

# SSHRC

## TRANSFORMATION AND CONSULTATION

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Reactions and Commentary  
May 2004

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Canadian Association for Graduate Studies

## Introduction

The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS) is appreciative of this opportunity to participate in the process of renewal and renovation of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). CAGS would like to express its appreciation to Dr. Wendy Hough-Eyamie for having prepared this brief. Details of the process of consultation with our member universities appear in Appendix A.

We believe that the effectiveness of any changes to the structure and granting policies of the Council will be determined by the degree to which SSHRC acknowledges its role and responsibilities in the provision of graduate education. We believe that SSHRC must recognize the fact that faculties of graduate studies and graduate students are emblematic of the core functions of a university - research, scholarship, and teaching. As such, the support of graduate education must factor centrally in a transformed SSHRC.

The present picture of graduate education in the social sciences and humanities in Canada is somewhat problematic - with the lowest rates of graduation and the highest times-to-completion compared with students in other disciplines (CAGS, 2003a). Contributing to this situation are chronic under-funding and the sense of academic isolation experienced by many students in the social sciences and humanities (Lovitts, 2001). Only by addressing these issues will SSHRC be able to secure the well being of present and future generations of this country's social scientists and humanists.

We propose that the amelioration of this situation will require an expansion of SSHRC's role from the provision of graduate funding to a more comprehensive focus on the fostering of top quality graduate education. Top quality graduate education involves several key elements including; ample funding for graduate studies, adequate funding for the operating costs of graduate research, access to excellent training and research facilities, first-rate mentorship, and opportunities for interactions and knowledge exchanges with fellow researchers (CAGS, 2003b). It is our hope that these key elements of top quality graduate education will factor prominently in the transformation process. However, we recognize that a truly radical transformation would require a substantial budgetary increase.

The remainder of the document is organized into three main sections. The first section outlines the range of initiatives supported by CAGS in the event that there is a significant increase in the SSHRC budget. The second section includes our comments concerning the possible restructuring of SSHRC in the absence of increased funding. The final section relates to general issues concerning graduate education and research relevant to the transformation process.

It should be noted that CAGS represents graduate faculties and students from more than 50 member universities from across the country all of differing size and structure. These differences were apparent in canvassing the views of our members. Differences of opinion were also apparent across the spectrum of disciplines represented in the social sciences and humanities. The views represented in this report, therefore, do not reflect a consensus opinion of our membership but rather the range of opinions expressed. Finally, those issues raised by our membership that were beyond the scope of our focus on graduate students and graduate education have not been included.

## An increased SSHRC budget

This first section of the brief presents our views regarding the allocation of resources should SSHRC be successful in its bid for additional governmental support. In this section we consider the ways in which the key elements of graduate education identified above might benefit from additional funding and changes to the structures and policies of SSHRC.

### 1.1

The provision of ample funding for graduate students in the social sciences and humanities is of paramount importance for two reasons. First, under-funding of students in the social sciences and humanities has resulted in large numbers of students engaging in waged employment often unrelated to their field of study in order to make ends meet. It is imperative that support levels be increased for these students to allow them to devote their time and energy to their studies thus improving both graduation rates and times-to-completion. The funding of graduate students must remain a priority for SSHRC.

Second, in order to fulfill the national agenda of social innovation and technical leadership while at the same time realizing the market demand for new graduates to replace our numerous retiring university professors, we will need to increase the number of graduate students in Canadian universities at all levels of study including masters, doctoral, and post-doctoral. Any such increase in the number of students will obviously require commensurate increases in the amount of available funding.

**Recommendation 1.1:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC increase its graduate funding both in the absolute number of graduate scholarships (masters and doctoral) and post-doctoral fellowships offered as well as the level of support offered to graduate students.

**1.2**

Another vital source of graduate student support is the research stipend and the research assistantship component of the Standard Research Grant. The important contribution of the graduate student to the research productivity of our institutions and in the dissemination of knowledge must be recognized. Graduate students are a valuable source of new ideas and, in the world of rapidly changing technology, they often provide a source of up-to-date technical expertise. In their roles as research assistants, graduate students are responsible for carrying out the day-to-day operations of many SSHRC funded research projects. The importance of their contribution should be acknowledged in the form of additional funding for research stipends and research assistantships in the Standard Research Grant.

**Recommendation 1.2:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC increase the amount of funds available in Standard Research Grants to be used for the purpose of research stipends and research assistantships.

**1.3**

In order for graduate students to conduct innovative and ground-breaking research, they must have access to adequate levels of operating funds through their research supervisors' grants. These operating funds must be adequate to cover field work expenses, expenses related to career development opportunities (i.e., attending conferences), and research infrastructure (i.e., desk, computer, library resources). Like research in

health and the natural and engineering sciences, the influence of technology has reshaped the nature and subsequently the cost of research in the social sciences and humanities. Current levels of funding are insufficient to support the standards of excellence in research that SSHRC has been long committed to. Further, it must be recognized that the support of graduate student research is a central component of research enterprise. These expenses are not indirect costs to the university and should be directly supported by SSHRC through research grants.

**Recommendation 1.3:** CAGS recommends that SSHRC increase the level of research grant funding available to professors in order to provide graduate students with the operating funds necessary to accomplish competitive and innovative research.

**1.4**

The present system of graduate scholarships is particularly deficient with regard to support for international students. It is appropriate in the current climate of increased globalization and internationalization that in its process of renewal SSHRC make a concrete commitment of support for foreign students who have come to this country for their graduate education. The contribution of international graduate students to the research productivity of our universities must be acknowledged. Moreover, their presence in our universities and their education provide an unparalleled opportunity to promote the Canadian values of global understanding and cooperation. Of course, the funding of international students must be in addition to and not take away from the already insufficient number of graduate scholarships presently available for Canadian students.

In a similar vein, many graduate students have called for increased support in the form of field scholarships for international work. Although SSHRC Doctoral Fellowships do permit Canadian students to do their doctoral work outside of Canada, the more lucrative Canadian Graduate Scholarships do not. Like the SSHRC Doctoral Fellowships, the Canadian Graduate Scholarships should be available for students whose research and educational goals would be better served by studying at a foreign institution.

**Recommendation 1.4:**

CAGS recommends that, in the interest of increased global awareness, SSHRC consider the funding of international students studying in Canada as well as extending CGS funding to Canadian students wishing to study at a foreign institution.

**1.5**

There are three primary reasons that opportunities for interactions and knowledge exchanges with fellow researchers are important for graduate students. First, recent research on graduate student attrition and time-to-completion indicates that one factor that negatively influences these outcomes is academic isolation (Lovitts, 2001). Second, research in the social sciences and humanities is becoming increasingly inter- and multi-disciplinary. Finally, more graduates in these disciplines are choosing diverse careers beyond the boundaries of academia. Taken together, these factors suggest that graduate students would be well served by opportunities to have interesting and challenging interactions with fellow scholars and scientists in a variety of settings.

The development of graduate student exchange and mobility programs would be an excellent way to provide Canadian graduate students with enhanced learning and research opportunities which would provide access to high quality researchers and research facilities across the country and around the world. If extended to non-academic settings, such exchanges could provide the graduate student with career training and contacts relevant to their professional development. Further, such programs would serve as an excellent means of transferring knowledge across the boundaries imposed by geography, discipline, or milieu. Of course, in the development of these programs, it will be necessary to allocate funds for the purpose of student travel.

**Recommendation 1.5:**

CAGS recommends the development of graduate exchange and mobility programs.

**1.6**

Fostering opportunities for interactions and knowledge exchanges could also be accomplished through student participation in the proposed “institutes” and “confederations of learning”. Participation in these programs would provide students with access to invaluable

sources of academic interaction and mentorship. As with the exchange and mobility programs, student involvement in these institutes and/or confederations of learning may require funding especially for travel or teleconferencing purposes. One question put forth in our consultation was whether the institutes, in particular, would include a student training component (i.e., doctoral or post-doctoral fellowship opportunities)? If so, how would these programs be administered?

**Recommendation 1.6:** CAGS recommends that SSHRC explore the full potential of student participation in confederations and institutes including the possibility of offering doctoral or post-doctoral training programs or fellowships.

**1.7**

The notion of awarding training grants as an incentive for universities to provide enriched and connected post-secondary training environments received considerable support from our membership. Cross-institutional training grants could link equipment and facilities in one university with researchers in another, thereby connecting institutions of various sizes and locations and degrees of research intensiveness. Such training grants could provide important educational opportunities for students to work together in a synergistic fashion with a team of presumably well-funded researchers either within a university or across universities - a situation that would appear to resolve both issues of funding and academic isolation for the graduate student. This type of funding could also serve as an appropriate means of funding international students.

**Recommendation 1.7:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC investigate means of promoting high quality training environments including training grants.

## The Impact of Restructuring

It is recognized that, with or without the influx of additional monies, there will be a review and restructuring of existing SSHRC programs. In this section, we present our perspective on some of these possible changes as well as certain elements of the status quo that are supported by our membership.

**2.1**

One obvious potential change to existing programs pertains to the preferred structure of the Standard Research Grant - fewer larger grants versus more smaller grants. During our consultation, many research grant holders expressed their current unwillingness to offer stipends or research assistantships to students based on SSHRC funding because of the short duration of these grants and the unpredictability of renewal. Although many humanists and social scientists would argue that more smaller grants, on the whole, would be the preferable model for the Standard Research Grant, such a decision would have a negative impact on the availability of funds for graduate student support. Both adequate and reliable sources of research funding are necessary to allow graduate supervisors to make firm and well-delineated offers of research assistantship or stipend funding to incoming graduate students.

**Recommendation 2.1:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC carefully consider the impact of changes to the Standard Research Grant with reference to the availability of graduate student research assistantships and stipends.

**2.2**

Perhaps the simplest way of promoting interactions and knowledge exchanges is the continued support of the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences and the conferences and sessions organized by the scholarly associations. Attending conferences provides an excellent opportunity to network with other researchers. Further, presenting papers at these conferences provides the opportunity for many graduate students to begin the process of professional development. Diminished support of the scholarly associations or the Congress would have a direct impact on graduate training and research in the social sciences and humanities. Student involvement in these conferences requires the continued availability of funding for travel expenses.

**Recommendation 2.2:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC continue its support for the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences as well as the scholarly associations.

**2.3**

Our membership expressed concern about the need for a linkage between the supervisors' and students' research topics. In particular, there was concern that

SSHRC plans to adopt a science or lab-based model of student funding in which only those projects which form part of or fall directly within the scope of the supervisor's program of research would be funded. Although this model may be appropriate for certain domains within the social sciences, it may not be appropriate for the humanities or fine arts where student research may be a discrete project only peripherally related to the supervisor's topic of inquiry. An adequate degree of flexibility should be maintained in this regard.

**Recommendation 2.3:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC maintain an adequate degree of flexibility with regard to the required relationship between supervisors' and students' research topics.

**2.4**

Similarly, there was concern that movement toward a strategic grant model of research funding would produce a graduate training environment in which research would be limited to the purview of the target research. More generally, there was apprehension about the process of setting the agenda for targeted research - who will set this agenda, what criteria will be used in the process? There was also concern that a strategic grant model could serve to skew researchers and students, implicitly or explicitly, toward those topics that are likely to receive funding. Notwithstanding the potential importance of strategic research for decision-making, policy and practice, support for curiosity-based academic research with or without governmental or commercial application must be continued.

**Recommendation 2.4:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC ensure that funding for both graduate students and professors reflects a diverse range of research interests including both curiosity-based academic research as well as strategic and more applied research.

**2.5**

While recognizing the need for and perhaps the inevitability of fundamental changes to research funding as a reflection of societal needs and current research trends, many of our members voiced the opinion that in many disciplines, particularly in the humanities, existing structures and the program of Standard Research Grants are both adequate and appropriate forms of research support. In many disciplines, individually-

conducted research on fundamentally academic issues with traditional forms of academic dissemination such as monographs remains relevant and appropriate. This fact behooves SSHRC to accommodate such pluralism between traditional and more innovative forms of research in the social sciences and humanities.

**Recommendation 2.5:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC maintain its support of traditional forms of research while encouraging the development of innovative programs and approaches.

## general issues

This section includes discussion of several general issues pertaining to the transformation of SSHRC many of which relate to the control of SSHRC funds.

### 3.1

The first of these issues is the nature of the work carried out by graduate students in their capacity as research assistants. Where funding for research assistantships exists, whether research supported through a Standard Research Grant or through larger projects such as those funded by the Major Collaborative Research Initiatives (MCRI) and Community-University Research Alliances (CURA), graduate student participation should mean the involvement of graduate students whose work for the grant is directly connected with the students' own areas of interest - most usually work that feeds directly into or derive directly from a thesis or dissertation topic. When possible, student participation in funded research projects should not be for waged work in return for literature searches, bibliographical verification, or manuscript proof-reading that are not relevant or related to the students' fields of study. Student participation in the research grant should serve to further the goals of both the student and supervisor. It is assumed that students funded by means of research stipends are working exclusively on thesis-related work.

**Recommendation 3.1:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC stipulates that, when possible, research assistantship funding should be allocated for work that is related to the student's field or topic of research.

### 3.2

Access to first-rate mentorship is one of the key elements of top quality graduate education. It is our view that the concept of mentorship extends beyond a role in guiding the research process to providing financial support and opportunities for professional development to students while ensuring timely completion of the degree. It was widely felt that more attention should be paid to the credentials and resources of the supervisors of students receiving scholarship funding. Specifically, is the individual capable of supervising students to completion? Of course, this involves several aspects, including the supervisor's previous track record with graduate students. It may also involve the availability of operating support from research grants and access to the necessary space, equipment, and facilities.

**Recommendation 3.2:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC consider instituting a process of supervisor evaluation for determining fellowship recipients.

### 3.3.

Despite general support for initiatives such as institutional training grants, there was a certain amount of trepidation surrounding programs of this type. First and foremost, there was concern that such training programs would have the effect of concentrating resources in fewer, more powerful hands at the expense of distribution and stimulation elsewhere. This raises the possibility that students may chose to study at a particular institution because of the availability of funding instead of basing their decision on access to the most appropriate academic supervisor for their proposed research. There was also concern that the allocation of funds to an institution could be a means of circumventing the adjudication process - it was strongly voiced that SSHRC must continue to fund those students with the strongest academic backgrounds and research proposal, as determined by peer review. Overall, the focus of graduate student funding must remain on the quality of the educational opportunity and the quality of the student.

**Recommendation 3.3:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC remain committed to ensuring that graduate student funding is based on the quality of the educational opportunity and the quality of the student as judged by peer review.

### 3.4

Finally, we would like to comment on the general issue of academic productivity. When applying for research funding or submitting a tenure dossier, the definition of academic productivity is fairly limited in scope to include scholarly publications and conference presentations, teaching and research supervision, and university activities. This notion of academic productivity would need to be expanded to include the diverse range of activities that students and professors may engage in while participating in some of the more non-traditional programs proposed in the Consultation Framework such as the mobility or exchange programs.

In a similar vein, the proposed development of scholarly-based journals for lay audiences will require granting agencies and universities to re-evaluate the current primacy of the peer-reviewed journal article when assessing a scholar's productivity. This argument also extends to the influence of multi-disciplinary research programs in which the multi-authored papers are in many cases a more appropriate form of dissemination than the coveted sole-authored article. It should be noted that the development of these journals whether hard-copy or web-based will require SSHRC funding.

It is important that SSHRC recognize that changes of this magnitude to the research process and graduate education represent fundamental shifts in what may be considered academic currency. SSHRC will need to play a leadership role in accepting these new forms of academic currency through changes to its own evaluation process. Moreover, SSHRC will need to advocate for recognition of the value of diverse types of academic and non-academic experiences and involvements by universities and other agencies.

#### **Recommendation 3.4:**

CAGS recommends that SSHRC re-evaluate its own granting policies to ensure that new forms of academic and non-academic activity and publications are given adequate weighting in the adjudication process. Further SSHRC should play an active role in encouraging universities and other agencies to undergo a similar re-evaluation.

## summary

Significant changes are required in the current system of funding graduate education in the social sciences and humanities in Canada. Improving time-to-completion and rates of graduation as well as promoting a sense of academic connection will require SSHRC to assume a more comprehensive role which extends beyond graduate student funding to the fostering of top quality graduate education. SSHRC must assess its transformations and innovations according to their impact on these issues.

The recommendations in the first section of the brief pertain to the allocation of funds. Central to these recommendations is the need for substantially increased graduate student funding in the form of graduate fellowships, funds for operating expenses, and research assistantships and stipends. Beyond this core base of funding, we support a broad range of initiatives proposed by SSHRC including the development of graduate exchange and mobility programs and institutional training grants. We believe that such initiatives will contribute to the graduate students' access to excellent training and research facilities, first rate mentorship, and opportunities for interactions and knowledge exchanges with fellow researchers.

In the process of restructuring, SSHRC will need to look to the future with innovative approaches to supporting graduate education and research in the social sciences and humanities while at the same time recognizing the merits of traditional forms of research and knowledge dissemination. Moreover, regardless of the outcome of this restructuring, SSHRC must remain committed to the basic tenet of academic freedom. We would also like SSHRC to carefully consider any unintended effects on graduate students of changes to its policies and programs of research funding.

The brief concludes with a discussion of general issues related to the transformation process; the majority of these are issues which relate to the control of money. Given the limited resources available for the funding of graduate students, it is important that SSHRC ensure that these resources be used in such a way that they are maximally beneficial to the student with regard to the goals of timely and successful degree completion. Toward this end, we have suggested that SSHRC consider measures such as developing guidelines regarding the

nature of work considered appropriate for research assistants. Likewise, we have recommended that a process of supervisor evaluation be instituted. In developing new programs, SSHRC must make certain that funds are allocated based on the quality of the educational opportunity available to the student and the strength of the student as judged by peer review.

The final issue presented relates to the concept of academic productivity. In its proposed transformation from a granting council to a knowledge council, SSHRC can and will have an impact not only on the shape of graduate education in this country but on the nature of the academic enterprise and academic currency in the social sciences and humanities. SSHRC must be aware of and assume responsibility for dealing with the consequences of such fundamental changes.

## conclusion

CAGS applauds SSHRC for engaging in this process of consultation and for taking these initial steps in transforming the role of the social sciences and humanities in Canada. It is our hope that SSHRC will place issues surrounding graduate funding and graduate education centrally in its transformation from a granting council to a knowledge council. We believe that investment in the development of future generations of researchers is paramount to achieving Canada's national agenda of producing highly qualified scholars and researchers who will move this country's cultural and social agenda forward, today and for years to come.

## Appendix A

### The Consultation Process

The Executive Committee of the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies discussed the question of SSHRC's Transformation at its meeting held on February 7, 2004 and identified nine "central issues" surrounding graduate education and graduate funding in Canada. These issues included:

- support for graduate students from SSHRC's research grants
- the essential nature of graduate students in the research enterprise
- research integration of graduate students among themselves and with other researchers

- university commitment to the provision of research infrastructure for graduate students
- provision of research mobility for graduate students, including money to spend time both within and outside the university milieu
- linkage of graduate student funding and supervisors' research activity
- the importance of strategic training grants
- professional development for diverse careers
- the promotion of interdisciplinary and collaborative research for graduate students.

In a letter to the Deans of graduate studies, dated February 11, 2004, Dr. John Lennox, President of CAGS, invited them to raise these nine "central issues" at the "Campus Dialogue" of their universities and at the next meeting of their regional associations and asked them to forward a report of these discussions to the CAGS National Office.

On the basis of the feedback received from our members we wrote, at the end of March 2004, the first draft of our brief. On April 20th, 2004, the Members of the Executive Committee held a conference call to discuss the first draft of our brief. Based on this discussion a second draft of the brief was produced, and, on April 26th, this was sent to the Deans of graduate studies inviting their suggestions. We then wrote the third draft of our brief and submitted it to the Executive Committee at the meeting held on May 8th, 2004 for final approval. Final edits of the draft were then completed for submission to SSHRC.

## References

- CAGS (2003a). The completion of graduate studies in Canadian universities: Report and recommendations.
- CAGS (2003b). Pre-budget submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance.
- Lovitts, B. (2001). Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study. Landham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.