



Spring 2021

# External Graduate Funding Procedures Report



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# Executive Summary

Between May and August of 2021, the University of Waterloo's Graduate Student Association (GSA-UW) conducted research to better understand how the graduate student community is impacted when they attain an external scholarship. The purpose of this research project is for the GSA-UW to investigate across all six faculties at the University of Waterloo to understand the influence of external funding on departmental funding. Information on how other U15 universities distribute funding will also be gathered to contrast the University of Waterloo's rules.

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase was to solicit data from the UW graduate student community. Questions about the impact of external funding on departmental funding were asked to graduate student departmental representatives. The second phase was to contact other Ontario universities, through their respective Graduate Student Association, to understand the process of how their university handles external awards.

The internal results found that many recipients of an external award found it very difficult to learn about the external funding procedures and are often frustrated when trying to learn about the procedure. Secondly, five of the six faculties said that there was a lack of transparency in their department's external funding procedure. Thirdly, five of the six faculties stated that when a student is awarded an external award their internal funding is clawed back. All six faculties said that a student who wins an external award earns a similar monetary amount if they were to keep their internal funding package.

As for external findings, it was determined that the funding procedure is very different for each university and even faculties or departments within a university. There is no consistent procedure for when a student wins an external award. However, in most cases, a student does receive a clawback on some aspect of their internal funding package. This can result in some students making less money overall, but in most cases, students make a similar amount or have a slight net increase.

Six recommendations are made to increase the transparency and consistency between UW Faculties and other Ontario Universities: (1) state the conditions in students' offer letters; (2) state how the external funding can be used; (3) outline the conditions on university/department websites; (4) work with university administration; (5) state the hierarchy of TA hiring; and (6) send reminders with the award procedures outlined.

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# Purpose of the Study

To help ease the burden of paying for postgraduate studies, the University of Waterloo (UW) provides grad students with funding. According to [Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs](#) (GSPA), the minimum funding for doctoral students is \$24,504 per year for the first four years; and for research master's students, the minimum funding is \$12,000 per year for the first year of studies. For international students, they can also obtain either the International Doctoral Student Award (PhD students) or the International Master's Student Award (master's students). Both of these awards are not included in the calculation of minimum funding. This funding can come from multiple funding sources such as awards from UW, graduate student employment, or external awards. Some of the internal funding sources from the university include Teaching Assistantships (TA), Research Assistantships (RA), Graduate Research Studentships (GRS), among other internal awards.

In addition to internal awards that graduate students can receive, there are also external awards that students may receive from the federal or provincial governments. At the federal level, common external awards for doctoral students are the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship. For master's students, there is the Tri-Agency (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC) Canada Graduate Scholarship (CGS M). At the provincial level, the most common awards for graduate students are the Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS) and the Queen Elizabeth II Graduate Scholarship in Science & Technology (QEII-GSST). Other awards that can be field-specific include the MITACS Award.

Although obtaining a highly competitive external scholarship is an incredible accomplishment that can be highlighted on a Curriculum Vitae and used to cover graduate students financially, the GSA-UW is finding that students are often penalized for this success since they cannot keep multiple awards that fund their schooling. For example, on the GSPA website, it says that "Receipt of certain major internal or external awards may result in an adjustment of your department funding package". In many instances, if students attain an external scholarship, such as OGS or a Tri-Agency Council award, their funding from their department (e.g. through

# Purpose of the Study

Teaching Assistantships or Graduate Research Studentships) is taken away or reduced. In some instances, students who receive external funding, such as the Vanier scholarship or OGS, receive less compensation overall than if they did not receive these scholarships.

The GSA-UW has received student cases where their department funding package was adjusted due to receipt of an external award. An example that was raised to the GSA-UW, was an international student that had received the International Doctoral Student Award but this funding was taken away because they won an external award. As a basis for reducing departmental funding in the event of an external award, departments may argue that the minimum funding level has been met and students need not to exceed their funding beyond the external award. However, the GSA-UW has heard of cases where students received overall funding that was less than if they were not to have received the external award (i.e., OGS). This prospect is concerning to graduate students since an external award should be seen as an incentive to cover their tuition and living expenses beyond their current funding. Any reduction in overall funding could be seen as a deterrent to attain external awards, especially for international graduate students where tuition and living expenses are a concern. To research this issue further, the GSA-UW is interested in understanding whether and how graduate students who win external scholarships impact their overall funding and its influence on the wider graduate student community.

**Research Purpose:** The purpose of this project is for the GSA-UW to investigate across all six faculties at the University of Waterloo to understand the influence of external funding on departmental funding. Information on how other U15 universities distribute funding will also be gathered to contrast the University of Waterloo's rules.

# Methods



## 01. Phase One

The first phase was to solicit data from the UW graduate student community. Questions about the impact of external funding on departmental funding were asked to graduate student departmental representatives. These questions can be found in Appendix A. Department representatives from each of the six faculties were encouraged to gather feedback from their constituents before June's Council meeting. The responses were gathered at June's Council Meeting on June 2nd, 2021 through breakout room sessions. Each faculty shared their findings and compiled the results into a summary. Each of the summaries were used to compare with the other faculties to understand the state of external funding at the University of Waterloo. The collective results follow in the next section.



## 02. Phase Two

The second research phase was to contact other Ontario universities, through their respective Graduate Student Association, to understand the process of how their university handles external awards. The following universities were contacted about their external funding procedures: the University of Ottawa, Carleton University, the University of Western Ontario, Queen's University, McMaster University, Wilfrid Laurier University, the University of Guelph, York University, and the University of Toronto. The GSAs were asked to fill out a survey answering questions about their faculty/department's external funding procedures between July 5th, 2021 and July 26th, 2021. The questions in the survey are included in Appendix B. The collective results are compiled in the next section.

The results from both phases were examined and recommendations were created as a result to make the external funding procedure more transparent for graduate students. Discussions at various levels, for instance, GSA-UW Council and the Graduate Student Relations Committee (GSRC), will be had about next steps to address any issues that commence from the findings of this study.

# Results and Key Findings

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## Internal Results – UW

### **How did you learn about your department/faculties external funding procedures?**

When the department representatives were asked about how they learned about their department's external funding procedure, every representative had to research it. There was an overwhelming response stating that many recipients of an external award did not learn about the funding process until they logged into Quest to check their balance and realized their internal funding had been replaced by the external award. Some students were told to talk to their graduate student coordinator to ask about the process. Not one student representative found an outline of the procedure on any University of Waterloo website, except for general information on both internal and external award amounts. Many representatives agreed that it was very difficult to learn about the external funding procedures and are often frustrated when trying to learn about the procedure.

### **How transparent is the external funding procedure information?**

As apparent in Table 1, five of the six faculties said that there was a lack of transparency to their department's external funding procedure. The only faculty that said the funding procedures were transparent was the Faculty of Science. The representatives in this faculty did explain that to understand the external funding breakdown, you have to ask the department's graduate coordinator and they will explain the procedure.

# Results and Key Findings

Table 1. Answer, by faculty, to the question “Is there a lack of transparency to your departments external funding procedures?”

	Arts	Engineering	Environment	Health	Math	Science
Is there a lack of transparency?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

The Department of Physics and Astronomy were the only department at the university to explain that on Learn, all graduate students had access to a PowerPoint presentation that explained the standard yearly physics funding package. This document even explained how the funding would be paid and when it would be paid (e.g. last Friday of every month, first month of the semester, etc.).

## How does winning an external award impact the student's funding package?

Of the six faculties, five stated that when a student is awarded an external award their internal funding is clawed back, as demonstrated in Table 2. Most commonly, a student’s internal GRS funding is reduced and a TAsip is taken away. The funding procedure for each faculty is slightly different, and as such, a breakdown of the procedure for each faculty follows below.

Table 2. Answer, by faculty, to the question “Does internal funding get clawed back when a student wins external funding?”

	Arts	Engineering	Environment	Health	Math	Science
Is internal funding clawed back when an external award is won?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Yes	Yes

# Results and Key Findings

Within the Faculty of Arts, it is dependent upon your department. The most common procedure is that your internal scholarships are clawed back and one TAship is taken away. Some departments will provide a top up award between \$500–2000 in addition to your external award. For the Faculty of Engineering, the procedure is dependent on the award you have received. If a student wins OGS or NSERC, this award replaces their GRS funding. If a student wins the Mitacs award, it is up to their supervisor if GRS is affected or not. In the Faculty of Environment, if you win an external award, your remaining TAships for that year are taken away. However, the faculty provides a top up in addition to your external award. A student's supervisor may also provide a GRS top-up, although it is not guaranteed. Within the Faculty of Health (formerly Faculty of Applied Health Sciences), it is dependent upon your supervisor. It is common to lose your TA and/or RA funding, however, some supervisors allow their students to keep their internal funding after being awarded an external scholarship. Some departments within the Faculty of Health will provide a top up from the faculty in addition to their external scholarship. In the Faculty of Mathematics, if a student attains a provincially or federally funded award, their minimum funding package is reduced. This results in the net change of a student's funding to be equivalent or slightly increased. However, if a student attains an external scholarship from a non-federal or provincial agency, then this award is a top-up on their minimum funding package. In the Faculty of Science, most external awards will replace your base funding from GRS or TAships. Winning prestigious external scholarships, such as the Tri-Agency awards, earn you a top up in addition to the external funding.

A common concern that came up was when this internal funding is taken away, what does the department/faculty do with it? No department representatives were sure of what happened to the internal funding or the TAships that were taken away.

# Results and Key Findings

**Have students from your department stated that they receive equivalent or less funding by accepting an external award than if they were to solely keep their internal funding package? What happened?**

In all six faculties, a student who won an external award made a similar amount to if they would have kept their initial funding package. In some cases, students were awarded a higher amount, due to top ups being awarded. It was unlikely that a student made less money, however, it does sometimes occur. A representative from the Faculty of Engineering stated that if your external funding is less than your tuition, your GRS funding will be maintained to keep the minimum amount. Additionally, there was one case where a student did make less money because they accepted their external award. In the Faculty of Health, it was noted that for international students who accept their OGS winnings and have their internal funding removed, ultimately make less money than if they had accepted their internal funding.

Table 3. Answer, by faculty, to the question “Does external funding equal more than internal funding?”

	Arts	Engineering	Environment	Health	Math	Science
Does external funding equal more than internal funding?	Similar	Similar	Similar	Similar	Similar	Similar

# Other Key Findings

## Course-Based Graduate Programs

For faculties that have a large percentage of students in course-based graduate programs, such as the Faculty of Health and Faculty of Mathematics, it was noted that there is no funding for course-based students. This made course-based students financially disadvantaged compared to their thesis-based counterparts. For one-year research project programs, many students do not realize that they are eligible for OGS or other external awards. For example, in the Master of Mathematics (MMath) in Computational Mathematics program, not a single student has applied to OGS in two cohorts. This is likely because students are not aware that their program qualifies for this award type. It is also likely that the extensive and exhaustive process of applying to OGS plays a role in the low application rate.

## Lack of Incentive to Apply to Major Awards

Another major concern coming out of every faculty is most students do not feel incentivized to apply for external scholarships. Most students do not gain a huge financial benefit from winning an external award, so the effort to apply to the external scholarships is not worth the hassle. In many departments, you lose out on TAing, and many students actually want this experience, especially for those students who want to go into an academic career. There are even some instances, where to get this teaching experience, a student will go and TA for another department or university. Many representatives said that students only apply to the external awards because their supervisor says they should. Additionally, many students say applying to an external award is an exhaustive process with a lack of clarity, a lack of reward, and requires an element of luck. The external award is merely seen as bragging rights, that does not benefit your financial situation significantly.

# Results and Key Findings

“The external award is merely seen as bragging rights, that does not benefit your financial situation significantly.”

## No Increase to External Scholarships Monetary Value

A third concern that was raised was that the many external scholarships have not increased the funding award in years. One student said that in the eight years they were a graduate student, neither OGS nor SSHRC had seen an increase in dollar amount. They even mentioned SSHRC has not increased since the 1990s. This is extremely concerning because inflation is regularly increasing and the cost of living is on the rise. Each year that the external awards do not increase their funding to match inflation or the cost of living, means that the awards are less valuable.

# External Results – Other Ontario Universities

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Of the nine Ontario universities contacted by email to fill out the survey, five universities participated: McMaster University, Queen’s University, University of Ottawa, the University of Western Ontario, and Wilfrid Laurier University. Ten representatives responded to the survey; the number of respondents from each university is visualized in Figure 1.

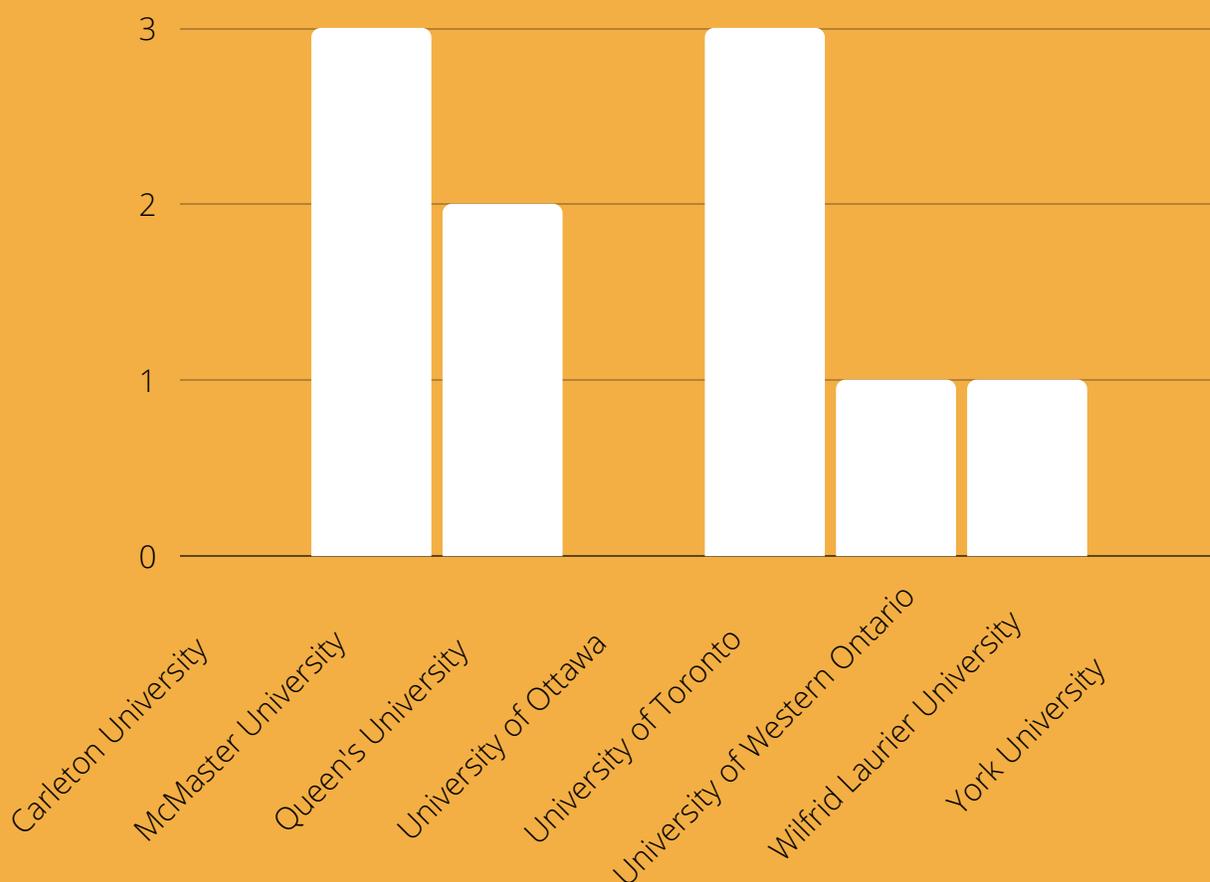


Figure 1. Number of respondents, by university, that filled out the survey.

# Results and Key Findings

## What is the impact of external awards on internal funding?

The procedure is dependent upon each university, however, there is generally a clawback of funding in some aspects. For example, in one faculty at McMaster University, the stipend paid by your supervisor is reduced when a student wins an external award. Another faculty allows you to keep your TAsip and it is considered a top-up on your external award. If your external awards collectively reach or exceed \$35,000, you no longer receive the departmental scholarship. Additionally, in some departments, some supervisors allow their students to receive their external award as a top-up of the internal funding.

At the University of Ottawa, it is dependent on your department. In one faculty, a TAsip may be removed from your funding package if you attain an external award. However, another UOttawa respondent stated that in their department, funding for TAsips is reduced, but students still receive their two TA positions. According to [the UOttawa Admissions Scholarship page](#), "Students who receive a scholarship from an external source (e.g., CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC, OGS, FRG), will receive or continue to receive the first component of the Admission Scholarship. However, if a second component is offered by their academic unit or another internal source, it will be optional for the period of validity of the external scholarship. The total value of the second component can therefore be reduced accordingly. Decisions are made by each faculty."

In one department at the University of Western Ontario, if you win an external scholarship, your Western Graduate Research Scholarship (WGRS) is completely taken away. The only faculties that take away WGRS are the Faculty of Information and Media Studies and the Faculty of Education. How much internal funding is taken away is based on the value of the award. At Queen's University, a cap is typically placed on an amount a student can be funded, so the internal funding is dependent upon the external winnings.

# Results and Key Findings

At Wilfrid Laurier University, funding may be amended at the discretion of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in cases where an external award is held. Graduate TAs can be taken away for major external award holders. However, Laurier does grant students with some awards (e.g. Laurier Graduate Scholarships, the Dean's Graduate Scholarship, Graduate Incentive Scholarship) as top-ups in addition to the winnings of external awards. Students who hold funding at \$50,000 or more per year are ineligible for Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies funding.

Although each Ontario University has its own external funding procedures, there are similarities between Ontario post-secondary institutions and the University of Waterloo. In general, when a graduate student attains an external award, their internal is clawed back. How the internal funding is clawed back depends on the faculty and/or the department at the university - much like at UW. Another similarity to UW's procedures is that the most common way of reducing internal funding is by clawing back TAship(s) or internal scholarships. The amount that is taken away is also very dependent on a student's supervisor or department, complimentary to the results in the internal findings.

**In general, do graduate students at your university experience a reduction in internal funding or no net increase in overall funding with receipt of an external award?**

Once again, this is very different depending on the university. As such, the results are shown by each university in Table 5, which follows on the next page.

# Results and Key Findings

Table 5. Funding Procedures by Ontario University According to Survey Respondents.

University Name	Description of Situation
McMaster University	Dependent on faculty. There is a reduction to net funds. Overall funding slightly increases compared to the minimum stipend.
University of Ottawa	Students make a similar amount of money.
Queen's University	Students can be disadvantaged by winning an external award. The university limits the amount of funding a student can receive.
Wilfrid Laurier University	Graduate students do experience a reduction/clawback in internal funding if they receive certain scholarships. Generally, students who win external scholarships have a net increase.

The result is dependent upon each unique case, likely due to each faculty/department has slightly different rules. However, in general, graduate students both at Waterloo and the other participating universities, students make a similar amount of money. More often than not, graduate students have a slight net increase in overall funding packages. That does not mean there are not select cases where a student can make less than in their internal package - which was also found amongst UW grad students.

# Results and Key Findings

Are you aware of any students who have been disadvantaged by the current process by which external funding impacts internal funding sources?

One respondent from McMaster University, who identifies as a Canadian PhD student, was disadvantaged by this process. However, they did not explain in detail how or why they were disadvantaged. It is assumed, based upon their other responses, that they were disadvantaged financially. An additional response from a McMaster student said that many international students in their department and first-year Master's students do not qualify for TAships and are therefore further disadvantaged.

At the University of Ottawa, an international student won OGS and will be getting \$5000 per term. However, if they were to keep their International Admission Scholarship, which was taken away because of OGS, they would have been making \$6,000 a term. The respondent even commented: What was the point of the scholarship if in the end my funding gets reduced?

At Queen's University, a student was capped on the amount they are provided by Queen's as they won an external scholarship from an institution that was not the government.

At Wilfrid Laurier University, graduate students have shared general feedback that they are not pleased with facing clawbacks for winning external awards and they would like for the GSA to better advocate the institution on comprehensive funding packages so they are able to hold both internal and external awards consecutively.

“  
What was the point of the scholarship if  
in the end my funding gets reduced?  
”

# Recommendations



## 01. State Conditions in Offer Letter

Clearly state in a graduate student's offer letter the internal funding as well as the process for what happens to the internal funding if that student were to be awarded external funding. For example, if a student is supposed to get three TAships, explain that if they win an external award, this opportunity may be taken away. The external awards and their application deadlines should be outlined as well, especially for international students who often miss applying to the early deadlines as they are unaware of the opportunities and research project students (not thesis students) as they are often unaware their research project qualifies for external awards. This will help considerably for transparency purposes.



## 02. State How Funding can be Used

State how each funding type can be used. Many students are unaware of how the external funding is awarded and what it can be used for (e.g. must it be put towards tuition fees or can it go straight into the student's pocket). This can be done by putting it on each student's offer letter or by putting it on Waterloo's external awards website(s).

# Recommendations



## 03. Outline Conditions on Website

Each department or faculty should have a website dedicated to clearly outlining the different types of funding opportunities. When stating that there are opportunities for external awards, the procedure for what happens to a student's internal funding package should be clearly outlined. A document can also be linked to the website to show the different funding packages, such as the one from the Department of Physics and Astronomy (see Figure 2). Having this outlined on the department's website, it will help for transparency purposes and can also save graduate coordinators time so they do not have to explain it to each student who asks them about the procedure.

### Yearly Physics Funding Package – Scholarship students



Figure 2. Example of how a faculty or department could outline a funding package based on Department of Physics and Astronomy funding packages layout.

# Recommendations



## **04. Work with University Administration**

Work with university administration to: (a) adopt a scheme that protects students who are significantly disadvantaged by reduced internal funding due to attaining external awards (i.e., international students); and (b) revisit departmental procedures in internal funding adjustments to ensure students are benefiting from external award attainment.



## **05. State Hierarchy of TA Hiring**

Each department (or faculty as a whole) should clearly state the hierarchy of hiring TAs. Some departments take away TAships when you attain external funding, even though there are TA shortages and classes can get cancelled if not enough support. By doing so, students who may not have been considered for the TA opportunity originally (e.g. course-based students or international students) can apply for it since the external award receipt can no longer occupy this position.



## **06. Send Reminders with Procedures**

At the start of external award application season, each department and/or the GSPA should send out a reminder of when the award deadlines are and the prerequisites for applying to the external awards. In addition, the external funding procedure for that department should be outlined so each student knows the benefits and risks of applying to that award.

# Appendix A

The following questions were asked to department representatives on June 2nd, 2021 during the council meeting. The department representatives discussed these questions in breakout rooms by faculty, resulting in a summary of procedures from each faculty.

- 01** — What is the procedure for your department when a student receives external funding (e.g. a Tri-Agency Award, MITACS, or OGS)?
  - 1.1** — How did you come to learn this information? (e.g. academic advisor, supervisor, department's website).
  - 1.2** — How transparent is this information?
- 02** — What happens to a student's internal funding from the department/faculty after an external funding source has been awarded?
- 03** — Have students from your department stated that they receive equivalent or less funding by accepting an external award than if they were to solely keep their internal funding package? What happened?

# Appendix B

Nine Ontario universities were emailed a survey to fill out between July 5th, 2021 and July 26th, 2021. The following questions were asked in the survey:

- 01** — What is the impact of external awards on internal funding? For example, does a TAship that makes up the minimum funding package become reduced once the external award is accepted? Note that you may be answering this question for all of your university if there is only one practice, or differentially for each faculty or department if they process external funding alternatively.
- 02** — Can you provide more information on the above answer? Where possible, please describe specific procedures by: Masters vs PhD; award type; Citizenship status. And for each category, whether those students will receive less funding, equivalent funding, or increased funding.
- 03** — In general, do graduate students at your university experience a reduction in internal funding or no net increase in overall funding with receipt of an external award? Please explain your answer and provide a rough estimate of what proportion of students would experience this circumstance (e.g., 70% of departments).
- 04** — Are you aware of any students who have been disadvantaged by the current process by which external funding impacts internal funding sources? Please describe any situations that are relevant. Details to include are the following: Masters vs PhD; Award Types; Citizenship. And for each category, please detail whether the students received less funding or equivalent funding.
- 05** — Do you have any final comments, websites, or resources you would like to share with us?

Spring 2021

# External Graduate Funding Procedures Report



## Contact

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