

The state of doctoral social work education in Canada

**Andrew D. Eaton**<sup>1\*</sup> ([andrew.eaton@uregina.ca](mailto:andrew.eaton@uregina.ca)), **Lin Fang**<sup>2</sup> ([lin.fang@utoronto.ca](mailto:lin.fang@utoronto.ca)), **Nelson**

**Pang**<sup>1</sup> ([nelson.pang@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:nelson.pang@mail.utoronto.ca))

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Social Work – Saskatoon Campus, University of Regina, 111-116 Research Dr.  
Saskatoon, SK, Canada, S7N 3R3

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario,  
Canada, M5S 1V4

\*Corresponding author

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### **Abstract**

**Doctoral education in social work is critical in nurturing the stewards of the discipline.** Universities across Canada, and elsewhere, are increasing admissions for bachelor and master of social work programs. Consequently, doctoral social work programs are expanding to **educate and** train new social work faculty. Extant literature on doctoral social work education is predominantly American. There are fourteen Canadian doctoral social work programs, yet no study has observed the state of these programs. Using two data sources, this article provides a snapshot of PhD social work student experiences in 2019-2020. The analysis of all doctoral social work students (n=157) from the 2019 Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS) found that: a) the overall quality of social work PhD programs in Canada was rated by students as moderate; and b) financial obstacles may be an undue barrier to academic success. Furthermore, the analysis of an online survey of Canadian social work PhD students (n=69) regarding their experience applying for doctoral fellowships and scholarships found that workshops significantly facilitated scholarship success, and that other institutional preparation activities were identified as valuable. These findings illuminate the current state of doctoral social work education in Canada with implications for research and education.

### **Keywords**

Doctoral; PhD; Fellowships; Scholarships; Canada

**Word count: 5,329**

## Introduction

### Doctoral Social Work Education

**Social work plays an important role in preparing students to be the stewards of the discipline and profession (Harrington et al., 2014, p. 282). PhD Students in social work are prepared to generate and disseminate knowledge that ultimately achieves this mission of the profession, dedicated to the welfare of all people, the development of research and professional knowledge as well as skills and resources to meet the needs of the populations we serve, and the achievement of social justice for all (Canadian Association of Social Workers Codes of Ethics, 2005).**

As social work is a discipline and profession that continues to evolve and expand, schools of social work worldwide are receiving increasing numbers of applications and are expanding the admission limits of their bachelor and master of social work programs (Council on Social Work Education, 2020; Truell, 2018). For example, in the United States (US), the number of bachelor and master of social work students increased 23.4% (~45,000 people) from 2010 to 2015 (Robbins et al., 2016). Globally, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) reported a 60% increase in the number of recognized national social work associations between 2011 and 2017 (Stark, 2018). This expansion – coupled with a global trend of prioritizing field-specific experience in the hiring of new social work faculty members – has resulted in a need for greater focus on doctoral social work education (Barsky et al., 2013; Lightfoot et al., 2021). PhD programs of social work prepare future social work faculty, and the quality of the field's faculty members is a key determinant of the profession's potential for continued growth and prominence (Csiernik & Hillock, 2021).

Due to social work's recent expansion at the bachelor and master's levels, there has consequently been an increase in the number of doctoral social work degree programs. (Franklin et al., 2021; Kurzman, 2015). However, there has as yet been minimal empirical study on doctoral programs of social work. The extant literature that is available is overwhelmingly focused on United States' (US) doctoral programs of social work (Acquavita & Tice, 2015; Cunningham-Williams et al., 2018; Liechty et al., 2009; Tijerina & Deepak, 2014; McGovern & Zimmerman, 2018), possibly due to the large number of social work PhD programs in the country. In 2019, there were 80 PhD programs of social work in the US (Bradshaw et al., 2021) compared to other countries, such as **29 in the** United Kingdom, **14 in** Canada, and **8 in** Australia (Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), 2022; **Postgraduate Search, 2022**; Postgrad Australia, 2022). It is important to study the state of PhD of social work programs in a contextual manner – at least, on a national level – rather than applying US knowledge worldwide. To date, there is no known study of Canadian social work PhD programs.

### **Canadian Social Work PhD Programs**

As of July 2021, there are 14 doctoral programs of social work in Canada (CASWE, 2022), all offered by public universities (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, 2022). Of these programs, relative to Canada's 10 provinces and three territories, one is in British Columbia (University of British Columbia), one is in Alberta (University of Calgary), one is in Manitoba (University of Manitoba), five are in Ontario (Carleton University, McMaster University, University of Toronto, York University, University of Windsor, Wilfrid Laurier University, Université d'Ottawa), three are in Quebec (Université de Montréal, Université Laval, McGill University), and one is in Newfoundland (Memorial University of Newfoundland). There are no doctoral programs of social work in the Canadian provinces of

Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island nor in any of Canada's three territories (Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon). These programs are structured somewhat similarly with coursework in years one and two, comprehensive exam or paper in year two or three, thesis proposal in year three or four, and thesis defense in year five or six (McMaster University, 2022; University of British Columbia, 2022). Thirteen of the 14 programs are relatively small (admitting 2-4 students per year) with the standout being University of Toronto which admits up to 10 students per year (Carleton University, 2022; University of Toronto, 2022).

### **Doctoral Fellowships and Scholarships**

Fellowships and scholarships are an important component of doctoral education. These stipends provide some financial security for doctoral students to develop their scholarship and conduct their dissertation research, while offering the opportunity for them to enter competitions that mirror the process of applying for grant and salary support as an independent researcher. While some institutions and doctoral programs in Canada offer base fellowships, ranging from \$17,500 to \$22,000 CAD per year to doctoral students and internal fellowships and scholarships that may be competitive at the departmental or university level, it is extramural fellowships that tend to offer more financial support and be regarded as more prestigious. Notably, among doctoral programs that provide base funding, several require students to apply for extramural fellowships (University of Toronto, 2022; Wilfrid Laurier University, 2022).

Extramural doctoral fellowships in Canada are primarily from the federal government via the Tri-Council funding agencies and are valued at \$20,000 to \$35,000 per year for up to 4 years (Government of Canada, 2022). Canada's Tri-Council is comprised of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and

the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC). Provincial and Territorial governments in Canada also offer doctoral fellowships, typically in the amount of \$10,000 to \$15,000 for 1 year (Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2022). Alongside less monetary value and shorter term than the Tri-Council awards, these fellowship competitions are often specifically focused on a particular provincial ministry (such as long-term care or child welfare). Finally, charitable and private organizations in Canada offer doctoral fellowships at a range of values and terms, although these tend to be for far fewer individuals than the federal and provincial/territorial awards.

Social work may be in a unique position amongst disciplines for doctoral study in Canada, for two main reasons. First, as a profession with proven ability to conduct both health and social science research, doctoral students of social work in Canada may find success with either SSHRC or CIHR when other disciplines may be more siloed to a single funding agency within the Tri-Council. Second, as both bachelor of social work (BSW) and master of social work (MSW) degrees are professional programs designed to prepare students for frontline social work practice and as completion of an MSW alongside post-degree practice experience are a key criteria for admission into a social work PhD program in Canada, many PhD students of social work in Canada may begin their research training upon commencement of their doctoral study. As such, while there are numerous opportunities available for extramural fellowships and scholarships, doctoral students of social work can be less prepared and consequently less competitive in multidisciplinary competitions (such as CIHR) than their peers in other disciplines.

## **Objective**

The objective of this article is to present recent, descriptive data on the experiences of students enrolled in PhD programs of social work in Canada and to focus on one key aspect – fellowships and scholarships – in order to develop a baseline level of understanding of the Canadian context and to encourage similar efforts in other countries and international collaboration to study and improve doctoral social work education.

## **Methods**

Two distinct data sources are reported here. First, we requested data collected by the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (CAGS) in their most recent 2019 Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS). We received data from 157 PhD students of social work who responded to the 2019 CGPSS (CAGS, 2022). As funding for doctoral study has been identified as a determinant to program and career success (Horta et al., 2018), we initiated a survey of current PhD students of social work in Canada regarding their experiences applying for doctoral fellowships and scholarships (n=69). This research received approval from the University of Toronto's Health Sciences Research Ethics Board (Protocol ID# 39009) and the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (Protocol ID# 112925).

## **Recruitment and Data Collection**

Both the CGPSS and the fellowship survey's recruitment and data collection materials were available in English and French. The CGPSS was conducted via an online survey in 2019, that was distributed to all graduate students in Canada and may be representative (CAGS, 2022). The CGPSS contains quantitative questions (combination of demographic, dyadic, and Likert-style scales) about graduate student satisfaction and experience (CAGS, 2022). The fellowship survey was conducted online using Qualtrics software from May 1 to October 31, 2020.

Purposive sampling was utilized as the first author (at time of study, a social work doctoral student) emailed the Chairs or Presidents of social work PhD student associations and the second author (director of Canada's largest social work PhD program) emailed PhD directors at each of the 14 doctoral schools of social work in Canada. Further, a recruitment flyer was disseminated via social media and email to organizations such as the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE). Fellowship survey participants provided their institutional email address to be entered into a raffle for one of five \$50 gift cards, and this honorarium mechanism was used to validate survey responses. A research assistant who was otherwise uninvolved with the study reviewed email addresses against departmental websites listing PhD students of social work. Upon confirming participants were genuine, email addresses were then removed from the dataset prior to any access from the authors. The fellowship survey was mixed methods, combining quantitative demographic, dyadic, and Likert-style questions with open-ended questions.

### **Data Analysis**

For both the CGPSS and the fellowship survey, a research assistant prepared the data for analysis by deleting partial responses and creating a study database. Descriptive statistics **were run to identify prevalence** and logistic regression was conducted **to determine the odds of institutional preparation activities predicting fellowship success. All statistical procedures were conducted** using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28. For the qualitative responses in the fellowship survey, the authors employed content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016; Kleinheskel et al., 2020) to determine which quantitative findings appeared to require additional elaboration from the open-ended response questions (**such as explaining highly prevalent facilitators and barriers of PhD study**), and which qualitative responses were most indicative of overall participant contributions.



## **Results**

### **2019 Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey**

Refer to table 1 for demographics of the doctoral students of social work in Canada who provided full responses to the 2019 CGPSS (n=157).

[Table 1]

#### ***Institution, Department, and Faculty Satisfaction***

On a five-point, Likert-style scale where 1 is ‘definitely not’ and 5 is ‘definitely’, participants averaged 4 (SD=1.2) on selecting the same university, 4.3 (SD=1) on selecting a PhD of social work, and 4.3 (SD=1) on selecting their supervisor, if they had the choice again. Overall, participants would recommend their social work PhD program (M=4, SD=1.1) and doctoral study at the university regardless of department (M=3.8, SD=1) to others.

Table 2 shows participant ratings of various dimensions of their social work PhD program, rated on a five-point Likert-style scale where 1 is ‘poor’ and 5 is ‘excellent’.

[Table 2]

#### ***Quality of Academic Career Preparation***

In Canada, an academic appointment is the predominant career pathway that specifically requires a PhD of social work. Table 3 displays how CGPSS participants rated their program’s quality of training and support for aspects of an academic career, using the same response options as with program dimensions above.

[Table 3]

#### ***Obstacles***

CGPSS participants rated factors as major obstacles, minor obstacles, and not an obstacle. Relevant to this paper, the largest obstacles were financial pressures (80.4% obstacle:

49.2% major and 31.2% minor) and work commitments (66.9% obstacle: 27.9% major and 39% minor). Largely identified as not obstacles were program requirements (48% obstacle), availability of faculty (36% obstacle), and course scheduling (35% obstacle).

### **Fellowship Survey**

Of the 69 survey respondents, 16 (23.53%) were registered with the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, 33 (48.53%) registered with an institution in the province of Ontario (excluding University of Toronto), 15 (22.06%) registered with an institution in Quebec, 2 (2.94%) in British Columbia, and 2 (2.94%) in Maritime provinces. Forty-four participants (63.76%) were successful at obtaining an external fellowship or scholarship, with the remaining 25 as yet unsuccessful at winning these funds. Successful fellowship applications were most commonly provincial (such as the Ontario Graduate Scholarship) at 36.23% (n=25) followed by federally with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) at 27.54% (n=19). Some participants were successful with private or non-profit foundation awards (n=15, 21.74%), the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (n=3, 4.35%), and with emergency scholarship funds available due to the COVID-19 pandemic (n=3, 4.35%).

### ***Institutional Preparation***

Participants were asked whether they attended a range of institutional preparation activities in the process of applying for PhD fellowships and scholarships. Logistic regression was used to determine the odds for those activities contributing to fellowship success (see table 4).

[Table 4]

Participants scored the value, helpfulness, and importance of these institutional preparation activities on a five-point, Likert-style scale where 1 was ‘not at all’ and 5 was ‘very’. Refer to figure 1 for average scores.

[Figure 1]

### *Qualitative Responses*

Participants responded to open-ended survey questions to elaborate on the facilitators and barriers to applying for academic scholarships, and their recommendations to social work PhD programs. Many participants wrote about the importance of starting early, months ahead of a fellowship deadline. An indicative quote from a second-year student was:

The due dates come hard and fast. I entered the PhD program after a number of years in social work practice and there was an assumption that I knew how to write a proposal...I wish I was told to prepare over the summer ahead of entering the program.

While workshops demonstrated the greatest odds of fellowship success, they were self-rated lower than most other institutional preparation activities. This may be partially due to student perception that workshop content isn’t specific to their individual needs, as a third-year student said:

We received very little guidance in turning our ideas and plans into appropriate research statements. While the university offered workshops for graduate students applying for external funding and there was a workshop offered by another PhD student in social work, neither workshop provided the specificity needed to address the unique needs of each student.

Some participants also spoke about the importance of personal growth and development, alongside external support, to facilitate scholarship success as a fifth-year student shared:

I had never written [a scholarship] before. My first few attempts missed the mark considerably. My PhD supervisor was very much involved in the process; however, after my first failed [federal application], I began to look elsewhere (outside the faculty) for support. I found that combining this learning with the support of my supervisor to be most helpful. [I felt] that my faculty didn't have the most current or relevant information.

In an academic setting, there is potential that students may face an undue burden to prepare all components of a fellowship application without much support. A fourth-year student discussed an example of this difficulty:

Students are far too often put in the position of writing their own letters for faculty to sign off on. Fundamentally, this should not happen, but to do it with inexperienced students who then write weak and ineffective letters because they do not know what to include or what language to use is doubly problematic. Additionally, particularly for students early on in their programs, faculty are not familiar enough with them to write strong letters of reference. More effort should be made very early on to build more relationship between incoming PhD students and existing faculty to facilitate this process.

Speaking to the uniqueness of social work doctoral programs indicated in this article's background, a second-year student discussed the difficulties of doctoral study in the field:

If we want experienced social workers in doctoral programs, we need to create space for them to be reintegrated into academia and provided some more 1-1 supports in how to do these pieces. Just as sending clients a list of 8000 resources and webinars is nothing short of overwhelming, as is it to offer those sort of disconnected pieces to social work practitioners that return for their doctoral studies. I am a first generation academic, and really felt that there was a formula to these pieces that took a while for me to learn.

Finally, a sixth-year student wrote a lengthy response that incorporates multiple similar comments from other participants:

We designed a student led program to support incoming PhD students in my 3rd year in the program. We began meeting with the incoming cohort in June, ahead of their classes beginning in September to discuss scholarship applications, writing techniques, and begin drafting their first applications to better prepare them. This was a highly successful program that increased the success rates within the department for external funding. More effort should be taken by the institution itself to develop programs like this rather than leave it up to student initiative and for the sake of long-term viability. Also, more effort needs to be taken by existing faculty to meet and take on a mentoring role with each PhD student, separate of supervision opportunities. Students need more support early on in the program and aren't getting it as they are not declaring supervisors for at least one year in. A mentor partnership with a faculty member assigned early on would provide that relationship moving forward.

### **Discussion**

The two data sources of the 2019 CGPSS and a 2020 social work PhD fellowship survey offer numerous insights into the state of doctoral social work education in Canada. Likert-style scales from both studies found averages in the middle of five-point scales, which may indicate an overall student rating of moderate for Canadian doctoral social work education. The CGPSS data suggests that Canadian social work PhD students may perceive that this moderate level of education quality persists across programs in the country, given their higher average scores regarding staying at their current institution and keeping their current supervisor (Fragenberg, 2017). There was also notable variability within the moderate range of Likert-style scores, with

the following program dimensions rating relatively low on the CGPSS: a) advice on availability of financial support; b) quality of academic advising and guidance; c) opportunities for student collaboration; d) amount of and opportunities for coursework; and e) opportunities for interdisciplinary work.

### **Degree Progress**

Canadian PhD programs of social work typically take longer to complete at four to five years than other jurisdictions such as the UK where timeline to comparable degree completion is three to four years (Elgar, 2003). With 23.6% of CGPSS participants in year five and above, and 23.8% actively conducting thesis research and preparing their dissertations, it would appear that most of those senior-year students may not graduate until at least year six. Overly prolonged timelines to PhD degree completion can hinder further academic success (Cunningham-Williams et al., 2018; Liechty et al., 2009), and the financial stressors of PhD programs have been identified in the literature (Acquavita & Tice, 2015; Horta et al., 2018) and frequently identified as obstacles amongst our participants. Further complicating timeline to degree completion may be student perception of degree progress. While a quarter of participants had completed their thesis proposal, 33.1% of participants expected to graduate this year or next year. It is possible that some Canadian social work PhD students may underestimate the amount of work involved in preparing for the dissertation defense (Franklin et al., 2021).

### **Motivation**

Motivation is a key determinant to academic success, both at the doctoral level and beyond. Further, suggesting potential improvements to educational programs can often be facilitated by highlighting students' desired outcomes (Gu et al., 2018; McGovern & Zimmerman, 2018). A difficult aspect of the CGPSS data is that 33.1% of respondents indicated

that they enrolled in a doctoral program of social work not for an academic or non-academic career, but due to interest in the field. Such motivation may be somewhat at odds with the intended purpose of PhD programs of social work, which is research training in contrast to the professional focus of bachelor and master of social work degrees (Franklin et al., 2021; Kurzman, 2015; Lightfoot et al., 2021). Nonetheless, this non-career motivation may partially explain relatively low scores on quality of support and training items in the CGPSS, which are all focused on academic career components.

### **Financial Pressures and Related Stress**

**As with obtaining a doctoral degree in many other disciplines, pursuing a PhD in social work requires significant commitment of time and resources.** The fellowship survey emerged as a critical consideration due to 80.4% of CGPSS participants identifying financial pressures as obstacles to their doctoral social work study. **Many Canadian social work schools do not provide base funding to PhD students, and among schools that provide base funding, the typical range of funding (~\$17,500 to \$22,000 CAD per year) is considerably less than a living wage amidst the rising inflation, similar to what PhD students experience in the US (Woolston, 2022).** The financial stress can be particularly felt by those who live in metropolitan cities where the cost of living is higher.

**Results from the fellowship survey show close to two-thirds of our survey participants indicated that they have received a federal or provincial doctoral fellowship. SSHRC or provincial doctoral fellowships in Canada provide support based on the disciplines, which makes them relatively more accessible compared to other countries where predoctoral fellowships are based on funding priorities (Hasche et al., 2009; Scourfield et al., 2018) and can result in fierce competitions (Hasche, et al., 2009).**

**Importantly, despite success amongst the majority of social work PhD students in the fellowship survey in receiving federal funding, qualitative findings suggest that they were required to write a fellowship proposal as early as year 1. The stress to complete a complicated fellowship proposal is high and it started early on in their doctoral study. Whether the experience of preparing a doctoral fellowship application is conducive to the student's future study and career success remains to be answered, but students in the fellowship survey clearly call for proper support and guidance in preparing a successful scholarship application.**

### **Institutional Preparation**

Regarding institutional preparation activities, there was a strongly significant relationship between attending fellowship workshops and fellowship success and a significant relationship between supervisor feedback and fellowship success. Yet despite these odds, students self-rated all activities (e.g., writing centre, online resources) somewhat comparably with the highest-rated activity (administrative faculty feedback) having the second-lowest odds of facilitating fellowship success. Qualitative responses indicate that students may not fully perceive the true value of fellowship workshops due to their group delivery format, preferring individualized support instead.

### **COVID-19 Considerations**

The qualitative data also highlighted a need from doctoral students of social work to feel matched with and supported by faculty during their PhD programs. The CGPSS data was collected prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fellowship survey was conducted in May-October 2020; as such, most respondents had some doctoral education experience prior to educational changes resulting from the pandemic such as closures of



university buildings, remote instruction, and working from home. Data presented here offers a baseline from which to further assess PhD programs of social work as they resume pre-pandemic operations. However, a distinct study of students commencing these programs during the COVID-19 pandemic may be warranted to understand the distinct dynamics of their experiences.

### **Directions for Future Research**

A new CGPSS of Canadian graduate students is planned to commence in the next year (CAGS, 2022), which may offer an opportunity for comparison of some items reported from the 2019 survey. Due to social work's somewhat unique nature – a) a professional bachelor and master's followed by a research doctorate; b) a relatively new field compared to other helping professions; and c) bridging health and the humanities in an uncommon manner, at least in Canadian graduate education – it may not be advisable to compare social work PhD programs against other areas of doctoral studies. Therefore, directions for further research may be: a) comparative studies of similar contexts (i.e., new CGPSS surveys); b) comparative research of social work PhD programs between jurisdictions; c) empirical inquiry from non-student (e.g., faculty) stakeholders involved in the design and delivery of social work PhD programs; and d) long-term study on program and career outcomes, attuned to demographics, funding, and other key determinants. **As one example of a study attuned to funding and its long-term impact,** comparing the program outcomes and career trajectories of social work PhD students who achieve and don't achieve external funding, alongside consideration of the amount of base funding their institution offers (if any) would be an important area for further study.

### **Limitations**

This article relied heavily on student self-report, whereby only partial explanations are available for data discrepancies. Participant demographics such as ethnicity, gender identity, and

sexual orientation were not collected and these factors may cause differential outcomes in PhD program success and career progression (Tijerina & Deepak, 2014; Weng & Gray, 2017). While the samples presented here may be from a majority of Canadian PhD students of social work, this is an estimate and the true population number is unknown. A more rigorous sampling process would be needed to achieve a fully generalizable dataset.

### **Conclusion**

This is the first known study of PhD programs of social work in Canada, and one of the first non-US studies. This article provides a baseline from which future data could be compared and offers insight for how other researchers may assess their jurisdictions' doctoral social work education programs.

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