

PROGRESS UPDATE TASK FORCE ON GRADUATE STUDENT FUNDING February 2025

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INTRODUCTION

In February 2023, McMaster's *Graduate Council* endorsed the Provost's call to form the *Task Force on Graduate Funding*. The group, which was chaired by the Vice-Provost & Dean of Graduate Studies, included six students, six Faculty Associate Deans and the Deputy Provost.

Task Force Membership

- Chair: Steve Hranilovic, Vice-Provost & Dean of Graduate Studies
- Steven Hanna, Vice-Dean & Associate Dean Graduate Studies, Faculty of Health Sciences
- Martin Horn, Associate Dean Graduate Studies and Research, Faculty of Humanities
- Manish Verma, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies, Faculty of Business
- Bhagwati Gupta/Bruce Newbold, Associate Dean Graduate Studies, Faculty of Science
- Melanie Heath, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences
- Michael Thompson, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies, Faculty of Engineering
- Matheus Grasselli, Deputy Provost
- Alisha Anand (M.Sc. Candidate), Graduate Council Student Representative, Faculty of Health Sciences
- Natasha Malik (PhD Candidate), Graduate Council Student Representative, Faculty of Humanities
- Shamik Pushkar (PhD Candidate), Graduate Council Student Representative, Faculty of Business
- Xiaobing Li (PhD Candidate), Graduate Council Student Representative, Faculty of Science
- Joseph Antwi-Boasiako (PhD Candidate), Graduate Council Student Representative, Faculty of Social Sciences

- Hassan Abdulhussain (PhD Candidate), Graduate Council Student Representative, Faculty of Engineering

The work of the Taskforce included the analysis of graduate student payroll data, 19 roundtable meetings involving more than 90 people, an online survey of the McMaster community, and a town-hall meeting. The [final report of the Taskforce](#) was submitted to the Provost on 11 March 2024. The report included recommendations in five key areas. The recommendations are reproduced below, with commentary that provides an update on the status of each, as of February 2025.

FINANCIAL STRUGGLES

1. *Remove limitations on the number of hours that students can work for pay both inside and outside the university.*
 - This was implemented September 2023.
2. *More clearly articulate that the financial supports provided to graduate students, which includes scholarships and bursaries, are only one component of a student's finances and are not intended to cover all living expenses.*
 - This is now explicitly stated in the Letter of Offer of Admissions (see Appendix)
 - Some Faculties also address this in orientation meetings, forums, and on program websites or student handbooks.
3. *Support efforts of graduate students to seek out affordable housing (in addition to recently increasing the number of housing units through the new Graduate Student Residence). This would be achieved by:*
 - a. *Exploring opportunities for housing bursaries targeted to students who are most disadvantaged.*
 - b. *Working with McMaster's Off-Campus Housing office to help identify housing options (raise awareness/help promote their services to graduate students).*
 - McMaster maintains a resource link for off-campus housing.
 - The Letter of Offer of Admissions provides a link to resources regarding the [Cost of Living in Hamilton Ontario](#).
 - Faculties work directly with *McMaster Housing and Conference Services* to provide information about the 10 Bay Residence and other HCS services.

4. *Explore the introduction of an alternate funding payment schedules to create more predictability and account for the variability in support over different terms in an academic year.*

- The *School of Graduate Studies* is currently engaged in a Graduate Payment System Project to improve the current payroll systems and processes. Given the complexities of planned system changes involving the integration of multiple payment systems, a consideration on modifying the frequency of payments to students will be considered in the next phase of the project

CLARITY ON FUNDING PACKAGES

1. *Share aggregated data on graduate funding annually with the McMaster community. This would make McMaster one of a few Ontario institutions to provide this level of transparency to existing and prospective students.*

- A new dashboard is under development in partnership with IRA to provide annually updated summary data of student funding. This is expected to be published in the Winter Term 2025.

2. *Form a Subcommittee on Graduate Funding within Graduate Council, to oversee the analysis of funding data and generate a publicly available annual report. The committee would provide recommendations annually to Graduate Council and the six Faculties on matters related to graduate funding.*

- Draft terms of reference were circulated to *Graduate Council* in November 2024 for comment. The Terms of Reference for the Sub-Committee have been revised and are slated to be presented for approval at *Graduate Council* in February 2025.

3. *Introduce regular reviews of letters of offer to ensure that the funding information provided not only continues to be accurate and complete but is also understandable and accessible by students.*

- Letters of Offer of Admission are reviewed annually.
- A new process ensures that student funding is clarified again when they transfer from master's to PhD studies, when applicable.

4. *Increase awareness of descriptions of all awards and scholarships available to students, including eligibility and number of awards. The process of how scholarships and bursaries are adjudicated should be made transparent by each Faculty and SGS.*

- Letters of Offer of Admission provide a link to the [SGS Scholarship webpage](#), with a comprehensive listing of scholarship and bursary opportunities.

- The Faculties supplement this information through program handbooks, orientations, and Faculty websites and newsletters.
5. *Inform graduate students of the array of sources from which funding is provided in each Faculty recognizing that these sources may differ substantially between Faculties.*
- Students receive a comprehensive breakdown of their funding sources updated annually.
 - Funding details, including the annual updates, are now provided centrally from the *School of Graduate Studies* at the time of promotion or transfer from master's to PhD student, ensuring clarity and standardization of the information provided.
 - Programs may supplement this information in program handbooks and orientations.
 - The new Graduate Pay System will be integrated into the Campus Solutions platform to allow students to see their student account alongside the funding they receive. A goal of this consolidated view is to help students with financial management. Support from employment (e.g., Teaching Assistantships) will continue to be provided through *Human Resources*.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BARRIERS

1. *Provide a resource with links for up-to-date local information on housing (both on and off campus), transit, medical, social, and government matters targeted to international students.*
- SGS provides a [webpage of comprehensive and up-to-date information for international students.](#)
 - *International Student Services* collaborates with *McMaster Housing and Conference Services* to deliver webinars on “off-campus housing” each term. These are recorded and available online for those who cannot attend.
 - Other orientation webinars include “Living in Hamilton”, “Healthcare in Canada”, “Banking in Canada” among others.
 - McMaster’s immigration advisors conduct monthly webinars regarding topics relevant to immigration and work, including “Working in Canada”, post-graduation work permits, study permits, visa extensions, permanent residency, and other issues.

2. *Ensure international students are aware of scholarships, bursaries, and other resources to which they are eligible.*

- We maintain an [SGS Scholarship webpage](#), with a comprehensive listing of scholarship and bursary opportunities, including those for international students.
- Faculties and programs highlight discipline-specific opportunities through orientations, program manuals, and newsletters, including those that may be oriented to international trainees.

3. *Develop opportunities through SGS and partner units to improve career readiness skills as well as advertise on- and off-campus employment opportunities for international students.*

- General information about work is provided at the [webpage of comprehensive and up-to-date information for international students](#) and through the program of webinars outlined above.
- The *Student Success Centre* provides guidance about [opportunities for on-campus work](#).
- It is likely that part-time work most aligned with a graduate students' studies is best identified within program and supervisor networks.
- Faculty initiatives provide discipline-specific opportunities. For example, the Faculty of Engineering maintains a *Centre for Career Growth and Experience* and has introduced a zero-unit course requirement relevant to career development in Engineering, across its graduate programs. The Faculty of Science provides similar opportunities for its graduate students.
- The *McMaster Office for the Development of English Language Learners* (MODEL) is a service offered free-of-charge to both undergraduate and graduate students who may need help with studying and living in an English-language environment. MODEL offers English-language training, workshops, and support, developed by certified ESL and EAP experts, to meet the needs of McMaster students of all academic backgrounds and levels of English language proficiency.
- *McMaster English Readiness for Graduate Excellence* (MERGE) is an intensive certificate program for current or prospective graduate students who are looking to improve their English-language skills. This comprehensive summer program is taught by the highest-qualified ESL/EAP instructors who have experience teaching in a university environment. The focus is to prepare graduate students for success in both the academic and professional world.

4. *Offer workshops to help international students understand the rules on employment associated with their study permits.*
 - As outlined in (1).
5. *Enlist support from University Advancement to seek out additional opportunities for scholarships that can be targeted to international graduate students.*
 - *School of Graduate Studies* senior staff work collaboratively with *University Advancement* in the development of new donor awards. They also work with the advancement teams in the Faculties to promote the development of opportunities for graduate students.

GRADUATE FUNDING ADJUSTMENTS FOLLOWING MAJOR EXTERNAL SCHOLARSHIPS

1. *Ensure that graduate students who win major external scholarships are better off financially after winning such an award, regardless of the funding adjustment practice in effect.*
 - All Faculties now have policies on graduate student funding that meet this requirement, as outlined below.
2. *Ensure there are strong incentives for graduate students to apply consistently to major external scholarships.*
 - As outlined in (1), (3), and (4), all Faculties now have policies by which a student must benefit financially if they win a major external scholarship.
 - Faculties and programs may have workshops or other supports for students writing Tri-Council agency and other major awards. These supports are not provided centrally, in part because the elements of a successful award vary somewhat by discipline. The *School of Graduate Studies* provides administrative support for students' applications, including advice about eligibility.
3. *Communicate clearly to graduate students the funding adjustment practices that are in place in advance of being asked to prepare scholarship applications.*
 - Each Faculties now has a policy that governs how funding packages may be adjusted following a major scholarship. The Faculties communicate their policy as follows:
 - *Engineering*. The policy is published under Graduate Student Resources on the Faculty [website](#), in program handbooks and communicated to the supervisor at the time of the award.

- *Health Sciences*. The policy is published by the [FHS Secretariat](#) and by the [Office of Health Sciences Graduate Studies](#). Every program is required to state its practices in their program handbook, which must conform to the FHS requirements.
 - *DeGroot School of Business* informs students about the adjustment policy in the PhD Program Student Handbook given to each student at the start of the program and on the [PhD Program website](#).
 - *Humanities* [publishes their policy online](#) and communicates the policy during student orientations.
 - *Social Sciences* [publishes their policy online](#) and in Letters of Offer of Admission.
 - *Science* has established a faculty-wide policy which is in the process of posting to their [graduate resource webpage](#).
4. *Develop uniform policies on funding adjustments for each Faculty and communicate them to their graduate students.*
- See (3).

FOUR-YEAR FUNDING MODEL FOR PHD STUDENTS

1. *Review McMaster's PhD programs, examining curricular requirements to completion times, graduation rates, time to completion and employment prospects for its doctoral graduates, and compare these to other universities when possible.*
 - These issues are a significant focus of McMaster's Institutional Quality Assurance Process, involving periodic reviews of every graduate program. Program leaders must complete a self-study report that includes completion times and graduation rates. Programs are encouraged to survey alumni regarding post-graduation outcomes. External reviewers frequently focus on these issues, particularly when metrics appear out of line with disciplinary expectations. Comparison data for other institutions is generally not available.
2. *Investigate disciplinary cultural expectations around scholarly work, publication and thesis format as there are some disciplines that may encourage projects in excess of four years in length.*
 - The disciplinary norms are generally well-understood.

- In health sciences and STEM disciplines, four-year doctoral programs are almost universally considered the norm. Thesis-based master's programs are generally designed for two-year completion but transfer to PhD prior to completing the master's is frequently allowed, with the master's research applied to the PhD.
 - Five-year PhD completion is more likely to be considered normal in some areas of the humanities, social sciences, and business. One-year master's degrees are more common.
 - Comprehensive examinations may be a significant influence on PhD completion times. Contemporary frameworks for PhD training provide an opportunity to rethink the value, form, and function of these exams to address completion times.
3. *Explore ways to enhance the time management and writing skills of PhD students through targeted activities such as workshops and dissertation-writing bootcamps delivered by SGS and partners in the Faculties, aiming to support timely program completion.*
- The McMaster Student Success Centre provides [writing supports to graduate students](#).
 - This portal also points to resources for financial management, career counselling, and international student support
4. *Encourage programs to think of creative ways to support timely completion. An example would be integrating field research placements, community-engaged projects, internships, and fellowships that provide experience and financial support as fulfilling partial requirements for the PhD degree.*
- Relevant initiatives are underway in some Faculties:
 - In *Social Sciences*, some PhD programs offer co-op and internship opportunities. The Faculty is considering ways to expand these.
 - *Business* is reviewing its PhD fields of specialization to identify common bottlenecks to progress.
 - In *Engineering*, Co-ops and internships are an option for graduate students, with opportunities available with over 129 employers.
 - *Humanities* has been reviewing program requirements and has designed a paid internship program for fifth-year PhD students, to be piloted in 2025.

- *Science* has been discussing opportunities for Work Integrated Learning.
 - The emphasis on experiential training should be considered in relation completion times, if such training does not replace existing curriculum requirements (such as comprehensive examinations).
 - A policy on Graduate Microcredentials and Progressive Curricula will be presented for approval to governance committees in winter of 2025. The policy sets out regulations for how graduate microcredentials, coursework, and certificates can be combined progressively to meet the requirements of graduate degrees. It is intended to be a student-centred framework, whereby students may undertake graduate programming flexibly, but also provides that students who have done relevant work can apply it to accelerate completion of advanced degrees.
5. *Enlist Graduate Council and all Faculty Graduate Curriculum and Policy Committees to evaluate proposals for new program requirements in the context of completion times.*
- New program development requires the completion of a self-study in which completion times, student support, and resources relevant to student success and timely completion must be explicitly addressed.

APPENDIX

Excerpts: Letters of Offer of Admission International:

At the beginning of each academic year, you will receive a comprehensive breakdown of your funding schedule.

McMaster's competitive graduate funding support packages help reduce the cost of undertaking full-time graduate studies and reduce financial barriers for students but may not replace full-time employment income. For an estimation on living expenses in Hamilton, please visit this webpage: [Cost of Living in Hamilton, Ontario](#).

For more information on possible Scholarship opportunities at McMaster, please visit our webpage: <https://gs.mcmaster.ca/current-students/scholarships/>

NOTE Your funding support package may be adjusted due to the following factors:

- If you are successful in winning a major external scholarship or award, the funding support above may be subject to change.
- Any changes during your program of study including but not limited to residency status and program status changes, your funding package may be adjusted.

Domestic:

At the beginning of each academic year, you will receive a comprehensive breakdown of your funding schedule.

McMaster's competitive graduate funding support packages help reduce the cost of undertaking full-time graduate studies and reduce financial barriers for students but may not replace full-time employment income. For an estimation on living expenses in Hamilton, please visit this webpage: [Cost of Living in Hamilton, Ontario](#).

We encourage you to apply each year, if eligible, for major external scholarships and awards (e.g. OGS, SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR). For more information on Scholarship opportunities, please visit our webpage: <https://gs.mcmaster.ca/current-students/scholarships/>

NOTE Your funding support package may be adjusted due to the following factors:

- If you are successful in winning a major external scholarship or award, the funding support above may be subject to change.
- Any changes during your program of study including but not limited to residency status and program status changes, your funding package may be adjusted.