

PGSS McGill Funding Working Group

# Graduate funding report - AY 20-21

Report and recommendations for PGSS Council review

---

## Me during my last year of phd



---

## **Table of Contents**

About the Initiative	2
<b>Preamble</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>7</b>
Survey Participation	7
Overview of Graduate Funding & Labour Wage Amounts	9
Funding and labor wages total + net take-home	9
Breakdown per source	11
Cost of living: it's not 1995 any more	12
Transparency, Consistency, and a Major Difficulty in Interpreting our Data	14
Wellbeing and Mental Health Impacts	18
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Conclusion &amp; future directions</b>	<b>23</b>

---

## About the Initiative

The Funding Working Group is a cross-disciplinary collective of McGill graduate students, assembled in summer and fall of 2020, and overseen to May 31st 2021 by the PGSS University Affairs Commissioner (as of June 1st, this group will be overseen by the Student Rights and Advocacy Committee, which is chaired by the corresponding Commissioner). The report you see here today draws on data collected in a survey carried out in Fall 2020, and is the result of countless hours of volunteer work. The University Affairs Commissioner would like to thank all members of the Funding Working Group for their contributions to its activities over the 2020-2021 academic year, and in particular Charles Brunette, Kate Bundy, Helen Hayes, Tareq Hardan, and Stuart Jackson. Thanks are also due to Bradley Por and Ushra Khan for their support at different stages of this project. Finally, enormous credit should be given to several individual PGSAs, including GGS, CAOS, ALLCGS, and AHCSGSA, as well as to the AGSEM Bargaining and Mobilization committees in the 2017-2018 academic year, all of whom have carried out similar work that has greatly inspired and informed this project.

While we have worked entirely remotely, we would like to acknowledge that McGill University is situated on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka, a place which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst nations, and that the lands on which we individually work and on which the infrastructures that support our work are located are often also unceded traditional territories of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. We recognize and respect the Kanien'kehà:ka as the traditional custodians of the lands and waters on which McGill is situated, and invite each of you to reflect on your own relations to the lands and places you currently are.

---

## Preamble

The cost of living in Montreal has increased greatly in recent years, and we are currently in a housing crisis, with the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment around \$900.00 CAD.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a recent study has shown that unoccupied units are more often rented out at prices in the \$1200 range,<sup>2</sup> and that landlords view students—and in particular international students—as a lucrative market segment who can not only be charged higher rents without question, but whose move-in/move-out dates often facilitate large, illegal rent increases between tenants.<sup>3</sup> The cost of food, already on the rise before the pandemic, has increased far above inflation rates over the last year, and is set to continue rising thanks both to the residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and to increasing climate catastrophes. Finally, the cost of tuition, fees, and mandatory insurance at McGill has also increased greatly in recent years, particularly for international students and students enrolled in the fast-growing plethora of non-thesis programs, for which tuition increases seem to not be subject to any kind of control or limitation. In a financial presentation made to the April 2021 meeting of McGill Senate, Provost Manfredi went so far as to identify “Application of optimal pricing strategy for deregulated students” as one variable within McGill’s control in mitigating the university’s financial losses due to the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, graduate student funding at McGill has remained relatively stable over at least the last five years, with variations on distribution by degree year in favour of years 1-4, and an increased reliance on external funding and labour wages for doctoral students. For master’s students, no recent data is readily available, but the results of our survey—as well as some of our lived experiences—indicate that this is largely because there is little to no internal funding available to master’s students, who must rely almost entirely on external funding (assuming they are enrolled in a thesis program) and labour wages. Moreover,

---

<sup>1</sup>Levesque, Lia. (2020). \$935 for a Student Apartment? A Study Says That’s the Average in Montreal. *Montreal Gazette*.  
<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/935-for-a-studio-apartment-a-study-say-thats-the-average-in-montreal>

<sup>2</sup> CBC News (2021). Montreal Saw Biggest Rent Increases in 18 Years in 2020, Study Finds.  
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/montreal-housing-crisis-rent-increase-1.6020003>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Budget Planning Report III: FY2021 Forecast and FY2022 Budget. Presented to McGill Senate, April 20, 2021. Slide 20. [https://www.mcgill.ca/senate/files/senate/05\\_d20-47\\_budget\\_presentation.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/senate/files/senate/05_d20-47_budget_presentation.pdf)

---

funding levels from external agencies (Tri-Council, FRQ, etc.) have remained stable for at least the last five years as well, at both the master's and doctoral levels.

Taken together, these conditions produce an increasingly financially precarious graduate student body, for whom one small hiccup (for example, a new payroll system failing to pay employees in a timely manner) has exponentially disastrous consequences. In addition, there is often a cultural stigma around discussing money openly at McGill, which leads to students living, working, and learning in conditions well below those which their supervisors, department chairs, and deans imagine. Further, the combination of all these factors—financial precarity, suboptimal living and working conditions, and a lack of support from those in positions of authority—has an exceedingly negative impact on graduate student well-being and mental health. These are things that we know intuitively, by our own lived experiences, and through hushed conversations with trusted friends. While lived experience and networks of care and mutual support are invaluable, they do not generally produce the kinds of data that can be brought into open conversations about graduate funding. With this survey, we aimed to collect a relatively large amount of data, both quantitative and qualitative, to facilitate the opening of such a conversation both within PGSS and between PGSS and McGill administration, deans, and department chairs.

---

## Executive Summary

### **Participation Rates**

***Survey respondents: 283 (177 doctoral students, 61 masters students)***

We suspect that the disparities in response rates by faculty are attributable, in part, to disparities in funding and transparency in funding practices across (and sometimes even within) faculties, and that contextualizing response rates with enrolment share is a somewhat reliable indicator of the general state of affairs in a given faculty.

### **Participation by Faculty**

Faculty	% of responses	Number of Responses	% of graduate enrolment <sup>5</sup>
Arts	26.9%	76 responses	11.4%
Science	20.6%	58 responses	12.0%
Education	13.9%	39 responses	11.1%
Medicine and Life Sciences	13.9%	39 responses	25.2%
Agricultural and Environmental Sciences	8.8%	25 responses	6.5%
Music	5.5%	16 responses	3.1%
Engineering	4.2%	12 responses	14.3%
Law	2.5%	7 responses	2.0%
Interfaculty Studies	2.1%	6 responses	10.9%
Dentistry	1.6%	5 responses	0.6%

### **Graduate Funding and Labor Wage Amounts**

Our graduate funding and labor wage calculations are categorized into the following four groups: Master's students, Doctoral students (All), Doctoral students (1-4), Doctoral Students (5+).

---

<sup>5</sup> Per <https://www.mcgill.ca/es/registration-statistics>

---

Average base funding for Master's students is \$14,296.00 and \$22,453.00 for Doctoral students. These funding amounts are comprised of: 1) stipends, 2) scholarships and awards, 3) and labor wages.

### **Cost of Living**

The average individual rent paid is \$726, excluding utilities. Other basic costs are, on average, \$347 for groceries (excluding take-out and coffee), \$168 for transportation, \$163 for health and medical care, \$54 for toiletries and cleaning supplies, and \$45 for clothing, shoes, and personal grooming.

### **Recommendations**

We present a series of recommendations based on the data collected from the 2020-2021 graduate funding survey. The following is a brief overview:

- Advocate for the use of the new funding letter template for annual funding confirmation letters.
- Advocate for an increase to the minimum funding, exclusive of labour wages and tuition amounts.
- Advocate to upper administration that they use their platform with external funding agencies to push for an increase in external funding amounts.
- Advocate to upper administration that they request in particular that international students who win an FRQ award also be given a Differential Fee Waiver (DFW).
- Advocate at all levels of administration to ensure that all external award holders receive some form of "top-up" in recognition of their success in securing external funding.
- Advocate to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies that funding information be made centrally available.
- Advocate to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies that funding policies and regulations be standardized across the university.
- Advocate for master's students to be included in graduate funding practices.
- Advocate to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies to create a transparent process for resolving funding disputes.
- Ensure that this survey and report are repeated every other academic year.

---

## Findings

### Survey Participation

The survey received a total of 283 individual responses. From this number, 238 responses originated from McGill University students, with 177 responses from Doctoral students and 61 responses from Masters students. Given the [Fall 2020 enrolment](#) statistics (5041 Masters and 3804 Doctoral students), this represents a 4.7% participation rate for Doctoral students and 1.2% participation rate for Masters students. Participants originate from different Faculties in the following numbers: Arts (26.9%), Science (20.6%), Education (13.9%), Medicine and Life Sciences (13.9%), Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (8.8%), Music (5.5%), Engineering (4.2%), Law (2.5%), Interfaculty Studies (2.1%), Dentistry (1.6%). There were no responses from the Desautels Faculty of Management.

Based on the disparities in funding and funding practices reported in this survey, as well as what we know from our own experiences and what we have heard from our colleagues in town halls, at Council, and in informal conversations, we suspect that the disparities in response rates by faculty are attributable, in part, to disparities in funding and transparency in funding practices across (and sometimes even within) faculties, and that contextualizing response rates with enrolment share is a somewhat reliable indicator of the general state of affairs in a given faculty. For example, while the Faculty of Medicine and Life Sciences is by far the largest faculty at the graduate level, with roughly double the number of graduate students as the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Arts had roughly double the response rate of the Faculty of Medicine and Life Sciences.

Based on our observations from responses in this survey and in ALLCGS and AHCS surveys, as well as a discussion with Dean Aimee Ryan from the Faculty of Medicine and Life Sciences, we know that it is not uncommon for students in the Faculty of Arts to be living on funding and wages that, combined, are well below the poverty line for a single individual in Montreal, with (prior to the Fall 2021 cohort) no transparency as to the source and nature of expected income; while in the Faculty of Medicine and Life Sciences, it is not uncommon for students to be given clear information up front about the source and nature of their income, and to be rewarded for securing external funding. We can also look at the relatively high response rate from the Schulich School of Music, which is proportionately nearly

---

double their enrolment share (5.5% vs 3.1%), as already a signal that something is amiss in funding in this faculty, a speculation which is borne out in some of the responses gathered in this survey.

## **Overview of Graduate Funding & Labour Wage Amounts**

Based on the responses from McGill students, what follows is a breakdown of the general self-reported financial situation of graduate students who participated in the survey. We report data on graduate student funding, graduate student employment, and tuition, in order to evaluate the net income received by graduate students. This section is based on the following questions from the survey:

- What is the total amount of your tuition and fees for the 2020-2021 academic year?
- What is the total amount of your funding, per year?
- What is the breakdown of your funding by source, per year?
- Do any of these amounts include teaching assistantship (TA), research assistantship (RA), or instructor/lecturer wages, or is there an implicit understanding that teaching or research support work is expected in exchange for your internal funding amounts?
- If you are working as a TA, RA, or course lecturer, or have held one of these positions in the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 academic years, what is the gross amount of your wages per semester?

From the answers to these questions, we extracted information on:

- Stipend amounts (provided by the supervisor or the department)
- Scholarships and awards amounts (internal or external)
- Graduate employment amounts (TA, RA, instructor/lecturer)
- Tuition & fees

Note that we present the results separately for Masters and Doctoral students, and further present a breakdown between early-stage Doctoral students (PhD 1-4) and late-stage Doctoral students (PhD 5+). In addition to reporting metrics such as the mean value, we also report the standard deviation of the variable of interest and the number of data points that were used to calculate the value ( $\pm\sigma$ ,  $n=X$ ).

---

## Funding and labor wages total + net take-home

This section presents total amounts received by graduate students. Two numbers are introduced, with the following definitions:

- **Base funding:** defined as the sum of stipend amounts, awards and scholarships amounts, and *guaranteed labor wages* received by a student. In several instances, students are offered funding packages where part of the amounts are distributed in the form of mandatory RAship or TAsip.<sup>6</sup>
- **Base funding + additional labor wages:** defined as the base funding plus any non-mandatory labor wages amounts contracted by the student, under the form of RAship, TAsip, or lecturer/instructor positions.
- **Net take-home:** defined as the base funding + additional labor wages (or just base funding in the table below) minus the tuition fees paid by the graduate students. We use the tuition fees as reported by each individual, since tuition waivers (total or partial), for local or international tuition fees, are non-uniform across different departments.

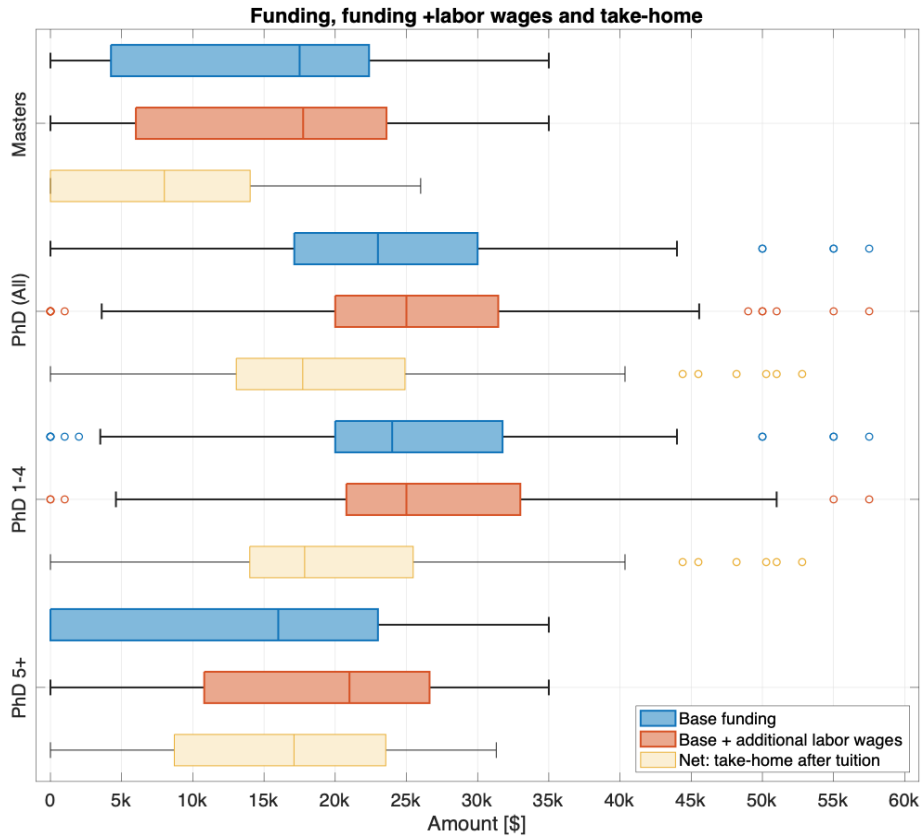
The following table shows the mean value for these two metrics, accompanied by the standard deviation and the number of responses from which these values could be calculated. The figure below shows box plots, where the center of each box represents the median values, and the edges of each box represents the interquartile range.

Level	Base funding [\$]	Base funding + additional labor wages [\$]
Masters	<b>14 296</b> (±10 622, n=59)	<b>15 394</b> (±10 264, n=54)
Doctoral (All)	<b>22 453</b> (±12 060, n=171)	<b>24 954</b> (±11 229, n=156)
Doctoral (PhD 1-4)	<b>25 049</b> (±10 696, n=132)	<b>26 500</b> (±10 825, n=121)
Doctoral (PhD 5+)	<b>12 568</b> (±11 707, n=37)	<b>18 738</b> (±10 784, n=33)

---

<sup>6</sup> The practice of including guaranteed labor wages within base funding amounts is coming to an end with the introduction of McGill's new funding letter protocol.

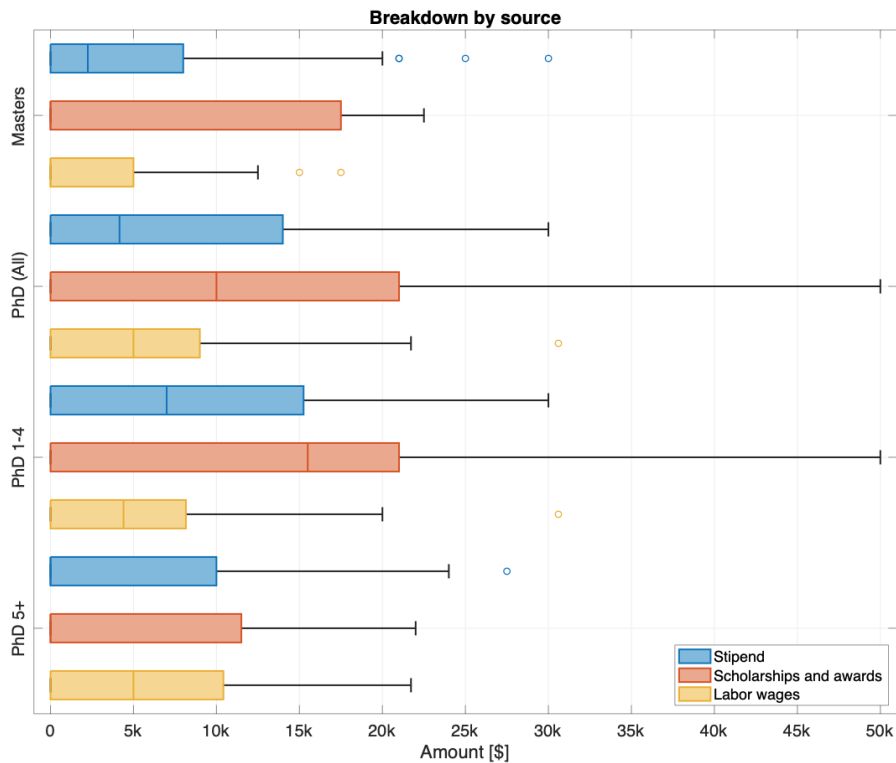
Level	Net take home: Base funding - tuition [\$]	Net take-home: Base funding + additional labor wages - tuition [\$]
Masters	<b>7 336</b> (±7 963, n=54)	<b>7 757</b> (±7 660, n=49)
Doctoral (All)	<b>16 445</b> (±11 273, n=159)	<b>18 868</b> (±11 071, n=144)
Doctoral (PhD 1-4)	<b>18 121</b> (±10 976, n=122)	<b>19 735</b> (±11 239, n=111)
Doctoral (PhD 5+)	<b>10 250</b> (±9 902, n=36)	<b>15 358</b> (±9 669, n=32)



## Breakdown per source

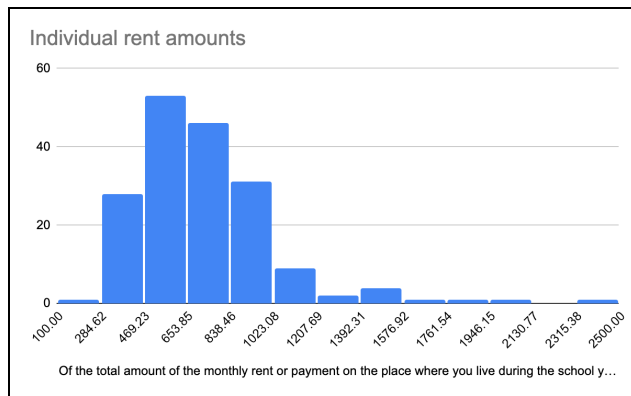
This section presents a more detailed breakdown of the graduate students financial situation by separately considering stipend amounts, scholarship and awards amounts, and labor wages. In the following table, two numbers are reported for each category: the mean value (number at the top of the box), and the mean value considering only students effectively receiving any of the stipend/scholarship/labor wages amounts (number at the bottom of the box).

Level	Stipend [\$]	Scholarship & Awards [\$]	Labor wages [\$]
Masters	<b>5 612</b> (±7 806, n=54)	<b>6 346</b> (±8 400, n=54)	<b>3 011</b> (±4 190, n=54)
	<b>10 102</b> (±8 027, n=30)	<b>13 708</b> (±7 120, n=25)	<b>6 254</b> (±4 015, n=26)
Doctoral (All)	<b>7 891</b> (±8 936, n=147)	<b>12 536</b> (±13 692, n=150)	<b>5 033</b> (±5 434, n=155)
	<b>13 333</b> (±7 886, n=87)	<b>22 386</b> (±10 650, n=84)	<b>8 212</b> (±4 691, n=95)
Doctoral (PhD 1-4)	<b>8 967</b> (±8 997, n=109)	<b>14 374</b> (±14 218, n=112)	<b>4 745</b> (±5 250, n=119)
	<b>13 209</b> (±7 935, n=74)	<b>22 999</b> (±11 133, n=70)	<b>7 843</b> (±4 601, n=72)
Doctoral (PhD 5+)	<b>5 069</b> (±8 246, n=36)	<b>5 708</b> (±8 670, n=36)	<b>5 916</b> (±6 058, n=35)
	<b>14 038</b> (±7 870, n=13)	<b>17 125</b> (±5 090, n=12)	<b>9 412</b> (±4 995, n=22)



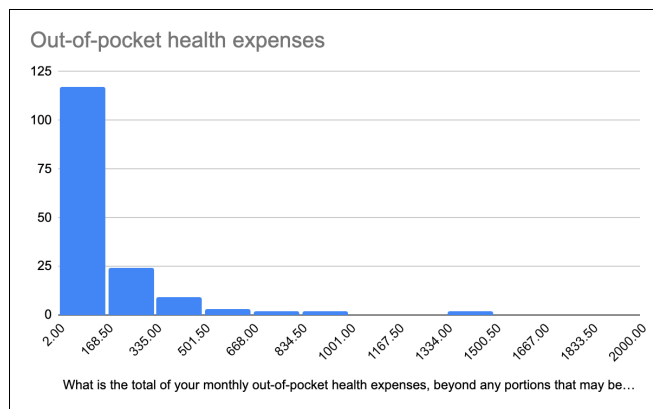
## Cost of living: it's not 1995 any more

As gestured to above, Montreal is currently in a housing crisis, and this is particularly true for low-income households, including graduate students. However, anecdotal data gathered during funding town halls and during Funding Working Group meetings suggests that GPDs and department chairs are, in many cases (and like François Legault), still operating under the assumption that an apartment in Montreal is not more than \$500/month, and that therefore gross funding as low as \$1666/month should be enough to live comfortably on and pay tuition, fees, and insurance. Our lived experiences say otherwise, and the data we gathered about the cost of living bears this out. We asked respondents to indicate how much they spend on rent, and also on bills, groceries, transportation, and out of pocket medical costs, with the following results:



**Average total rent: \$1260.** Most students who pay any rent at all pay between \$400-\$800/month, and when we remove those who pay no rent at all, the **average individual rent paid is \$726.** Of the students who live with other people, the average number of people in the household is two. NB: this excludes utility costs.

**The average cost of groceries (excluding take-out, coffee, etc.) is \$347, plus an additional \$54 for toiletries, cleaning supplies, and other essential items.** The average

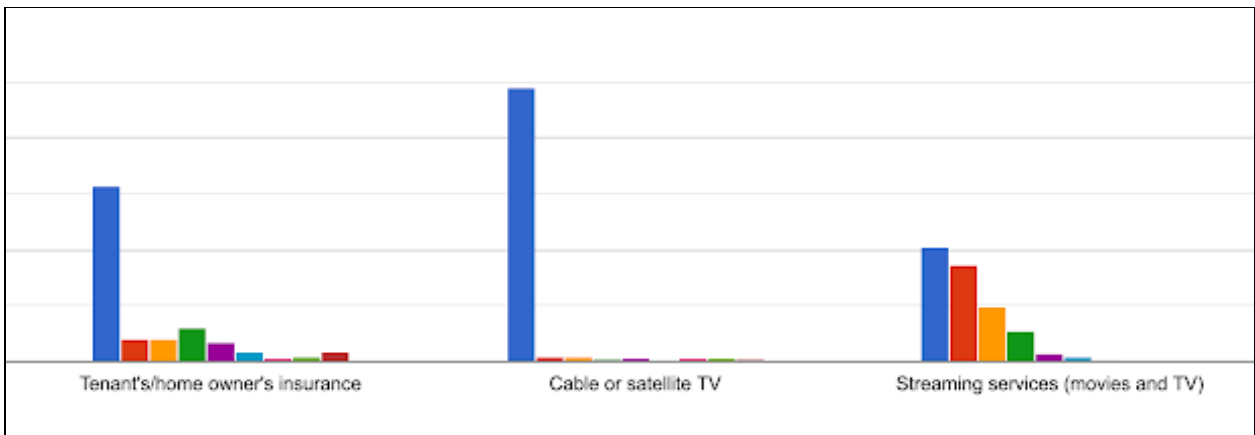
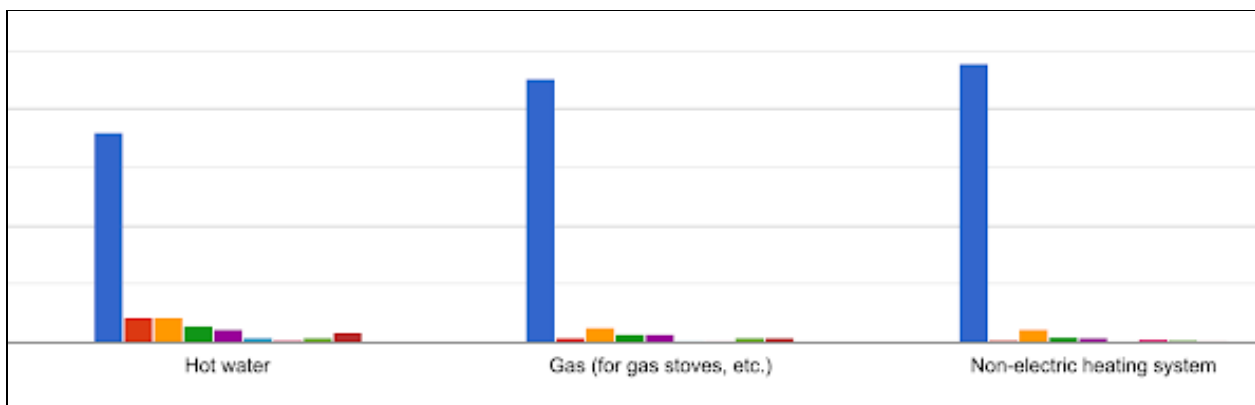
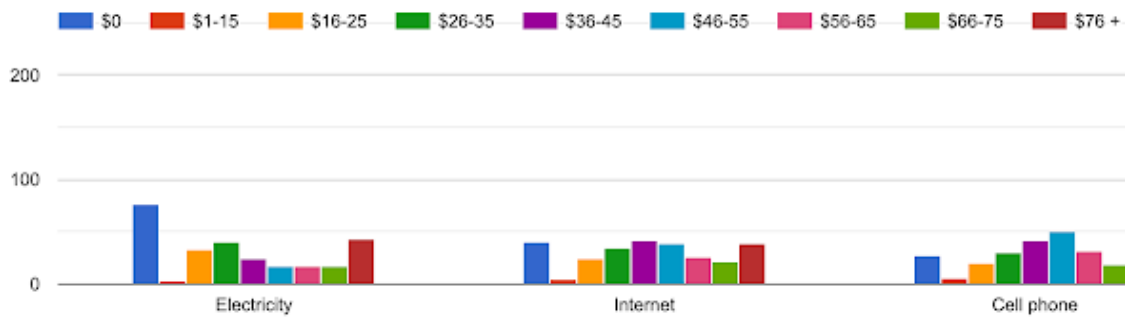


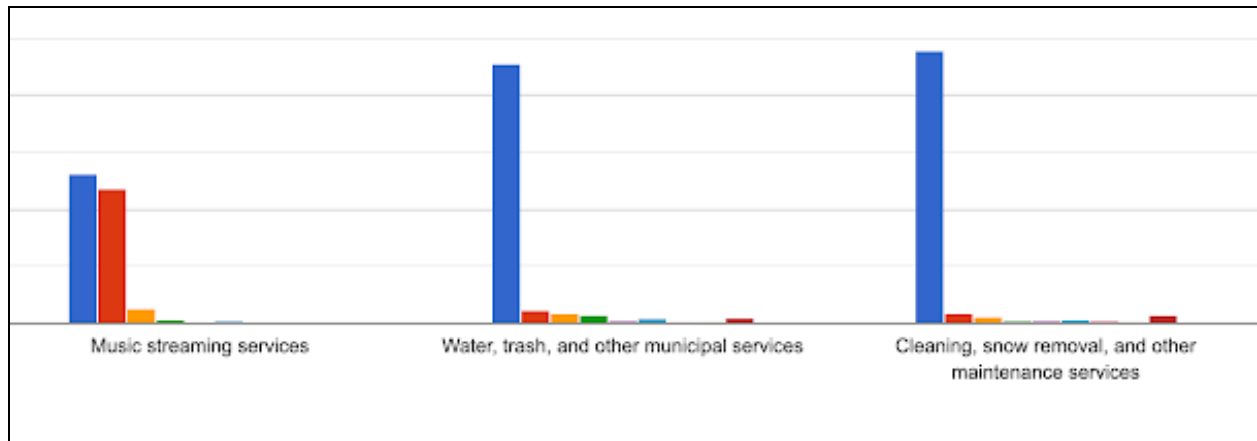
amount spent on clothing, shoes, and personal grooming is \$137/three-month period. The average monthly transportation cost in winter is \$168, and in summer \$116. Overall average out-of-pocket health expenses are \$126, and when we remove those with no additional health expenses, the average rises to \$163 per month. It is important to note that **a number of respondents**

**indicated that they are not able to access needed medical or other health care due to a lack of funds,** despite the mandatory insurance plans billed through our student accounts. Finally, many respondents are carrying a significant debt load from previous degrees that they are obliged to service in the course of their current degrees, with an average monthly payment of \$652 (n=96).

Utility costs vary widely, and can be seen here:

How much do you spend on each of the following utilities and services every month





## Transparency, Consistency, and a Major Difficulty in Interpreting our Data

Across all questions in our survey where a write-in option was possible, regardless of how many other options were available to respondents, by far the most popular responses were “I don’t know,” “Not sure,” and write-in variations on this theme, as well as write-in options indicating specifics of the respondents’ own circumstances, often with a disclaimer that they are not sure if it applies to everyone or just them. Above and beyond making it difficult to interpret many of these responses quantitatively, as intended, this points to a lack of transparency and consistency in funding policies at McGill, both across and within faculties. Not only does this aggravate financial inequities, it creates a climate of uncertainty, fear, and needless stress in an already-stressful context, and often has other unintended consequences.

This is echoed in many of the responses to our major qualitative questions, “Do you have any comments, opinions, or suggestions relating to graduate student funding in your department/program?” and “Is there anything else you would like to tell us?” Responses to these questions tended along the themes of a lack of clarity, a lack of transparency, a lack of consistency, and overall feelings of anxiety, regret, and a mix of outrage and betrayal, for example:

“If I knew about the financial difficulties that I went through at mcgill earlier, I would have never left my country to go to mcgill”

---

“We just need more transparency. I'm really fortunate to be a group that is very, very well-funded and that I have a supervisor who is generous and supportive of his students. But, many of my colleagues are not and I can see that they sometimes are having a tougher time than I am with regards to money and resources.

It shouldn't just be up to the supervisor, we need more transparency and guidelines within departments.”

“Transparency. Our department does what they think is best for us without consulting with students or making it clear who gets what or what support mechanisms there are, what funding beyond outside scholarships is available in emergencies.”

“They should have a guideline. We have no idea how they manage the financial resources and what are our rights or limitations. It is a jungle and we fight for funding.”

“Students have no information whatsoever, before and during their program! It is never clear how much they would get from a stipend (if anything at all) if accepted. The fact that external fellowship holders have to pay full tuition is NEVER disclosed until the payment moment.”

“I wish it had been clearer to me before I began my studies that students had to pay tuition using their stipend money. I would also have liked more clarity & transparency on the tuition & fees graduate students have to pay (especially in regards to Master's vs PhD students) for continuing research during the summer semester”

Similarly, when asked “Are funding amounts, sources, and disbursement methods made clear to students well in advance of the start of term?,” with a preset range of options available, write-in responses highlighted the difficulties inherent in and arising from not knowing in advance what to expect financially:

“There are a bunch of different messages on funding that make it unclear what is actually possible and available.”

---

"(...) not all funds are made clear in advance of start of term - we receive some info over the term"

"No funding amounts provided. When faculty awards are won the distribution methods are unclear. I had to email several times to find out why I had not received my award money."

"Nothing is communicated. I regret doing my PhD here."

"I would say that the amount and sources are reasonably clear in the offer letter, but the department commonly changes those terms on a whim. You might get lucky and they might not decide to change the amount/source, in which case I guess it is clear. But almost everyone I've talked to has received some sort of curveball over the course of their funded years."

"Funding letters are extremely unclear, and as I mentioned, my funding has constantly been decreased, shifted, and deducted. There is no clear point of contact for asking questions about finances and no one in the department went over this information with me. I highly expected a brief run-through of what to expect during our department orientation (which just ended up being a meet and greet), but there was none! I have had to figure everything out on my own."

"Hard to find an apartment without a guarantor since stipend is so low. Even if we're willing to pay ~50% of our monthly stipend for an apartment (almost a necessity in Montreal), a lot of places won't rent without a guarantor."

## **Wellbeing and Mental Health Impacts**

Our data also shows that our own lived experiences of precarious finances having a negative effect on our well-being and mental health is not an uncommon experience. In addition to many students not being able to afford the kinds of care they need due to a lack of funds, the general uncertainty and anxiety around low funding levels and inconsistent and/or opaque policies have a significant detrimental effect on graduate students:

---

"It's dismal. The worst mistake I ever made was deciding to do my PhD at McGill. I feel trapped here and the thought of having to leave without a degree is both heartbreaking and just a massive relief to not have to deal with the sheer mountain of shit that comes along with being at this institution."

"Faculty in general need to realize that while they may feel overwhelmed by all the stuff on their plate, students also have a lot to deal with (especially in a department where they are expected to teach with next to no training) and moreover many of them ARE NOT BEING PAID. Having to worry about how I'm going to make rent, utilities, and minimum payments on credit cards/lines of credit makes it THAT MUCH HARDER to focus on my studies because I'm basically working a full-time job with no pay."

"I am more afraid of what is to come."

"the department should guarantee differential fee wavers to all international students. It is not fair that I take the time and energy and a lifetime of achievements to win awards, I save the department my portion of funding for 3 years (an amount they can now redistribute to other students), but I am left to pay my own international fees out of my award. Bringing this up to my department and navigating this injustice has been a defining moment of my graduate life in Canada."

"It gets really hard to juggle the need to work with the need to study/write when you're also debt cycling with an almost maxed-out line of credit and only a pittance coming from Quebec's AFE."

"Especially in this tough time, we all need more than free online therapy appointments or yoga, we need financial security. I am constantly concerned about my finances, how I will pay for moving to Montreal, how I will live on a month-to-month basis. I grew up very poor, and even though I am thrilled to be able to study, at times it feels that I will always be impoverished; always be worrying about when I will get my fundings, how much I will be able to eat, how long I can run the heat. I have needed a surgery for years and have never been able to access this care because I either have not been able to get the time off of work or because I do not have healthcare. Giving people a decent funding package gives them dignity."

---

"I entered grad school with approx \$180,000 of debt in student loans/line of credit/credit cards and have been unable to pay back any of it, and have experienced extreme stress throughout my masters and phd degrees, especially now that my degree is coming towards its end"

"financial matters have made my entire grad school experienced, both academically and personally, extremely stressful, and the prospect of finishing my degree and going into debt repayment with mental illness no clear prospects for employment fills me with dread - I am caught in a cycle of being stressed in my program, and almost more stressed by the fear of managing debt afterward, to the great detriment of my mental health."

"My personal situation of working FT to support a family while trying to finish a PhD and having my estranged elderly father move in with us due to COVID proved to be too much for me. I am now on a sick leave and will be having spinal surgery due to injuries related to overuse of computers and extreme stress. It's been a bad year. And I'm still not finished my PhD. :("

"I regret doing my PhD at McGill. I should have accepted at U of T and I would not have had to live in poverty or visit food banks. McGill is systemically inequitable."

"i had to change my diet for health reasons and it made my monthly budget much higher- it has made my health better, ie i can do better work, but i always accrue debt each month now because of the specially nature of the diet."

"it is difficult to talk openly with people in the department because, even if it may not be true, it seems like people within university administration and profs don't experience the financial precarity that some grad students do, and the social stigma of discussing economic well-being is heavy and prevents honest conversations. Also, there appears to be a tone within academia that even though everyone theoretically agrees that research would be done best if we could focus on our work and not be distracted by other time and energy draining obligations, there is a competing cultural narrative which needs to financially haze grad students as part of the process, that if it was easier for us to do our work, we would be getting away with something? i get the feeling from tenured faculty that our desire for enough money

---

to meet our research and livelihood needs is seen as something disagreeable and slightly pathetic, even ungrateful for the positions we have, and if we truly were good researchers we would choose to starve to create knowledge/pay our dues. to be clear though, this is not something i find explicitly in my department, it seems much broader.”

“i am concerned that grad students broadly experiencing precarity sets us up as vulnerable to whoever decides to offer us financial security in the future... whether that is the private sector, specific interests within academia, etc. for instance, i may think something is a fundamentally incorrect research agenda, but because i have so many years of 'not enough' accrued that i might be inclined to compromise in new and distressing ways to access secure funding. and this economic method of institutions shaping researchers makes me very uncomfortable because it seems, on the surface, to be the clear opposing goal of academia (despite the cynical perspective of what academia is and does). i wonder what the creation of knowledge as a public good would look like if we invested in the researchers as much as the research.”

## Recommendations

1. **Advocate for the use of the new funding letter template for annual funding confirmation letters.** The new template is extremely clear and easy to read, and makes clear to potential graduate students what funding they can expect from which source, while avoiding conflating funding with labour wages. It also ensures that prospective students see up front whether, and how much, their potential departments will contribute to the costs of tuition, fees, and insurance. Currently enrolled students (entering before the Fall 2021 cohort) should be given the same transparency with regards to their finances.
2. **Advocate for an increase to the minimum funding, exclusive of labour wages and tuition amounts,** so that no student is funded below the level of the poverty

---

line for a single individual in Montreal (currently approximately \$28,000),<sup>7</sup> **and that this amount be reviewed in context with the actual cost of living every other year.**

3. **Advocate to upper administration that they use their platform with external funding agencies to push for an increase in external funding amounts, particularly in social sciences and humanities.** The poverty line for a single person living in Montreal is currently around \$28,000.<sup>8</sup> A student with external funding should not be taking home only slightly more than half that, after tuition.
4. **Advocate to upper administration that they request in particular that international students who win an FRQ also be given a DFW to pay only Québec-rate tuition.** Many international students who win FRQ subsequently see their departmental DFWs revoked, leaving them with about \$2000 to live on after paying tuition, fees, and insurance.
5. **Advocate at all levels of administration to ensure that all external award holders receive some form of “top-up” in recognition of their success in securing external funding.** Applying for these awards is often a part-time job in itself, and is often mandatory in many departments. In addition, external award holders often find themselves discouraged from applying for jobs for which they are entirely eligible, while their internal funding and awards are entirely revoked, leaving them worse off than if they had never applied in the first place.
6. **Advocate to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies that funding information be made centrally available, in an obvious place.** Currently, one must know where to look to find data, and this data is presented without context or discussion.<sup>9</sup>
7. **Advocate to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies that funding policies and regulations be standardized across the university, including policies about top-ups and rollbacks.** In the process, also ensure that no student’s

---

<sup>7</sup> According to a study (2020) conducted by The Institute for Research and Socio-Economic Information (IRIS), the poverty line for a single person living in Montreal, Quebec, is 27,948 CAD.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/graduate-education-statistics/average-phd-financial-support>

---

funding is more than 50% dependent on their supervisor. Supervisors often lack the administrative knowledge to ensure that students are paid in a timely fashion, and full control of a student's finances sets up a power dynamic with the potential to do great harm to the student.

8. **Advocate for master's students to be included in graduate funding practices,** especially those enrolled in non-thesis programs who do not have access to external funding programs.
9. **Advocate to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies to create a transparent process for resolving funding disputes.** Currently, students have no clear path when their funding reality is not in line with what was promised. This puts students at a significant disadvantage in attempting to resolve disputes, and essentially allows departments to revoke or reduce funding without notice and with impunity.
10. **Ensure that this survey and report are repeated every other academic year,** ideally in partnership with AGSEM and other campus bodies representing graduate students, and that the anonymous data be made available to graduate student associations at other universities across Canada and especially in Québec.

## Conclusion & future directions

Clearly, there is much work to be done in the area of graduate student funding, and many different entry points to that work. We hope that this report provides some suggestions as to where that work might begin. We also plan to ensure that the rest of the data we have collected does not sit idle, but is used to further the Funding Working Group's advocacy work over the coming year. While some of us will be moving on, others will remain an active part of this group, and will also ensure that many of the suggestions that have been made about what the next version of the survey might look like are taken into account.

We thank you all for participating in this survey, and for supporting the implementation of our resulting recommendations.

— PGSS Funding Working Group, 2020-2021