

University Delegates Meeting
February 4th, 2021 - 12:30-1:30pm EDT
Meeting Minutes

Chair: Adrian Mota, Associate Vice-President, Research Programs (Operations)

1. CIHR UPDATES

CIHR welcomes new UD member, Dr. Jennifer Knopp-Sihota

Dr. Jennifer Knopp-Sihota, Associate Professor at Athabasca University, was welcomed as a new University Delegates Network member.

UDEC Appointment Process

The UDEC appointment process is currently underway. The call for nominations has closed and a poll will soon be sent to members allowing for voting on the nominees. The successful nominee should expect to be informed of their appointment in late February and UD members will be advised at the next UD meeting.

Requesting Test Registration and Application Accounts

Research Granting Offices can request a test registration for funding opportunities with more than one stage (i.e. registration and application stages). In early 2020, the process a Research Administrator would follow to obtain a test account changed. As UD Network members, we would like to request your help by sharing this information with your RGOs.

To obtain a test registration, Research Administrators should submit a request to the Contact Centre support email address (support-soutien@cihr-irsc.gc.ca) with their name, CIHR PIN and the email address associated with their ResearchNet account. This option applies only to funding opportunities with more than one stage (i.e. registration and application stages) and a request must be submitted for each new FO launch (e.g., the test account does not carry over from the Spring Project Grant competition to the Fall Project Grant competition).

Our goal in reminding the community of this option is to increase the uptake of this functionality and better equip Research Administrators in supporting their colleagues through the registration and application process. A message will also be sent to CARA members in the coming days. Please contact [CIHR's Contact Centre](#) if you or your colleagues have any questions.

Filling vacancies on CIHR's Governing Council

As mentioned at the January meeting, the Privy Council Office is looking to fill vacancies on various Government of Canada commissions, boards and advisory bodies. As part of this recruitment drive, the Government is looking to solicit applications from individuals interested in sitting on CIHR's Governing Council. Governing Council is the top layer of governance at CIHR, responsible for its strategic direction and overall performance, and ensuring oversight of its budget, policies and operations.

As mentioned in the message that was sent to the network in January, it is important to note that while the review of applications started on January 22, 2021, this will be a rolling in-take and applications will continue to be reviewed until all positions are filled.

College Chairs Resignations

We understand there was some confusion circulating around the network regarding the College Chairs resignations and what this means. We wanted to provide some clarity.

The College Chairs were established in 2016 to oversee the development of the College of Reviewers and as an integral component of the previous strategic plan (Roadmap II). The College Chairs provided strategic guidance in building the College of Reviewers, including the development and oversight of a continuous improvement process. They have also played an important role in repairing trust and strengthening linkages between the research community and CIHR following the Reforms.

As the CIHR leadership transitioned, the College Chairs' mandate was expanded to focus on peer review broadly and they made important contributions in helping CIHR shift back to face-to-face peer review. The future role and composition of the College Chairs has been an item of discussion during the last three College Chairs meetings, as several Chairs felt that the group was obsolete once the College membership base of ~ 4,000 members was established and CIHR's relationship with the research community was beginning to improve. The College Chairs group also felt they lacked diversity (e.g. career stage, inclusion of visible minorities, etc.), were discussing a process to transition members, and a need to refresh their membership should the group continue.

Over the past year, CIHR has been increasingly relying on peer review panel Chairs and Scientific Officers for advice to best serve our research community, as well as engaging the Scientific Directors and the University Delegates Executive Committee (UDEC) for peer review advice to support the work of the College. Given ongoing discussions about the future role of the College Chairs, and the imminent release of the CIHR strategic plan, the remaining eight College Chairs felt that collectively it would be an appropriate time to retire from their existing terms and allow CIHR an opportunity to decide what the future advisory and governance requirements should be.

Thanks to the groundwork of the College Chairs, CIHR now has a robust College of Reviewers that is centrally managed by dedicated staff at CIHR. College Staff are well placed to ensure that the College membership base can deliver excellence in peer review while also offering opportunities for continual improvement through learning and capacity development and performance management measures.

Spring 2021 Reviewer- in-Training Program

As mentioned in an email distributed to members on February 3, CIHR is pleased to announce the launch of the new [Reviewer in Training \(RiT\) program](#) for the Spring 2021 Project Grant competition.

The RiT program expands on and replaces the Observer program, based on evaluations of the Observer program as well as feedback from the community. The RiT program offers Early Career Researchers (ECRs) a learning opportunity to gain a better understanding of the elements of high quality review and the peer review process through direct participation in the Project Grant competition with the support of a mentor. RiT participants will be assigned three applications to conduct practice reviews, attend peer review meetings, present one of their reviews, and participate in the committee discussion of their assigned applications.

This is based on evaluations, feedback from the community, feedback from panel Chairs, Scientific Officers and reviewers. The goal is to allow ECRs to learn, see how the panel works and enable them to be a good reviewer. This is also beneficial to help ECRs understand what goes into a good grant.

Following completion of the RiT program, participants will be promoted within CIHR's [Reviewer Pathway](#) and are expected to participate in peer review when requested and available to do so. The application period for the RiT program opens on February 1, 2021 and closes on February 26, 2021. Please promote this opportunity for ECRs within your networks and institutions.

2. Spring 2021 Project Grant Competition

Timeline

Competition deadlines are as follows:

- Registration opens: February 4, 2021

- Registration deadline: March 4, 2021
- Application deadline: April 1, 2021
- Peer review meetings: June 1-30, 2021
- Anticipated notice of recommendation: July 8, 2021
- Anticipated notice of decision: July 22, 2021
- Funding start date: October 1, 2021

What's New for the Spring 2021 Competition

In response to feedback from the community, [CIHR has made some changes to the Project Grant program](#), starting with the Spring 2021 competition. Those changes include:

1. **Summary of progress page:** In response to requests from peer reviewers, the Spring 2021 Project grant competition will see the return of the Summary of Progress report. While some will recall the Summary of Progress from when it was last used in 2015 (in the Open Operating Grant Program, or OOGP), its purpose has been updated. This free-form, two-page (maximum) document **will be mandatory for all applicants** and will provide the opportunity to describe how the application fits into your overarching research program. This document will allow you to outline any results from your research activities that support your current application.

The summary of progress should include the following:

- **Progress/productivity:** Contextualize any results from your research activities that support your current application.
- **COVID-19 impact on your research:** Outline the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your research program, as appropriate. The use of this space is up to your discretion.
- **ECRs:** For those who are early career researchers (ECRs) and who have held a Foundation grant, you can contextualize your Foundation grant in the Summary of Progress (i.e., this is where you can include the content that would have gone into the half-page statement that you were formerly able to add to your Project application).
- **Budget requested in relation to overall funding held currently or previously:** Contextualize your current application and proposed budget in relation to your overall program of research and funding history. Your narrative must include all funding currently held and pending (as outlined in your CV), including grants received through the course of the recent pandemic funding opportunities. It will be incumbent on you to illustrate clearly to reviewers why the requested funds are needed, how they are distinct from the funds you currently hold, and how they will advance your research.

While it is up to the applicant's discretion as to how to utilize this space, it is important to note that this step is intended to provide added context that will enable a more robust peer review of each proposal. Of critical importance, it will also provide CIHR with valuable feedback as we move toward **removing the across-the-board budget cuts applied to all funded applications starting with the Fall 2021 Project Grant competition** with the intent of providing greater discretion to peer review committees on budget allocations.

2. **Removal of weighted scores in the evaluation criteria:** CIHR has heard clearly from peer reviewers, Peer Review Committee (PRC) Chairs and Scientific Officers that **the weighted scores should be replaced**. In response to this feedback, reviewers will now provide one score that reflects all three evaluation criteria: (1) significance and impact of the research, (2) approaches and methods, and (3) expertise, experience, and resources. This was the model used in 2015 and allows reviewers flexibility to weight the criteria as appropriate based on their judgement given the context of the application being reviewed.

3. **Applicant Profile CV:** As noted [previously](#), CIHR is aware that the Canadian Common CV (CCV) requirements are a barrier to application for some groups. To address this issue, CIHR has developed a new PDF CV template based on

the **NIH Biosketch** that has been refined with input from various stakeholders, including Indigenous community members and researchers. This template, referred to as the [Applicant Profile CV](#), was piloted in several recently delivered and ongoing COVID-19 competitions. In the Spring 2021 Project grant competition, we will continue to evaluate the utility of this approach by implementing the Applicant Profile CV more broadly to include knowledge users, Indigenous applicants and international applicants. These groups will have the option of either submitting the [Applicant Profile CV](#) or the standard CCV. Canadian academic applicants (i.e., [independent researchers](#)) will still be required to submit the standard CCV.

- 4. Sex and Gender Based Analysis (SGBA):** CIHR remains deeply committed to the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion. To continue raising the bar with respect to [the integration of SGBA within research](#), **reviewers** will be explicitly required to include their assessment of whether SGBA is appropriate for the research being proposed. If so, the overall application score and written evaluation will reflect if SGBA has been suitably addressed in the research proposed. This will go beyond the current practice of simply identifying whether SGBA is a strength, a weakness or not applicable to the proposal.

Entry of Foundation Grant Holders

This is the first competition where non-ECR Foundation grant-holders will be eligible to apply to the Project grant program. One-hundred and thirty Foundation grant-holders from the 2014 cohort are eligible to apply to the Spring 2021 Project competition. CIHR is taking steps to prepare for former Foundation grant-holders to transition back into the Project grant program, including by [presenting transition options to Foundation grantees](#).

CIHR will be investing the funding previously allocated for the Foundation Grant Program as it becomes available directly into the Project Grant Program. This means that CIHR will continue to invest approximately \$650M in its Investigator-Initiated Research Programs. When CIHR sunset the Foundation Program, the planned amount to be invested per annual competition was \$100M. That means that, **starting with the Spring 2021 Project Grant competition**, approximately \$50M will be added to each twice-yearly Project Grant competition. Total budgets for Project Grant competitions will therefore increase from \$275M to approximately \$325M.

Competition Budget

The budget for the Spring 2021 Project Grant competition is \$325M. This represents an increase of \$50M from the Fall 2020 competition. Within the investment allocated to each Project Grant competition, there will be a funding envelope for:

- Large grants: Large grants are defined as those within the top 2% of total grant amounts requested by all applicants within the competition and varies with each competition.
- Indigenous health research: 4.6% of the total competition budget is dedicated to supporting applications with an Indigenous health research focus.
- Equalization: A portion of the competition budget is reserved to ensure the proportion of grants funded is at least equal to the proportion of applications received from ECRs, females NPIs and applications submitted in French. Any unused funding is re-invested in the competition to fund additional Project Grants.

Decision process for Spring Project grant competition

CIHR acknowledges the importance of transparency and clarity when it comes to explaining the [processes by which applications in the Project grant competition](#) will be selected for funding. The process for funding applications submitted to the Project competition involves several steps:

1. Within each peer review committee, applications are ranked based on the final ratings (0-4.9) for each application. Other than the removal of the weighted score described earlier, this process will remain as is.
2. An application's ranking is then transformed into a percent rank score that enables comparison across committees. For example, the first-ranked application in every committee receives a percent rank of 100 %. An application that was ranked 5/57 within its committee has been ranked higher than all but four of the other 56

applications in the committee and therefore has a percent rank of 92.9 % (percent rank = $1 - (4/56)$). [Read more about application percent rank by committee.](#)

3. Applications are then funded across committees in order of percent rank until insufficient funds remain to fund the highest ranked application(s) remaining.

Upcoming Engagement Sessions

Upcoming [applicant webinar sessions](#) to support participants with the requirements of the Spring 2021 Project Grant Competition and to answer any questions on how to apply are on the following dates:

- English sessions: Tuesday, February 23 from 1-2pm and Wednesday, March 10 from 11am-12pm
- French sessions: Tuesday, February 23 from 11am-12pm and Wednesday, March 10 from 1-2pm.

Questions and Answers:

Some of our Principle Investigators have expressed concerns about the proposed eligibility and mechanism for the rollout of new COVID-19 strategic funding. Their concerns relate to equitable eligibility and whether the plan necessarily captures all of the best currently available research. Funding additional COVID-focused grants from the Fall Project grant competition is an easy approach but these grants were not designed as rapid response/strategic programs with a focus on COVID-19 and the new SARS-CoV-2 variants. In contrast, there is a cohort of highly ranked but unfunded applications from round 2 of the rapid response funding (announced last June). Those applicants did not benefit from the high success rates in round 1 that resulted from the late-added extra funding, and round 1 awardees are now going to be eligible for a supplement. Can you please provide some insight into the thinking behind the eligibility decisions for the new funding? Would CIHR consider including highly ranked but unfunded applications from COVID-19 round 2 among the candidates for priority funding? Or is there a possible future priority opportunity that would properly capture new proposals specifically designed to capture research that takes full advantage of a rapidly changing situation?

- In CIHR's [pre-announcement for the CIHR funding for SARS-CoV-2 variant research](#), the following streams were identified:
 1. **Variant:** A supplement to those who have received a COVID-19 grant from the COVID competitions that we have launched.
 - There is a supplement component and a network component.
 - This funding opportunity should be launched soon.
 - It has been restricted to those who have received COVID grants. This potentially excludes people who may be interested in contributing to research on COVID variants who did not get a COVID grant. The idea is to focus on those who have already received grants with the understanding that these individuals will be able to ramp up their research quickly. We are looking for people who are poised to start working on COVID variants with the goal of having an impact in as close to real-time as possible.
 2. **Project:** This will leverage the Fall 2020 Project Grant competition and investments will be made in applications that specifically address SARS-CoV-2 variants across all pillars of research. The announcement was focused on characterizing variants; however, there are other priorities that CIHR is looking at and that we may focus on in the future.
- **Is there more coming?**
 - It is highly likely. All the COVID funds are 'new funds' received from the Government of Canada. Future competitions prioritizing COVID research will be open to everyone. Future investments will likely depend on how the pandemic continues to evolve. Therefore, we will continue to observe where the research needs are and investments would be made based on those needs.
- **Would we consider going to the COVID 2 Projects?**

- It is highly unlikely as we are 6-8 weeks past that now. The reason CIHR looked at the Project Grant program is because those projects were submitted later in the year and are therefore more recent.
- It is important to note that the funds need to be spent by **March 31st**.
- **Can those who previously participated in the (old) reviewer training apply?**
 - Yes, past Observer Program participants can apply to the Reviewer in Training program.
- **Will the 'Reviewers-in-Training' be matched to Peer Review committees? We have had some who were way outside our mandate.**
 - Yes, they will be matched to a committee based on area of expertise.
- **The current guidelines online for Spring 2021 competition refer to Biosketch CV for applicants - not the applicant profile CV.**
 - The Applicant Profile CV is intended for those who are knowledge users, Indigenous and international applicants. They may use the Applicant Profile CV or continue to use the Biosketch CV.
 - Canadian academic applicants must continue to use their CIHR Biosketch CV, which is also known as the [CCV](#).
- **There is a lot of variability in SGBA evaluations.**
 - Yes, this is correct and a very important point. This is something that Dr. Cara Tannenbaum, her team at the Institute of Gender and Health, and our Science Policy group have been focusing on. Presentations have been made to every peer review panel to share data to help reviewers understand what CIHR is looking for. An analysis is underway on the impact of that evaluation and we will analyze the link between the extent to which SGBA is evaluated in a given application and its likelihood of being funded.
 - It is important to mention that if you do notice reviews that are not of the quality CIHR expects, please send them to CIHR, so that we can follow up.
- **Success rates for women depend on pillar from my quick analysis of data. Is it equalized across pillar and/or committee?**
 - Equalization does not occur across pillars or by committee. It is done across the competition.
- **I also noticed last competition that some investigators had 5 years of pubs and some had 7. Which is it supposed to be?**
 - Applicants are allowed to list up to five publications (relevant to the proposal) from the past 7 years.
 - The reason you may see applicants list publications from more than five years ago is that, if a researcher has been on leave (i.e., parental, medical), that period of leave is not counted in the window. Applicants will describe this in their leave section, and we would allow them to include an extra year to account for this disruption to their career.
- **I saw a few COVID grants in last competition that clearly had been rolled over from COVID competition to regular projects, so those may be picked up through this mechanism.**
 - Yes, those individuals who had previously applied to our rapid research COVID competitions were welcome to apply to the Project competition.
- **As part of the Applied Health Research Chair, the eligibility states that: The NPA must also provide a confirmation from their institution that they are in a tenure track position or will be able to apply for a tenure-track position (or equivalent) in their department or faculty during the six-year award period. However, Researchers based at Hospital Research Institutes would never be tenure-tracked as this option is not available. It seems strange to eliminate Hospital based researchers for an Applied Health Research Chair. Could these eligibility requirements be amended?**

- CIHR will look into this and provide information at a further date.
- **If a grant is written by a female ECR in French, will this be counted once or three times towards the equalization?**
 - This will be counted three times as we look at the variables individually.
- **In terms of equalization, is there a mechanism or guideline to address racialized research teams, particularly Black researchers and teams working on health issues affecting Black Canadians and racialized communities?**
 - At this time, we do not collect the data to make these interventions. We do collect self-identification data on age, gender, and whether applicants identify as Indigenous, a visible minority or a person with a disability.
 - CIHR does not currently use the self-identification data it collects for the purposes of equalization. Rather, we use it at the aggregate level for purposes of program design.
 - We acknowledge that we need better data, and this has been under discussion. CIHR will provide more information at a later date.
- **Rushing to get \$25 million out of the door by March 31 is likely not the best use of dollars. The variants of concern "competition" from III looks smells performative due to the limitations.**
 - As with all Health Research Rapid Response competitions, CIHR is trying to balance the need for high quality evidence to inform decision making with the reality that high quality science takes time. We want to ensure that we give people enough time to submit high quality applications and ensure that reviewers have enough time to do high quality reviews.
 - Decision-makers want to incorporate science and evidence and have ultimately seen the value of doing so. We acknowledge this is complex, but hope the community understands that everyone is doing their best to balance all of this and make wise investments.
- **The return of the first Foundation grantees to the Spring 2021 competition will not be equivalent across the panels. I know you have given this a lot of thought. How will this be dealt with at the panel level so that the pressure on certain fields is balanced?**
 - When the Foundation Grant competition was implemented, it was done without the panel structure. CIHR completed some modelling using past competitions, and attempted to model their behaviour when coming back in. This exercise indicates that Foundation Grant recipients will likely come back to panels in an uneven way.
 - It is possible that application pressure will be higher on some panels.
- From the equalization perspective, CIHR will not intervene at the panel level for this competition and will continue to monitor this closely, modifying the approach in the future if necessary.
- **Are the funding decisions monitored at the level of the committee to determine if there appears to be bias, and thus a potential need for equalization at the committee level?**
 - This is something CIHR will monitor over time because the committees are smaller entities.
 - A panel with 20-60 applications suggests a small sample size, and therefore one lower or one higher can skew that percentage. CIHR will continue to monitor this from a number of different dimensions.
- **A primary objective of the research community should be to work together to increase the funding for the project scheme to increase success rates (this will also reduce how different 'bias' affects the review process to some extent). Increasing the success rate is the key to make sure excellent science is funded across the country at all institutions, yet we never seem to work towards this as a group.**
 - We intend to remove the across-the-board budget cuts in the Fall 2021 competition. If nothing else changes and we do remove the cut, the success rate could go down.
 - CIHR heard through our engagement on the Strategic Plan ideas for how to approach the issue of increasing success rates. Discussions will continue as the Strategic Plan is implemented, and one of our top priorities going forward will be strengthening our investigator-initiated research program.

- **I think 22-25% success rate would be much better instead of cutting off among the top grants.**
 - We agree that there is a lot of excellent science that remains unfunded. The amount of money that CIHR has available will likely not change. CIHR cannot lobby the federal government directly for more funds; however, discussions are ongoing.

3. Updates on Funding Opportunities

Strategic Funding Opportunities

A list of current funding opportunities with deadlines was provided as well as recent competition results.

Discussions have continued between CIHR and NSERC on the Collaborative Health Research Projects (CHRP) that had previously been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will update the group as soon as more information is available. CIHR is also not yet ready to provide updates for the Institute Community Support (ICS) program, but discussions are ongoing and updates should be available shortly.

Fall 2020 Project Grant competition

The peer review committee meetings for the Fall 2020 Project Grant competition wrap up February 5, 2021. CIHR has received generally positive feedback on the virtual format. Feedback from panels will be categorized into themes and analyzed for purposes of continuous improvement.

4. Upcoming Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Online Discussion

In December, CIHR announced an upcoming online discussion on the topic of systemic racism in Canada's health research funding system. This online discussion launched February 4th and will be open until April 9th, 2021. The purpose of the online discussion is ultimately to identify specific measures that CIHR can implement to address barriers faced by racialized and Indigenous communities.

CIHR acknowledges that we must listen to those communities most affected by systemic racism in the research funding system to better understand the ways in which our policies and programs may reinforce systemic barriers or biases and inequities, whether explicit or unconscious. We specifically invite the engagement of racialized and Indigenous communities with lived experience of systemic racism in the health research sector although the online discussion will be open to all. An email was sent directly to the University Delegates Network with the online discussion link on February 4th.

Starting in spring/summer 2021, CIHR will hold virtual small group listening sessions with racialized communities on systemic racism in the health research funding system that will build upon themes and suggestions from the online discussion. Furthermore, CIHR will also hold dedicated engagement activities with Indigenous communities to discuss how CIHR can supplement our [action plan](#) to build a healthier future for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples in a way that further recognizes and addresses systemic racism. We will share more details about these dedicated engagements in the near future.

Following the engagement activities, CIHR will develop, implement and monitor an action plan, or plans, to address systemic racism in the health research funding system.

5. Health Research Training Platform (H RTP) Pilot

In early January, CIHR launched the [Health Research Training Platform \(H RTP\) Pilot funding opportunity](#). Nine CIHR Institutes and one CIHR Initiative support this priority-driven funding opportunity. The H RTP Pilot competition was created

to fill a gap in the career development opportunities available to [trainees](#) and [ECRs](#). Through the H RTP Pilot, trainees and ECRs will have access to interdisciplinary training environments (i.e., “platforms”) where they will benefit from high-caliber mentors and gain the skills required for academic and non-academic careers.

Full discussion on this agenda item was deferred due to lack of time to the March 4, 2021 meeting agenda.

6. Adjournment

The Chair thanked members for their participation. The meeting ended at 13:35pm EDT. The next meeting of the University Delegates will take place on March 4, 2021.