University of Calgary Graduate Students’ Association (UCGSA) Bill 18 Brief (*Provincial Priorities Act*)

Background

The *Provincial Priorities Act* (PPA) — also known as Bill 18 — stipulates in Article 1(d)(iii) that universities must receive prior approval from the provincial government for all intergovernmental funding agreements.

The Tri-Council granting agencies — the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) — have significant funding agreements with Albertan universities. Part of this funding includes merit-based graduate scholarships. Grants awarded to professors for research projects also include significant research funding for graduate students, as professors use these grants employ graduate students for both academic and administrative assistance.

The enabling legislation for each Tri-Council agency stipulates the structure of the organization and allows the Governor-in-Council (i.e., the federal cabinet) to appoint members, but that is the extent to which the federal cabinet intervenes in the business of each organization. All funding priorities, regulations, and requirements are set by the governing bodies of each organization, which are made up of scholars and community members with experience in each of the three organizational missions.

For graduate students, the Tri-Council scholarships are the highest valued, and most prestigious, awards they can win. Their prestige is such that being awarded one of these scholarships significantly increases your chances of continuing within academia.

Concerns

We appreciate the assurances, from Minister Sawhney, that carve-outs for graduate student funding are being considered. Our concerns, then, primarily focus on how the PPA would impact graduate students **if no carve-outs were being considered**.

* The application process for Tri-Council scholarships is onerous and requires significant investments of time, energy, and attention from both students and their academic supervisors. Additional red tape would likely reduce the help that Alberta graduate students receive for their applications from supervisors, delay student’s coursework, cut into their teaching duties, cause delays in research project planning, and possibly result in fewer Albertan applications to the Tri-Council agencies if deadlines are routinely missed. Given that Universities receive base funding by the province it could increase operational costs as well.
* Students may become risk-adverse with their research projects, knowing that there’s an additional layer of bureaucracy they must clear. Entrepreneurial activity is supposed to be disruptive, and students may be disincentivized to “go bold” if someone other than their peers is evaluating their research. Currently Alberta Universities lead the country in startup, and we are concerned that this could put it in jeopardy.
* Additional regulatory requirements will likely require the expansion of each institution’s bureaucracy, as Graduate Program Administrators (GPAs), advisors, and internal reviewers play important roles in handling the administrative side of research grants. This will require either more money from the provincial government to cover these administrative costs or a reallocation of funds from other programs.
* The Alberta Graduate Excellence Scholarship (AGES) is a provincial scholarship that is given to unsuccessful Tri-Council applicants who nonetheless present highly meritorious research projects. Any delays in the application process for the Tri-Council competition, as well as any administrative bloat that universities must take on, will be compounded for the AEGS competition. This would have an additional knock-on effect where-by the Ministry of Advanced Education would likely have to shoulder a higher administrative burden for all AEGS scholarships.

In addition to Tri-Council graduate scholarships, a broader concern we have is that any research funding — especially research grants that pay for professors to employ graduate students as part of a large-scale project — frequently involves technology transfers between universities and private industry. Publicly funded research grants also tend to crowd in additional private funding, especially when graduate students are included in the project.

An additional layer of red tape may make businesses more hesitant to work with universities, given that it will drive up administrative costs and carries the risk that federal funding may be pulled from the project. If businesses are less enticed to work with universities directly, Alberta’s could see research investments move to other provinces. Given the increasing productivity gap between Canada, including Alberta, and our OECD peers, we need to accelerate the number of cooperative projects between industry and academia, rather than push them apart.

Summary

Ultimately, our hope is that the potential carve-outs are reflected in the body of the PPA itself, rather than just in the regulations. This would give graduate students additional peace-of-mind and ensure the stability of research funding. It would also send a clear signal to the global research community that Alberta is open for business for work with graduate programs. If an amendment to the PPA is not possible, we’d also be happy with the carve-outs being clearly articulated in the coming regulations.

We additionally hope that the constructive dialogue we’ve begun can continue moving forward, as we are happy to provide the UCP caucus with direct information about how future legislation might impact graduate students.

With global markets increasingly rewarded skills learned in graduate studies, the more we can ease the process of rewarding meritorious student research, the more Alberta’s economy will prosper.