

# **2019 Pre-Budget Brief: Investing in Canada's Postdoctoral Training System**

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget  
Consultations in Advance of the 2019 Budget

By:



**Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars  
Association Canadienne des Stagiaires Post-doctoraux**

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## Recommendations for the 2019 Budget

- 1) Amend the Employment Insurance Act to clearly define all postdoctoral scholars working in Canada as employees of the institutions where they conduct research and other scholarly activities, regardless of citizenship or source of funding.
- 2) Create a uniform national policy on postdoctoral research and training that defines all postdocs as both trainees and employees, and establishes:
  - a minimum gross annual income starting at \$47,500/year for all postdocs and increasing by 2% for each additional year of postdoctoral training;
  - access to statutory (EI and CPP) and workplace benefits; and
  - additional support / training requirements for postdoctoral employers.
- 3) Increase Tri-Agency funding to offset the increased labour costs associated with new minimum standards and the following additional expenses:
  - Increase the stipend for all Tri-Agency fellowships (except Banting) to \$50,000/year to start (+\$5,000 research allowance) and increase by 2% per year of additional training.
  - Adjust the annual stipend for awards physically held outside of Canada to reflect differences (and/or changes) in currency exchange rates (up to a maximum of \$10,000).
  - Increase the duration of fellowships to 3 years for SSHRC- and NSERC-related disciplines and 4 years for CIHR-related disciplines (as per the Naylor Report).
  - Eliminate limits on the duration of postdoctoral support from Tri-Agency grants
  - Increase the number of fellowships available for all three funding agencies to maintain a success rate of at least 25% and allocate 20% of those awards to international postdocs.
  - Create new funding opportunities for senior postdocs to support those who are close to being competitive for (or in the process of transitioning to) faculty positions.
  - Create new funding opportunities specifically geared towards indigenous postdocs
  - Establish a pool of smaller awards for trainees to support professional development and career transitions for PhDs and postdocs seeking non-tenure track careers.
  - Establish grants to fund research focused on postdoc and PhD career development, experiential learning, career transitions, and employability in non-academic sectors.
- 4) Provide subsidies to institutions based on number of postdoctoral trainees to support:
  - access to on-campus services and support for postdocs (e.g., ombudsmen, career counseling, health and wellness services, immigration support, etc.);
  - professional development programming specific to postdocs;
  - childcare / housing allowances for postdocs; and
  - administrative costs.
- 5) Establish funds to:
  - monitor postdoctoral employment conditions and policies at the institutional, provincial, and national levels;
  - track postdoctoral labour market outcomes; and
  - promote the value of postdoctoral and PhD training to non-academic employers.
- 6) Increase investments / incentives for research and development in non-academic sectors drive the creation of jobs that require PhD-level training

## Overview

The Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars (CAPS) is a national organization that represents the interests of postdoctoral trainees ('postdocs') working in Canada, as well as Canadian postdocs abroad. Much of the content and many of the recommendations in this Pre-budget Brief were adapted from CAPS' Official Report to the Advisory Panel for Canada's Fundamental Science Review ([Sparling & Jadavji, 2016](#)) and input from over 5,000 current/former postdocs on the three Canadian National Postdoctoral Surveys we conducted in 2009 ([Stanford et al., 2009](#)), 2013 ([Mitchell et al., 2013](#)), and 2016 ([Jadavji et al., 2016](#)).

Herein we focus on identifying the major challenges facing Canadian postdoctoral trainees and provide recommendations to address those challenges in order to improve recruitment and retention of Canadian-trained researchers.

## Background

According to CAPS' 2016 National Survey data, the average postdoc working in Canada today is 34 years old, married, and has a median gross income of \$42,500; which is about half that of their average PhD peer who entered the workforce rather than pursue postdoc training. About 1/3 of postdocs in Canada have children, and of those, 50% have more than one child. In summary, postdocs are adults, at a stage in life when settling down, buying houses, starting families and saving for retirement are the norm. While low compensation and lack of access to pension/benefits have always represented challenges to the recruitment and retention of postdocs in Canada, lengthening training times and the related aging of the PhD and postdoc populations have considerably heightened the need for improved support over the past couple of decades, and this is reflected by the fact that access to EI, pension plans, and health/dental insurance ranked among the most desired benefits for respondents on our 2016 survey.

Due primarily to a steady rise in postdoctoral unionization across the country over the past decade, coupled with the fact that the vast majority of postdocs in training are 'internally funded' (i.e., primarily paid off grants held by their supervisor), the average postdoc in Canada is now classified as an employee with access to EI/CPP, workplace benefits, and bargaining rights. However, this is not the case at all Canadian institutions, as even where unions exist, externally-funded postdocs (including Tri-Agency award-holders) are commonly labeled 'trainees' instead of employees and denied access to similar benefits. This has led to a situation where the average postdoc now has access to benefits and rights that are not provided to the most promising postdocs in training (i.e., federal fellowship holders). Thus, it is now rather common for Tri-Agency fellowship winners to be expected to give up access to pension and benefits by accepting their award. This situation makes some postdocs (particularly those with families) reluctant to even apply for Tri-Agency funding and resentful of institutions that make external funding applications a contractual requirement for postdocs.

Longer training times and stagnant compensation levels among PhD students have led to an increase in student debt and 'lost wages' to the point where it now takes the average PhD 20+

years to recoup the wages they lose during their training ([Edge & Munro, 2015](#)). The situation for postdocs is even worse, as there is no evidence that the average Canadian postdoc today ever makes up for the earnings they lose during their postdoctoral training ([Sparling & Jadavji, 2016](#)). For postdocs lacking employee status, the loss of wages is compounded by a lack of access to pension plans that include employer contributions and may be further exacerbated by a lack of EI and health/dental benefits. Moreover, CAPS 2016 Survey, found that former postdocs had an unemployment rate more than twice that of the average PhD in Canada, which clearly demonstrates the need for EI coverage and improved career development / support for Canadian-trained postdocs.

## Reimagining the Canadian Postdoctoral Training System

Our **first recommendation** is largely aimed at providing employee status and access to EI and CPP for externally-funded postdocs, including Tri-Agency award-holders. This would harmonize access to statutory benefits for all postdocs in Canada and ensure that our most promising postdocs are no longer penalized by reduced access to benefits compared to the average postdoc. Based on precedence, all internally-funded postdocs in Canada will eventually be granted employee status through CRA or provincial labour board rulings, so this move will simply speed up the inevitable for institutions that have yet to be challenged on that policy. Providing statutory benefits for all postdocs will enhance postdoctoral recruitment by making Canada more competitive with many foreign countries (the UK, France, Switzerland, Australia) that offer similar benefits to their postdocs. While this approach may seem unusual, it should be pointed out that postdocs (including the externally-funded) already meet most of the criteria for determining employee status at the provincial and federal levels in Canada, and there is precedence for special rulings of this nature (e.g., the taxi and hairdressing industries).

The **second recommendation** aims to create uniform postdoctoral policy at the national level. The lack of system oversight and policy coordination at the national, provincial, or regional levels has contributed to the rampant disparity in compensation, benefits, and other support for postdocs across Canada and at this point it is clear that neither provincial/institutional policy reform will be able to rectify that situation. With respect to the recruitment of both domestic and international postdocs, it is important to note that Canada competes with many other countries that have more uniform and standardized national policies for postdoctoral training. As such, the development of uniform national postdoctoral policy will make the Canadian system more competitive in attracting potential postdocs and easier for new recruits to navigate.

The notion that trainee and employee status are mutually exclusive is rampant in academia despite the fact that EI Regulations clearly state otherwise (Paragraph 6b; [Employment Insurance Regulations](#)). A number of federal ministries that hire postdocs (i.e., ‘visiting fellows’) are equally guilty of this, as despite a 2012 CRA Ruling to the contrary, postdocs in many government labs continue to be denied employment status and the associated benefits. Conversely, some institutions where postdocs have gained employee status now treat

internally-funded postdocs as though they are not trainees, thereby diminishing their access to training opportunities. This should simply not be allowed, as regardless of whether a postdoc is considered an employee, the inclusion of 'training' should be required in any postdoctoral position by definition. Otherwise postdocs are simply reduced to less expensive replacements for research assistants and technicians.

The establishment of a minimum annual income of \$47,500 for all postdocs in Canada is intended to correct for a lack of appropriate inflation-adjustments in postdoctoral compensation over time, to minimize wage loss during training, and to make the Canadian training system more attractive to postdocs relative to other countries. It should be noted that this value matches the minimum stipend value now adopted by the NIH.

## Increasing Direct and Indirect Support for Postdocs

Our **third recommendation** calls for an increase in Tri-Agency funding to cover the increased labour costs associated with the minimum standards established by Canada's new national postdoc policy as well as a variety of recommendations related to:

- 1) increasing the competitiveness of Tri-Agency fellowships;
- 2) adjusting durations of support to reflect the reality of the current training and labour environment for postdocs;
- 3) creating new funding opportunities for minority groups and postdocs in career transitions; and
- 4) supporting research to improve the Canadian postdoctoral training system.

## Investing in the Postdoctoral Training System

**Recommendation #4** suggests that subsidies be provided to institutions based on the number of postdocs they train per year to support access to on-campus services/support, professional development, allowances (e.g., childcare and housing), and administrative costs. This approach is similar to the subsidies provided to institutions based on the number of enrolled students.

## Maintaining a Healthy Postdoctoral Training System

The **5<sup>th</sup> recommendation** focuses on maintaining a healthy postdoctoral training system in the future by funding the monitoring of postdoctoral employment conditions and policies at the institutional, provincial, and national levels and improving tracking of former postdocs to assess long-term labour market outcomes. These investments are essential to maintaining the health and adaptability of the system, as evidence-based adjustments in policy and funding cannot be made in the absence of accurate data.

## Investing in Job Creation for Postdocs in Canada

Our **6<sup>th</sup> recommendation** is focused on creating more jobs for PhDs and postdocs in Canada through increased investments and/or incentives for research and development in non-academic sectors. This recommendation is specifically designed to increase the retention of postdoc trainees by making Canada more attractive to PhD holders in general.

## Concluding Statement

At present, the Canadian postdoctoral training system does not provide a level of support that is competitive with other nations with respect to the recruitment and retention of highly qualified personnel. The full implementation of the recommendations in this pre-budget brief would change all that and transform the Canadian postdoctoral training system to boost our capacity to attract, develop, and retain highly qualified personnel. This would position our country as a world leader in innovation and advanced post-graduate research and training.

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