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Caught in the Middle

International Ph.D. students at U. of Western Ontario say their program can't be completed in four years, and that without fifth year of funding they risk having to leave empty-handed.

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By **Elizabeth Redden**

If Saad Anis doesn't finish his philosophy Ph.D. within four years he may never finish it at all. While many students at the University of Western Ontario do not complete their degrees within the standard four-year funding period, for international students like Anis the situation is especially stark: in order to reapply for his study permit, he would have to prove to the Canadian government that he can pay for a fifth year of study – at an international student tuition rate of about \$16,000 – plus the cost of living. Otherwise he would have to leave Canada, and his program, without a degree.

"Transfer is one option," said Anis, who is from Pakistan. "But I think most likely what is going to happen is I will not be able to finish and I'll just go back home and teach at a high school or something."

Anis is one of six international philosophy Ph.D. students who are lobbying administrators at Western Ontario to extend their funding beyond year four, in light of a 2010 change in immigration policy that restricts international students from applying for permanent residency prior to completing their degrees. With permanent residency, the students could pay domestic tuition – which is less than half the cost of international tuition -- and would not face the prospect of having to leave the country when their study permit expired.

The situation illustrates the challenges international students can face whenever immigration rules change. University officials have agreed to lobby the federal government on their behalf, but the students believe that Western Ontario's own policies have contributed to their predicament. Crucial to their argument is the fact that their program generally takes more than four years to complete. The average time for completing a Ph.D. in philosophy at Western Ontario is 5.2 years.

"We do not wish for the university to focus on lobbying the government on our behalf for the reversion to its previous immigration policy," Anis said. "Instead, we want the university to remain faithful to the spirit of its commitment to us: to provide us with funding adequate for the completion of the Ph.D. program within a reasonable time."

"They're caught in a bind, there's no disputing that," said Russell Poole, the associate dean of research and graduate studies for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. "I feel very sorry for them that the rules have changed and those rules have changed while they've been here.

"Where I radically disagree with them is in trying to shift the responsibility and liability to Western," Poole said. "It would be simply wrong to say that any time a student is not completing in four years the university has the obligation to provide funding for the fifth or sixth year."

Finishable in Four?

According to Poole, the four-year funding term is standard across the university's Ph.D. programs and is decreed by the provincial government, specifically the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. "It's their say-so that the funding for Ph.D. students is four years, four fundable years, and then after that there's nothing."

There is a longstanding tradition of supporting students in their fifth year and beyond in a more piecemeal manner, through part-time teaching or research assistant positions. But the international students argue that this ad hoc approach won't go far enough in helping them cover their much higher tuition bills. In addition, unlike their Canadian peers they are in a situation where they need to be able to guarantee their income to the government in advance.

Across Western Ontario the average time to complete a Ph.D. is 4.9 years. Broken down by division, the average time to completion in years is 4.46 for the pure and applied sciences, 4.53 for the life sciences, 5.41 for the social sciences, and 5.92 for the humanities. When compared with 11 of its peer institutions in Canada – all major research universities -- Western Ontario has the fourth-shortest overall completion time but the sixth-shortest in the humanities.

Western's figures are for students admitted from 1996-2000, and Poole said that he believes they do not reflect the changes Western has made in recent years to streamline its Ph.D. programs and cultivate what he called a "culture of completion."

"Clearly we don't want to downgrade quality, we don't want to downgrade curriculum coverage, we don't want to downgrade originality or substance of the thesis," Poole said. "But programs do have ways of achieving efficiencies." The philosophy department, for example, has revised the reading lists for its comprehensive exams and eliminated a competency test in history.

Another recent change involves the funding structure: for one and a half years of their total four, students do not have to take on any teaching duties. "It's a significant change," said Henrik Lagerlund, the philosophy department chair. "It's very uncommon that you get that much time during your graduate studies to solely work on your thesis."

Lagerlund is supportive of the international graduate students in his department. "If you've started a program you should be able to finish it; you shouldn't be forced out of the country," he said.

"I think it's crazy when you accept international students to come, you pay for their education but you don't want them to stay."

From his end, though, there's not much he can do for the international students other than make part-time teaching positions available in their fifth year and ensure that the program can reasonably be completed in four. "It might not have been like that in the past, but with the changes that we have made over the years, I think I can say with confidence that this program is doable in four years," he said.

"But it is hard work to do it in four years."

"My only question is if it is finishable in four years, why aren't people finishing in four?" asked Anis. "If you come into your first year of your Ph.D. knowing what your dissertation is going to be on, then certainly you can finish in four, but how many students do I know who come into their Ph.D. program knowing what their dissertation is going to be? Perhaps a couple."

A Question of Fairness

The philosophy students are asking for a fifth-year funding package conditional upon meeting certain benchmarks toward completing their degrees. "We're not asking for a blank check from the university," said Amy Wuest, an international student from the United States. "We're not asking for an indefinite extension of funding for the fifth year for all students; we're asking just for a cohort of students. We're fine with it being conditional funding, and we're also fine with doing as much work as we can do while we still have a reasonable amount of time to work on the dissertation."

Wuest maintained that the situation for international graduate students is distinct and should be treated as such. While it is true, she said, that neither Canadian nor international students get guaranteed funding beyond the fourth year, the Canadian students have more flexibility to work and do not face the stark prospect of either proving they can pay their own way or packing their bags.

"The problem is essentially that if we don't finish in four years, not only do we lose our residency in Canada but we're dis-enrolled from the program," she said. "In principle, I don't think that's a burden that should be facing any Ph.D. student. It's hard enough just to live and make ends meet."

Poole said, however, that there is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and he's not in a position to increase funding selectively. While some Ontario universities do provide five years of funding in particular disciplines, "The crucial thing to know about that is they do it by robbing Peter to pay Paul," he said. "They don't have any more funding than we do, so one thing that they systematically do is not fund M.A.s. We at Western do fund M.A.s." (Students who enter Western's philosophy program without a master's receive five years of funding, instead of four.)

"We could never say yes to the fifth year of funding. We don't have the money and we can't do it universally," Poole said. If Western were to fund international students for an extra year, domestic students would cry foul, for example. "It wouldn't be fair."



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