

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Postdoctoral Associations of Alberta Post-secondary Labour Relations Consultation Report for Alberta Advanced Education

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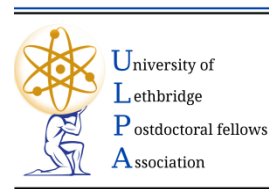
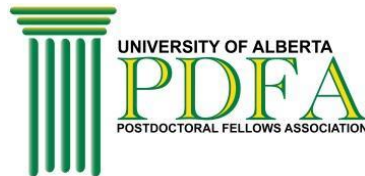
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Executive Summary – Postdoctoral Associations of Alberta Post-secondary Labour Relations Consultation for Alberta Advanced Education

Background

In response to a request from the Minister of Advanced Education, the Honourable Marlin Schmidt, the Postdoctoral Association of the University of Calgary (PDAC), the University of Alberta Postdoctoral Fellows Association (PDFA), and the University of Lethbridge Postdoctoral Fellows Association (ULPA) submitted a 19-page report (along with 7 appendices including survey data from Alberta postdocs) as part of the Post-secondary Labour Relations Consultation conducted by Alberta Advanced Education in fall 2016. This Executive Summary reviews the key points from the full report ([available here](#)) and highlights the policy recommendations contained therein.

The report was largely based on data from postdocs working in Alberta collected in 3 recent surveys:

- 1) The Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars' (CAPS) 2016 Canadian National Postdoc Survey – An online survey conducted March to May 2016; data filtered to only include postdocs working in Alberta (n = 231; ~25% of Alberta postdocs) or formerly working in Alberta (n = 32).
- 2) PDAC's 2015 Postdoc Survey – An online survey of postdocs working at the University of Calgary from Nov 2015 to Jan 2016 (n = 168; ~34% response rate).
- 3) The PDFA's 2015 Member Survey – An online survey of postdocs working at the University of Alberta from Feb-March 2015 (n = 140; ~25% response rate).

Highlights from the report

Summary Data from CAPS 2016 Survey – postdocs who worked in Alberta only

The average postdoc working in Alberta was 34 years old and married or living in a common-law relationship (73%). Nearly 1/3 of respondents were parents, and of those 1/3 had more than one child.

Citizenship

- 35% were Canadian citizens
- 20% permanent residents or landed immigrants
- 45% international postdocs holding work permits

Gross annual income

- \$49,530 (average) or \$47,500 (median)
- ~\$35,000/year less than the median annual income reported for a Canadian PhD holder working full-time in a non-postdoc position 3 years after graduation (Ferguson & Wang, 2014).

Employment status

- Estimated that ≤ 16% of postdocs working in Alberta were classified as 'employees'
- Among former postdocs who trained in Alberta 16% reported being unemployed
 - o ~2x the national average (9%) for all former postdocs on CAPS 2016 Survey
 - o 4x the unemployment rate (4%) for PhD-holders in Canada working in non-postdoc positions 3 years after graduation (Edge & Munro, 2015)
- This data speaks strongly to the need for job-loss benefits among postdocs working in Alberta

Executive Summary – Postdoctoral Associations of Alberta Post-secondary Labour Relations Consultation for Alberta Advanced Education

Employment status and benefits

The average postdoc is now at an age when most people are saving for retirement in earnest, settling down, buying homes, and starting families. Despite the fact that postdocs in Alberta pay full provincial and federal income tax, we are largely classified as ‘trainees’ rather than employees and denied access to social support programs including Employment Insurance (EI) and the Canada Pension Plan (CPP).

Without access to EI most postdocs working in Alberta lack coverage for:

- ***Job loss (‘regular’) benefits***
- ***Maternity and parental benefits***
- ***Sickness benefits***
- ***Bereavement benefits***
- ***Compassionate care benefits***
- ***Special benefits for parents of critically ill children***

Access to maternity and parental benefits is provided for some postdocs based on source of income.

- Full parental benefits are only guaranteed for postdocs holding awards from the Tri-council (6 months at full pay) or provincial (e.g., Alberta Innovates; 1 year at full pay) funding agencies.
- Maternity benefits (4 months at full pay) are guaranteed for postdocs holding some internal awards (e.g., Eyes High) at the University of Calgary.
- For the majority of female postdocs (funded by internal grants) paid maternity leave depends entirely on whether their supervisor has adequate funding to cover the cost.
- None of the universities offer more than 5 days paid leave to new fathers paid off internal grants, so paid paternity/parental leave is practically non-existent for that group.
- Under EI, all postdocs would have access to maternity/parental benefits that pay 55% of their average insurable weekly earnings up to a maximum of \$543/week (as of January 1st, 2017) for up to 1 year; 35 weeks of which can be split between the parents to maximize family income.

The majority of postdocs lack access to any retirement plan (CPP or otherwise) that includes employer contributions. Thus, postdocs are severely disadvantaged in terms of their ability to save for retirement as they need to contribute twice as much to savings to match employee pension contributions.

In the absence of employee status postdocs are often denied other ‘employee-style’ benefits. For example, according to the CAPS 2016 Survey data, among postdocs working in Alberta:

- 16% lack dental insurance
- 29% lack drug plan coverage
- 34% lack health insurance for family
- 35% lack extended health coverage
- 60% lack vision/eye care
- 76% lack life insurance
- 84% lack long-term disability

Only 31% of postdocs have access to benefits from other sources (e.g., spouse), so the lack of standard employee benefits represents an additional financial burden for postdocs and their families.

Executive Summary – Postdoctoral Associations of Alberta Post-secondary Labour Relations Consultation for Alberta Advanced Education

Why postdocs working in Alberta should be classified as employees

1. *Most postdocs working in Alberta want to be classed as employees and have access to EI and CPP*

- CAPS 2016 Survey:
 - Access to EI and CPP were the most desired benefits among postdocs working in Alberta
 - 80% of respondents agreed that lobbying for access to statutory benefits (e.g., EI and CPP) should be an ‘essential’ or ‘high’ priority for CAPS
- University of Alberta PDFAs’ 2015 Survey: 58% of respondents selected access to EI and CPP as the top priority for changing “the situation” of postdocs
- PDAC’s 2015 Survey: 79% of postdocs supported the goal of attaining employee status

2. *Postdocs are not enrolled in a formal training program, rarely complete coursework, and receive no significant additional accreditation for their training*

- Postdoctoral training is best envisioned as an apprenticeship that includes ‘on-the-job’ training (as per labour relations board rulings in other provinces)
- Other groups of apprentices in Alberta tend to be categorized as employees with access to EI and CPP

3. *Postdocs spend the majority of their time engaged in research and academic work*

- Postdocs spend ~92% of their time engaged in research and academic work and only 8% of their time on career development (CAPS 2016 Survey)

4. *Postdoc duties are similar to those of other groups in academia that are considered employees*

- Postdoctoral work is highly similar to that of research associates and faculty members, though the latter groups tend to spend less time engaged in hands-on research
- Despite similar duties and similar sources of salary funding, both research associates and faculty members are considered employees whereas postdocs generally are not

5. *Postdoctoral salaries are largely supported by internal funding*

- The majority of postdocs working in Alberta (>58%) receive primary salary support from research grants or institutional/department grants. This would qualify most postdocs working in Alberta as employees if they worked in Ontario or Quebec at present.

6. *Most postdocs meet the criteria to be considered employees in Alberta*

- As a group, postdocs largely meet the criteria for determining employee status used by Alberta Labour (see Table 3 in report for full assessment of criteria).

7. *Many postdocs working in other provinces and countries are classified as employees and provided access to EI and CPP or similar benefits*

- Postdocs currently working in Ontario and Quebec, but also in other countries with strong academic research sectors (e.g., UK, Australia, Denmark; see Appendix 6), are considered employees and provided access to EI and CPP or similar benefits.

Executive Summary – Postdoctoral Associations of Alberta Post-secondary Labour Relations Consultation for Alberta Advanced Education

Why postdocs should be included in legislation governing post-secondary institutions

Postdocs represent a key group in post-secondary academia and research that is excluded from Alberta's legislation governing post-secondary institutions (the Post-Secondary Learning Act, or PSLA). The PSLA legislates the establishment and incorporation of student and faculty associations and empowers those associations to self-govern and negotiate employment agreements (i.e., collectively bargain) with institutions on behalf of their members. The PSLA also defines the composition of the governing bodies of Alberta universities (e.g., the General Faculties Council, Board of Governors, and Senate), guaranteeing a certain proportion of seats for representatives from student, graduate student, and faculty associations, among others.

Alberta's postdocs deserve to be included in the PSLA, or another piece of legislation that guarantees similar rights and privileges to those provided to students and faculty at our post-secondary institutions.

The inclusion of postdocs in such legislation could:

- ***Increase uniformity in postdoctoral policy in Alberta***
- ***Provide a means to clarify the status of postdocs working in Alberta***
- ***Allow postdocs and their associations to effectively bargain for improved rights and benefits***
- ***Ensure that universities were obligated to consult postdocs or their associations in setting or changing policies affecting postdocs***
- ***Allow postdoctoral associations to incorporate and self-govern***
- ***Increase postdoctoral engagement in university governance***

Alberta postdocs generally want to be included in post-secondary legislation. Indeed, 57% of respondents supported the inclusion of postdocs in the Alberta PSLA on PDAC's 2015 Survey, whereas only 4% were opposed, and the remaining 38% were undecided.

Summary of specific recommendations

Based on the findings from recent surveys and input from our respective postdoctoral communities, the postdoctoral associations of Alberta made the following recommendations to the Alberta government:

- 1. Make all postdocs working in Alberta (regardless of source of funding) employees with access to EI and CPP.***
- 2. Offset the cost to postdocs and/or institutions by providing funding specifically earmarked to increase services, protections, and/or benefits for postdocs in Alberta as part of ongoing support for research and innovation. We specifically suggested re-allocating provincial income tax collected from postdocs towards this goal.***
- 3. Include postdocs in provincial legislation governing post-secondary institutions and provide rights and privileges similar to those afforded to other key groups in academia (e.g., graduate students and faculty), including collective bargaining rights, incorporation, self-governance, and appropriate representation in university governance.***

Executive Summary – Postdoctoral Associations of Alberta Post-secondary Labour Relations Consultation for Alberta Advanced Education

Discussion of potential outcomes

The recommended policy changes will come at a cost, as access to EI and CPP is not free. Based on the median postdoc income of \$47,500/year, the annual premiums for EI and CPP in 2017 will cost each postdoc \$2,952 (employee premium) and each institution \$3,262 per postdoc (employer premium).

At that rate, the cost to a given institution can be estimated. For example, assuming the University of Calgary maintains ~475 postdocs in 2017 the total cost would be ~\$1.55 million to cover employer premiums for EI and CPP for all postdocs. This represents 0.43% of the University's \$360.5 million sponsored research budget in 2015-2016, or ~33 postdoctoral positions at the median annual income.

To minimize the impact on research funding and postdoctoral positions we suggested that the province provide funding to offset the additional cost of providing access to EI and CPP for all postdocs. Support for such a program could come directly from the income tax collected from postdocs, and it could be directed towards subsidizing the cost to postdocs and/or institutions.

In the absence of adequate provincial funding to offset those premiums, the costs associated with the recommended changes may result in a decrease in the number of postdocs working in Alberta. Whether or not those changes will result in fewer postdocs long-term remains unclear, as there is little evidence for a long-term decrease in the number of postdocs at institutions where postdocs have gained employee status through unionization.

There are indications that we are over-training postdocs relative to the availability of jobs requiring that level of training in Canada. Evidence for this comes from the fact that only approximately 20% of current postdocs are expected to attain tenured faculty positions (Powell, 2012) and the higher unemployment rate among former postdocs in Canada and Alberta compared to the unemployment rate previously reported for PhD-holders in Canada (see page 2). Thus, a moderate decline in the number of postdocs working in Alberta may not be wholly negative. Indeed, many postdocs would support a reduction in our ranks, as 75% of Alberta respondents on the 2016 CAPS Survey indicated that "Addressing the perceived disconnect between the number of postdoctoral scholars and the employment opportunities available that make use of postdoctoral scholars' skills" should be an 'essential' or 'high' priority for CAPS.

Concluding statement

Improving working conditions for postdocs by providing access to EI and CPP and the power to negotiate employment conditions will help minimize concerns and distractions related to money, job security, and family planning, thereby making Alberta's postdocs more productive overall. Addressing the needs of Alberta's postdocs will make this province more attractive to the best and brightest minds from around the globe and thus enhance the recruitment of talented scientists and academics for years to come. These changes will help increase the capacity for research and innovation in our province, which will facilitate economic diversity, prosperity, and long-term growth. Given that the challenges facing postdocs here are not unique in Canada, or around the world, this is an opportunity for Alberta to set a new standard in terms of postdoctoral policy in our country, and to demonstrate true leadership to the global community in terms of labour relations in the post-secondary sector.

Executive Summary – Postdoctoral Associations of Alberta Post-secondary Labour Relations Consultation for Alberta Advanced Education

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