



Graduate Studentships in Patient-Oriented Research Program Guide

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Please visit <https://absporu.ca/training-opportunities/absporu-graduate-studentship-in-patient-oriented-research/> to access the online application platform, important dates, and contact information for the AbSPORU Graduate Studentship Program.

Background

The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) has implemented the national [Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research \(SPOR\)](#) through provincial partnerships across the country to support the advancement of patient-oriented research (POR) with expertise, resources, and knowledge. As part of this national strategy, the Alberta SPOR SUPPORT Unit (AbSPORU) is dedicated to supporting patient-oriented research in Alberta. Together, AbSPORU and its funding partners -- CIHR, Alberta Innovates and the University Hospital Foundation -- are fostering the integration of research into care by “putting patients first.”

AbSPORU plays a critical role in training and capacity development for POR stakeholders including but not limited to researchers, graduate students, trainees, patients, health practitioners, and clinicians. AbSPORU, in partnership with Alberta Innovates, hosts and coordinates the AbSPORU Graduate Studentships, including training, monitoring, and management of activities throughout the funding year.

Paragraph Objectives

The objectives of the AbSPORU Graduate Studentships include:

- Supporting and building capacity for Master’s or PhD graduate students in the principles and practice of POR;
- Providing POR activities to develop capacity -- through a multidisciplinary approach that embeds the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) -- for all stakeholders including students, thesis Primary Research Supervisors, patients, and community team members;
- Creating opportunities for students to engage with stakeholders to work closely together from conceptualization of research questions to dissemination and implementation of results at the practice and community levels.

As a short-term award, the AbSPORU Graduate Studentship program is intended to provide a foundational program of support, network building, and capacity development to contribute to the development and implementation of a graduate thesis project.

Program Details

The AbSPORU Graduate Studentships in Patient-Oriented Research awards are designed to provide incentive for graduate students to pursue their research projects with a POR approach. The AbSPORU Graduate Studentship provides **12 months of funding support** towards a thesis-based Master’s or Doctoral degree, consisting of a **stipend of \$30,000**.

The AbSPORU Graduate Studentship is funded by AbSPORU, through funding support provided by Alberta Innovates (AI). A limited number of awards will be reserved for applicants who demonstrate they (will) have matched funding -- **See Page 10 for more details**.

AbSPORU Graduate Studentship recipients (“Recipients”) will have the opportunity to develop the knowledge and experience to transition to careers in research and innovation areas and beyond that leverage their scientific training and expertise. To develop the required interdisciplinary and collaborative skill sets for Alberta’s next generation of scientists, clinicians, and health services professionals, AbSPORU coordinates competency development activities in POR for successful Recipients.

Eligibility

(a) AbSPORU Studentship Recipient Eligibility Criteria

To qualify as a Recipient, a student is required to satisfy the following criteria:

1. Be enrolled in any year of a Master's or PhD (or comparable doctoral) program as of the award start-date, at one of Alberta's four comprehensive academic and research universities¹ (CARUs), undertaking health-oriented research training leading to a thesis-based graduate degree.
 - a. **Note:** The Applicant's thesis defense must not occur prior to or during the term of the award.
2. Must not hold a simultaneous award from Alberta Innovates;
3. Must not be a previous AbSPORU Graduate Studentship recipient;
4. Must not be an Alberta SPOR SUPPORT Unit staff member (employed through the University of Alberta, University of Calgary, Alberta Health Services, or Alberta Innovates) at any point during the term of the award;
5. Be enrolled full-time in a graduate degree program that is linked to the award, and must engage in full-time research activities throughout the term of the award;
6. Be enrolled in only one (1) degree or diploma program during the term of the award, with the exception of formal joint degree programs.
7. Complete the AbSPORU *Introduction to Health Research and Patient-Oriented Research (POR)* e-learning module prior to application submission, and upload proof of completion as part of the application package.
8. Fulfil the following required capacity development activities during the term of the award -
 - a. Complete and pass an AbSPORU-affiliated training course to demonstrate competency development;
 - b. Attend and actively participate in consultation sessions with AbSPORU experts and patient-partner experts, coordinated by AbSPORU;
 - c. Present on their Research Project as a poster and/or oral presentation, as well as actively participate in the workshops and training opportunities offered during the AbSPORU annual conference event;
 - d. Complete supplemental equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and sex- and gender-based analysis+ (SGBA+) capacity development activities assigned by AbSPORU;
 - e. Participate in a monthly online journal club hosted by AbSPORU;
 - f. Participate in any other pertinent activities identified by AbSPORU during the term of the award.

(b) Project Eligibility Criteria

AbSPORU has operationalized the CIHR definition of patient-oriented research to clarify the minimum requirements for a research project to be considered patient-oriented (POR). The research proposal must clearly articulate that the Project does or will do all the following (see Appendix A for detailed descriptions):

- addresses patient-identified health priorities;
- aims to improve patient health outcomes; and
- engages patient-partners (and providers) in a manner appropriate to health-oriented research.

In addition, the project must aim to integrate principles of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and factors and outcomes relating to sex- and gender-based analysis+ (SGBA+) in a manner appropriate to the research. (If SGBA+ will not comprise primary outcomes of the Project, the Applicant must explain why and must describe how they considered SGBA+ in making this determination.)

¹ University of Alberta, University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge, Athabasca University

(c) Primary Research Supervisor Eligibility Criteria

Recipients are required to complete their training with the support of an Alberta-based Primary Research Supervisor. The Primary Research Supervisor will sponsor the Application and ensure adherence to the terms and conditions of the award. They must possess both a record of productive health-oriented research and sufficient resources to ensure satisfactory conduct of the research. They must provide direct supervision. A co-supervisor may also be identified if the Recipient has a secondary research supervisor.

How Funding Works

(a) Project Funding

The AbSPORU Graduate Studentship funding year begins September 1, 2026 and continues until August 31st, 2027. The Recipients can receive a Stipend of up to \$30,000 for the term of the award.

(b) Stipend Incentive

AbSPORU encourages Recipients to apply for and accept awards from other national or international agencies. Recipients and their Institution must inform AbSPORU of receipt of any other major comparable awards secured during the term of their AbSPORU Graduate Studentship award.

If a Recipient receives another major comparable award, they will not be eligible to receive the full value of the AbSPORU Graduate Studentship award at the same time. Instead, they will be eligible to receive a stipend Incentive, which is structured to enable receipt of funding from both sources, while ensuring the combined total is equal to or greater than the value of the original AbSPORU Graduate Studentship award offered (subject to any maximums allowed by the other funding agency).

The minimum stipend of the Incentive offered is \$12,000 CAD per 12-month award term. AbSPORU will increase the stipend Incentive as necessary to ensure the combined value of the awards does not fall below \$30,000 CAD for the AbSPORU Graduate Studentship funding term.

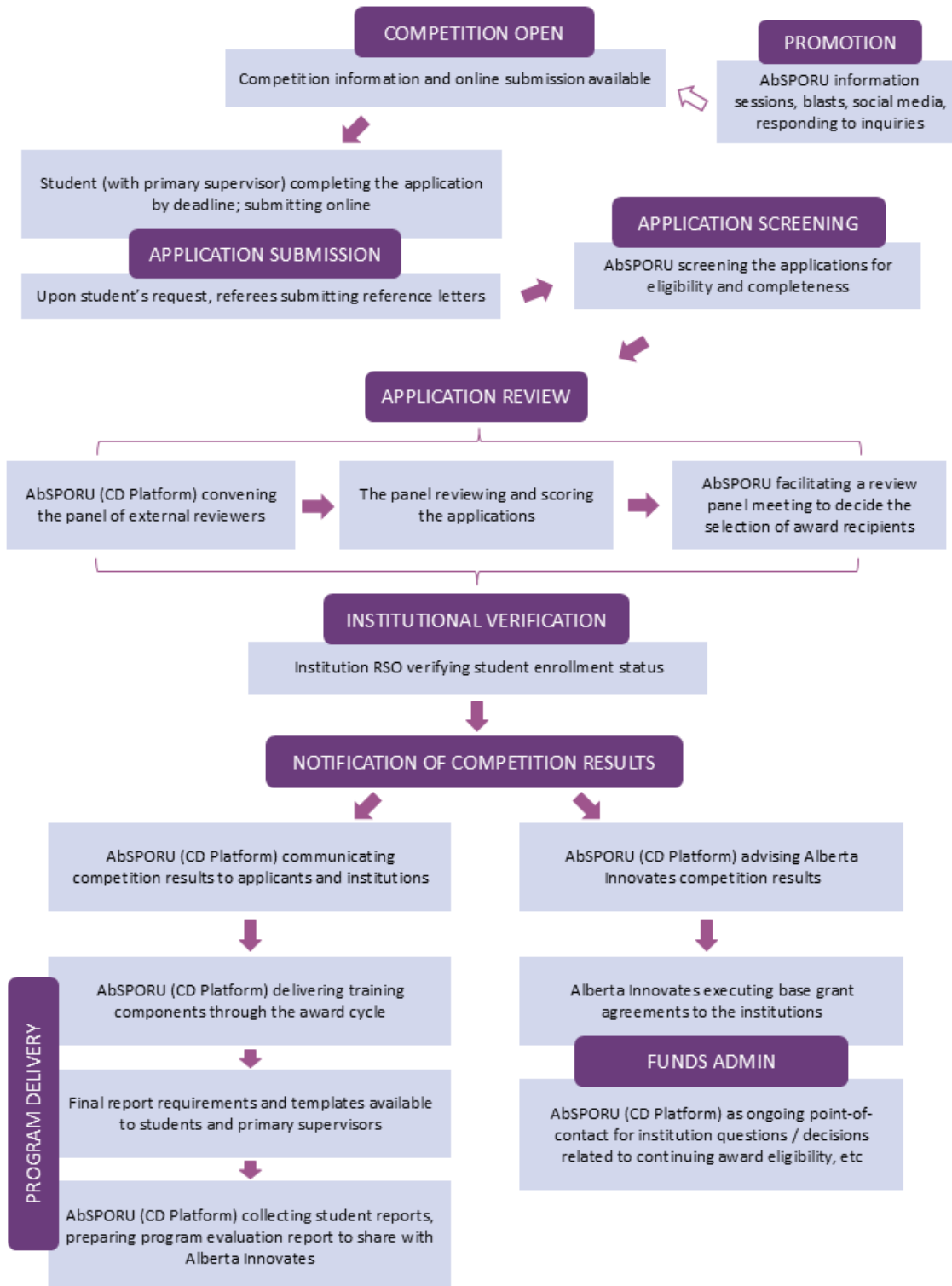
Recipients should note that stipend Incentives are still considered AbSPORU Graduate Studentship awards. All forms of these awards are covered by (i.e., count equally towards) the maximum eligible terms for graduate training support from AbSPORU.

Award recipients may not receive simultaneous support from another Alberta Innovates trainee program.

(c) Eligible and ineligible expenses

The Stipend (or stipend Incentive) is to be used exclusively to pay the AbSPORU Recipient and the AbSPORU. The Recipient may use it without restrictions.

Program Process Map



APPLICATION EVALUATION PROCESS

All applications will undergo a comprehensive review and final selection process involving an external review panel convened by AbSPORU. The review panel will include patient-partner reviewers. Review panel members will be asked to complete training in advance relating to: 1) recognizing and mediating implicit bias; 2) equity, diversity and inclusion; and 3) sex- and gender-bases analysis.

Each application will be reviewed by a minimum of three panel members (including one patient-partner reviewer). Each application will then be brought forward for discussion and final ranking by the full review panel. The panel's final ranking will help inform AbSPORU's final selection of the applications for funding. See Appendix B: Overview of Application Evaluation Areas.

AbSPORU retains the sole right to determine the evaluation process and does not disclose the names of its external reviewers to ensure their objectivity and impartiality. All external parties are subject to both confidentiality and conflict of interest policies set by AbSPORU and Alberta Innovates.

Reviewers' comments will be made available to all applicants. AbSPORU reserves the right to withhold any part of the reviewers' comments. Appeals of decisions taken on the basis of any such reviews will not be entertained.

The assessment criteria include the AbSPORU recipient's academic record, relevant work and/or research and/or lived experience, career development plan, and research training and mentorship environment. All funding decisions are at the sole discretion of AbSPORU.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

This Guide is intended as a high-level overview of the Program. It provides interested students with a roadmap of what to expect over the lifecycle of an AbSPORU Graduate Studentship Project, from the announcement of the program, through the Application stage, during the Project and post-completion. Should you have any questions about this guide or what is expected, please contact AbSPORU. Please be aware that AbSPORU may modify this guide from time to time in keeping up with any changes to the program.

Once AbSPORU has evaluated and approved an Application for funding, AbSPORU will notify Alberta innovates. Alberta Innovates will require the Applicant's institution to sign a standard form of Investment Agreement. The Investment Agreement sets out in detail the roles, responsibilities, and obligations of the various Parties to ensure a successful Project. Funding will not be provided until the Investment Agreement has been signed by all required Parties.

AbSPORU will only fund AbSPORU Graduate Studentship applicants who have satisfied all eligibility criteria. Meeting the eligibility criteria does not guarantee access to funding, and all funding decisions will be made by AbSPORU at its sole discretion. Appeals on any basis will not be entertained.

APPENDIX A: Project Eligibility Criteria

Definition of patient-oriented research

“Patient-oriented research is a continuum of research that engages patients and providers, focuses on patient- relevant priorities, and attempts to improve health care practices or policies to improve patient outcomes.”

- (Alberta SPOR SUPPORT Unit, 2021)

To meet the minimum requirements for research to be considered patient-oriented, the research project proposal must clearly articulate **the following**:

- Where the proposed health-oriented research fits into and how it will contribute to the continuum of research described above;
- How the proposed research is or will be informed by and address patient-identified health priorities;
- How the proposed research aims to improve patient health outcomes, and what methods and tools will be used towards achieving these aims;
- How principles of equity, diversity and inclusion have been considered and will be integrated in and/or addressed through the proposed health-oriented research project;
- What community partner research outputs, if any, may be anticipated from the proposed health- oriented research.
- How the proposed health-oriented research will appropriately integrate meaningful patient (and provider) engagement:
 - If patient engagement will be an embedded component of the proposed research project, the proposal must clearly articulate how patients will be meaningfully engaged as partners -- Refer to the [IAP2 spectrum of engagement](#) the [PORLET \(Patient-Oriented Research Level of Engagement Tool\)](#) and/or the [IRLET \(Indigenous Research Level of Engagement Tool\)](#).
 - Meaningful engagement refers to active involvement in the project that is mutually beneficial for all parties across the research process. Examples include, but are not limited to engagement in:
 - Governance
 - Identifying research topics to investigate
 - Helping plan & organize a study
 - Helping recruit participants & carry out the study
 - Helping share the results with other patients/public

Note: A student’s lived experience alone does not meet the qualification criteria of patient engagement.

APPENDIX B: Overview of Application Evaluation Areas

Applications will be evaluated by the AbSPORU review panel in six (6) areas:

- 1) Academic Record
- 2) Research Outputs
- 3) Relevant Work, Research Experience, and/or Lived Experience
- 4) Career Development Plan
- 5) Personal Statement
- 6) Research Project Proposal - (Project Overview; List of Project References; Alignment to POR)

Additionally, evaluation will consider the information provided in the reference letter from the Applicant's Primary Supervisor and, if applicable, the letter of the support from the Applicant's affiliate SPOR Network.

More details are provided below.

For each of the six areas listed above, the AbSPORU review panel will use a scoring system. The scoring system utilizes a 9-point numerical category score (9 = exceptional; 1 = poor):

High Score

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 9. Exceptional | Exceptionally strong with essentially no weaknesses |
| 8. Outstanding | Extremely strong with negligible weaknesses |
| 7. Excellent | Very strong with only some minor weaknesses |

Medium Score

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 6. Very Good | Strong but with numerous minor weaknesses |
| 5. Good | Strong but with at least one moderate weakness |
| 4. Satisfactory | Some strengths but also some moderate weaknesses |

Low Score

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 3. Fair | Some strengths but with at least one major weakness |
| 2. Marginal | A few strengths and a few major weaknesses |
| 1. Poor | Very few strengths and numerous major weaknesses |

Minor Weakness: An easily addressable weakness that does not substantially lessen the application

Moderate Weakness: A weakness that lessens the application

Major Weakness: A weakness that severely limits the application

Details of evaluation areas

1) Academic record –

- The Applicant's university-level transcripts

Note: An Applicant will not receive a lesser score if there have been periods of interruption in their active training.

- List of the Applicant's academic achievements (prizes, honours, awards) if applicable

Note: In the absence of academic achievements, review panelists will consider factors relative to the Applicant's lived experience, and whether non-academic accomplishments may demonstrate commensurate achievements.

2) Research outputs –

- The Applicant is asked to provide their publications list and/or link to their online bibliography.

Note: Alternative (i.e., non-traditional) research outputs may be included and described.

3) Relevant work, research experience, **and/or lived experience** –

- The Applicant is asked to identify relevant work/research experience, and to describe how their work, research, and /or lived experiences:
 - Have influenced their academic career path to-date,
 - Will support their ability to undertake their proposed Research Project, and
 - Will shape their future academic and career goals.

- Review panelists will consider whether the Applicant demonstrates a strong foundation of research-related skills and achievements informed by relevant work/research/lived experience

Note: In the case of those with non-traditional academic paths, consideration will be given to relative standards of research productivity for their level of experience/qualifications. Review panelists will consider individual workstyles, contributions, commitments, variations in disciplinary/community/cultural standards (e.g. collaboration).

- Review panelists will consider whether the Applicant demonstrates strong leadership qualities as demonstrated by accomplishments from their relevant work/research/lived experience, and whether these experiences are of high quality relative to the value they may add to the Applicant's research potential.

4) Career development plan –

- The Applicant is asked to describe their career goal(s) and development plan:
 - What types of career options is the Applicant considering?
 - How does the Applicant's program of study support progression towards their career goals?

5) Personal Statement –

- The Applicant is asked to explain their motivation for pursuing advanced research training in health in Alberta and why they should be considered for this award. Description of the Applicant's lived experience will be considered.

Note: Review panelists will consider whether funding the Applicant's research will contribute to enhancing equity, diversity and inclusion in patient-oriented research, either by supporting the Applicant's research career directly or through the impacts their funded research may have.

6) Research Project Proposal that includes the following sections –

- Project Overview
 - The Applicant is expected to write the Project Overview.
 - The Project Overview should be written in general scientific language that is understandable by a broad audience.
 - Describe the hypothesis/research question, objectives, anticipated study design and methodological approach, deliverables, expected outcomes, and knowledge dissemination/implementation plan in sufficient detail for the reviewers to be able to assess the feasibility and overall merit of the proposed research in terms of its suitability as a training opportunity.
 - **Describe how principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion have been considered and will be integrated in and/or addressed through the proposed research project.**
 - **Describe how factors and outcomes relating to sex- and gender-based analysis have been considered and will be appropriately addressed and integrated – (If not appropriate as primary outcomes, please explain why, and what considerations informed this determination).**
 - **Describe any non-traditional research impacts/outcomes and measures of success that may be anticipated from the proposed Research Project (e.g. community partner research outputs).**
 - Include background information that provides rationale and helps to position the proposed research in the context of the current state of the field and the significance of the work being proposed.
 - Ensure sufficient detail for the reviewers to understand how the proposed research project will (or has the potential to) embody patient-oriented research (per Appendix A: Project Eligibility).
- List of Project References
 - The Applicant is asked to provide a list of key references relating to the proposed Research Project
- **Alignment to Patient-Oriented Research**

The Applicant is asked to provide a detailed description of how the proposed research Project embodies the principles of Patient-Oriented Research (POR), as defined by AbSPORU (per Appendix A: Project Eligibility Criteria).
- Primary Supervisory Letter of Reference
 - One reference letter will be considered in support of the application. The reference letter must be from the Applicant’s Primary Supervisor. The letter should:
 - Include information regarding eligibility of the proposed Research Project
 - Highlight the strengths and research & innovation leadership potential of the Applicant as a research trainee and future researchers (including but not limited to intellectual and motivational capacity, interpersonal and collaborative skills, and ability to generate and apply new ideas).

Additionally, the review panel will provide feedback regarding the described **research training and mentorship environment**; however, this will not be an evaluation area used in assessing the student’s application:

- The Applicant (in collaboration with their Primary Supervisor) is asked to describe the research training and mentorship environment and the Applicant’s trainee role in the proposed Research Project. The description should include:
- Details about the resources available to support the trainee’s research and the broad training opportunities the environment provides.
- An outline of the benefits for trainee training in this environment, highlighting the facilities, and other personnel

the trainee will have the opportunity to interact with.

- Details about the role of the trainee in the proposed Research Project and how it links to the Primary Supervisor's research program and/or research group.
- The Review Committee will provide feedback to the Applicant and their Primary Supervisor regarding how the research training and mentorship environment described may be leveraged and/or improved to support the Applicant's capacity development in patient-oriented research.

(Optional:)

Submission of CIHR Competition Results

- If applicable/available, a copy of Applicant's results (ratings, etc.) from prior a CIHR competition application(s) relating to the proposed health-oriented research project may be submitted.

SPOR Network Letter of Support

- A limited number of awards will be reserved for Alberta-based Applicants whose Research Project will be conducted in affiliation with a [SPOR Network](#), and who meet all other eligibility, project eligibility, and overall review criteria.
- One letter of support signed by the affiliate SPOR Network may be provided. The letter should outline:
 - The scope of the relationship between the Applicant and the SPOR Network with respect to the Applicant's proposed research project
 - How the Applicant's proposed research serves the mandate of the SPOR Network, and
 - How the SPOR Network anticipates actioning/ implementing the outcomes of the Applicant's proposed research project
 - Project alignment with patient-oriented research principles and incorporation of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) considerations

Matched funding from an organizational partner

- A limited number of awards will be reserved for Alberta-based Applicants who demonstrate they (will) have matched funding from a partnering organization. The Applicant must meet all other eligibility, project eligibility, and overall review criteria.
- Matched funding will be for one of the following options:
 - Option 1: Funding equal to 50% of the total AbSPORU Studentship award (i.e., \$15,000) to be provided by the partner organization simultaneously with the 12-month AbSPORU award period. The term of the matched funding must align with the AbSPORU Studentship award period (i.e., within the same 12-month period).
 - Option 2: Funding equal to 100% of the total AbSPORU Studentship award (i.e., \$30,000) provided by the partner organization to support a subsequent 12-month studentship period after the initial 12-month AbSPORU award period (i.e., AbSPORU will provide a \$30,000 award to fund Year 1 of the studentship; the partnering organization will provide \$30,000 to fund Year 2 of the studentship*.)

* For Option 2: The funded student must complete all elements of AbSPORU's training component of the studentship in Year 1. Year 2 of the studentship must consist of an embedded training opportunity for the funded student, provided/facilitated by the partner organization.

- The partnering organization must agree (and have a mechanism) to remit the matching funds directly to the student

as a monthly stipend per a Notice of Award, for the duration of the matched funding award period, unless otherwise directed by AbSPORU.

- If at any time AbSPORU withdraws a student's award, AbSPORU will immediately notify the partnering organization, and the partnering organization will discontinue remittance of the matching funds per direction provided by AbSPORU.
- Within thirty (30) days of the award end-date, the partnering organization will provide a financial statement to AbSPORU detailing the expenditure of the matching funds.
- In addition to providing matched funding, the partnering organization must commit to providing and/or facilitating embedded learning opportunities for the student (e.g., the student will carry out their thesis project in affiliation with the partnering organization).
- Eligible partnering organizations may include [SPOR Networks](#) and Canadian Primary Care Research Network
- One letter of support from the partnering organization may be provided. The letter should outline:
 - The scope of the relationship between the Applicant and the partnering organization with respect to the Applicant's proposed research project;
 - The partnering organization's commitment to provide matched funding;
 - How the Applicant's proposed research serves the mandate of the partnering organization; and
 - How the partnering organization anticipates actioning/ implementing the outcomes of the Applicant's proposed research project
 - Project alignment with patient-oriented research principles and incorporation of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) considerations

APPENDIX C: Leave of Absence Policy for the Program Awardees

The AbSPORU Capacity Development team collaborates with awardees' home institutions to ensure that all Leave of Absence (LOA) requests are managed per institutional policies and that the awardee's funding is effectively administered during the leave period.

The AbSPORU Capacity Development team will communicate any changes to the Leave of Absence policy to awardees who should regularly review the policy for updates.

1. Alignment with University Policies

The AbSPORU Graduate Studentship program adheres to the leave of absence policies set by the awardee's home institution. This alignment ensures that the conditions for leave, including the type, duration, and eligibility criteria, are consistent with the university's established procedures.

2. Award Management

1) Maternity/Parental Leave: Awardees may request maternity or parental leave following the birth or adoption of a child, typically for up to 12 months. The AbSPORU Graduate Studentship may continue to provide stipend support for the remaining period of the award, contingent upon the awardee being the primary caregiver and not engaged in academic activities during the leave.

2) Medical or Personal Leave: For medical or personal leave, the AbSPORU Graduate Studentship grant may be paused during the leave period and resumed once the awardee returns to their academic activities.

3) Extension of Grant Period: The duration of the AbSPORU Graduate Studentship cannot be extended beyond the original term due to leave, as grant funds are allocated strictly on a yearly basis. Awardees should plan their leave or research activities in alignment with the grant cycle, where possible.

4) Returning from leave: Upon returning from leave, awardees must provide confirmation of their return to resume their studentship payments.

3. Documentation and Reporting

Awardees must submit a copy of their formal leave of absence request to the AbSPORU Graduate Studentship program at the same time they submit it to their home institution's Graduate Program. In the case of emergency leave, awardees are expected to inform the AbSPORU Graduate Studentship program within five to seven business days of the leave commencement.

The home institution is kindly requested to inform the AbSPORU Graduate Studentship program of any approved leaves to facilitate coordination regarding any necessary adjustments to the award.

Awardees should provide an updated research plan or timeline to the AbSPORU Graduate Studentship program if their leave impacts the progress of their research. Upon returning from leave, they must also submit the necessary confirmation and documentation to resume studentship payments.

APPENDIX D: Program Evaluation, Improvement, And Impact

For AbSPORU/Alberta Innovates, the ultimate impact of funding, facilitating patient-oriented research and innovation is to realize health, social, and economic benefits for patients and the health system.

AbSPORU/Alberta Innovates uses a comprehensive evaluation strategy developed from Alberta Innovates' Research to Impact Framework to systematically evaluate the benefits of AbSPORU/Alberta Innovates investments for the purposes of accountability, analysis and learning. The results and benefits from research are captured across broad categories of impact that include capacity building, knowledge generation, informing decision making, health, social, and economic benefit.

The information collected from Recipients by AbSPORU/Alberta Innovates will be used to inform decisions in terms of program planning, management, and quality improvement. This information will also be used to communicate the impact of AbSPORU/Alberta Innovates to key stakeholders, partners, patients and the public.

Once Recipients' Projects are completed, AbSPORU/Alberta Innovates continues to monitor performance for five (5) years to accurately evaluate the economic, social and environmental benefits realized for the province.

All Investment Agreements outline performance indicators tracked over the course of the Project and it is the responsibilities of the Recipient, the Recipient's Primary Supervisor, and the Recipient's Institution to report on outcomes subsequent to the completion of the Project. Alberta Innovates has a common set of performance metrics it monitors, both at the individual Project level and for the aggregate Program. These are highlighted on the next page.

Objectives and Performance Metrics

