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## NEWS LOCAL

# Doctoral students receive huge funding boost



By Michael Lea, Kingston Whig-Standard  
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Kellie Leitch, left, parliamentary secretary to the minister of human resources and skills development, places a pin on the lapel of Queen's University doctoral student Yingli Rao, as well as Kerri Froc, left rear, Jay Jantz and Emma Dargie after they were named recipients of the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship, worth \$150,000. Not present for the ceremony was recipient Shane McIntosh.

Five doctoral students at Queen's University are walking around today wearing on their lapels small silver pins each worth \$150,000.

Actually, it's not the pins themselves, as nice as they are, that are worth the money. The stylized Vs denote the wearer is a new recipient of the prestigious Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship, which comes with a research grant of \$50,000 a year for up to three years.

Former governor general Georges Vanier is well known for giving his name to the cup that goes to Canada's top university football team each year.

The research scholarships that now bear his name go towards more cerebral efforts than punting and passing and are designed to attract and retain at Canadian universities the best and brightest doctoral students in Canada and around the world. This would help ensure Canada maintains a major presence in global research.

Winning the scholarships this year from Queen's are Emma Dargie, Jay Jantz, Yingli Rao, Shane McIntosh and Kerri Froc.

The scholarships go to doctoral students in natural sciences, engineering, social sciences, humanities and health sciences.

They were first established by the federal government in 2009, and 660 scholarships have now been awarded, 164 of them to international students. The government's total investment so far is almost \$100 million.

Including the newest recipients, Queen's now has 13 Vanier scholars named since the program began.

The scholarships are awarded after a competitive evaluation process. The names of potential candidates are submitted by the universities to one of three federal research granting agencies. A selection committee narrows down the list and submits its findings to a board for final decisions.

The candidates are judged on their academic and personal achievements, their research potential, as well as their social and leadership skills.

Brenda Brouwer, dean of the school of graduate studies at Queen's University, said the Vanier award is the "Holy Grail" for young researchers in Canada.

She said the accomplishments of the five students who are receiving the award this year are "humbling."

"The achievements of these individuals are absolutely phenomenal, given where they are in their careers."

She said there are currently nine Vanier scholars still carrying out their research at Queen's.

"This fellowship program, Vanier Canada, has had considerable impact on Canadian universities being able to attract the world's best and brightest."

She said the financial backing is crucial to the students being successful in their work.

"These awards provide the financial support that allows them to focus on their research without distractions of having to flip burgers at McDonald's."

Kellie Leitch, parliamentary secretary to the minister of human resources and skills development, made the scholarships announcement during a ceremony Thursday.

She said the Vaniers "are the most prestigious awards that Canada provides to doctoral students."

She said the Vanier recipients are recognized for their proficiency not only nationally, but also at a global level.

"Vanier scholars are among the most accomplished graduates across the world and represent the future of research and excellence in Canada."

This year, 156 doctoral students at 29 universities in Canada are receiving the scholarships. Forty-three of them come from 26 different countries.

"Many scholars come from across the world to study here in Canada. This is about growing the knowledge economy in Canada and bringing the best and brightest across the globe to our country."

She said the five Queen's students "are leaders and innovators of tomorrow."

Yingli Rao is originally from China and is in a PhD program in chemistry. Her work involves photochromic materials that change colour depending on the intensity of the light.

She is hoping to come up with new window materials that can change colour and keep the interior of a home cooler.

She said the scholarship "just makes my life much easier."

Normal funding places many limitations on her work and potential travel, she explained.

"With this money, I can have more freedom to attend more conferences and also try to learn more from other professors from different countries."

Kerri Froc is in the faculty of law and her research is looking at Section 28 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees equal rights between men and women.

She is doing a gender audit, "looking at how rights work for women or don't work."

"My hope is that eventually it will further equality for women and further their access to charter rights so they have truly equal access to the charter. The way we look at rights, the way we interpret rights has to change, and that eventually will mean greater social justice in Canada."

Froc said when she found out she had won the scholarship she was "more excited that they recognized that this is really an urgent field of study and I was excited about it that way, that it's going to get some recognition for this area that I think needs a spotlight shone on it."

The funding permits a better concentration on work without worrying about where the money is coming from, he said.

"It sure makes it easier when you have that funding to support you that you are able to really focus on your research."

Emma Dargie is studying chronic vulva pain by women in the genital area and hopes to help doctors better diagnose the condition.

"A lot of people either have not heard of it or they don't really know how to diagnose it properly, so many women will be experiencing this very excruciating type of pain but are unable to find help for it because people aren't aware of how it really works and how to treat it."

Her research is focussing on developing a diagnostic tool for physicians.

She said she had "tears of happiness" when she found out she had won the scholarship.

"It is really tough to get funding these days. You go into the process of the application with a hard heart, so you are expecting the worst. And then when something good happens it's really, really wonderful."

She said the research would have continued without the award in order for her to get her PhD, "but this scholarship has afforded me the opportunity to take it a step further because I will be able to invest so much more time in it."

She won't have to seek employment outside the department that can take away from research time and productivity.

Jay Jantz is doing research into Parkinson's disease and trying to find out more about the areas of the brain that are involved with the condition.

"A big problem is we don't know how this area of the brain actually works. So we are investigating this area to really pinpoint how we can fix it and restore normal brain activity."

Jantz said he was "ecstatic" when he found out he had won the scholarship.

"There is so much amazing research going on in Canada, I feel so honoured to have won."

He said the scholarship will make "a huge difference" in his work.

"Normally, we would have to apply for a grant or scholarship every year. This one is, of course, a very large amount of money and it will carry me through the PhD, and it allows me to go to more conferences and to expand on my research ideas and really do some things that I never would otherwise be able to do."

The fifth doctoral student to win the award at Queen's, Shane McIntosh, was not present at Thursday's awards announcement. His research is in computer science.

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