

Mark Carney
Liberal Party of Canada

Yves-François Blanchet
Bloc Québécois

Pierre Poilievre
Conservative Party of Canada

Jagmeet Singh
New Democratic Party of Canada

Re: What Graduate Students Can Do for Canada

April 15th, 2025

Dear Messrs Blanchet, Carney, Poilievre, and Singh,

We write to you as the representatives of nearly 8,000 graduate students at the University of Calgary, at a time when every industry and community in Canada has been rocked by uncertainty. The ongoing trade war initiated by President Donald Trump will likely plunge Canada's economy into a recession, risking the loss of jobs and income for young and old alike. As you work to respond and defend our sovereignty and livelihoods, we want to emphasize that graduate students are an integral resource for policymakers to draw from. Strategies that address barriers to accessing graduate school and reverse our brain drain are needed now more than ever, given how there is simultaneously an ongoing productivity crisis and a global rush to attract research talent fleeing the United States.

Graduate students are teachers, researchers, and workers. We perform large portion of the teaching and research at universities, meaning we are major contributors to the economic activity generated by research-intensive institutions in this country. We are also a key linkage between universities and the private sector, which helps spur the creation of intellectual property, facilitates business scaling, and makes it easier for new technologies to end up in the hands of Canadians everywhere. The greater the number of graduate students at work, the more vibrant the Canadian innovation system—and the better off we all are.

The research that graduate students perform also serves as an ever-growing pool for policymakers to draw from. For example, we have graduate students who specialize in researching arctic security who can help provide policy suggestions on securing the north. There are scores of graduate students researching sustainable energy, housing, and food security, which can provide policymakers with ideas on how to diversify our energy production, build better and more affordable homes, and protect Canadians from malnutrition. And our medical students are already active in researching ways to treat diseases and ensure that Canadians live long, healthy lives.

One particularly underrated impact that graduate students have is on science diplomacy, a way of utilizing research networks to create new economic and political alliances. Give that the United States—with whom we conduct most of our trade—is no longer a reliable trading partner, cooperating with universities in other countries can help Canadian businesses connect with foreign markets. These connections will strengthen supply chains, support businesses who want to disengage with the United States, and compliment government efforts to expand our free trade agreements.

Graduate programs in Canada face a number of challenges, however. Three of the most major are non-competitive stipends, caps on international graduate student enrollment, and an ongoing “war on woke,” particularly inside the federal research granting process. As the data included in the Appendix shows, the average European graduate stipend can reach five times more than those in Canada, even adjusted for cost-of-living. A combination of provincial operating grant cuts and lack of federal scholarships for outstanding students have led to this situation, which puts us in a poor position to compete with Europe for graduate student talent.

There are also caps on international students who want to study in Canada, including graduate students. The rhetoric around international students has severely hurt Canada’s standing as an attractive destination for researchers, but expanding these caps to include master’s and doctoral students also will make it difficult for institutions to expand their graduate programs.

Finally, we are deeply concerned over the insertion of culture war rhetoric into the federal granting process. Entire disciplines—most notably the social sciences and humanities—have been demonized by federal officials, even though the business community repeatedly praises the skills of graduates in these fields. Important conversations around how federally funded research should be evaluated have been derailed. And we would be remiss if we did not mention that many American researchers are fleeing for Europe because of a similar “anti-DEI” rhetoric from Congress, Governors, and the President. We are in desperate need of a serious conversation around federally funded research, and the culture war is merely a distraction.

We believe graduate students have much to offer this country in terms of addressing its vulnerabilities. And we believe that the leaders of all our major parties can use this letter as the basis for plans to utilize graduate students for the common good. As such, the University of Calgary Graduate Students’ Association recommends that the next federal government:

Recommendation 1:

- Work with provincial governments to increase graduate student stipends by expanding research funding and scholarships;

Recommendation 2:

- Remove graduate students from the IRCC caps on international students, and instead work to expand internationalization between universities to help facilitate new trading partnerships;

Recommendation 3:

- Focus on securing Canada’s innovation and research ecosystem rather than trying to “win” the culture war.

Sincerely,

Saaka Sulemana Saaka
Chair of the Elected Council
(President of UCGSA: 2024-25)

Hunter Yaworski
Elected Councillor
(Vice President—External of UCGSA: 2024-25)

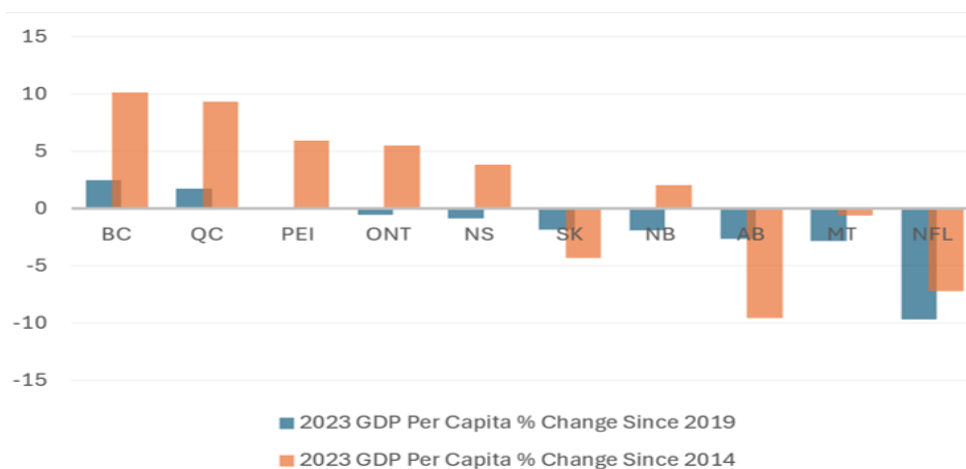
Appendix:

Further Information on Graduate Students and Obstacles

Productivity and Graduate Students

No sub-federal jurisdiction is insulated from the impact of President Trump's tariffs. For example, our home province of Alberta is particularly vulnerable in this regard. Not only are we the most exposed to the negative effects of a prolonged trade war,¹ but our GDP per capita—one measure of the strength of a region's economic fundamentals—has been well below average, according to the Government of Alberta's Economic dashboard (*Fig.1*).

Fig.1. %Change in Real GDP Per Capita from 2019 to 2023 and 2014 to 2023²



Similarly, Alberta's productivity growth has been in decline: according to the Government of Alberta's own data,³ we have seen either negative or stagnant productivity growth—as measured by output divided by hours worked—between the years 2019 to 2023 and 2014 to 2023 (*Fig.2*). Of the three largest economies in Canada, Alberta's productivity significantly underperformed in both periods. This is worrying, since Alberta has, for decades, had either the first or second highest GDP per capita in Canada. If our richest province is also seeing some of the largest declines in both output per person and labour productivity, then the already large gap between ourselves and the United States⁴ will increase. If we want to strengthen the Canadian economy and secure our incomes against external trade shocks, we need across-the-board solutions to our productivity woes—and we need them yesterday.

¹ <https://businessdatalab.ca/publications/which-canadian-cities-are-most-exposed-to-trumps-tariffs/>

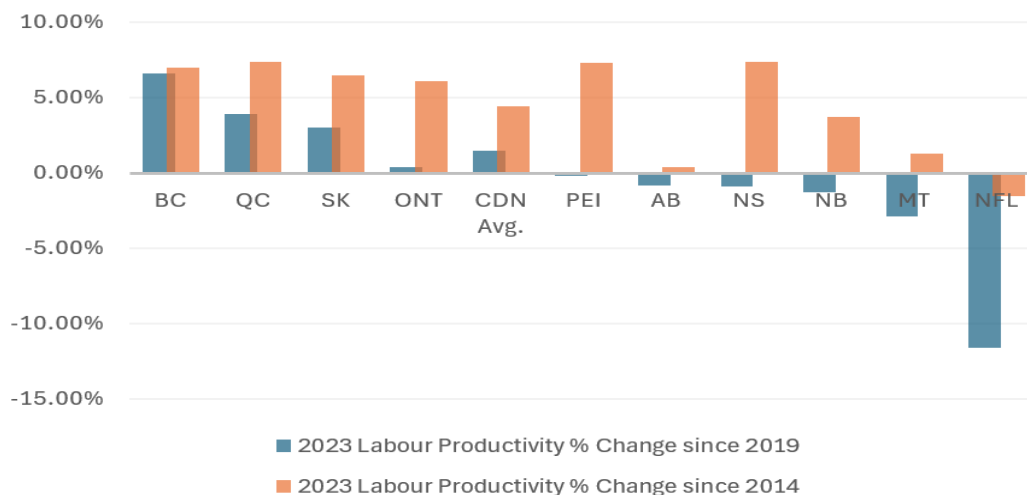
² <https://economicdashboard.alberta.ca/dashboard/gdp-per-capita/>

³ <https://economicdashboard.alberta.ca/dashboard/labour-productivity/>

⁴ <https://thehub.ca/2023/06/15/trevor-tombe-most-provincial-economies-struggle-to-match-the-u-s/>

The most widely cited causes for our low productivity are interprovincial trade barriers,⁵ a lack of capital investment,⁶ restrained labour mobility,⁷ and insufficient research and development funding.⁸ The latter is particularly important, as endogenous growth theory—a set of theories that believe the sources of growth can be modeled by economics—all state that human capital and innovation are the most important drivers of prosperity.⁹ Without sufficient support to Canada's innovation ecosystem, we will not be able to generate the skills and knowledge necessary to continue growing our economy, especially in the face of a rapidly changing world.

Fig.2. %Change in Labour Productivity from 2019 to 2023 and 2014 to 2023¹⁰



Graduate students are underappreciated drivers of innovation, which is why the Business Council of Alberta argued that a lack of graduate students partially explained the productivity gap between Canada and the United States.¹¹ For instance, we perform an outsized role in the teaching¹² and research^{13,14} functions of universities across the country, which means we perform much of the work that leads to every dollar spent on advanced education generating \$4.80 of economic activity.¹⁵ Studies have also shown that the closer a business is to a university, the more innovative they are¹⁶ and the faster they

⁵ <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/liberalizing-internal-trade-through-mutual-recognition-a-legal-and-economic-analysis/>

⁶ <https://cdhowe.org/publication/underequipped-how-weak-capital-investment-hurts-canadian-prosperity-and-what/>

⁷ <https://canadianlabour.ca/research/issues-research-labour-mobility-canada-issues-and-policy-recommendations/>

⁸ <https://www.bdo.ca/insights/canada-s-productivity-paradox#:~:text=6-Insufficient%20investment%20in%20R%26D,contributes%20to%20Canada's%20impaired%20productivity.>

⁹ See Romer, P. 1994. "The Origins of Endogenous Growth," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 8(1): 3-22, as one of the most cited examples.

¹⁰ <https://economicdashboard.alberta.ca/dashboard/labour-productivity/>

¹¹ <https://businesscouncilab.com/insights-category/analysis/productivity-part-three-canada-us-productivity-gap/>

¹² Berdahl, L., Malloy, J., and Young, L. 2024. *For the Public Good: Reimagining Arts Graduate Programs in Canadian Universities*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, pg. 92.

¹³ Enders, J. 2002. "Serving Many Masters: The PhD on the Labour Market, the Everlasting Need of Inequality, and the Premature Death of Humbolt," *Higher Education* 44(1): 493-517.

¹⁴ Bienkowska, D. and Klofsten, M. 2011. "Creating Entrepreneurial Networks: Academic Entrepreneurship, Mobility, and Collaboration during PhD Education," *Higher Education* 64(1): 207-222.

¹⁵ <https://www.ualberta.ca/en/media-library/impact-report/u-of-a-economic-impact-study-report.pdf>

¹⁶ Bloom, N., Reenan, J.V., and Williams, H. 2019. "A Toolkit of Policies to Promote Innovation," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33(3): 163-184.

grow,¹⁷ in large part because they have easy access to knowledge and skilled workers, such as graduate students. As we additionally mentioned to economist Jack Mintz, in his capacity as the chair of Alberta's expert panel on Post-Secondary funding and Alberta's competitiveness, business testimony in the House of Commons has noted that recent graduates are a key source of intellectual property and technology transfers between universities and private business.¹⁸ Studies from the United States,¹⁹ United Kingdom,²⁰ and Portugal²¹ have also found that graduate students are essential for commercializing research and connecting academics with entrepreneurs. This means that graduate students not only contribute novel ideas and technology to Canada's economy, and also ensure that undergraduates have the skills and knowledge necessary to generate their *own* novel ideas and technology, but are an essential component of *commercializing* that research—that is to say, putting technology and knowledge into the hands of Canadian consumers, not-for-profits, and businesses.

If we want to increase productivity growth—by scaling our businesses to make them more competitive globally, by enhancing Canada's innovation ecosystem, or by increasing the private sector's capacity to turn university knowledge into practical goods—then using graduate students to unlock the full potential of Canadian universities is an essential step.

The New Global Reality

Our productivity woes are not the only challenge Canada must confront. Our international trade and foreign policy require radical adjustments in order to adapt to a world with a much more isolationist—and yet simultaneously hostile—United States government. We not only need new infrastructure for getting our products to market, but also new capacity to navigate the politics, regulations, and alliances of countries outside North America.

While the government has already made strides to secure stronger partnerships in Europe,²² 10 EU states have still not ratified the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) first brokered by the Harper government.²³ And relying on Europe alone will not solve our dependency worries: according to the World Bank, approximately 77% of all Canadian exports go to the United States, while they provide 49% of our imports (**Fig.3.**), meaning we will require strong connections with new countries to diversify our trading partners. We need to look towards, and build rapport with, countries such as South Korea and Japan if we want to weather what could be a very stormy geopolitical decade.

¹⁷ Löfsten, H., Isaksson, A., and Rannikko, H. 2023. "Entrepreneurial Networks, Geographical Proximity, and their Relationship to Firm Growth: A Study of 241 Small High-Tech Firms," *The Journal of Technology Transfers* 48(1): 2280-2306.

¹⁸ <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/INDU/Reports/RP9261888/indurp08/indurp08-e.pdf>

¹⁹ Boardman, P.C. and Ponomariov, B.L. 2009. "University Researchers Working with Private Companies," *Technovation* 29(2): 142-153.

²⁰ Radko, N., Belitski, M., and Kalyuzhnova, Y. 2023. "Conceptualization the Entrepreneurial University: The Stakeholder Approach," *The Journal of Technology Transfer* 48(1): 955-1044.

²¹ Santos, P., Veloso, L., and Urze, P. 2021. "Students Matter: The Role of Doctoral Students in University-Industry Collaborations," *Higher Education Research & Development* 40(1): 1530-1545.

²² https://www.thestar.com/politics/mark-carney-looking-to-europe-to-boost-canada-s-security-in-shift-away-from-reliance/article_8a871782-f454-4e7f-b8ca-b9b6d3e7b34f.html

²³ <https://carleton.ca/tradenetwork/research-publications/ceta-ratification-tracker/>

Fig.3. Top Five Export and Import Markets, 2022²⁴

Export Destination	% of Exports	Importer	% of Imports
1. United States	76.88	1. United States	49.25
2. China	3.70	2. China	13.47
3. United Kingdom	2.40	3. Mexico	5.57
4. Japan	2.32	4. Germany	3.02
5. Mexico	1.17	5. Japan	2.30

Beyond trade, all Canadian foreign policy will be conducted under the shadow of a three-pronged threat to our national security: from China, Russia, and now also the United States. The challenge of navigating between China and the United States will be especially difficult,²⁵ given the gaps in our defense capabilities—and this does not even get into the ongoing problems with military procurement.

Graduate students will be an essential component of any solution here, too. The research our members perform should be seen as a readily available pool for policymakers in international trade, global affairs, and national defense to draw from, in areas that commentators²⁶ and Parliamentary committees alike²⁷ have identified as strategic priorities. Graduate student engineers and natural scientists are at the forefront in developing new, sustainable ways of producing energy,²⁸ are similarly at the cutting edge in the fields of cybersecurity and artificial intelligence.²⁹ Our social scientists are active in investigating how we structure trade agreements to produce the most economic value for Canadians, secure the Arctic,³⁰ fix our procurement problems, analyze the challenges of food insecurity,³¹ and expand our soft power³² to create more stable alliances. And as US government slashes funding for the National Institute of Health (NIH) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC),^{33,34} our doctors and medical researchers will be even more important in investigating, treating, and preventing outbreaks. Canada's rich cultural mosaic would not be complete without the fine arts, nor would our future be secure without the tireless work of teachers and education students.

²⁴ <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/can>

²⁵ <https://cdainstitute.ca/strategic-outlook-2025/>

²⁶ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-how-to-awaken-canadas-sleeping-economic-giant/>

²⁷ <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/SRSR/Reports/RP12490814/srsrrp04/srsrrp04-e.pdf>

²⁸ <https://www.ualberta.ca/en/engineering/about/news/2024/shaping-a-greener-future-profiles-of-graduate-students-in-sustainability.html>

²⁹ <https://www.innovatingcanada.ca/technology/graduate-students-at-the-forefront-of-ai-development/>

³⁰ <https://uwaterloo.ca/tri-university-history-graduate-program/news/arctic-research-dr-sam-hossack-timely>

³¹ <https://ucalgary.ca/news/ucalgary-researchers-explore-dynamics-food-insecurity-costs-living-continue-rise>

³² <https://www.concordia.ca/cunews/main/stories/2019/04/02/concordia-phd-student-examines-the-role-of-music-in-cultural-diplomacy-between-canada-and-brazil.html>

³³ <https://www.science.org/content/article/news-glance-flat-u-s-research-budget-cdc-nominee-dropped-and-who-writes-review-letters>

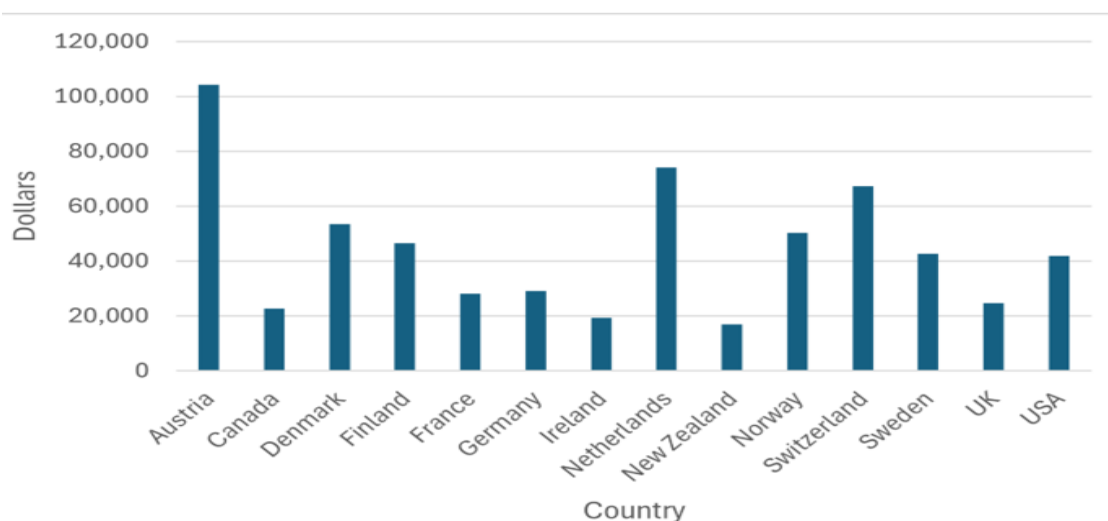
³⁴ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5468112/>

Importantly, graduate students can also contribute to “science diplomacy,” the sharing of knowledge and technology between countries as a means of securing new allies and solving transnational problems.^{35,36} Scientific diplomacy connects not just governments, but businesses, not-for-profits, and universities together. This will increase the benefits of non-governmental organizations pivoting to new trading partners and lower the costs of transition away from the United States, making it more likely that Canada can rebalance its external trade. Graduate students would not only provide the scientific knowledge and technology necessary for science diplomacy, but could—alongside our undergraduate counterparts—help internationalize our universities by studying abroad or collaborating on research projects with faculty and students in other countries. A comprehensive internationalization policy, which Canada has lacked for some time,³⁷ would then open up a new pathway for us to reduce our dependency on the United States—and graduate students would be right at the centre of it.

Challenges

If Canada wants to fully leverage graduate student talent—whether that is solving our productivity woes, researching how to reduce Canada’s dependence on the United States, or facilitate scientific diplomacy—we first need to convince students to stay here. The average graduate student stipend is lower in Canada than in almost every other competitor country (*Fig.4.*), and the European Union, with the Draghi Report,³⁸ is poised to make that gap even wider.

Fig.4. Average Stipends for 14 Countries, 2022 (USD)³⁹



³⁵ <https://www.uottawa.ca/research-innovation/news-all/rise-science-diplomacy-can-universities-provide-blueprint-national-strategy>

³⁶ <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/july-2024/strategic-scientific-diplomacy/>

³⁷ Trilokekar, R.D. 2010. “International Education as Soft Power? The Contributions and Challenges of Canadian Foreign Policy to the Internationalization of Higher Education,” *Higher Education* 59(2): 131-147.

³⁸ https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/ec1409c1-d4b4-4882-8bdd-3519f86bbb92_en?filename=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness_%20In-depth%20analysis%20and%20recommendations_0.pdf

³⁹ <https://academiainsider.com/phd-student-salary-how-much-cash-will-you-get/>

The increase to Canadian Graduate Scholarships (CGS) in last year's federal budget was certainly a welcome development.⁴⁰ However, this increase only erased what had been nearly twenty years of inflation-adjusted cuts, meaning the real value of these awards is around what they were back in 2004—or, in the case of CGS doctoral awards, significantly *less* than they were worth in 2004 (*Fig.5.*) This will not make the stipends of successful award winners competitive relative to our international peers; furthermore, only a select few students ever win a CGS. For the rest of the graduate student population, the only other forms of federal funding are through faculty-led research projects; but, as noted above, funding for research and development in Canada is insufficient to meet the demand for novel research and high-quality talent. Graduate students must then rely on provincial governments to fund their research and teaching activities; unfortunately, provincial funding for post-secondaries has sharply declined since the 1990s, leaving many universities to rely on international student tuition to cover for budget shortfalls.^{41,42} We are unlikely to meet the competitive demands of graduate stipends in other countries if these trends continue.

Fig.5. Nominal and Real Value of CGS Master's and Doctoral Awards (Feb 2025 CPI)⁴³

CGS Master's			
2004 Value	Real 2004 Value	2024 Value	Difference
\$17,500	\$27,560	\$27,000	-\$560
CGS Doctoral			
2004 Value	Real 2004 Value	2024 Value	Difference
\$35,000	\$55,121	\$40,000	-\$15,121

As already states, we believe that Canada is strong enough to maintain our values in the face of external threats. That being said, there has already been pressure for us to abandon our principles in favour of quick, and often poorly conceived, fixes. For instance, the recent cap on international students has sent universities that are far removed from the so-called “diploma mills” in some provinces into financial distress, such as the University of Calgary.⁴⁴ It has also led to the negatively impacted Canada's reputation as a welcoming country for top student talent.⁴⁵ The Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) international student caps also apply to graduate students,⁴⁶ which makes little sense if the objective was to punish institutions who abused the immigration system, and international students more broadly,⁴⁷ to compensate for the loss of provincial funding. To put it bluntly, universities cannot turn a

⁴⁰ <https://www.canada.ca/en/innovation-science-economic-development/news/2024/05/government-of-canada-announces-details-of-increase-in-award-values-for-federal-scholarships-and-fellowships.html>

⁴¹ <https://higheredstrategy.com/spec-2023/>

⁴² <https://higheredstrategy.com/is-queens-running-out-of-money/>

⁴³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/innovation-science-economic-development/news/2024/05/government-of-canada-announces-details-of-increase-in-award-values-for-federal-scholarships-and-fellowships.html>

⁴⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/university-calgary-revenue-international-student-1.7393803>

⁴⁵ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240926140444361>

⁴⁶ <https://gsa.ucalgary.ca/ucgsa-response-to-ircc-rule-changes/>

⁴⁷ <https://higheredstrategy.com/the-road-ahead-for-international-students/>

quick profit by creating graduate programs: they are intensive, expensive, and heavily scrutinized degree streams. Whatever problems Canada may have with unregulated “diploma mills,” they do not—in any circumstances—apply to research-intensive universities with graduate programs. These caps would restrict Canada’s ability to recruit top research talent even under favourable conditions, which, given the funding situation for Canadian graduate students, is hardly ideal at the moment. But with waves of researchers already fleeing the United States^{48,49}(indeed, a poll by *Nature*⁵⁰ saw 75% of scientist respondents are considering leaving) and with Europe having made significantly more moves than Canada to welcome these academics,⁵¹ IRCC’s caps—in conjunction with low funding—risks Canada bowing out of the fight for new talent when the match has only just started. This, of course, does not even factor in the reputational damage mentioned above, which not only feeds into anti-immigrant sentiment but seems actively designed to make, in the words of Alex Usher, “Canadian higher education less desirable.”⁵²

Finally, there has also been a concentrated insertion of culture war rhetoric into Canada’s research and innovation ecosystem. A Standing Committee on Science Research (SRS) study into the impact of research criteria on science in Canada was effectively hijacked and turned into a criminal trial against Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) practices.⁵³ This is in addition to the deluge of near-daily op-eds in the *National Post* declaring that Canada’s universities are “rotten to the core”.^{54,55,56, 57,58}

One of the main reason why so many researchers are fleeing the United States is because of the culture war, with whole words and phrases related to so-called “DEI” or “woke” ideology being banned from government-funded projects and papers.⁵⁹ The negative impacts of the Trump administration’s full-throated embrace of the culture war cannot be overstated. Jason Stanley, an expert on fascism who left Yale University for the University of Toronto,⁶⁰ has made it clear that the United States government’s “anti-DEI” playbook is part of a long-standing far-right strategy to erase history, cloaked in thought-stopping cliches like “restoring sanity.”⁶¹ Despite claims that American college campuses are hot-beds of subversive, illiberal leftism, it is “anti-woke” politicians at the state and federal level that are actively using the coercive power of the state to silence academics, rip apart curriculums, and undermine entire disciplines.⁶² Even the claim that public opinion is against universities is suspect, as this seems to be more

⁴⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/cdcbe3df-9475-4816-9a95-0df64838566f>

⁴⁹ <https://www.science.org/content/article/overseas-universities-see-opportunity-u-s-brain-drain>

⁵⁰ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-00938-y>

⁵¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/25/europe-universities-us-researchers-trump-administration-science>

⁵² <https://higheredstrategy.com/the-new-international-student-regime/>

⁵³ <https://www.ourcommons.ca/committees/en/SRSR/StudyActivity?studyActivityId=12988426>

⁵⁴ <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/leigh-revers-universities-better-get-prepared-for-poilievres-anti-woke-agenda>

⁵⁵ <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/j-d-tuccille-rampant-dei-nonsense-to-blame-for-the-chaos-seizing-higher-education>

⁵⁶ <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/defunding-threats-will-not-be-enough-to-rid-universities-of-systemic-wokeism>

⁵⁷ <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/leigh-revers-universities-are-rebranding-dei-but-the-rot-remains>

⁵⁸ <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/canadian-universities-are-rotten-to-the-core>

⁵⁹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-00367-x>

⁶⁰ <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/story/the-fascism-expert-at-yale-whos-fleeing-america>

⁶¹ Stanley, J. 2024. *Erasing History: How Fascists Rewrite the Past to Control the Future*. New York: Atria/One Signal Publishers.

⁶² <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adr3820>



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a result of persistent agitation by Trump officials and allied state governments than a genuine belief from the public.⁶³

In a purely instrumental sense, a similar “anti-woke” crusade would lead to an exodus of researchers at a time when we can ill-afford to accelerate the brain drain. From the perspective of Canadian values—the way we ought to act as an open, tolerant, and forward-thinking nation—stoking the culture war in the midst of increasing societal division is entirely incompatible with building a stronger Canada. A truly strong nation does not shirk when confronted with calls for more diversity, equality, and inclusion—and it most certainly does not attempt to gut its research system to score points with authoritarians.

For questions or further information on UCGSA advocacy, please contact advocacy.gsa@ucalgary.ca.

⁶³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/18/academic-freedom-us-trump-administratio>