social science disciplines. Additionally, as we have emphasized already, the funding agencies that the Albertan government seeks to interfere with operate at arm's length from the federal government, staffed by experts from academia and the wider research community. Any claim that these current funding arrangements favour left-wing disciplines is laughably false.

Finally, we reject the notion that Bill 18’s interference in the post-secondary system is some extension of the government’s fight for decentralization and federalism. If the Government of Alberta truly stood for decentralization, it would use its position to empower post-secondary institutions to handle their federal funding arrangements independently, informed by their local expertise. Moreover, if the Government of Alberta truly stood for decentralization, legislators would have taken care to engage the voices of our on-the-ground experts—our graduate students and researchers—well in advance of this bill being tabled; again, we’ve seen none. As far as federalism is concerned, its most important virtue is providing accountability by making clear which level of government is making which decisions. Your government’s concerns over accountability can only appear as empty platitudes, however, so long as our students are excluded from relevant and major legislative changes like this. We hope that changes soon.

The job of graduate students and reserachers is to contribute knowledge to Alberta’s innovation ecosystem, and to help train future innovators to do the same. It is *not* the job of the Provincial Government to make ours more difficult.

Therefore, we call upon the Government of Alberta to:

- Rescind the *Provincial Priorities Act*, and thoroughly consult Alberta’s graduate students on how to attract and maintain top talent in this province for the Alberta Advantage.

Sincerely,

Undersigned Graduate Student Leadership:

Bishoi Hany Gamil Aziz

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