Emils Matiss
President
Society of Graduate and Professional Students

September 19th, 2024

Dear Queen's Community,

I am reaching out with an urgent and critical request regarding master's student funding—an issue that could have profound consequences for our university's research, teaching, and overall strategic goals.

As you are likely aware, Queen's has been grappling with a budget deficit, and considerable efforts have been made to balance the financial outlook. These efforts have resulted in difficult decisions, some of which carry significant repercussions. While these measures are often intended to minimize the impact on students, they can lead to painful outcomes.

On Tuesday, September 17th, 2024, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) approved a series of cost-cutting and fundraising measures. Some of these measures present exciting new opportunities, but **one in particular has raised widespread concern: a proposed cut to master's student funding.** Specifically, the centrally funded Queen's Graduate Award (QGA), which currently provides an average of $4,100 per student toward research master's stipends, is set to be eliminated for new master's students beginning in Fall 2025. The amount of QGA each student receives may vary due to funding packages being composed of multiple sources.

I acknowledge that the SLT is carefully considering all viable options in addressing the significant challenge of balancing the budget. This proposal is an unfortunate consequence of those financial pressures.

This change is **likely** to affect only new master's students entering in Fall 2025. **However, I strongly urge current master's students who will be continuing into Fall 2025 to review their offer letters carefully and confirm whether their second-year funding is guaranteed.** If you are unsure, please contact your graduate program for clarification to avoid unexpected support gaps. While this proposal is specific to Queen's University, the education sector in Canada is under considerable pressure, and we must not be pioneers in a shift toward reducing graduate funding. **Queen's currently has an opportunity to lead by**

reinforcing the importance of robust support for graduate education rather than cutting it.

This decision shifts the financial burden onto individual programs and principal investigators (PIs). Given the absence of a university-wide minimum stipend for master's students, we can expect significant reductions in master's funding packages. **This would severely undermine our ability to support graduate students at a time when financial pressures are already overwhelming many in our community.**

As outlined in the Queen's Educational Equity Policy, the university recognizes that systemic barriers disadvantage certain groups based on social identities such as race, ethnicity, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. A reduction in master's student funding risks disproportionately impacting these equity-deserving groups, further entrenching barriers, and reducing access to graduate education. Such an outcome is counter to Queen's University's mission of fostering a climate where all individuals can participate fully and equally. Undergraduate students graduate with an average student debt of $30,600.

Our advocacy against this proposal has been earnest but limited compared to those within the university who cannot freely share their opposition. Many stakeholders involved in graduate studies, research, and teaching agree that **this is a short-sighted and damaging strategy.**

While I acknowledge that the SLT is tasked with finding solutions to balance the budget, I must voice my strong opposition to this measure. The estimated $3.5 million savings it would generate come at too high of a cost to our academic and research mission. Any realized savings would likely be diminished by a loss of tuition from reduced enrolment and other negative impacts.

Queen's is both a research and teaching institution. Master's students play an integral role in both areas. They provide crucial teaching support as teaching assistants (TAs) and are key contributors to faculty research efforts, particularly in disciplines such as STEM and other areas heavily reliant on master's-level work. Furthermore, about **one-third of our PhD students start their academic journey at Queen's as master's students**, making this cut detrimental to both current research and future PhD recruitment. Reducing master's student funding would also have wider implications. It could lead to a decline in enrolment, which would in turn reduce our allocation of Ontario Graduate Scholarships (OGS) and Queen Elizabeth II Graduate Scholarships in Science and Technology (QEII-GSST). This could harm our competitiveness for Tri-Agency funding, with potential consequences for our research output and reputation. **Additionally, the Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Indigeneity, and Accessibility (EDIIA) impacts of this decision could further marginalize students from**

underrepresented backgrounds, exacerbating inequalities within the Queen's community.

During consultations with the Principal and Provost, I asked what evidence might be needed to reconsider this proposal. One area that has not yet been fully analyzed is the impact on diversity and equity. It seems clear to me that this cut would disproportionately affect those students who already face financial challenges, including first-generation graduate students and those from equity-deserving groups.

To strengthen our case against this measure, I am calling on master's applicants and current students to share their stories—specifically how a $4,100 reduction in stipends would affect their ability to pursue or continue their studies. I urge graduate students to share how their stipends are already insufficient to meet basic living expenses. I also encourage PIs, research support staff, and faculty to highlight the vital role master's students play in your research programs and teaching missions.

Our community has been advocating for increased graduate funding for some time, and we are all too aware of the hardships caused by the existing inadequacies in financial support. We cannot imagine the further detrimental and counterproductive consequences this proposal would have on an already struggling community.

This is not a critique of the need for fiscal responsibility. Respectfully, it is a critique of a strategy that undermines Queen's values of equity and excellence.

Please join us in providing clear and compelling evidence that we cannot afford to further erode the financial support for our graduate students.

If you find this information overwhelming, please reach out to any of the mental health resources found at https://sgps.click/mhresources.

Thank you for your time and for standing with us in this crucial effort.

Sincerely,

Emils Matiss

President, Society of Graduate and Professional Students
On behalf of the 2024-2025 SGPS Executive Team

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