

Research Assistant Pay Equity Settlement: Information and Action for MAUT Members

MAUT Working Group on the Research Assistant Pay Equity Settlement
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MAUT seeks to mitigate the potentially enormous negative impact of the Research Assistant Pay Equity Settlement now undergoing review. Your participation is needed. We believe that **letters from researchers** who will suffer the negative impacts of the settlement are the best way to convince the administration that this is a problem that requires immediate intervention.

Background

The 2010 Pay Equity settlement, pursuant to Quebec's Pay Equity Act, enacts a dramatic increase (~30%) in the hourly wages paid to Research Assistants (RAs) at McGill University, to take effect at an implementation date that could be as early as late 2016 and which must occur before September 2017. The part of this salary increase that is retroactive from the implementation date going back to 2010 will be covered by university funds. However the administration expects that the cost of the increased RA salaries going forward will be borne by the researchers' grants which provide funding for most of these positions. This sudden major increase in cost will represent a crushing burden for many researchers who face the prospect of losing their research assistants, and poses a major threat to McGill's ability to maintain its status as a top-level research university. MAUT believes this situation poses a significant threat to the university's mission and reputation and is urging the administration to take action to mitigate the impact, enable researchers to maintain productivity and support the research and research-training missions of the university.

Impact on McGill's credibility as an institution committed to equity

Pay equity is of course desirable, but if not implemented properly this initiative could lead to a significant loss of jobs, that runs directly counter to the principle of equity and will in fact make things worse. We fear that by not taking steps to minimize job losses that result directly from the pay equity settlement, McGill risks its reputation as an institution committed to the concept of equity. Institutional loss of public credibility would be a major negative fallout that may affect the willingness of donors and alumni to support McGill.

Impacts on McGill's mission and research competitiveness

RAs play critical roles in academic research labs. The sudden increase in RA salary costs will have four related but quite distinct impacts on the university's activities and mission.

First, the sudden increase in RA wages in the face of already fixed research grant budgets means that some researchers will no longer have sufficient funding to pay their RAs and will have to let them go or reduce their hours of work. The *increase* in annual salary for a senior RA at the top of the AMURE payscale would be ~\$21,000 (not including increased benefit costs), an amount that could be ruinous to many PIs. Because RAs are a key element of the research laboratory

ecosystem, this would translate directly into reduced research productivity both for individual researchers and the university as a whole.

Second, RAs, in addition to helping design and performing experiments, play a major role in the day-to-day management of research laboratories including handling of administrative tasks such as ordering, receiving and storing chemicals and supplies, carrying out routine maintenance of laboratory equipment and overseeing service contract implementation and service calls. A reduction in the number of RAs or in their hours of work means that such duties will now become the responsibility of the principal investigator, taking further time away from their ability to apply their skills and energies to advancing the university and its missions of teaching, research and service.

Third, research grant funds make numerous important contributions to the research training environment of McGill University. Stipends paid from research grants support a large number of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. If research grant funds must be diverted to fill the sudden gap introduced by the increased RA salaries, this will result in reduced or lost training opportunities for McGill students and trainees. For example, travel to international scientific meetings to present their work is an extremely important aspect of the overall training experience of graduate students and postdocs. Diversion of limited research grant funds to keep laboratory RAs will limit activities that contribute greatly to the quality of the McGill training experience.

Fourth, even a short-term "crunch" that sees research productivity diminished as outlined above will have a lasting negative impact on McGill's research profile because this will translate into McGill scientists being less competitive in research grant competitions over the near future term: this in a particularly challenging research funding climate further exacerbated by chaotic changes at the major Tri-Council funding agency CIHR. We are particularly concerned about the impact on McGill's cohort of early-career investigators as the contribution of RAs to research and training in smaller labs is critical to their establishment and success.

MAUT Efforts

Although MAUT has explored possible financial solutions with the administration, we are now convinced that additional input from affected researchers is essential to convince the administration that this is a serious problem that needs a timely solution.

While a financial solution would have its costs in terms of the university operating budget, the net cost would be reduced by an important additional factor. If nothing along these lines is done, we expect that there will be challenges/grievances launched by terminated employees who feel that their jobs were lost as a result of the pay equity settlement. The significant legal costs associated with such grievances, not to mention the aggravation and distraction of researchers and university administrators from their real jobs, would be a burden that could be eliminated by a timely financial solution.

The cost of permitting active researchers to maintain their RAs at full productivity would be a

wise investment in the present and future strengths of research at McGill, and in the public credibility of the university as an institution committed to equity.

Your participation is needed!

We ask you as MAUT members, as individuals or organized groups such as in units and departments, to write to Provost Manfredi AND your Dean, with a cc to Principal Fortier outlining the negative impacts the administration's current plan for implementing the Pay Equity Settlement will have on your research productivity and academic activities. Because the implementation date could conceivably be as soon as late 2016, this is an urgent matter. Please make every effort to write your letter before the end of November. Please also cc MAUT so that we can track this information and integrate it into our own efforts. We also urge you to discuss this important matter with your colleagues who may not be aware of the seriousness and the impact.