



GUIDELINES FOR THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF FULL-TIME GRADUATE STUDENTS

Dr. Steven Hanna
Vice-Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences
Associate Dean, School of Graduate Studies (Health Sciences)
Professor, Health Research Methods, Evidence, and Impact,
McMaster University

George Bijelic
Program Manager, Health Sciences Graduate Studies
Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University

First Drafted: February 2020
Last Reviewed: November 2021
Reviewed By: Drs. S. Hanna & D. Welch
Last Revised: November 2021
Next Scheduled Review: October 2022
Contact: George Bijelic

All PhD, and many MSc, students are guaranteed a financial support package as stated in their letters of offer. This package is typically a mixture of program scholarship, competitive external scholarships, TA employment income, and research scholarship provided by the supervisor.

This document is intended to clarify how McMaster's policies with respect to employment and scholarship support for graduate students may be clearly articulated in offers of admission and what changes in funding support after arrival are acceptable. It is especially important that the constraints on graduate support are understood given the range of research grant and contract funding sources available to FHS researchers.

OFFER OF ADMISSION

The letter of offer of admission is a contract with the student. The nature and minimum amounts of financial support must be specified in this letter. The School of Graduate Studies requires that the financial support offered to full-time PhD students must be at least \$13,500 plus tuition per year for 4 years, although many FHS graduate programs offer total funding packages in excess of this required minimum. There is currently no university-mandated minimum level of financial support for MSc students, although FHS graduate programs may have internal policies that establish such an amount. A student may be provided more than the amount guaranteed in the letter of offer, but never less. A *sample letter of offer*, illustrates strategies for articulating the sources of a student's support, as outlined below (see Appendix A). Most letters of offer will not include all of these sources.

TYPES OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT

RESEARCH SCHOLARSHIP

Research scholarship consists of a financial contribution from the supervisor which is typically generated by research grants and contracts. This source of support is guaranteed for the duration that the student is considered "in-time". Research scholarships may be provided during overtime and out-of-time status at the supervisor's discretion.

Research scholarship is *not* employment income. It is offered to support a student in full-time study and is not subject to taxes or deductions. As such, there are no specific duties expected in exchange for such support, aside from the academic expectations set by the program, including the requirement to be available on campus on a full-time basis (or the requirement to begin studies online, as appropriate). For example, a student is being provided a research scholarship to complete coursework and make reasonable progress on thesis research and other academic milestones. A student may choose to work on a non-thesis research project or other professional development activity that is mutually agreeable, but a student cannot be required to do this in exchange for research scholarship.

No hourly pay rate, or expected number of hours of work, may be associated with research scholarship. For example, the research scholarship is not contingent on the number of hours per week spent in the laboratory or working on a project. Performance as a full-time student is evaluated in terms of reasonable progress and scholarship regarding program requirements. Examples include thesis supervisory committee reports, course grades, and the timely and effective achievement of program milestones.

PROGRAM SCHOLARSHIPS

The program's contribution towards a student stipend typically comes from the distribution of scholarship funds allocated to the program by the School of Graduate Studies or program operating funds.

These funds are typically provided to students in the form of a Program or Departmental Scholarship. Such scholarships are provided solely to support the student in undertaking fulltime study and are not employment.

EXTERNAL AWARDS

A student may win competitive financial support awards, such as Tri-Council fellowships and Ontario Graduate Scholarships. It is normally permissible for such awards to contribute to the student's total guaranteed financial support, thus reducing the amount required from other sources. It is a best practice for students who secure awards to receive some amount of the award as an increase in their financial support, and also for supervisors to obtain some reduction in their research scholarship contribution, where applicable.

In cases where the award is granted prior to admission, the letter of offer should specify how the award contributes to total amount of financial support. The letter should also indicate that, should the student win an award subsequent to admission, the program may adjust the amount contributed from other sources.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

It is important to note that international students cannot be paid until they have arrived in Canada and opened a Canadian bank account. Please be advised that that no TA employment is possible outside of Canada and a supported student doesn't begin to be employed until they have arrived and signed their employment forms. That is, their time outside Canada is not part of TA employment they are owed.

TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIP AND "RA IN LIEU" EMPLOYMENT

The terms and conditions for employing teaching assistants are governed by the collective agreement negotiated with CUPE 3906 Unit 1, available here:

https://hr.mcmaster.ca/app/uploads/2019/02/CUPE-Local-3906_Unit-1-Collective-Agreement_FINAL.pdf

The specific terms will change as the contracts are periodically renegotiated, but a key feature is that an offer of TA employment in any particular term creates a commitment for future employment for the duration of a student's guaranteed eligibility. Full-time graduate students are eligible for employment as a TA for 2 years of MSc and 4 years of PhD studies, provided they maintain regular full-time graduate status and their ability to perform the work. There is no requirement for the letter of admission to include an offer of TA employment. However, once offered and accepted, the same number of hours must continue to be offered for the remainder of the period of guaranteed eligibility. The wage rate will be as outlined in the collective agreement. The employee is not guaranteed to be assigned to a particular course and may be employed as a TA in 2 different courses per term.

Normally, the scope of the collective agreement is Ontario, therefore graduate students working remotely from anywhere within the Province may perform TA duties and will be eligible to participate in the CUPE 3906 Unit 1 benefit plan. Beginning in the Spring/Summer 2021 terms through to April 30, 2022, employees who have received approval to work remotely in Canada but outside of Ontario as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic will be recognized as members of CUPE 3906, Unit 1, and will be subject to the Unit 1 collective agreement. This agreement recognizes the special circumstances and the prolonged nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. TA employment is not possible outside of Canada.

In many cases, TA employment may contribute to the guaranteed minimum level of financial support as outlined in the letter of offer. The pay rate (subject to applicable taxes and deductions) and minimum number of guaranteed hours should be summarized in the letter. Continued employment as a TA may be contingent on satisfactory performance in the role, but once offered, it may not be withdrawn for any other reason during the period of eligibility.

If an employee is provided TA hours in excess of the guarantee, this becomes the new guaranteed number of hours for the remainder of the eligibility period. It is important to be aware that a student may independently apply for additional TA hours on campus (up to a maximum of 260 hours). If hired, those hours become part of the new guarantee and the home department may be responsible for providing those hours in future years.

The collective agreement treats McMaster University as the employer and does not differentiate between programs and departments. As a consequence, it is crucial that there is a clear agreement, prior to hiring, between a student's graduate program and the program employing the TA about which unit will fulfill the guarantee. This is a common issue for graduate programs in departments which do not operate a corresponding undergraduate "feeder" program.

Program heads and administrators should be aware that if a student goes on an approved leave of absence from study, this does not automatically imply a leave from employment. A student on leave who wishes to continue their TA employment should be informed that if they complete the TA assignment, it will exhaust one of their guarantees. It should be noted that if the individual on leave applies to a vacant TA position (not part of the guarantee) and is awarded the position, these additional hours will become part of the guarantee in subsequent years.

A student who is guaranteed a TA during masters program studies and subsequently transfers to a doctoral program must continue to be offered TA employment for the period of PhD eligibility unless a revised letter of offer is issued. A new letter of offer is generally not produced since most doctoral programs provide total funding that is in excess of that provided to masters candidates.

Students who are not guaranteed TA employment in a letter of offer may subsequently apply for employment as a TA, and if it is offered, this becomes a guarantee of future employment for the remainder of their eligibility.

Students may waive, decline, or defer a portion, or the entire, TA guarantee at their discretion. Students who...

- *decline* a TA position relinquish their guarantee of future TA employment.
- *wave* a TA position are requesting to waive their guarantee for that academic year only.
- *defer* a TA position are postponing their employment to the following term, when they must be offered a position. This is applicable even if they are not normally eligible in the following term (e.g. overtime status).

A student who declines a guarantee is permanently forfeiting a significant fraction of their support package, and so it is expected that students will rarely choose this over a waiver. As a result, whenever an employee is considering declining rather than waiving a guarantee it is important that the implications of this choice are understood by the student, the program staff, and the employer. If a student has previously *declined* a TA guarantee, it is similarly important to clarify that student's intentions at the time the decision was made. Individuals must decline, waive, or defer in writing using the Declination/Deferral of TA-ship Form available at <https://hr.mcmaster.ca/resources/>.

Individuals holding TA guarantees may be offered a research assistant position in lieu of a TA ("RA in Lieu"). RAs in Lieu are employed at the same rate and the same conditions (i.e., hours) as the TA position, but will work as a research assistant instead of a teaching role. Students may not choose whether they are offered a TA or RA in Lieu.

The Hours of Work form is the contract that documents expectations of hours worked. The greater level detail that is included on an hours of work form, the more effective it is in the event of a grievance. Employment supervisors should provide sufficient detail as to the breakdown of hours so that the employer is not vulnerable to a student's claim that they have worked their hours much sooner than anticipated during a term. For example, rather than specifying a total of 70 hours allocated to grading, it is better to give the expected hours for each grading assignment. The Hours of Work form applies to both TA and RA in Lieu positions.

OTHER EMPLOYMENT

Students may be employed as a research assistant (RA), as long as their total number of hours of employment at McMaster does not exceed 505 total hours of employment (in all roles) per academic year. Employment as an RA is not equivalent to an RA in Lieu; the latter only applies if a student has been guaranteed a TA position and it is governed by terms and conditions of the collective agreement for teaching assistants.

Students are not required to accept an offer of research assistant employment unless the terms of this work are specified in the letter of offer. In this case, the letter must indicate, *"At the program's sole discretion, a portion of the amount of a Research Scholarship in a given year may be replaced by a time-limited research assistantship,"* and also specify that the guaranteed minimum financial support in the offer may include up to a defined number of hours of research assistant work per year at a specified rate of pay. In this way, it is possible to require students to perform work on research projects that are outside the scope of their degree requirements, if they are informed of this possibility in the letter of offer. In this case, RA work may be a source of the minimum total financial support outlined in the letter. For detailed information about the terms and conditions that may apply to a specific candidate, please consult Employee/Labour Relations.

Students may be offered research assistant work that is not in the letter of offer, but students are not required to accept this work and it may not substitute for an amount of financial support guaranteed in the letter of offer. That is, it is offered as an option for students who wish to increase their incomes.

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE LETTER OF OFFER

ID: <Applicant's Slate ID number> <date>
<Applicant's Name>

Dear <Applicant's Name> (<Applicant's preferred name, if applicable>),

It is with great pleasure that I write to offer you admission to the full-time Ph.D. program (<Program name>) in the Faculty of Science at McMaster University for the term beginning in September 2022. The typical duration of this program is 48 months. We are delighted that you are joining the vibrant academic community at McMaster. Your prospective supervisor is Dr. <supervisor's name>.

Financial Support

We are pleased to offer you the following financial support for the academic year (September 1 to August 31), prior to any deductions, fees or tuition:

Year 1	<\$xx.xx>
Years 2 to 4	<\$xx.xx>

We encourage you to apply each year, if eligible, for major external scholarships and awards (eg. OGS, SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR).

As part of this financial support, a one year Entrance Scholarship valued at <\$xx.xx> is included. This will be paid out in the first term of your first year of studies. Your supervisor will provide <\$xx.xx> to you in the form of a Research Scholarship.

Please note that if you are successful in winning a major external scholarship or award, the financial support mentioned above may be adjusted partially according to the policies of your in-coming program and of McMaster University. You will be provided with official correspondence from the program reflecting the change in your financial support.

This financial support includes a Teaching Assistantship (TA) involving 260 hours of work over each year of study in the program. The 2022-23 rate is \$44.95 per hour and therefore the Teaching Assistantship, prior to any deductions, is valued at \$11,687.00. In accordance with the CUPE Local 3906, Unit 1 Collective Agreement, an additional 3 paid hours per term of active employment will be allocated for health and safety training and orientation. All payments for your TA work are contingent on fulfillment of your employment obligations. Please note that ongoing employment as a TA is subject to you maintaining regular full-time graduate student status and your ability to perform the work.

Terms and Conditions

- You must maintain good academic standing in any courses currently in progress or taken post-application/offer
- Conditions of admission
 - Official transcripts for all institutions you have previously attended. In addition, where official transcripts are not in English, official translations are required.
 - Submit all required documentation to your program by December 1, 2022.

- Failing to meet these conditions, this offer will be rescinded.
- Additional terms and conditions related to the offer are described in the "Notes for Successful Applicants" section of the School of Graduate Studies website: <https://gs.mcmaster.ca/live-accepted-my-offer/notes-for-successful-applicants/>

Tuition and Fees

Currently, full-time program fees for the <Program Name> program for the 2021/22 academic year (September to August) for <International or Domestic> students are <\$xx.xx>, plus flat fee full-time supplementary fees of <\$xx.xx> per year. Supplemental fees are non-refundable and subject to change for subsequent academic years. Tuition for the 2022/23 and subsequent academic years is subject to change.

Language below included in international offers only:

Health Insurance is mandatory for all International students and is provided through the University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP) at a current cost of \$756 annually for one person. It is mandatory to apply for UHIP for dependents (spouse and/or children) if they are residing in Ontario, within 30 days of arrival.

A reasonable estimate of living expenses, in addition to tuition fees and travel costs to and from McMaster, for a Graduate Student for a 12-Month period is about \$12,500 for a single person.

Responding to your Offer

McMaster University currently expects students to be fully vaccinated prior to enrollment for September 2022 in compliance with *McMaster University's Vaccine Mandate* (<https://covid19.mcmaster.ca/vaccination-mandate/>). By accepting this offer, you are agreeing to comply with any vaccine policies related to the start of the Fall term. You will not be permitted to enroll in courses, conduct research or TA if proof is not supplied prior to the start of the term. Details for how to fulfill this requirement, including a link to the University Vaccination Mandate and Policy can be found in Notes for Successful Applicants.

Please inform us of your acceptance or rejection of this offer prior to <offer response deadline> by completing the online response form at https://applygrad.mcmaster.ca/portal/applicant_status. We hope that you will decide to accept your offer, and we look forward to welcoming you to Graduate Studies at McMaster University.

Language below included in international offers only:

We encourage you to begin the application process to obtain your study permit as soon as possible.

Sincerely yours,

<Admission Officer Name & Signature>
Admissions and Recruitment Officer
McMaster University DLI#: O19395535729