Graduate Student Survey 2025 Final Report

Temerty Faculty of Medicine, Graduate Representation Committee

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1 Introduction

The Graduate Representation Committee (GRC) is a student-led advocacy group representing the interests of graduate students within the nine University of Toronto Temerty Faculty of Medicine departments included in the Harmonized Base Funding Agreement (HBFA) – Biochemistry, Immunology, the Institute of Medical Sciences, Laboratory Medicine & Pathobiology, Medical Biophysics, Molecular Genetics, Nutritional Sciences, Pharmacology & Toxicology, and Physiology. The GRC is dedicated to keeping students informed about important faculty-wide and University policies and opportunities that influence graduate experience and quality of life. We actively seek feedback from Temerty graduate students to ensure our advocacy aligns with the most pressing needs and current sentiments.

This report presents findings from the GRC's annual Graduate Student Survey, which we use to collect key data on graduate student well-being, financial security, and awareness of available resources. This year's survey included longitudinal data from 2017–2025 (n = 3,757 total respondents across all years; n = 244 respondents for 2025).

1.1 Summary of Key Findings

The 2025 Graduate Student Survey (n = 244) reveals a mix of encouraging improvements and persistent challenges for Temerty Faculty of Medicine graduate students.

Key Positives:

- **Insecurity Trends:** Rates of food (Figure 19), housing (Figure 20), and healthcare insecurity (Figure 21) have held steady compared to 2024.

Remaining Challenges:

- **Financial Strain:** Respondents overwhelmingly report that external employment is primarily for additional income, with most students ranking career development (Figure 16) as a secondary reason for seeking external employment. This suggests that financial necessity, rather than career development goals, is the primary driver of external employment — a trend that may impact research productivity and student well-being.
- **Mental Health:** Mental health ratings deteriorated compared to pandemic years and 2024 (Figure 22).
- **Living Situations:** A decreasing trend in students living alone as opposed to with parents/relatives or with partners (Figure 17), likely driven by the cost-of-living crisis.
- **Mental Health of PhD Students over Study Years:** Poorer mental health outcomes are observed among PhD students in later years of their programs, particularly those in Year 5 (Figure 23).

- **International Students:** This cohort reports increasing frustration with limited award opportunities (Figure 29) and stagnant satisfaction with departmental transition support (Figure 28).

Resource Awareness & Usage (New Findings):

- **Awareness Gaps:** While awareness of sports facilities and library access is high (>90%), knowledge of support services like the **Coursera and related learning platforms** and **OISE Psychology Clinic** remains low (Figure 25). For mental health resources, the **only service** with majority awareness is the periodic health visit (Figure 27).
- **Usage Discrepancies:** Significant gaps exist between awareness and usage (Figure 26). Notably, CGMS has 56.3% awareness but only 0.6% usage, suggesting potential barriers to access or perceived value.
- **Communication Barriers:** Students cite "e-mail overload" and the lack of a centralized resource hub as primary obstacles to accessing services (see Section 3.5).

Potential Courses of Action:

- **Communication:** Implement a centralized, single-page "resource cheat sheet" and targeted orientation presentations to improve service visibility. The GRC has expanded part of its scope to include resource awareness presentations to departments in the spring semester. Initial pilot presentations have received positive feedback.
- **HBFA Awareness:** Address the low awareness of living allowance increases (Figure 9) through improved departmental communication. The GRC will complement this by making an updated post on this topic available on our website and social media channels.

2 Methods

The survey was created using Google Forms and the form link was distributed through multiple administrative channels at the departmental and faculty levels to maximize response rates. Outreach efforts included periodic e-mails to departmental and faculty administrators, social media campaigns through GRC communication channels, collaborations with student-led Graduate Student Associations (GSAs), and brief presentations during mandatory student seminars and courses.

Data collection spanned approximately two months (December 2025-January 2026), yielding 244 responses from graduate students across the nine Faculty of Medicine departments included in the HBFA. Historical data from 2017–2024 were integrated to enable longitudinal trend analysis.

Data processing involved standardized cleaning procedures using the `pandas` Python package, followed by statistical analysis and visualization using the `tidyverse` suite of R packages. We used the Claude 5.5 Opus large language model (LLM) to perform qualitative sentiment analyses on paragraph-based response questions to identify key themes and actionable insights.

3 Results and Discussion

This year's survey reveals both encouraging improvements and persistent challenges facing graduate students in the Temerty Faculty of Medicine. Rates of food, housing, and healthcare insecurity were comparable to 2024 according to survey respondents. However, concerning trends persist, particularly in the realm of financial security: our data suggests that students increasingly seek external employment for additional income rather than personal interest, indicating an inability to sustain necessary living expenses on stipends alone. Additionally, international students continue to express frustration with limited opportunities to supplement their income with scholarships and awards. Interestingly, our new resource awareness module highlights significant knowledge gaps in areas of available support services as well as awareness of HBFA policies, suggesting opportunities for improved departmental communication strategies and collaboration with the GRC.

3.1 Student Demographics

The demographic profile of respondents has remained relatively stable over the survey period. As shown in Figure 1, the average age of graduate students has held steady at approximately 25.6 ± 3.4 years across all survey years, suggesting consistent enrollment patterns.

Compared to 2024, the proportion of international student respondents has declined (Figure 3). When we assessed the data further, we observed that domestic student respondents within Ontario have increased in proportion, and international student respondents have slightly decreased (Figure 4).

When stratified by department for the most recent year, it is clear that the distribution of international students is not uniform across the faculty (Figure 5). **The survey suggests that some departments have a substantially higher proportion of international students, such as Medical Biophysics with 36% of department respondents identifying as international students**, which may warrant more targeted support and resources.

The distribution of degree programs (Figure 2) reveals that the proportion of PhD respondents for the survey has increased following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and has remained stable since then. To better understand the factors influencing students' decisions to pursue graduate studies within a specific degree program at UofT, we conducted an LLM-assisted thematic analysis of open-ended responses from the 2025 survey.

Overall, a few major points were identified regarding students' motivations for pursuing a PhD versus a Master's degree:

1. Students pursing a Master's degree who chose to not pursue a Ph.D. cited the **length of the PhD, the current level of funding, and the cost of living in Toronto** as primary reasons for choosing a Master's degree/not reclassifying to a PhD stream.
2. Conversely, PhD students cited **UofT's program structure** (notably, the rotation matching system) and the **institution's prestige** as key factors in their decision to pursue a PhD.

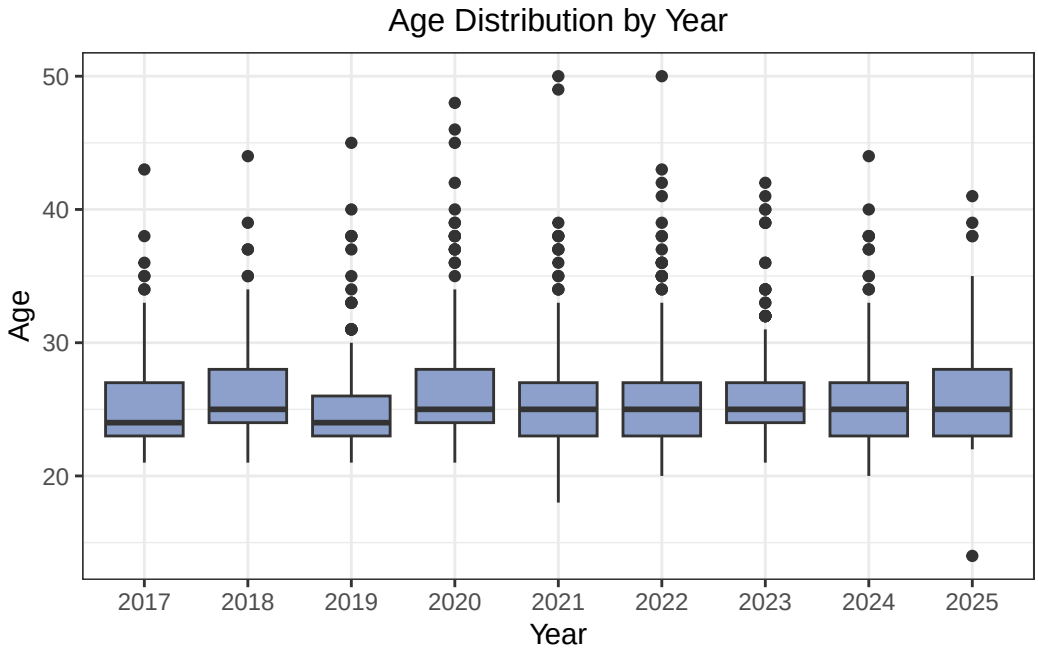

Figure 1: The average age of respondents across years has held steady around 25.6 ± 3.4 years.

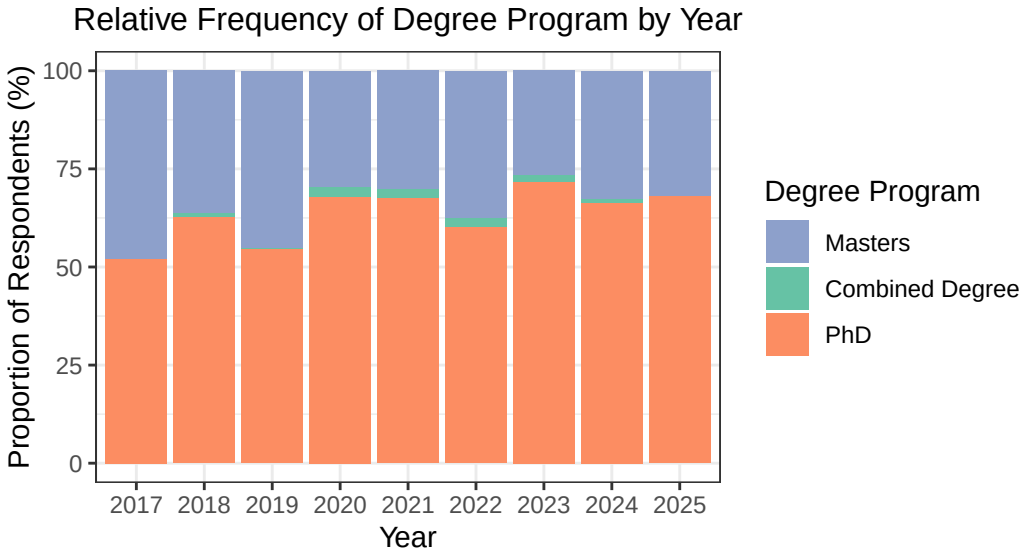

Figure 2: The **proportion of PhD student respondents has increased** following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and has since remained stable.

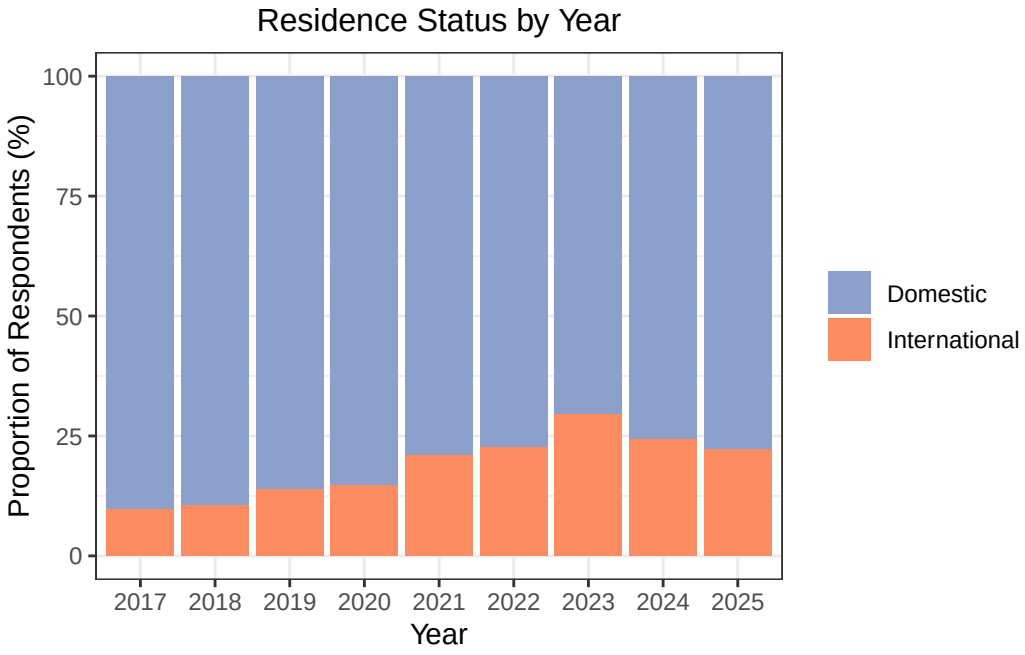

Figure 3: The proportion of international student respondents increased from 2017-2023 **but has been trending downward since 2024**.

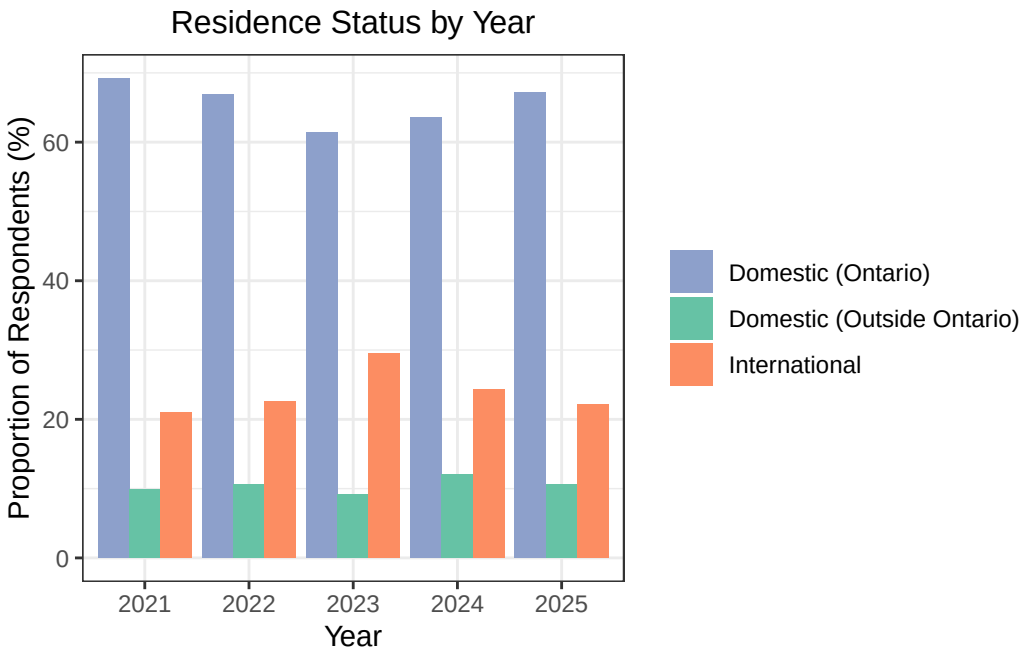

Figure 4: The decreased proportion of international student respondents in 2025 compared to previous years may be driven by an increase in domestic students from Ontario.

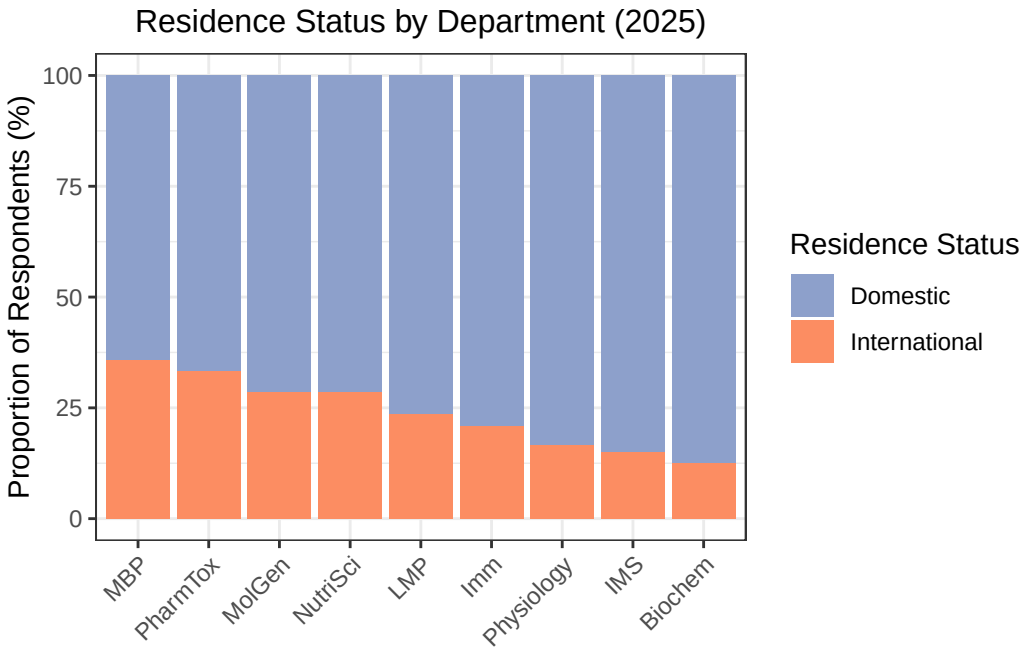

Figure 5: Proportion of international students varies across departments.

3.2 Research

Compared to 2024, the distribution of weekly research hours (Figure 6) has shifted away from working more than 50 hours per week. This may reflect external students prioritizing external employment for career development Figure 16. It also aligns with Figure 7, which demonstrates that fewer respondents report spending more than 5 days per week conducting on-site research.

To assess the primary barriers affecting students' academic progress and research productivity, we conducted an LLM-assisted thematic analysis of open-ended responses from the 2025 survey, following the approach described in Section 3.1.

1. **Administration and bureaucracy**: Students identified administrative processes largely outside their control as key barriers to academic progress and research productivity, including research ethics approvals, data access, and collaboration with clinical partners.
2. **Commuting and Transportation**: Students cited lengthy commutes as barriers to research productivity, particularly for those living outside the downtown core.

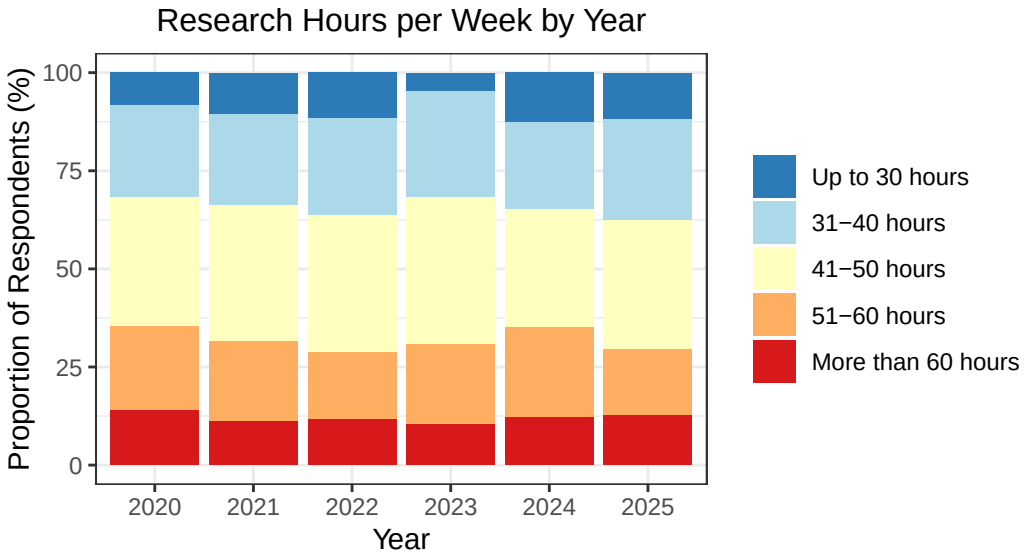

Figure 6: Number of respondents working more than 50 hours is decreasing per year.

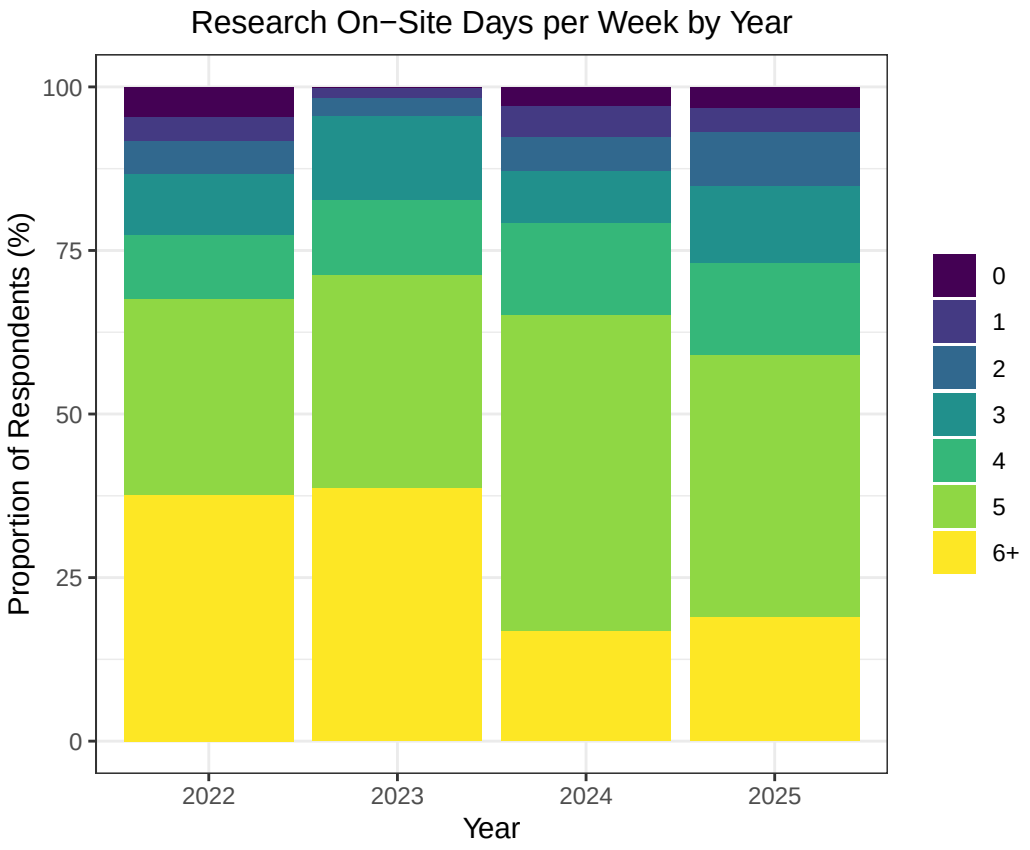

Figure 7: The proportion of respondents spending 5 or more days per week conducting full-time research has decreased in 2025.

3.3 Student Finances and Employment

Awareness of the Harmonized Base Funding Agreement (HBFA) continues to show steady, albeit plateauing, growth (Figure 8), with over half of students now familiar with how the HBFA impacts their stipendiary funding. Similarly, awareness of living allowance increases has increased again this year compared to 2024 (Figure 9). **This trend indicates that efforts to communicate funding changes are improving, and represents an ongoing actionable opportunity for departments to ensure students are informed about funding changes through targeted e-mails, orientation sessions, and departmental meetings.**

Student perceptions of stipend adequacy (Figure 11) show that while sentiment improved within this survey year. Approximately half of respondents still disagree that their stipend adequately compensates their work.

In terms of transportation costs, Figure 12 indicates that costs have largely held steady since 2018, conveniently settling on a median cost of $128 which matches the cost of a TTC Post-Secondary Monthly Pass. Public transit and walking comprise the majority of transportation modes respondents use.

Employment patterns (Figure 15) reveal that while over 60% of students do not hold additional positions outside of their research roles, those who do are overwhelmingly employed in academic roles at the University of Toronto. Additionally, those who do hold additional employment report working approximately 10 hours per week in these roles, regardless of employment category. Figure 16 demonstrates a clear and concerning pattern surrounding students' motivation for seeking additional employment opportunities. Namely, **students seem increasingly likely to prioritize external employment for additional income over personal interest or work experience**. This shift strongly suggests that financial necessity, rather than career development goals, are the primary driver of external employment — a trend that may impact research productivity and student well-being.

HBFA & Stipend

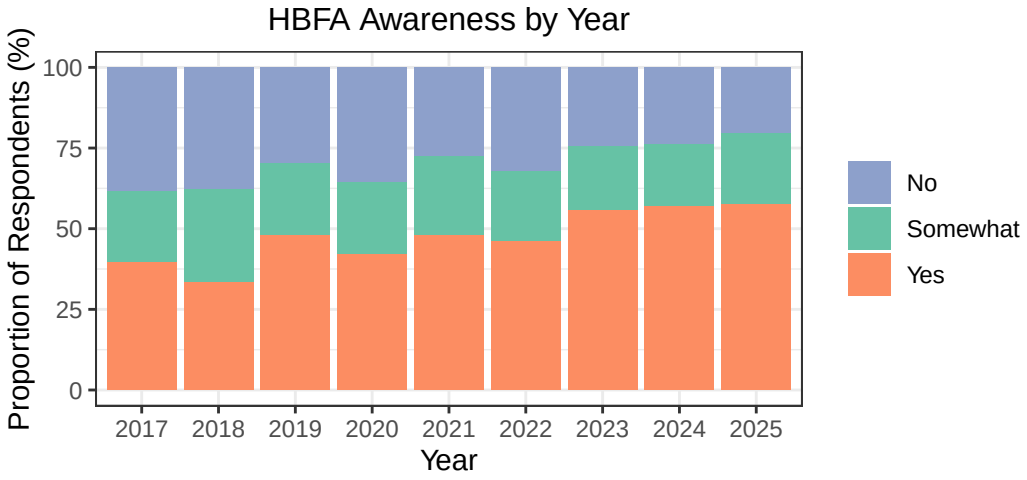

Figure 8: There is a steady, albeit plateauing increase in respondent awareness of the HBFA.

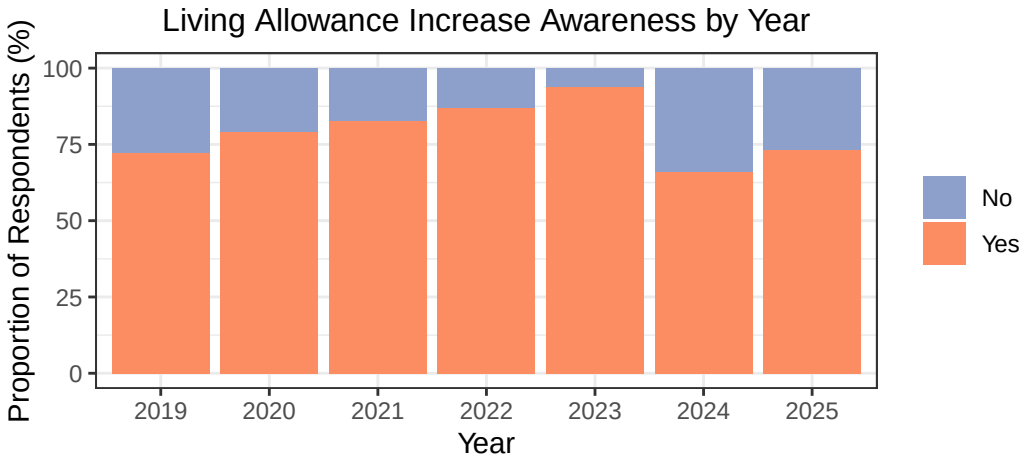

Figure 9: Respondents' awareness of their annual guaranteed living allowance decreased in 2024 to the lowest on record, but has improved in 2025.

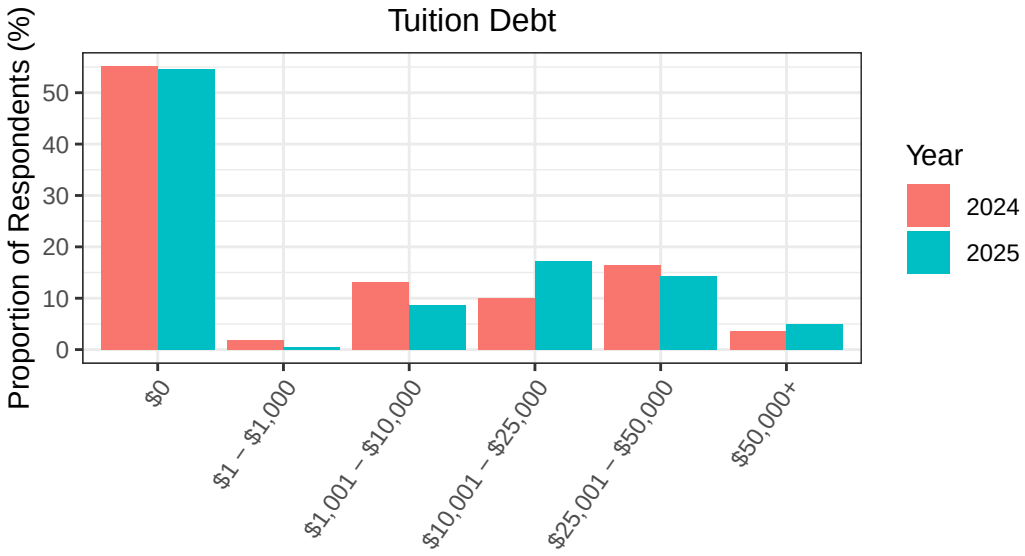

Figure 10: While most respondents reported no debt in 2025, a large proportion of those with debt reported owing more than $10,000.

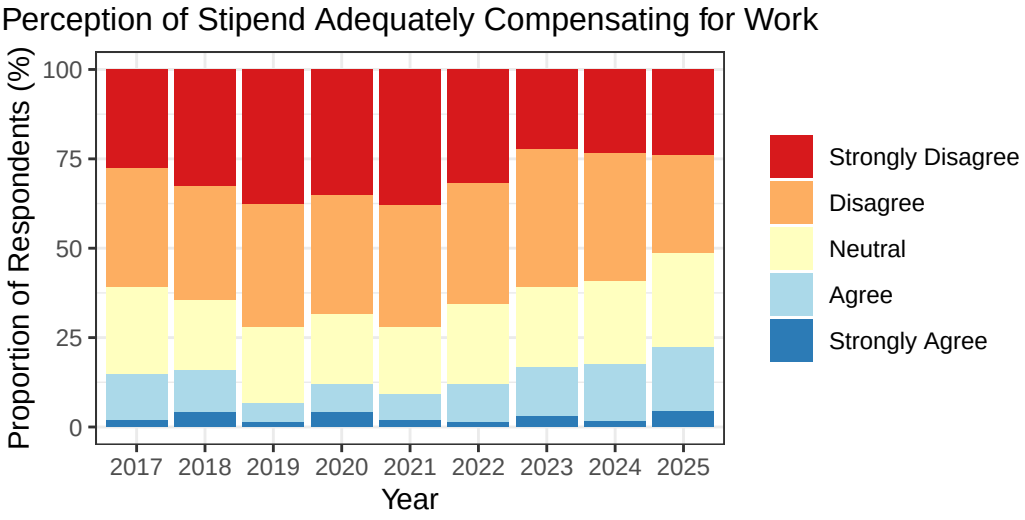

Figure 11: Stipend adequacy perceptions have improved since the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022), but most students still consider their compensation insufficient.

Transportation

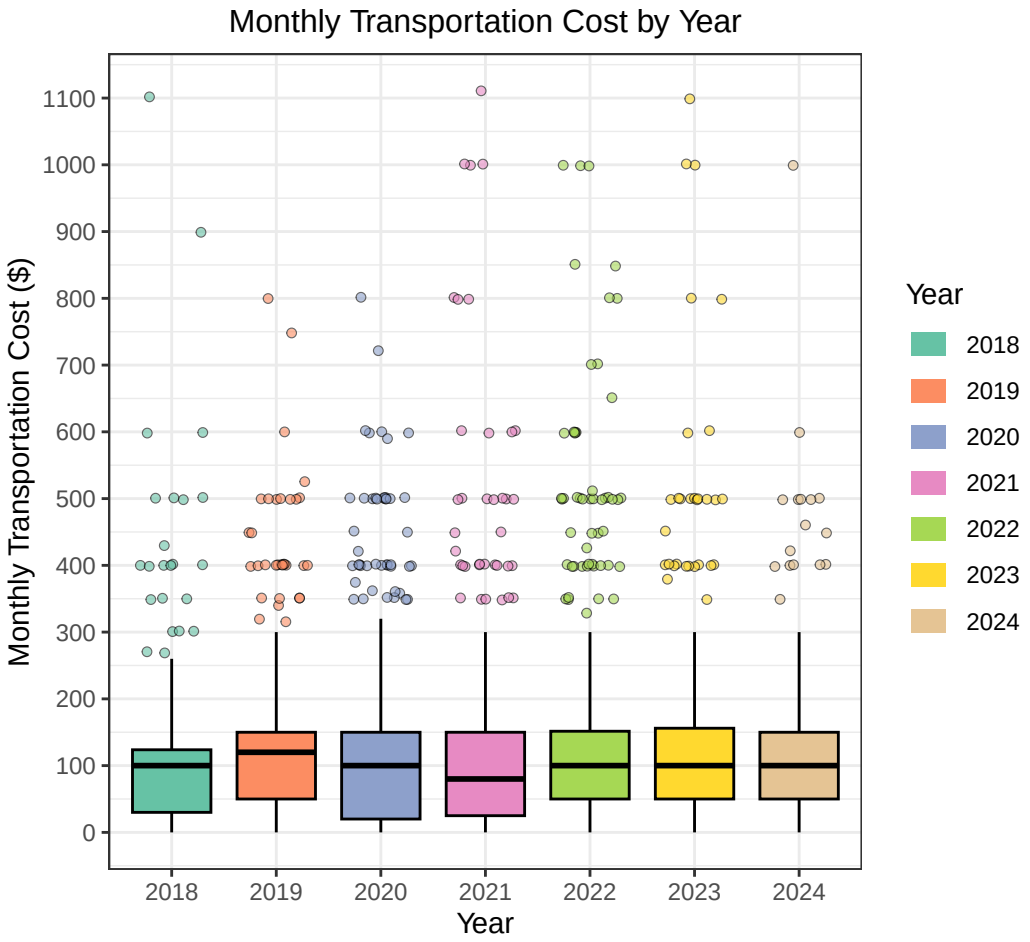

Figure 12: Transportation costs are largely stable since 2018, with an overall mean over the years of $128 which matches the monthly cost of a student TTC monthly pass.

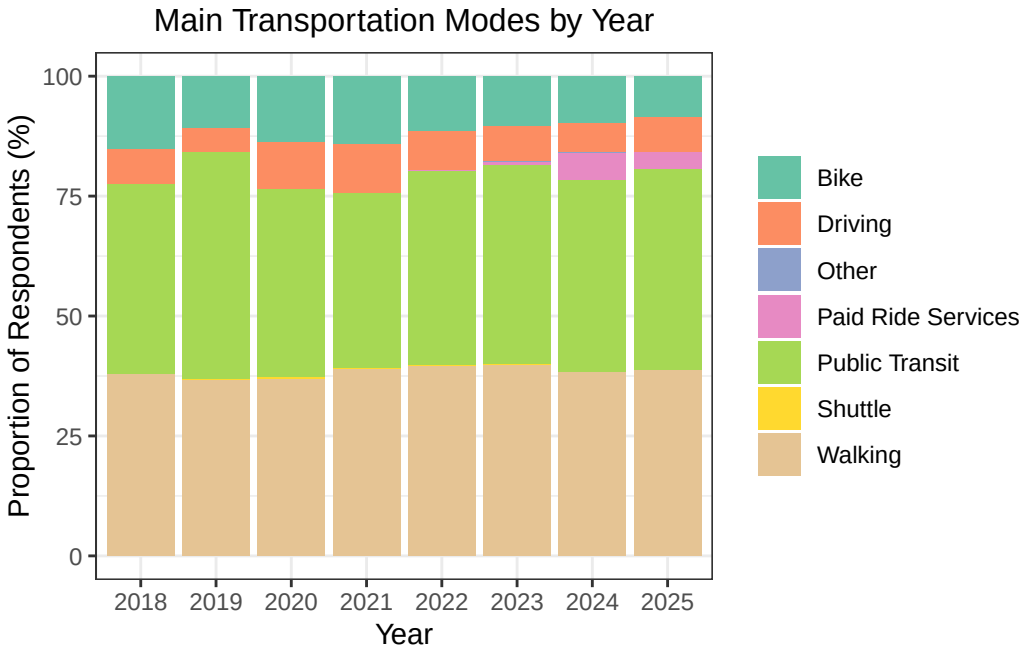

Figure 13: The use of transportation modes remain stable overall, though use of paid ride services (e.g., Uber, Lyft) increased in 2024.

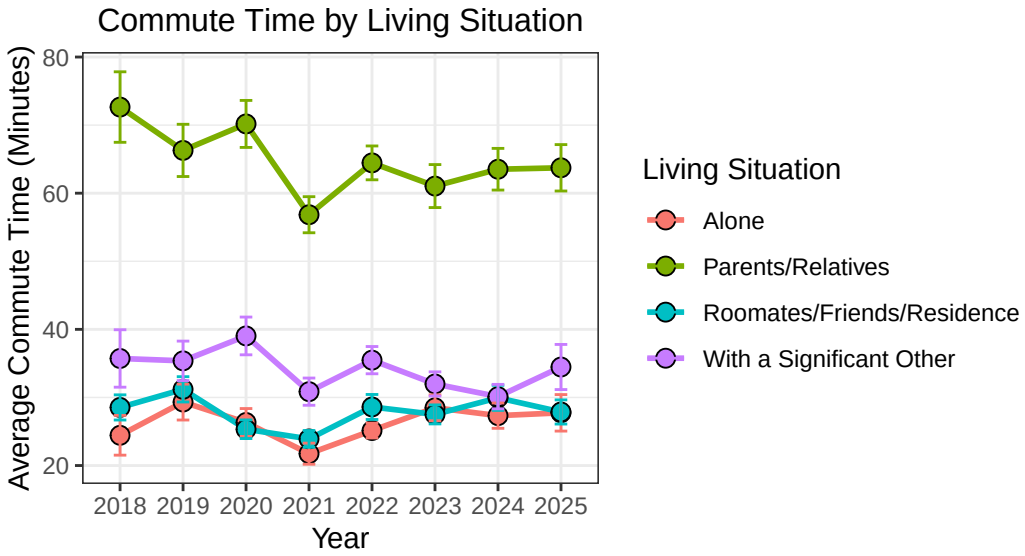

Figure 14: Respondents living with parents/relatives consistently have longer commute times compared to those living with significant others or roommates.

Employment

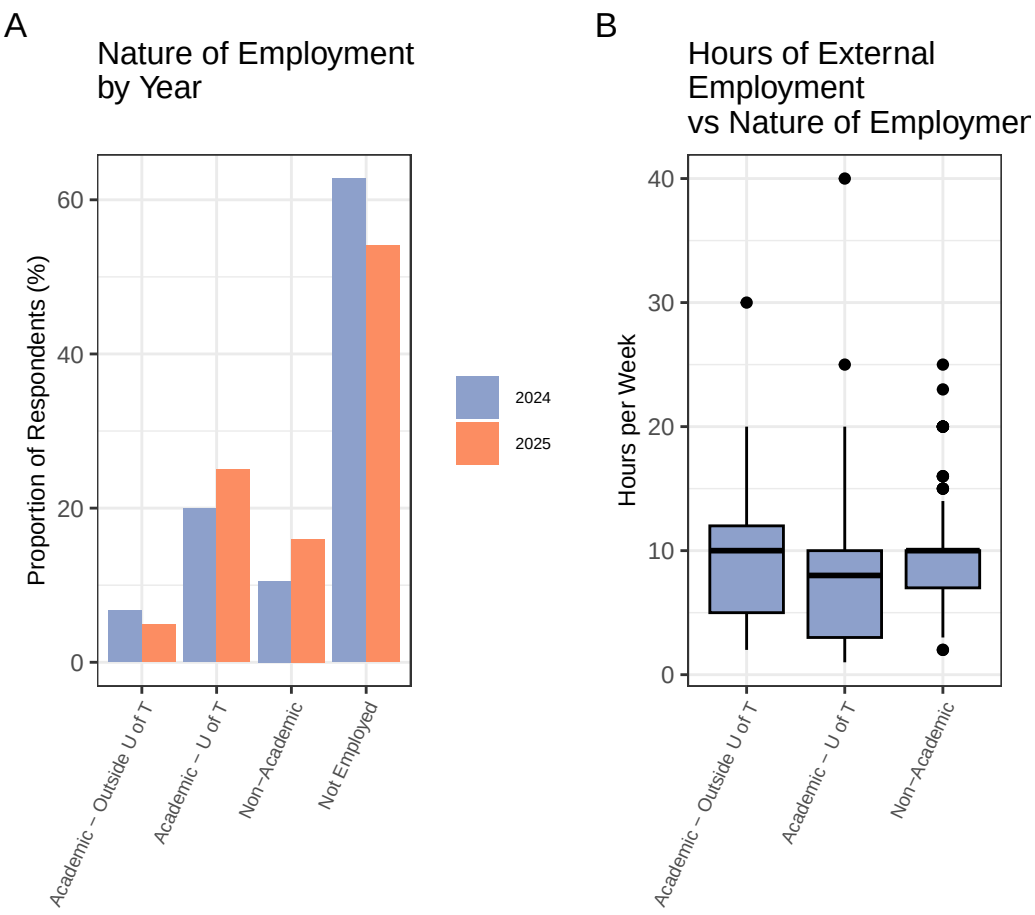

Figure 15: (A) Most respondents do not have additional employment, but those who do primarily hold academic positions at U of T. (B) The hours of external employment are relatively consistent at **10 hours per week** regardless of employment category.

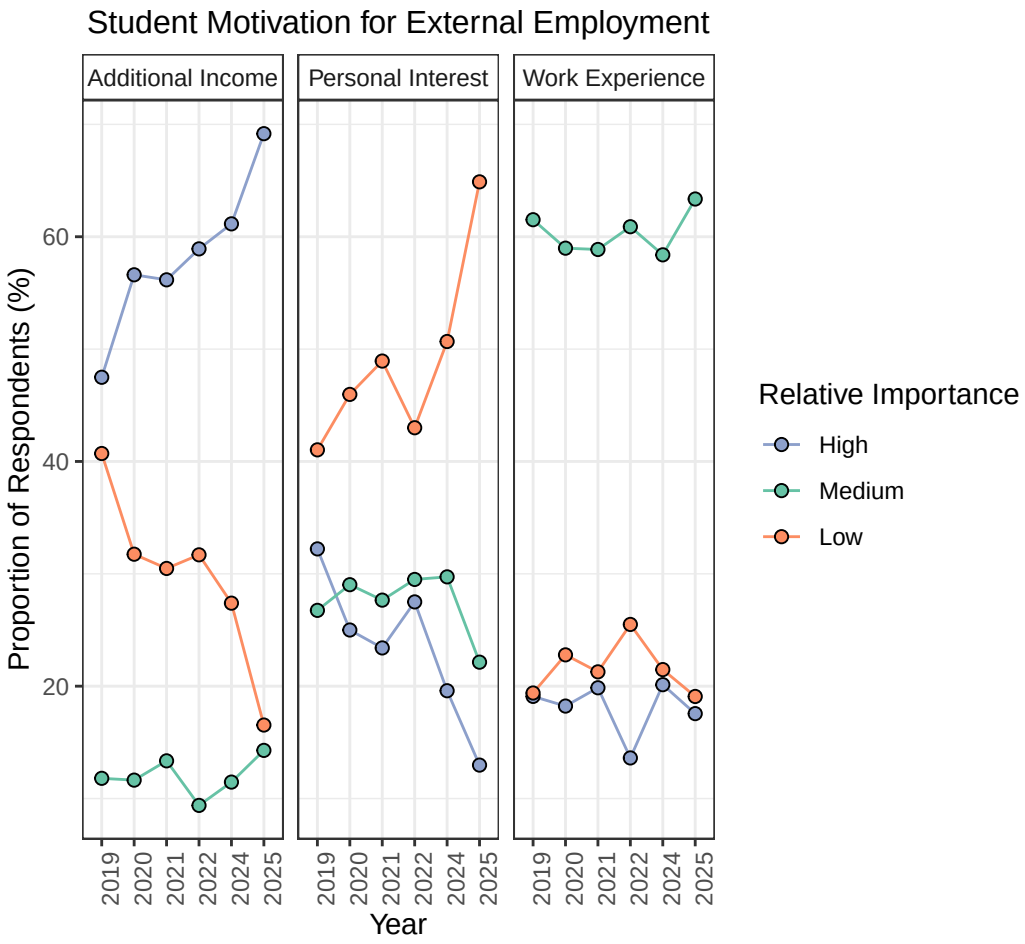

Figure 16: Responses indicate a clear pattern of students seeking external employment for the purpose of additional income rather than personal interest or career development.

3.4 Student Well-being

Living situation patterns (Figure 17) demonstrate that there is a **sharp increase in likelihood to live with parents or relatives rather than with significant others** (decrease from 38.1% in 2023 to 30.9% in 2024). This likely reflects the cost-of-living crisis developing in Canada and particularly in the Greater Toronto Area.

This year's survey has also highlighted some positive trends:

1. The proportion of respondents who claim they can support all living expenses from graduate funding alone has held steady since 2024 (Figure 18), though the **majority still require supplementary income sources**.
2. In 2025, respondents report an financial strain in all three major insecurity measures of food (Figure 19), housing (Figure 20), and healthcare (Figure 21) have generally held steady from the previous year.
3. The proportion of respondents reporting that they struggle to find housing has decreased since a peak high in 2024 (Figure 17).

Figure 22 also shows an increase in respondents reporting poor mental health compared to 2024, with **an increased proportion of respondents reporting "very poor" mental health in 2025**.

We examined the relationship between PhD respondents' mental health ratings and their year of study. Poorer mental health ratings were generally more common among students in later years of their programs (Figure 23). However, in Years 6 and 7, the proportion of students reporting "Fair" mental health decreased alongside a slight increase in "Good" and "Excellent" ratings. This pattern may reflect a greater sense of relief among students approaching the end of their programs, although further investigation is needed to understand this association.

We also gathered long-form responses from students to the following question:

> "Please provide any additional comments about how your financial situation has impacted your well-being and/or your feelings associated with the current medical coverage for graduate students:"

Responses highlight ongoing barriers to accessing healthcare, particularly concerns about affordability and perceived gaps in health insurance coverage, with a majority (>75%) of students experiencing challenges (Figure 21). A selection of representative comments gathered from these responses is provided below:

> *"I do not use the health care I need (i.e., mental health, physiotherapy) because I cannot afford it."*

> *"I don't go to prescribed medical care simply because I am not sure I can afford it. […] a dental clinic that cooperates with UTGSU plan tried to charge me $900 for a filling. Nightmare."*

> *"If I didn't have [access to] my parent's medical insurance, I wouldn't be able to cover a majority of the care I currently access."*

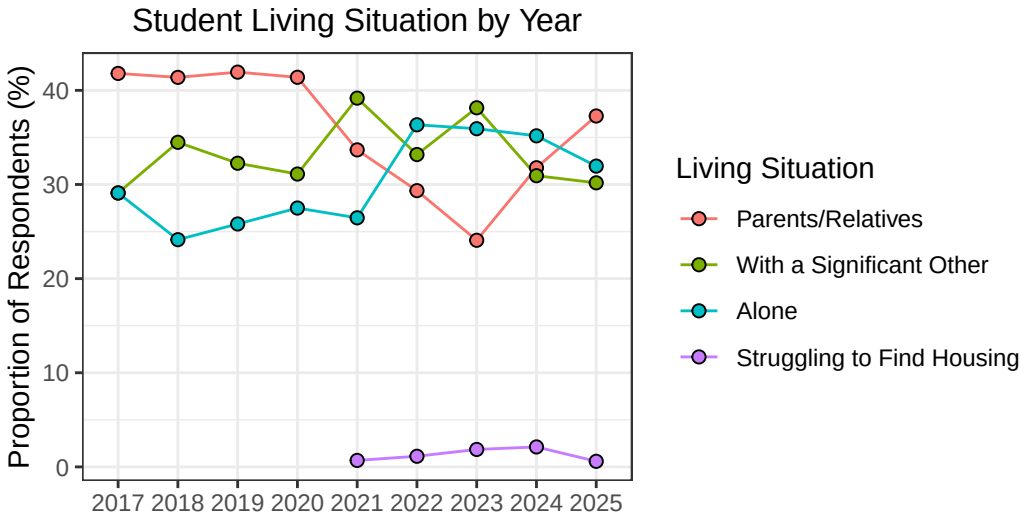

Figure 17: Students increasingly tend to live with parents or relatives rather than significant others, marking a shift in living arrangements.

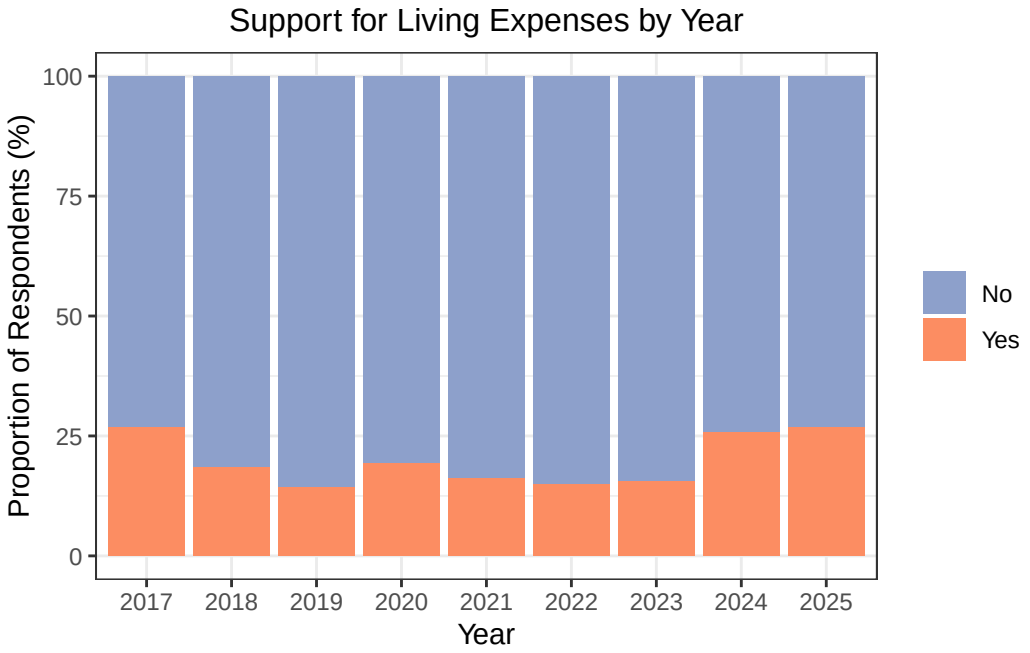

Figure 18: The proportion able to cover living expenses with their stipend alone remains similar to 2024, though most still cannot cover all their living expenses.

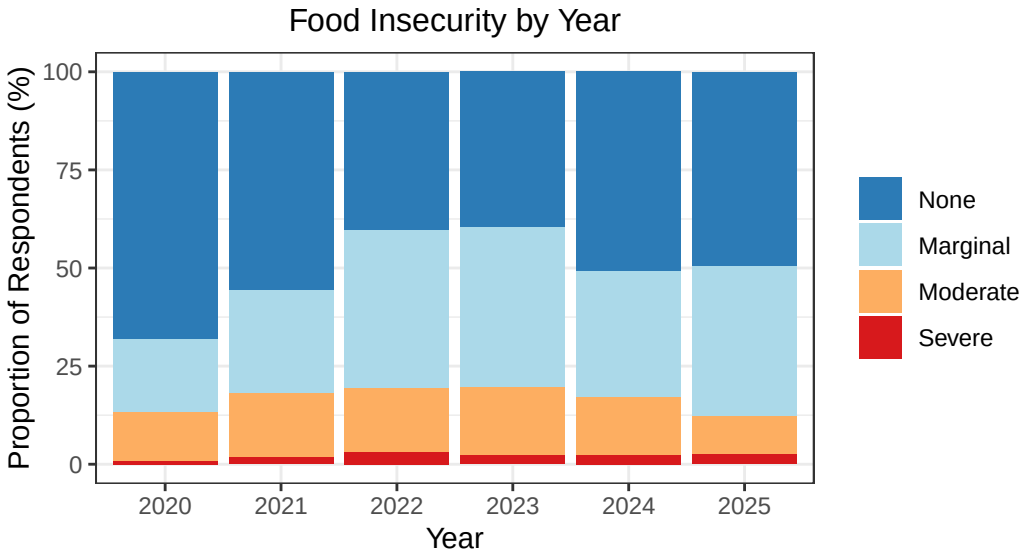

Figure 19: In 2025, the proportion of respondents experiencing **moderate or severe food insecurity has decreased**.

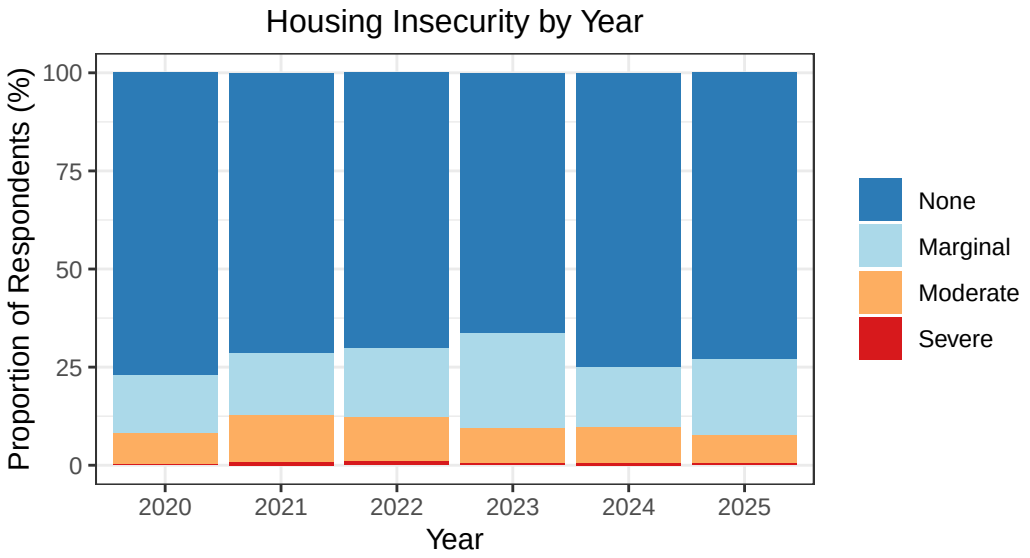

Figure 20: The proportion of respondents experiencing housing insecurity remains stable into 2025.

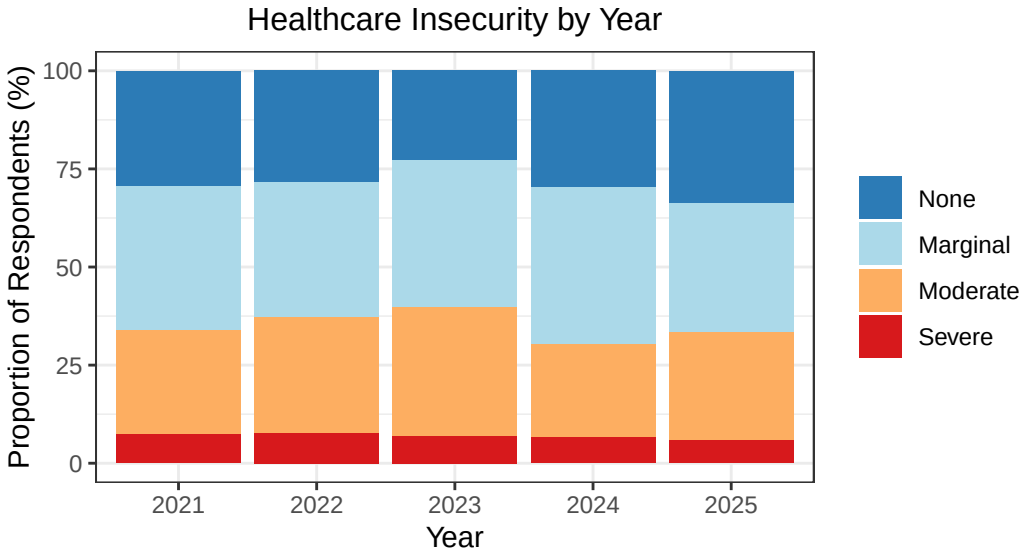

Figure 21: Healthcare insecurity continues to decline, though most respondents still experience some degree of insecurity in 2025.

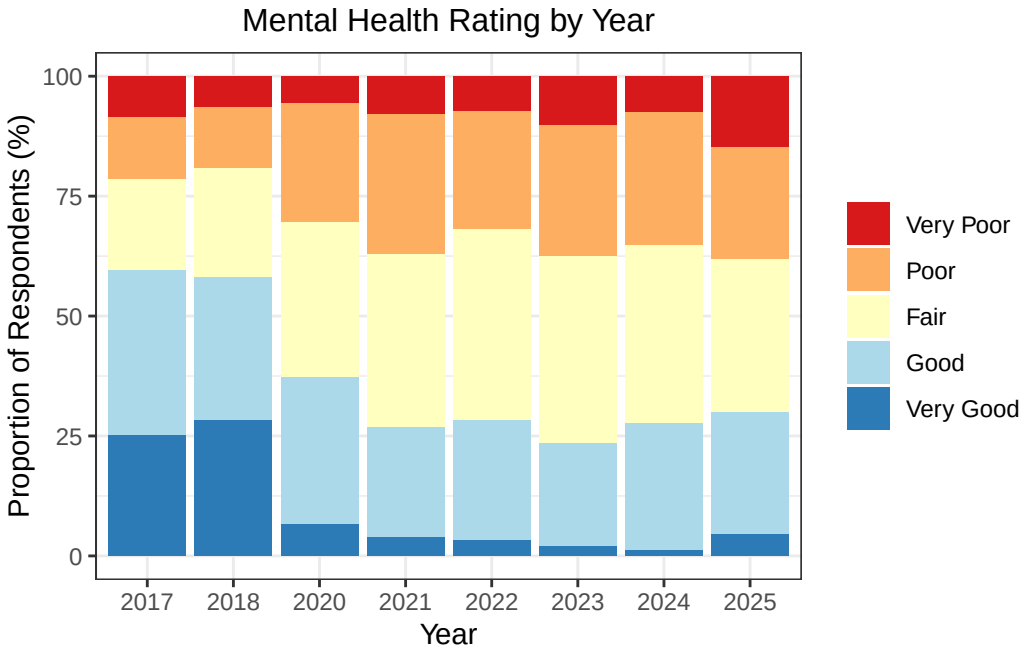

Figure 22: Poorer mental health ratings are more common among PhD respondents in later years of study.

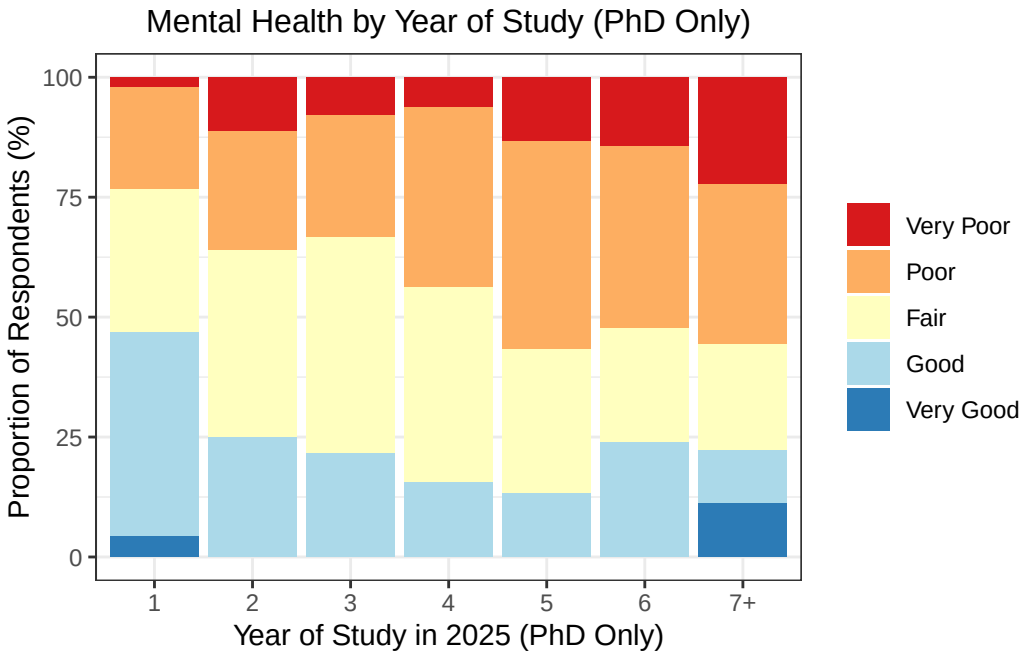

Figure 23: Mental health ratings appear to worsen as a function of time.

3.5 Resource Awareness

The 2025 survey continued the comprehensive resource awareness module introduced in 2024 to assess awareness and usage of support services among Temerty graduate students. Findings suggest modest improvements in students' ability to locate resource information, although substantial gaps in awareness and utilization persist.

As shown in Figure 24, the proportion of students reporting that finding resource information was easy or very easy increased from approximately 40% in 2024 to 46% in 2025, while those reporting difficulty decreased from approximately 28% to 24%. Despite this improvement, **nearly one-quarter of respondents continued to experience difficulties locating relevant services.**

Resource usage (Figure 26) also remained largely consistent with 2024, although modest increases were observed for certain services. Usage of TA Online Job Postings increased from approximately 34% to 38%, while U of T Health & Wellness usage increased from approximately 39% to 43%. Libraries Article and Media Databases continued to have the highest usage at approximately 58%. However, several substantial awareness-to-usage gaps persisted:

- **Centre for Graduate Mentorship and Supervision (CGMS)**: Despite awareness exceeding 50%, **fewer than 1% of respondents reported using this service in both years**. This may reflect limited need for additional supervisory support, but could also indicate uncertainty about the service's purpose, value, or effectiveness.
- **Centre for Learning Strategy Support (CLSS)**: Awareness remained approximately 75%, while **usage was around 6%**, suggesting that awareness alone does not necessarily translate into utilization.
- **CLNx Career Services**: Awareness decreased from approximately 66% to 61%, while usage remained around 18%. Given the employment concerns identified elsewhere in this report, this persistent gap warrants further attention.

Health and wellness service awareness (Figure 27) showed modest improvements compared to 2024, particularly for Mental Health Workshops, Peer Support Services, Harm Reduction, and Gender-affirming Care Services. However, awareness of most services remained below 50%, with Periodic Health Visits being the only service recognized by a majority of respondents. Given ongoing financial pressures, greater awareness of free and low-cost health and wellness services could provide valuable support to students.

To assess the barriers contributing to these persistent resource awareness gaps, we conducted an LLM-assisted thematic analysis of open-ended responses from the 2025 survey as performed in Section 3.1. Representative quotes are included alongside each theme to illustrate the challenges faced by students. The analysis identified four themes:

1. **Difficulties with University web resources - 78% of responses**: Students reported difficulties navigating university websites due to outdated or inactive links, overlapping information across multiple platforms, and the need to know specific search terms. Information about mental health services and insurance coverage was particularly difficult to locate, including counselling coverage and appointment booking procedures.

   "There's too many different websites for everything, A cohesive list is needed."
   "There needs to be a single webpage with a search function with all the resources from metal health to academic to insurance […]"

Recommendation: Develop a centralized, searchable resource hub with direct links and updated information about available services, particularly mental health and insurance resources. Accessibility could be improved through QR codes on student identification cards or other university materials.

2. **E-mail overload - 40% of responses**: Students described important resource information being lost in lengthy listserv e-mails and mixed with event announcements, making relevant services difficult to identify.

   "I do recall receiving some information, but the service was buried under an avalanche of words in a e-mail."

Recommendation: Separate resource-related communications from event announcements and prioritize concise messaging. Specific seasonal reminders, such as promoting tax clinics during tax season, could improve resource visibility.

3. **Insufficient communication of available resources - 30% of responses**: Some students reported that resources were never communicated to them or were only briefly introduced during orientation sessions, when large amounts of information were presented at once.

   "This was never communicated to me and it feels too difficult to find it. I may need a resource but the first thing that comes in mind is never if UofT has it."

Recommendation: Strengthen ongoing communication through regular reminders, brief departmental presentations, and targeted outreach beyond orientation. A single-page resource guide distributed each semester could also help students access relevant information throughout their studies.

4. **Additional student recommendations**: Students also suggested initiatives addressing broader academic, professional, and financial needs, including interactive degree-milestone trackers, career and financial-planning works.

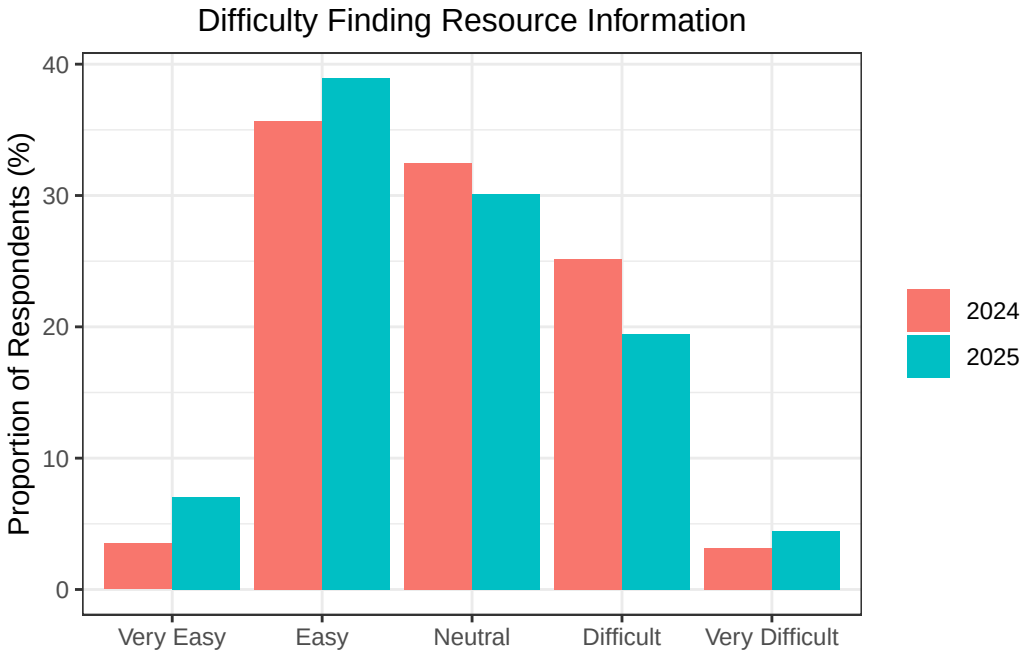

Figure 24: A greater proportion of respondents claim to find it easier to find information about student resources from 2024 to 2025.

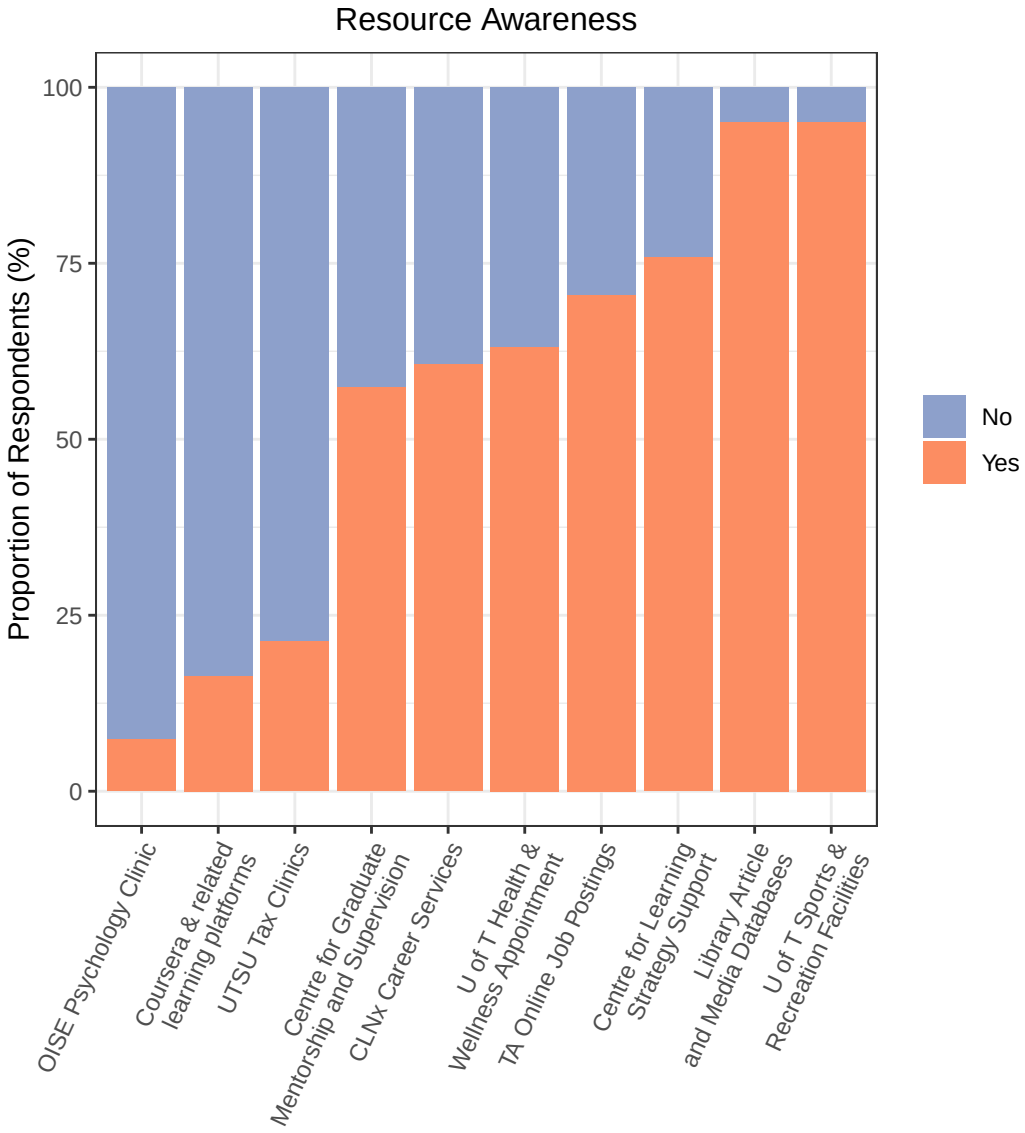

Figure 25: There is excellent awareness of the UofT Sports & Recreation Facilities and Library Article and Media Databases. Other resources still need to be made more widely known.

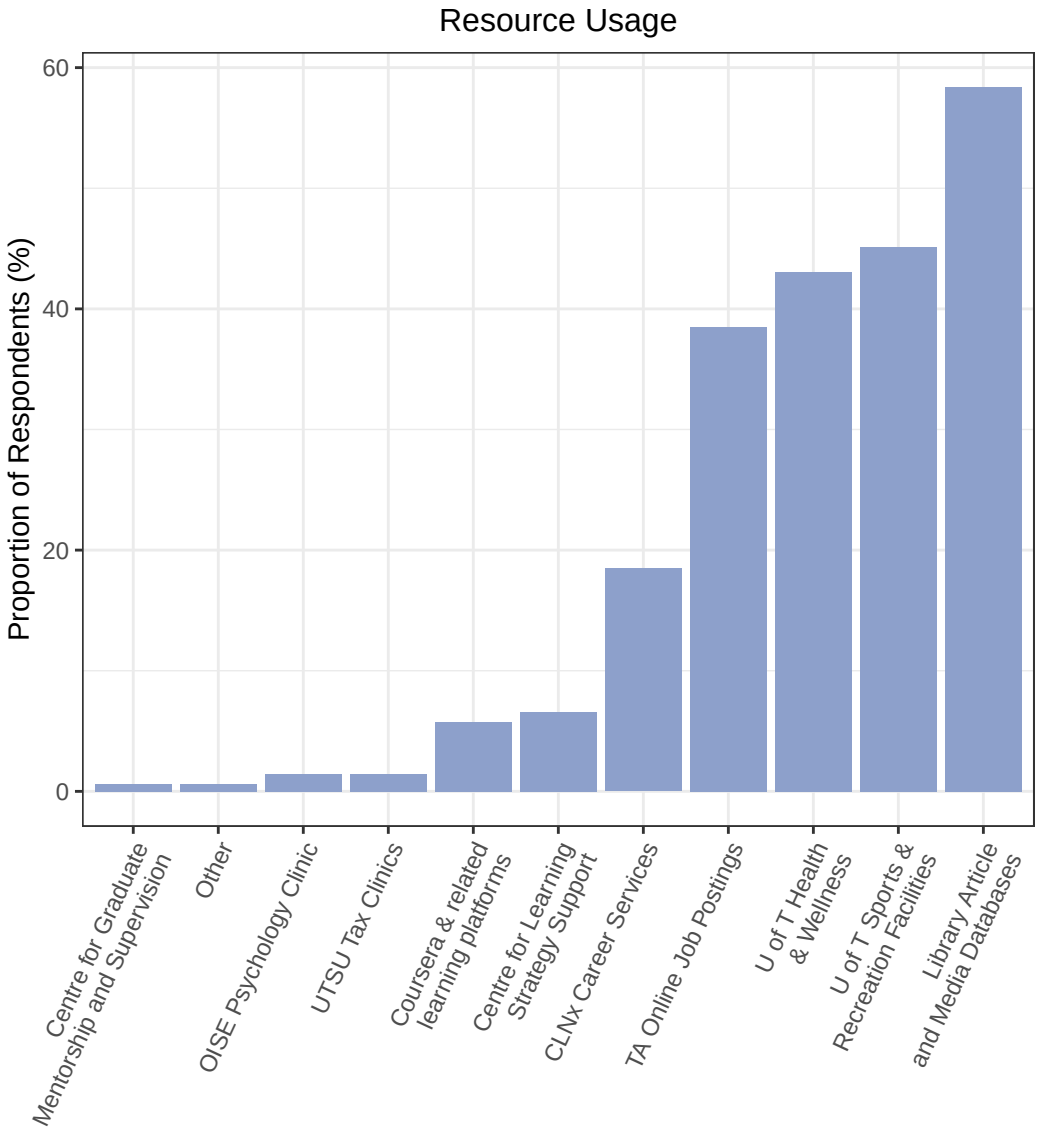

Figure 26: Resource usage generally matches awareness.

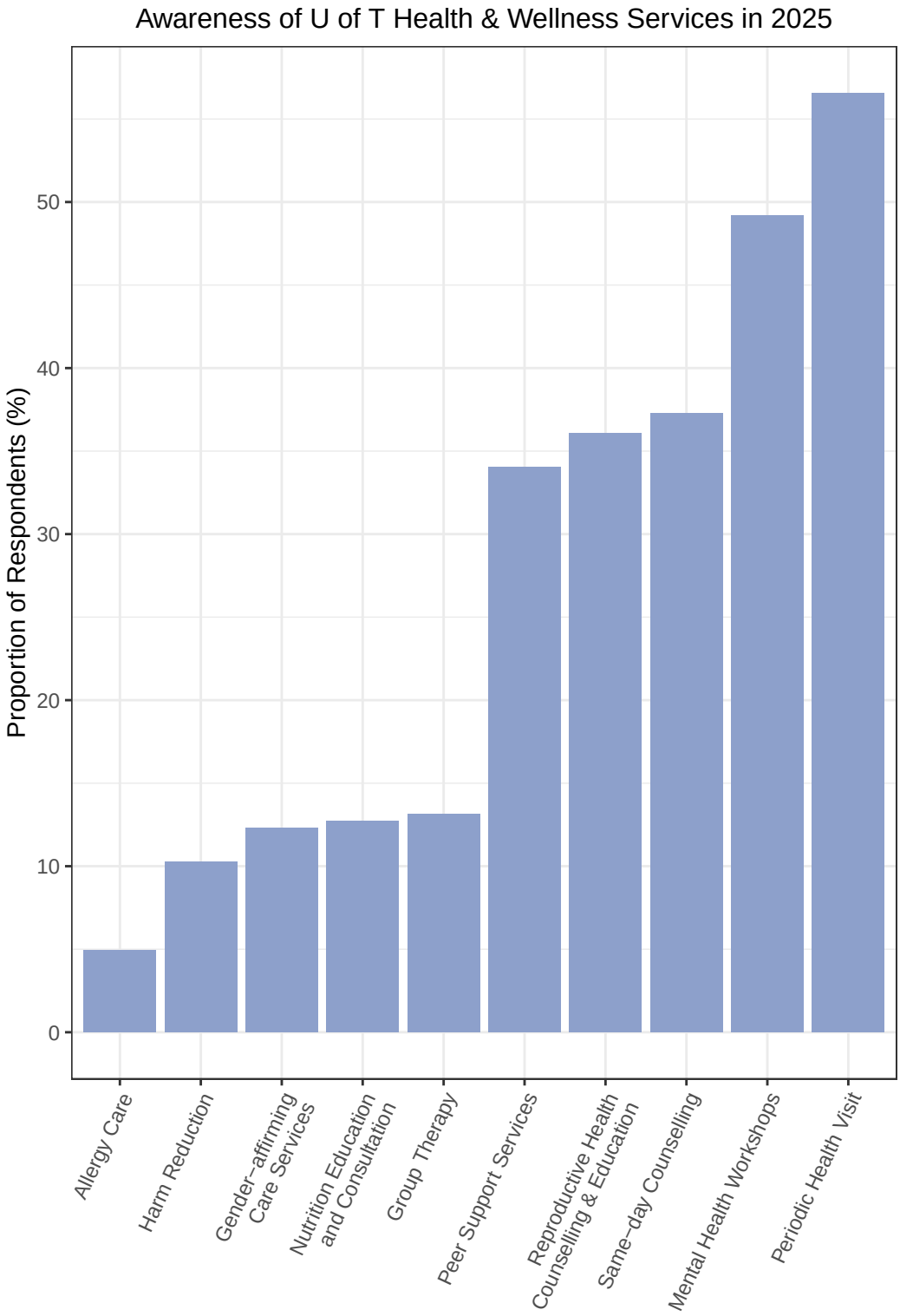

Figure 27: The only health & wellness service that was known about over 50% of the students was the periodic health visit.

3.6 International Students

The proportion of international students has continued to decline (Figure 3).

Financial pressures are evident in Figure 30, which shows a longitudinal trend toward less money being sent back home. This may be reflecting the increasing cost of living in Toronto for international students who often face higher expenses and limited funding opportunities.

The transition experience for international students shows mixed results (Figure 28). Compared to previous years where respondents report difficulty with securing a guarantor, the majority of respondents in 2025 did not need a guarantor at all. Satisfaction with departmental support during the transition to Canada has shown no year-to-year improvement, with consistently low satisfaction levels. **This is a clear area for departments to improve in.**

Most concerning is Figure 29, which highlights a concerning trend of increasing dissatisfaction with award opportunities available to international students, although we recognize that broader policy changes are beyond departmental control.

To better understand the challenges faced by international students transitioning to UofT and life in Canada, we conducted an LLM-assisted thematic analysis of open-ended responses from the 2025 survey, following the approach described in Section 3.1. Representative quotes are included alongside each theme to illustrate the challenges faced by international students. The analysis identified three key themes:

1. **Financial and Immigration-Related Challenges:** International students identified their first year as particularly challenging due to substantial upfront expenses, including moving costs, housing deposits, and visa fees incurred before receiving their first stipend.

   "[…] besides the regular living expenses that all students face, there was also a more significant one-time start-up cost I had to bear during moving […]"

Recommendation: Introduce start-up advances or earlier first stipend payments and align tuition payment deadlines with stipend disbursements to alleviate financial pressures during the transition to UofT.

2. **Navigating University Systems:** Many international students reported insufficient practical orientation to essential university systems such as ACORN and Quercus.

   "I didn't know about Quercus […] I find there are way too many different platforms to check into."

Recommendation: Develop practical orientation resources and provide targeted guidance on navigating UofT systems before or shortly after arrival.

3. **Adapting to Life in Canada:** International students also reported difficulties navigating practical aspects of settling in Canada, including obtaining a Social Insurance Number, setting up banking, using public transit, and understanding the University Health Insurance Plan.

   "There was no such structured guidance such as information about work study programs, SIN document, bank accounts, TTC/Presto, photo card, how health insurance works etc."

Recommendation: Develop a pre-arrival guide or "Canada 101" session covering essential aspects of settling in Canada, including clearer guidance on UHIP coverage and access to services.

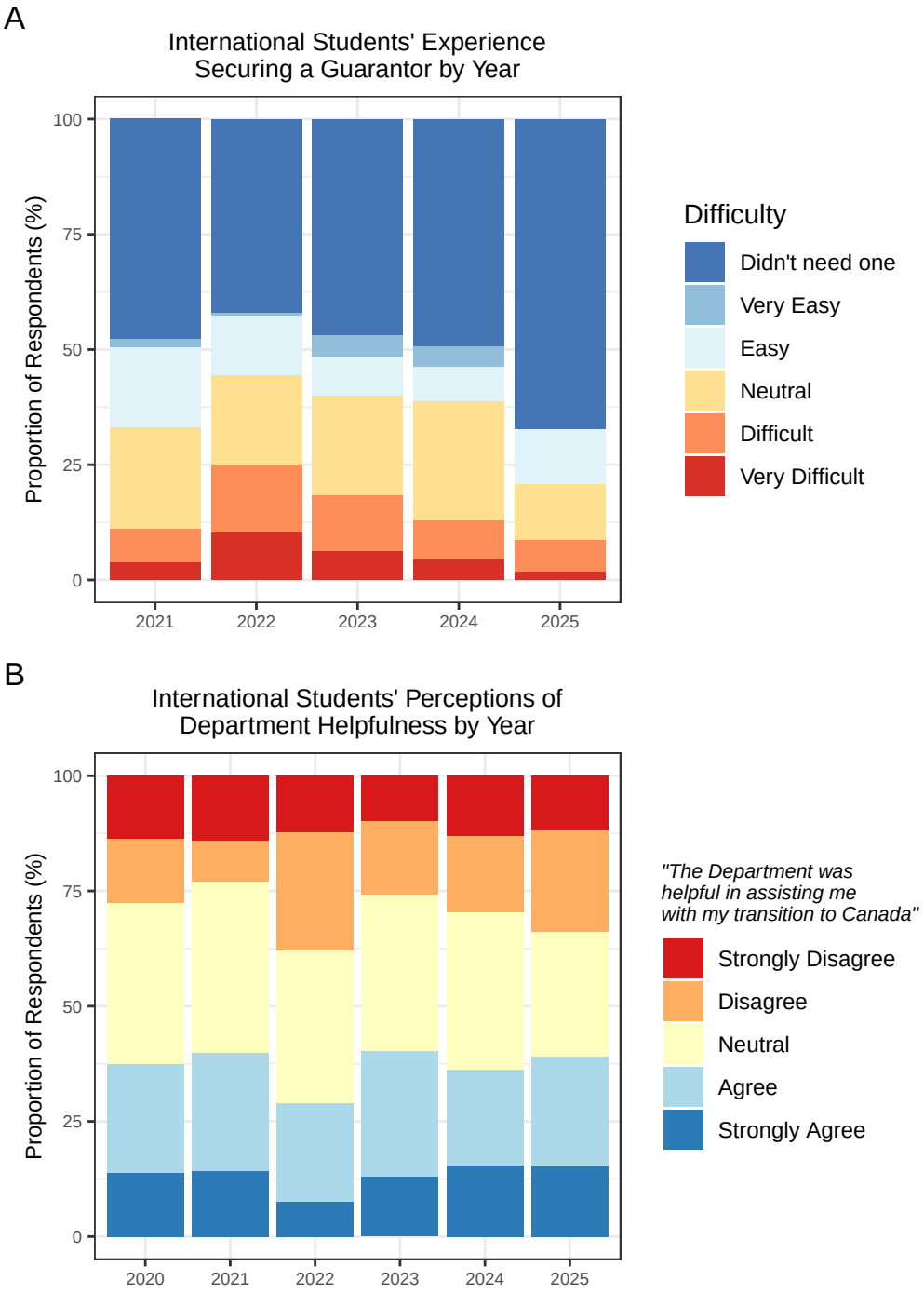

Figure 28: While the need for international students to secure a guarantor has decreased (A), this appears to have been independent of the department which provided minimal year-to-year improvements (B).

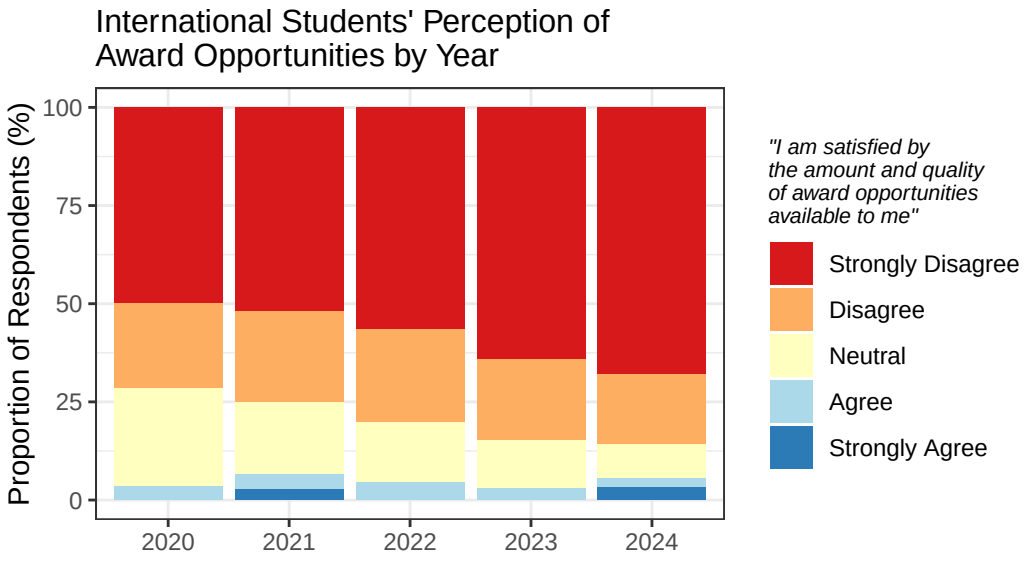

Figure 29: There has been a consistent trend of increasing frustration among international students regarding the availability of award opportunities.

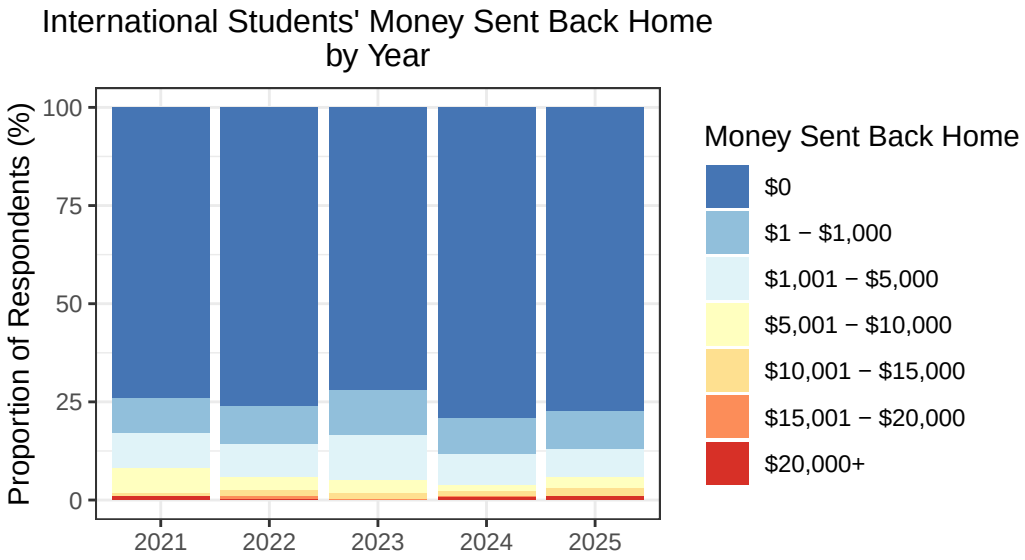

Figure 30: There is a longitudinal trend towards less money being sent back home by international students.