



24 October 2022

Ted Hewitt
President
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
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Dear Dr. Ted Hewitt,

I am writing on behalf of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) to strongly encourage the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to immediately move to redirect significant funding to doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows. Put simply: more fellowships of greater value.

The persistent dismissal of precarity across the humanities and social sciences has been aided by the corrosive idea that we live and work in a meritocracy: that the “best” candidates do find tenure-track employment. On the one hand, the internalization of the meritocratic idea has caused many contingent faculty and recent graduates looking for work to doubt themselves. If only they had worked harder, published more, met more people: then the outcome might have been different. On the other hand, meritocratic thinking has served to comfort the comfortable: effectively depoliticizing precarity and rendering the structural violence all but invisible to others. This needs to change.

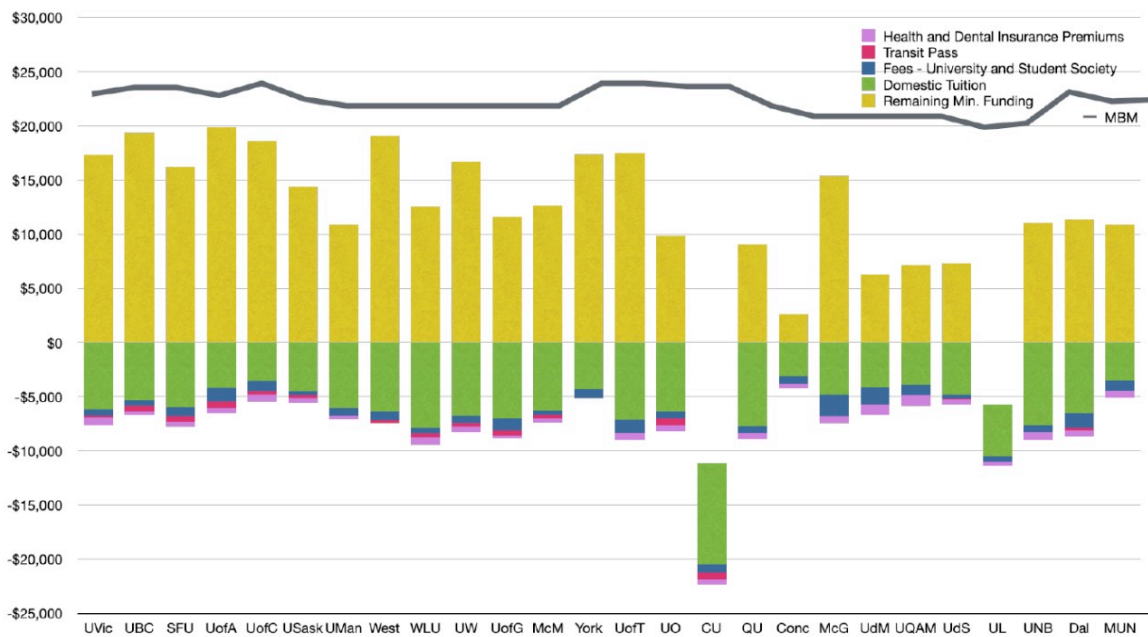
Over the past two years, the Canadian Historical Association has worked hard to encourage a culture change within our own ranks. It began with a series of national round-tables where we heard loud-and-clear that fundamental changes are urgently required. Here is just one example of the testimony shared (since published online):

“We all love what we do deeply.... This love is taken from us by our institutions, employers, and administrators. It’s used to exploit us every time we do extra work or support the students we teach or mark papers properly even though we’re not paid enough to do it, or get a course outline just right even though we’ve only been given a week.” – Dr. Jeremy Milloy, CHA round table, January 2021

These conversations led to a major CHA report on precarity in Spring 2021. One of its key recommendations was the creation of a seven-member Task Force to inquire into future of the History PhD at Canadian universities.

Over the past year, the members of the task force have undertaken an enormous amount of research. Its recently issued report, attached here and available at <https://t.co/FvS4XKqIS1> , points to major structural problems, starting with a massive gap between the average time it takes to complete a History PhD (6 years+) and funding packages (usually 4 years). Another point that the final report of the Task Force makes clear is that funding levels, everywhere, fall far below the poverty line. I am reproducing one of the graphs from the report which captures the problem.

We therefore urge SSHRC to immediately raise the funding levels for the standard PhD fellowship by at least 50%.



Net Annual Minimum Funding for Domestic Ph.D Students by History Department in Canada

The line at the top of this graph is Canada’s Market Basket Measure (MBM - Canada’s Poverty Line) by City¹⁹

We are also aware that there is considerable disparity in funding between doctoral students. Unfortunately, the success rate for SSHRC doctoral scholarships remains abysmally low. This, too, needs to change.

We urge SSHRC to redirect substantial funding to its standard PhD fellowships in order to offer substantially more every year. The success rate should be substantially higher than it has been in recent years.

The Task Force also made it clear that SSHRC needs to make a major new investment in its postdoctoral funding programme. Postdoctoral funding is essential for graduating students as it allows them to stay in the job pool for the critical first two years. Here, too, the success rate has declined significantly over the years.

We call on SSHRC to immediately double its funding envelope for postdoctoral fellowships, effective immediately.

This single action will make a big difference for recent graduates who are often the most precarious and will have a long-term positive impact on our disciplines.

With reference to race, Indigeneity, and working-class roots, when we go to SSHRC's [EDI dashboard](#), data for doctoral fellowship recipients is not available. Moreover, SSHRC's categories pay no attention to class. This is a problem as, without adequate funding, students who don't have savings or families who can support them are far less able to succeed. Research shows that a growing number of faculty are themselves the children of faculty members. This is not healthy for our universities.

We urge SSHRC and the Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Canada to undertake a survey of existing graduate students in the SSHRC-funded disciplines to determine whether students in these fields reflect the diversity of the Canadian population.

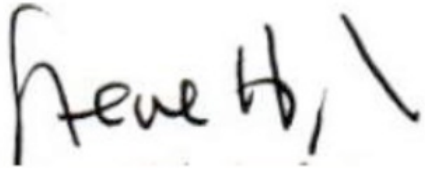
Finally, we call on SSHRC to review its eligibility requirements for community-based researchers who are, at this point, ineligible to be a principal investigator on a SSHRC grant. This has resulted in precarious researchers having to approach someone else to front their project. This is wrong on multiple levels, putting everyone in an untenable position.

We realize that these action items, if implemented with the existing funding envelope, represent a substantial redirection of SSHRC funding from faculty to students and postdoctoral fellows, but we feel that this is a tangible way that we can begin to tackle the structural issue of precarity within our disciplines. Action must be taken now and not deferred to some future date.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council has an obligation to respond forcefully to the crisis of precarity.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven High". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Steven High, President
Canadian Historical Association