Chair: Adrian Mota, Associate Vice President, Research Programs

1. CIHR Updates

Update CIHR's Strategic Plan
- CIHR has been developing a new Strategic Plan to guide operations and investments for the next 10 years. With this plan, CIHR also seeks to lay the foundation for a shared vision for how Canada's health research ecosystem could look in the next 30 years.
- To help support the development of the Strategic Plan, CIHR has engaged extensively with the health research community, including the University Delegates' Network.
- The content of the Strategic Plan has been revised to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the increased awareness and actions felt throughout the world in relation to systemic racism. These revisions also consider the broader societal context, including health inequities, as well as the unique COVID-19 challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples. CIHR is looking to support Canada's health research ecosystem towards recovery, following the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Several recent discussions with various health research organizations have allowed CIHR's President to hear additional recommendations regarding the Strategic Plan and its implementation. Once the Strategic Plan is approved by Governing Council and the First Year Action Plan is prepared, it will be launched, likely in early winter 2021.

Operating Grant: COVID-19 Knowledge Synthesis Network

- This funding opportunity is part of the Government of Canada's continued response to address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. This funding will enable the coordination, prioritization, and development of rapid and timely knowledge syntheses and evidence-based products to ensure the Canadian and international response to the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be informed by the best available science.
- The Expression of Interest deadline for the COVID-19 Knowledge Synthesis Network was on November 5, 2020.

2. Program Design and Delivery Team Update

Fall 2020 Project Grant Competition

Please see accompanying PowerPoint slides for additional information.

- The Fall competition application deadline was October 15, 2020 with 2,364 total applications. This represents an 11% increase compared to the 2020 Spring competition.
- The Fall competition received 40 applications in French, which will be receiving all of their reviews in French. This represents a 53% increase compared to the Spring 2020 Project Grant competition.
- CIHR is on track to complete the Fall competition before the Spring 2021 Project Grant competition begins. This means that the competition timelines will not overlap. A similar schedule as the Spring 2020 Project Grant competition will be used including the use of the Notice of Recommendations (NOR) approximately six weeks before the application deadline for the Spring 2021 competition.
- Meetings with peer review committee executives (Chairs and Scientific Officers) took place during the last week of October 2020 to inform them of recent changes and delivery implications, as well as consulting them on process and procedural aspects of the Fall 2020 competition.

- Peer review will continue to be delivered remotely for the Fall 2020 Project Grant competition, with peer review committee meetings taking place via MS Team between January 14 and February 5, 2021. Recruitment of Chairs is complete and 92% of Scientific Officers have been confirmed.

Questions from members:
- The Spring 2021 Project Grant competition is the competition where those who got the one year financial extension as well as the Foundation grant holders are returning. Is CIHR expecting more applications for the next competition and how will CIHR accommodate the increased pressure on grants?
    - CIHR explained that they are currently modeling different scenarios as well as holding discussions with their Scientific Directors to prepare for the Spring 2021 Project Grant competition. Additional information on this topic will be provided at an upcoming UD meeting.
- Will the COVID-19 applications submitted to the Fall 2020 Project Grant competition be considered like any other application? Will there be any Priority Announcements for these applications?
    - CIHR confirmed that COVID-19 applications submitted to the Fall 2020 Project Grant competition will not be given priority over any other applications. CIHR explained that there will be no specific Priority Announcements related to COVID-19 for this competition.

Lessons Learned from the Spring 2020 Project Grant Competition

Please see PowerPoint slides for additional information.

- There were 709 reviewers, Chairs and Scientific Officers (SOs) who participated in the Spring 2020 Project Grant competition survey.
- Please see slide 16 of the PowerPoint presentation for a statistical overview of the survey results.
- Based on this survey, a number of suggestions for enhancing the virtual peer review experience were provided. In addition, recommendations for future Project Grant competitions were received.
- The feedback on program considerations included:
    - Reexamine the use of Appendices in applications;
    - Increase content in Budget Module;
    - Standardize SO notes across all peer review committees;
    - Eliminate weighted criteria in reviews;
    - Review the following scoring processes:
        - streamlining
        - consensus scores
        - use of top/bottom placement
    - Update resubmission process:
        - Reintroduce Summary of Progress in applications (CIHR confirmed that this is planned for the Spring 2021 Project Grant competition)
        - Mandatory inclusion of previous reviews for resubmissions
        - Consider resubmission frequency
- The feedback on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) considerations included:
    - Strengthen EDI considerations in peer review committee composition; and,
    - Increase integration of EDI discussions at peer review meetings.
- The feedback on Early Career Researcher (ECR) considerations included:
    - Review ECR applications early in the meeting schedule to ensure fulsome discussions;
    - Increase mentorship opportunities with senior reviewers mentoring early and provide first-time reviewers mentorship opportunities before, during and after the meetings; and,
    - Expand the role of ECRs in the review process (CIHR confirmed that for the Fall 2020 Project Grant competition, there will be 3 observers per peer review committee).
- The feedback on Sex and Gender-Based Analysis (SGBA) considerations included:

- o Increased training and orientation in SGBA, which would be mandatory for all committee members;
- o Increased visibility of SGBA in evaluation criteria:
  - Elimination of the Yes or No box on applications in favour of full descriptions and justifications;
  - First reviewer to set the tone and be explicit about SGBA component compared to Yes / No; and,
  - Establish scoring mechanism for SGBA.

Questions from members:

- Do weighted scores refer to the weighting of the criteria or the weighting in terms of rank within the panel?
  - o CIHR confirmed that weighted scores refer to the weighting of the criteria.
- One member noted that despite the fairly successful process, reviewers also felt that the virtual format held some weaknesses compared to the in-person panel discussions. The discussions were shorter, not as many people participated in the discussions of each application and there was a lack of networking opportunities.
  - o CIHR explained that similar feedback was received from the Chairs and SOs. Additionally, CIHRCIHR indicated that Microsoft Teams is expected to release new functionality, which may allow enhancements to the current structure including conflict rooms that hold multiple reviewers. CIHR emphasized that peer review meetings will continue to be held virtually for the next few competitions as the global pandemic continues to be monitored; however, this is not an indication of the future of peer review meetings.
- Will CIHR continue to use Microsoft Teams for future virtual peer review meetings?
  - o CIHR confirmed that they will continue to use Microsoft Teams for future virtual peer review meetings as it is the chosen platform for the sharing of security information and is accepted by the Government of Canada.
- The re-introduction of the Summary of Progress with the application has merit. Does this mean that applications will be considered as either renewals or new applications?
  - o CIHR confirmed that the summary of progress implies that applicants will need to indicate whether or not their applications are new or renewals. CIHR is working to make system changes to accommodate this change. Once the system changes are implemented, CIHR will be able to clarify the process and the steps that applicants will need to follow.

Strategic Funding Opportunities

- After a six-month pause on the design, launch and delivery of strategic funding opportunities, activities resumed in early September. The majority of funding opportunities that had been posted prior to the pause have been revised and posted on Research-Net to reflect new timelines.
- With the input of Institutes and CIHR staff, known funding opportunities still in development were prioritized for launch to ensure manageable release for both applicants and CIHR staff.
- As CIHR's Project Grant competition, Tri-agency Award programs and time-sensitive Government of Canada priorities, including COVID-19, remain a priority, there will be no more than four application deadlines in any given week.
- CIHR is currently engaging in process discussions including long-term goals of alignment with CIHR's strategic plan and integrated investment strategy.

Questions from members:

- Does CIHR have data on overlap and behaviour of applicants for strategic and Project Grant opportunities? Do strategic applicants tend to apply for multiple strategic competition? Is this pillar related? Do applicants provide multiple proposals to different panel within the Project Grant competition?
  - o CIHR confirmed that their data does suggest overlap; however, the data was not available at the time of the meeting. CIHR explained that the overlap is likely not pillar related; rather it is most likely related to

the area of science based on the opportunities invested in by the Institutes strategically. CIHR is more actively looking at identical and essentially identical applications. CIHR confirmed that they will be looking into this data for the strategic and Project Grant competitions.

- As CIHR was provided with additional money from the government to prioritize COVID-19, does CIHR foresee additional help from the government in that regard?
  - o CIHR explained that additional COVID-19 funding is expected to be announced in the coming weeks.
- As this seems like an opportune time for the government to increase investments for health research in Canada, is there any motion to increase funding for the Project Grant competition?
  - o CIHR explained that as an agency of the Government of Canada, it cannot make funding requests to the federal government. Instead, CIHR can only highlight areas of need within the federal budget process.
- What is the status of the Collaborative Health Research Projects (CHRP) competition?
  - o CIHR explained that they are in active discussion with the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and will provide additional information when available.

3. Adjournment
- The meeting ended at 13:30. The next meeting of the University Delegates Network will be held on December 3, 2020.