SUMMARY

Minimum funding guarantees for doctoral students have been implemented at several of our peer institutions and the GSA has advocated for a minimum funding guarantee as a strategic priority this year and last.

Discussions between the Provost, Deans Council and FGSR began in fall 2017. There is general support for the concept.

FGSR has worked with the Associate Deans Graduate to develop a working proposal similar to our peer institutions. The proposed threshold is $18K/annum for 4 years.

Over the 2018 summer, FGSR investigated the current state of funding for doctoral students and discussed the situation with Deans and Associate Deans Graduate where significant gaps in funding have been identified for doctoral students in years 1-4.

This briefing document provides background information, outlines a draft policy and discusses the benefits and risks as identified by the Graduate Enrolment and Funding Advisory Committee composed of the Associate Deans of Graduate Studies from across campus. The policy and implementation plan is a draft for discussion purposes. Policy options are provided within for consideration and feedback.

Proposed Consultations

- GEFAC - ongoing since early 2017
- Deans’ Council - Deans’ Council December 19, 2018
- Graduate Students’ Association Executive - January 31, 2019
- FGSR Council – February 13, 2019
- Graduate Students’ Association – February 2019
- PACC – Feb 19, 2019
- Chairs’ Council – March 19, 2019
- GFC Early Consultation
- Doctoral Students-at-large
Background

Students at all levels participate in the research enterprise of the university. The PhD is the highest degree conferred by the university and doctoral students are selected based on their exemplary academic achievement and advanced research skills. Doctoral students commit many years to our institution, foregoing gainful employment and contributing their research and creative work to the benefit of our institution. A funding guarantee aligns with institutional values and strategic priorities in several ways:

- “We value diversity, inclusivity, and equity across and among our people, campuses, and disciplines,” (FPG Objective 1). Strategy iv is to “Ensure that qualified undergraduate and graduate students can attend the university through the provision of robust financial support.” A funding guarantee provides better access to the highest degree of the university for those who cannot self-fund, and ensures that qualified graduate students can attend the university.

- “Prioritize and sustain student, faculty, and staff health, wellness, and safety by delivering proactive, relevant, responsive and accessible services and initiatives,” (FPG Objective 19). As an initiative, creating more financial security for students will remove one source of stress that can undermine student wellness. UBC noted that financial strain was a reason for 1 in 5 students leaving their doctoral programs.

Issue

Funding guarantees make a difference to students while they are choosing a place to study; this has been noted in at least one program review self-study to date where students noted that other institutions provided a funding guarantee.

We risk falling behind other institutions that have implemented minimum funding policies in recent years. Without a funding guarantee, the University of Alberta may be disadvantaged in recruitment of doctoral students as the absence of a funding guarantee may deter potential applicants. The impact is difficult to measure given many programs already offer strong funding packages.
Doctoral Student Minimum Funding Guarantee
Background Briefing Note and Draft Proposal

Last update: February 6, 2019

Current State

Currently there is no university policy on funding packages for doctoral students. 35 of 72 doctoral programs currently provide funding guarantees of various types. Of those with minimum funding policies, the amounts are distributed from $15K (1 case) up to $31K, with the majority (19 out of 35 cases) clustering between $25K and $27K. In some cases, minimum funding levels are prescribed for paying stipends, but are not guaranteed beyond the end of a grant (that is, funding is contingent on grant renewals).

Early conversations with the faculty Associate Deans, Graduate, indicated a general sense that funding students is a priority, but there were varying points of view in terms of the level of funding. There were many concerns about the impact to programs that do not have the resources to fund students. In 2015-16 FGSR worked with SADW to investigate the funding situation for PhD students and the following information was shared as a starting point for discussions:

- $70 M flowed to PhD students in 2015-16.
- Less than 10% of PhD students received no funding in 2015-16.
- Of those students funded, the average funding level is $29,959.
- Scholarships from Provincial ($7.6 million) and Federal ($7.0 million) agencies account for ~20% of the PhD student funding.
- Internal scholarships outpace Provincial and Federal with ~13% of total reported funding.
- Graduate Teaching Assistantships (GTA) account for only 10% of funding to PhD students (but 17% for Master’s).
- Graduate Research Assistantships (GRA) accounts for the largest fraction of funding for doctoral students (~45%). These are primarily supported through grants to faculty members and since 2016 will include GRA and GRAF.

External Scan

A consideration for setting the stipend levels is for doctoral students to have funds to defer the cost of living expenses. As noted in the FGSR cost-of-living estimates on our website, the current estimate for a single adult is $21-28,000 not including tuition. The current doctoral program tuition costs are $5,683 for Canadian students, and $9,250 for International students (noting that the sticker price for international students is $4000 higher). It should be noted that our tuition for international graduate students is well below the national average, although
now that several institutions in Ontario have removed international differentials for doctoral students, the playing field for attracting doctoral students has been altered.

UofC has developed an operating standard on graduate student funding in response to recommendations of an external review of their Faculty of Graduate Studies in 2016. The operating standard is moving through their governance this year. FGSR has taken the initiative to explore the implications of instituting a policy similar to that at UBC and the policy under review at UofC. One of the appeals of the UofC policy is that it outlines a standard that will require each program to develop a policy that meets the standard, and provides a template to assist with policy creation.

Recommendation

The following draft policy should be considered a starting point for further discussions. The draft policy includes several areas where options are provided for consideration and discussion prior to FGSR making firm recommendations to the community.
Doctoral Student Minimum Funding Guarantee
Background Briefing Note and Draft Proposal

Last update: February 6, 2019

DRAFT POLICY

Purpose: The purpose of a four year funding guarantee for PhD (or all doctoral) students is to provide stable funding allowing students to pursue studies full-time, and recognizing the valued contributions that PhD students make to research and the learning environment of the university.

Minimum Standard Funding Guarantee:

- Each program shall set a funding policy for doctoral students for the first four years of their programs, that will not be less than
  - Option 1 - $18,000 per annum.
  - Option 2 - $20,000 per annum.
- The funds may be through any combination of scholarships, graduate teaching or research assistantships, graduate research assistant fellowships and declared sponsorship.
- The funds may be distributed unevenly over the course of the year.
  - Option 1 - The year starts from the term of first admission.
  - Option 2 - The year runs by the academic calendar of July 1 – June 30.
- External scholarships and sponsorship programs are included toward funding levels and must be disclosed by the student whether or not they are administered by the University of Alberta. Sponsorship includes funds provided by governments, scholarship agencies and employers.
- The minimum amount will be reviewed to determine if it continues to be appropriate every (1, 2, 3) year(s) by
  - Option 1 - FGSR Council,
  - Option 2 - GFC
  - Option 3 - other
  If the amount is increased, the change will apply to current and new students.
- Where students are admitted as a master’s student with the possibility of elevating to a PhD and paid at or above the minimum standard,
  - Option 1 - the years registered in the master’s program will count toward the four years of funding guarantee.
  - Option 2 - up to two years in the master’s program will count toward the four years of funding guarantee.
Doctoral Student Minimum Funding Guarantee
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- Self-funded students:
  - **Option 1** - A funding package must be offered all admitted students. In exceptional circumstances, a student may accept admission and decline the funding package.
  - **Option 2** - In exceptional circumstances, programs may recommend admission of (or change of status to) a self-funded student to the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research.

**Eligibility**

- Students must be registered with full-time status.
- Students are expected to be engaged in their studies full-time.
- **Option:** Students may not be employed greater than 10 hours per week in addition to the employment provided under the collective agreement.
- **Option:** Students may be/are obligated to apply for external and internal scholarships.
- **Option:** When a student has an approved leave, the leave will not count towards the years of guaranteed funding.
- Where a portion of the funding is through assigned GRA or GTA employment unrelated to thesis work, the student must fulfill their employment duties, and maintain sufficient progress in their thesis research. If they are unavailable, unwilling, or unable to fulfill these duties, their funding may be reduced accordingly and in accordance with the GTA collective agreement.
- Students are expected to make adequate progress in research and contribute to the collective research effort to receive GRA or GRAF support. Where students do not meet these expectations, assessment of research progress should follow procedures in the Calendar on Academic Standing and GRA or GRAF funding maintained until a student has been required to withdraw by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research.

**Exemptions**

- **Option:** Professional and executive doctoral programs at the graduate level are exempt (ex. DMus, DEd).
- The policy does not apply to undergraduate doctorate programs (ex. Pharm D).
- **Option:** Online programs are excluded (eg. PhD in Nursing).

**Accountability**

- Departments and/or Faculties will hold the financial responsibility for the students admitted to their programs.
- Oversight and monitoring for compliance will rest with FGSR.
IMPLEMENTATION

If approved by during 2019, the policy will apply for admissions beginning with
- **Option 1 - Fall 2020**
- **Option 2 - Fall 2021**

**Grandparenting**
- **Option 1** - Students in years 2-4 are brought into compliance in the year of new registrants under the policy.
- **Option 2** - Students in years 2-4 are not included.

**Admission Letters - FGSR**

A general statement describing the minimum funding guarantee will be included in the admission letter issued by FGSR. The general statement will note that departments may provide higher levels of funding and additional years. Students will be informed that they will receive a separate letter from the department explaining their funding offer and policy (noting that the current practice is for programs to issue funding letters).

**Allocation of Funds**

During the implementation phase, funding that is currently being used to support current students enrolled in years 1-4 cannot be diverted to cover the minimum funding packages for incoming students.

FGSR will collaborate with faculties and programs to identify funding opportunities for students to help mitigate the impacts on programs, especially where the impact will be large. Select programs with significant challenges could have softer timelines for implementation to prevent removing access for students and/or a collapse of a program.

**Faculty and Department Accountability**

Deans and Department Chairs will collaborate to navigate the transition period through budget planning processes and to determine where contingency funds may be identified to allow faculty members to accept PhD students near the end of a grant. These situations are best managed at the lowest level as departments may have specific priorities to ensure equitable
access of faculty at various career stages to supervision of PhD students. This is current practice in many departments where students are paid through grant funding with funding policies already in place for students.

**FGSR Policy – Part Time Registration**

In conjunction with this policy, FGSR Council should amend the registration policy to allow FT students to convert to PT registration\(^1\). This would alleviate the need to guarantee funding to particular groups of graduate students who often work full time and would in fact prefer part-time registration. For example, professionals can often arrange for a leave from employment to spend one year full-time completing course-work on campus and then return to full-time employment while completing thesis work (a common practice in Education). This policy change will also offer cost relief to students who work full time and would not qualify for the funding guarantee. However, students must be informed that full time registration is a requirement for other funding sources including most scholarships.

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\(^1\) For additional reasons, a proposal on the fulltime/part-time registration rule is under consideration by the policy review committee of FGSR Council.
**IMPACTS**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Potential Impact</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Funding Gap</strong></td>
<td>There are a few programs with greater than 10 students under the minimum or unfunded, and these students are both in large and small faculties or programs. These details were shared with the Dean and/or Associate Dean Graduate in each faculty for their consideration and discussion during the Fall of 2018.</td>
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<td>Using institutional data, FGSR has provided each program with an estimate of the funding gap that currently exists to bring all students to $18,000 per annum for 2016-17. The analysis also captured all funds paid to students through scholarship, awards, and academic work.</td>
<td>The combined total gap is ~$2 million, which is a small amount in relation to the $70 million distributed to PhD students in 2015-16. However, the shortfalls are not evenly distributed between programs/faculties.</td>
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<td><strong>Student Employment</strong></td>
<td>An unintended consequence of the policy is that it might promote departments giving priority to students for all academic-related employment even when those students are not the best fit for the work.</td>
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<td>Programs may be unaware of some student academic employment outside of their program, and so they would not have that funding under their control.</td>
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<td><strong>Availability of Funds</strong></td>
<td>Programs may alter admission practices to maximize capturing the highest caliber students that will increase success in scholarships. There may be increased pressure for faculty to pursue grant funding to ensure the health of doctoral programs. There may also be increased motivation for programs to support students to be successful in external scholarships. Pressure on bursary funding for doctoral students may decrease.</td>
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<td>Programs will need to manage enrolments to ensure funding is available for the duration of the commitment. Many departments do not have flexibility to backstop guarantees and to allow faculty members to take on doctoral students without secured grant funding.</td>
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**Note:** At some institutions, students pay into a fund to provide coverage for students on medical or maternity leave.