



Craig Berggold, President
Silja Freitag, Vice-President (Postdoctoral Scholars)
Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) Local 901
Queen's University
68 University Ave.
Mac-Corry Hall, Room E324
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
www.pvac901.org
president@psac901.org
vppd@psac901.org

19 January 2017

The Honourable Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour
House of Commons Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

Dear Ms. Hajdu,

We are writing to you in the capacity of President and Vice-President (Postdoctoral Scholars) of Public Service Alliance of Canada Local 901, representing over 1,600 Teaching Assistants, Teaching Fellows and Postdoctoral Scholars at Queen's University.

As you know, Postdoctoral Scholars (Postdocs) are the backbones of research accomplished in academia. These highly trained research professionals hold a PhD or MD degree (or both) and provide their considerable expertise to academic research labs performing the majority of research in Canada.

Postdoctoral research positions are notoriously precarious: contracts are short and dependent on funding either provided by the Principal Investigator's research grant, or the Postdoc's own grant, such as an NSERC or SSHRC fellowship (for the Humanities). A key goal of Postdoctoral work is to develop into an independent researcher. Postdocs are essential contributors to research, innovation, arts, culture, and policymaking. They perform research, write grants, supervise graduate students and teach undergraduate courses. Hired at a fraction of the salary of tenured faculty members, Postdocs take on many of the same tasks.

The profile of a typical Postdoc appointment has changed. Traditionally a one-year training position was followed by a permanent position as a faculty member. This is no longer the case. Today, most

Postdoctoral Researchers take on re-occurring contracts every 2-3 years, and spend considerable time in these low-paying positions, before finding one of the few permanent jobs in the academic or private sector. Postdocs are usually in their thirties and over one-third support dependents (2016 Canadian National Postdoctoral Survey, Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars (CAPS)). At Queen's University half of the Postdocs are parents (PSAC 901, 2016). For most Postdocs, the combination of large student debts after their graduate degree, plus low pay and long hours of unpaid overtime, along with few family-oriented benefits as the norm, all contribute to considerable stress due to the precarity of short-term contracts and insufficient funding.

We would like to bring several important issues to your attention.

Inadequate Salaries: Almost half of Canadian Postdocs have an annual gross income of less than \$45,000. On average Canadian Postdocs earn relatively less than their colleagues internationally (2016 Canadian National Postdoctoral Survey, CAPS). In 2016, at Queen's University, 21 percent of Postdoctoral Appointments are at the minimum salary of \$32,174. Postdoctoral salaries are not sufficient to ensure that Postdocs live in dignity. Indeed, the average household expenditures for (all) 2014 Canadian Households was \$80,728; the average for a couple with no children was \$82,048; the average for a couple with children was \$116,927; and, the average for a single parent was \$65,263 (Statistics Canada).

In the fall of 2016, we were approached by a Postdoc here at Queen's University, telling us that with her salary of \$32,174, she was unable to pay her rent and student loans and also buy food. Consequently she was now considering the local food bank to ensure survival. We have attached her letter (**Attachment A**). Her story has motivated us to ensure that Postdocs can get access to the Queen's University Alma Mater Society's Food Bank. However, gaining access for Postdocs to the food bank is not a viable long-term solution.

Many Postdocs find it difficult to find affordable daycare for their children, forcing their partners to stay at home rather than focus on their own careers. At Queen's University, the vast majority of employees, other than Postdocs, receive childcare benefits, with faculty members receiving in excess of \$2000/year/child. One of our members, a Postdoc performing research in the Division of Cancer Biology & Genetics and the Department of Pathology & Molecular Medicine made the difficult decision to send her young children back to her homeland Georgia (Europe), because she was unable to afford childcare for them in Canada. We need to ensure that our talented female researchers no longer face additional barriers. No one should have to send their children to another continent in order to perform cancer research.

Exodus of research talent: Canada is losing talented Postdoctoral researchers to other countries after investing in their training for more than a decade. A significant percentage of Postdocs are forced to leave Canada to gain permanent employment or to find *better* employment. Half of Canadian Postdocs are not satisfied with their career options and the lack of tenure track positions available in Canada (2016 Canadian National Postdoctoral Survey, CAPS).

Emphasis on infrastructure funding: We are delighted that research is supported by federal grants, such as the multi-million dollars to Queen's Department of Physics in 2016. An ongoing concern about

these large grants is that they often support research infrastructure at the expense of research talent or operational grants. Updated research infrastructure is very important, but world-class research is only possible if labs have operational grants that keep projects going. World-class research requires retaining talented Postdocs and paying them a sustainable living wage.

National Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and Social Sciences and Humanities Council (SSHRC) and Postdoc Salary: We have questions concerning federal government funded research grants administered by the University employer, such as NSERC and SSHRC, and if salaries are directed fairly to ensure Postdocs with a living wage. For example, at Queen's University, 21 per cent of Postdocs receive the minimum salary of \$32,174 yet the typical NSERC grant is \$45,000. Why is the margin a \$12,826 difference? The employer's contribution to the employees' Health and Dental package does not account for this wide margin. Furthermore, Postdocs do not have childcare benefits. How many Postdocs with NSERC grants are receiving, or close, to the minimum salary? We are noticing a pattern that across Universities Postdoc salaries may actively be kept low?

Postdoctoral Researchers and the Minimum Salary and the Poverty Line: In Ontario, the poverty line for a family with one child is \$28,185 (Social Planning Network of Ontario, 2014). At Queen's, over 50 percent of Postdocs have one child or more; and, 21 percent receive the minimum salary of \$32,174 (PSAC Local 901, 2016). With large childcare expenses and student debts, it is easy to see from these facts that many Postdocs have already slipped below the poverty line. The average cost for full-time licensed daycare in Kingston ranges from \$1200/month for infants to \$560/month for school age children. In Canada, the average student debt (both government and non-government) for a PhD graduate is \$80,000 (Statistics Canada, 2014). The question we now face is: do we expect highly trained Postdocs to perform world-class research on heart disease, cancer and global warming while they are living in poverty?

Based on our local experiences and the Canadian Postdoc Survey, we would like to present several recommendations to address issues faced by Postdoctoral Scholars in Canada.

1. A competitive national minimum salary standard for Postdoctoral Scholars to ensure they live in dignity, allowing them to increase their research performance. This minimum salary standard should be enforced when Postdocs are funded with federal grants through Principal Investigators.
2. Queen's University Postdocs are considered employees, yet this is not the case in many other universities. We need policy to ensure that all federally funded Postdocs are employees, and not contractors, and have employment insurance, CPP and standard parental leave.
3. Oversight and increased accountability to ensure that federal research grants are earmarked for researchers' salaries and pay a living wage. Salaries should increase with yearly inflation and reflect experience.
4. Funding increases for operations of Principal Investigators projects at academic research institutes, in addition to infrastructure.

5. Childcare benefits and affordable quality daycare are important equity issues for Postdocs. Unfortunately, the burden of childcare falls disproportionately on women and this puts female Postdocs at greater risk to abandon their research careers than their male counterparts. It is unfair that female Postdocs are faced with the choice of starting a family or staying in a competitive research environment, traditionally not designed with female researchers in mind.
6. To address the lack of permanent employment opportunities for Postdoctoral Scholars, we need to ensure that all universities offer training programs preparing Postdocs for careers outside of academia. Postdocs are some of the brightest minds of this country and are unable to access full time employment outside of academia, because their skills are not considered transferable. This needs to be addressed immediately with mandatory career counselling via their academic institutions.
7. At the local level Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) Local 901 works hard to increase the profile of our Postdocs and to address their all too common feelings of isolation, resulting in depression and poor mental health. These researchers make valuable contributions to society, they try to find cures for cancer or climate change – the public should be made more aware of these successes. With the involvement of universities, public servants and communities, we need to raise Postdocs' profile at the national level.
8. The Canadian National Postdoctoral Survey has already identified many of the major issues that must be addressed. We recommend a task force to confirm these issues and report back to the Canadian Government.

In late 2016 we shared some of these concerns with the Assistant Deputy Minister for the Science and Innovation Sector of the Canadian government, (please see **Attachment B**).

We also had the honour to meet with The Honourable Minister of Science Dr. Kirsty Duncan during her 2016 visit to Queen's University for a funding announcement and shared our concerns with her. Minister Duncan assured us that we might contact her with questions and comments related to Postdoc issues anytime.

We look forward to the findings of the *Fundamental Science Review Panel* and hope that the report will include Postdoctoral Scholars issues, such as salary and benefits. We trust that you will pass our concerns on to any other appropriate government agencies and look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for meeting with us at Queen's University, and for the on-going support of science, research, postdocs and women in science.

Respectfully,

Craig Berggold, MA
President

Silja Freitag, PhD
Vice President Postdoctoral Scholars

Attachment A: Letter from Postdoctoral Scholar to VP-Postdoctoral Scholars (Fall, 2016)

I just wanted to tell you a little about my situation. I began my one-year Postdoc on July 1st, so I may have missed the interview period that you mentioned. I want people to know the realities that some of us live with. Please forgive me for the long message!

I did my graduate work overseas, so subsequently I have a fair amount of student debt. I wasn't eligible for many funding opportunities in England; I applied for the ones that I could, and I did receive some funding (over 4,000 GBP), but it was only a drop in the bucket. (Especially when you're paying in GBP with Canadian dollars.) Tuition was nearly \$18,000.00 per year alone. I worked several jobs in addition to my studies, and lived very frugally; but even so, by the end of my four years doing my doctorate, I found myself with over \$95,000.00 of student debt.

I made the choice to study overseas due to the nature of my work. I attended a world-class institution that specializes in what I research, so really it was the best place for me.

Now I am expected to pay my debt back. Between my Canada-Ontario Integrated Student Loan (government loan) and my student line of credit (bank loan) I am required to make mandatory, minimum payments of \$1,000.00 per month. Mandatory, minimum. Every month. I make \$2,121.00 per month after deductions. My annual salary is around \$32,000.00. I also need to pay for rent, car, insurance, food, gas, toiletries, medications that my benefits don't cover, bus, clothes, cleaning products, feminine products, exercise equipment, and heaven forbid for the odd coffee with friends!

At first I thought I'd be okay, but it is becoming clear to me that I need to get a second job in order to make my monthly student loan payments. In my opinion, I should NOT have to work two jobs at this point. I have four upper-class degrees. I'm 35 years old. I've been "pinching pennies" all of my life. Now that I'm in the working world, can't I afford more than canned beans for dinner?

I have also been looking into receiving assistance from the food bank. Fortunately, the process does not seem too complicated. I know where the food bank is and how to access it.

I've realised that I don't think that I can afford the bus anymore. I have been walking in and home these days, but it's a rather lengthy walk at 35-45 minutes. Quite tiring, as you can imagine! And likely difficult in the winter months too.

This job is the first I've had that grants me benefits--I am very grateful for that! Thank you for your efforts in securing dental, drug, and life insurance eligibility for Postdocs at Queen's. I've noticed, though, that these benefits don't cover everything...for instance, massage is not covered. I have chronic back and shoulder pain, and a session with a registered massage therapist would be very beneficial for me! I was in an automobile accident in December 2010 and have some lasting effects.

Anyway, that is my reality at the moment. Thank you for taking the time to listen! If there's anything that you or the union can do to improve any of these challenges, I would really appreciate it. Feel free to share the content of my message with others, though perhaps if you could refrain from mentioning me by name (or my department, as we've only got two Postdocs!), I would really appreciate it.

(The letter writer requested that they remain anonymous at this time.)

**Attachment B – Correspondence from Lawrence Hanson, Assistant Deputy Minister,
Science and Innovation Sector**

PCB Correspondence / Correspondance DGCP (IC) <ic.pcbcorrespondence-
correspondancedgcp.ic@canada.ca>
to me

12/21/16

Dear Dr. Freitag:

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts regarding the salaries of Postdoctoral scholars in Canada, which were forwarded to Innovation, Science and Economic Development by the Prime Minister's Office. These exchanges help to inform Ministers, as well as me and my colleagues about the challenges faced by researchers seeking to launch successful research careers in Canada—an issue of great importance to Minister Duncan.

Canada is fortunate to have a large and growing supply of PhD graduates, and it is essential that we support these individuals in finding work that not only brings meaning to their own lives, but leverages their talents to support a thriving Canadian innovation ecosystem and make discoveries that will improve the lives of all Canadians. As you say in your letter, if we cannot do this, we risk losing valuable Canadian talent to other countries.

While the federal government does not have the authority to directly influence salaries within post-secondary institutions, the issue of how we can better support early career researchers find well-paying, meaningful work in their fields is on this Government's radar. As you may be aware, Minister Duncan launched a Fundamental Science Review Panel last summer in order to ensure that federal support for fundamental research is strategic, effective, and helps preserve Canada's world-class standing. As part of the Review, the Panel is exploring the barriers students, trainees, and emerging researchers face in the current Canadian system.

What we learn from the Panel's final report, which is expected in the new year, will give us valuable advice on how to strengthen Canada's international standing in fundamental science and ensure that our scientists—including early career researchers like the Postdoctoral scholars you represent—have the tools, training, and support needed to excel. While we still have work to do, I am confident that the Panel is a step in the right direction toward supporting our early career researchers.

I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Lawrence Hanson

Assistant Deputy Minister

Science and Innovation Sector