



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

# Audit of Documented Competitive Processes (Phase 1) Management (Action Plan) Responses

February, 2006

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Management of the Programs Branch applauds the initiative of the *Corporate Performance, Evaluation and Audit (CPEA) Division* in commissioning this comprehensive audit of the competition processes used by the *Research and Dissemination Grants Division* and the *Strategic Programs and Joint Initiatives Division*.

It wholeheartedly supports the audit's thrust of suggesting ways and means for SSHRC to achieve more transparency and simplification, and therefore, is generally supportive of the recommendations contained in the audit. It agrees with the three basic aims of the recommendations, where they can be achieved appropriately and efficiently. The aims are to:

- Standardize processes and guidelines across programs;
- Compile and complete detailed information currently absent, or dispersed across web pages and printed documentation;
- Document all the processes and guidelines that aim to mitigate risks and bias.

It finds, however, that the audit has not always taken into consideration the legitimate reasons why processes and procedures may differ between the two Divisions being audited. It also concludes that the problems that will be encountered in accepting the recommendations might have been underestimated: the report alludes to this issue, stating, "All recommendations ... represent a significant information and knowledge management challenge to SSHRC." They also represent a significant financial and human resources challenge that, rightly, has not been addressed in the report. Implementation of the major recommendations will require close cooperation and coordination between the Divisions in *Programs Branch*, the *Corporate Secretariat*, the *Corporate Performance, Evaluation and Audit Division*, the *Policy, Planning & International Affairs Division*, and the *Public Affairs Division*.

In general, however, the management of the Programs Branch is pleased to lend its support to the majority of the recommendations contained in the Audit Report, as follows:

#	PRIORITY	DESCRIPTION OF RECOMMENDATION	MANAGEMENT RESPONSE	DUE DATE
<b>SCREENING THE APPLICATIONS</b>				
1.	HIGH	To improve consistency, compile all the eligibility criteria in one section of the web-site. This section should mirror the SSHRC internal eligibility documentation used for screening applications. The criteria should be presented in the form of a check list.	<p><b>Agreed, as Medium Priority.</b> Implementation to be led by Programs Branch, coordinating with the Public Affairs Division, the Corporate Secretariat, and the Programs Coordination Committee, and coinciding with new documentation to be posted on the SSHRC Web Site relating to the new Continuum of Research Support programs – “Type A” and “Type B” Research Grants.</p> <p>Eligibility must be considered in all aspects: personal, institutional and application eligibility.</p> <p>Whether a check list is the best format or not will be explored during the implementation phase.</p>	July, 2007 OR at whichever other time the “Type A” and Type B” Research grants Program Descriptions are posted on the web site.

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2.	HIGH	Produce for each program, an eligibility screening manual aimed at program officer that takes account of the above recommendations (no. 1). This manual should clearly document the formal and tacit rules used to determine the eligibility of applications and should document in detail the administrative rules and action expected from program officers in relation to frequently encountered situations and document procedures that mitigate each of these risks of bias. This manual must make a clear distinction between eligibility criteria and administrative criteria.	<b>Agreed.</b> Programs Branch to implement. Implementation is already under way through the "Officers Training Manual" being developed in the Research & Dissemination Grants Division. The completed Manual to be then adapted by other Divisions.	April, 2006, and ongoing afterward
<b>ASSESSING THE APPLICATIONS</b>				
3.	HIGH	Compile and standardize the documentation relating to evaluation and adjudication guidelines and procedures including presentation and definition of evaluation	<b>Agreed, as Medium Priority.</b> To be implemented in the next round of Grants Guides	July, 2006, coinciding with

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		criteria throughout online and internal documentation for every program. Scoring guidelines and procedures for each program that lead to recommendation for funding should also be documented and published online.	revisions. Programs Branch to implement, in cooperation with the	the posting of the RFP for Standard Research Grants
4.	MEDIUM	Produce a downloadable and printable manual for applicants to each program that integrates application instructions, application forms, eligibility and admissibility (administrative) criteria, risk mitigation procedures, evaluation criteria, scoring and ranking guiding principles, and detailed step-by-step evaluation and adjudication procedures.	<p><b>Disagree with this recommendation.</b> An alternate procedure would be to create a direct electronic link between the RFP on the web site to the applications and instructions, without requiring a User ID to access the information. This requires coordination between the Programs ESD Unit &amp; the ISD Division, to explore the technological feasibility of this procedure and security considerations.</p> <p>The application materials and instructions should be available in a “print-friendly” format. <b>High Priority.</b></p>	July, 2006 for alternate procedure, if technologically feasible, coinciding with the posting of the RFP for Standard Research Grants.
5.	MEDIUM	For each program, standardize generic material from adjudication committee manuals by ensuring that all the manuals include comprehensive sections on the fundamental principles for adjudicators and on the role and functioning of adjudication committees.	<b>Agreed, as High Priority.</b> To be implemented as each new Adjudication Manual is created. The Public Affairs Division to lead in implementation, working	Immediate.

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			<p>with the Corporate Secretariat, the Senior Policy Officer, Programs Branch, and the Programs Coordination Committee to create the generic material to be used in all adjudication committee manuals.</p> <p>Under the proposed new Programs Branch structure, Programs Branch should consider having an editorial capability within the proposed Coordination Unit.</p>	
6.	MEDIUM	Assess the effectiveness of and standardize the scoring methods and the number and the value of scored criteria for each program. Also provide in the scoring guidelines in the adjudication manual a predetermined scoring scale for each ranked criterion.	<p><b>Disagree with the recommendation</b> that scoring methods can be standardized for each program.</p> <p><b>Agreed</b> that scoring guidelines should be provided in adjudication manuals.</p> <p>Programs Branch to lead implementation, in coordination with the Public Affairs Division.</p>	Immediate, as new Adjudication Manuals are created, in conjunction with action taken to implement Recommendation number 5.
7.	HIGH	Document and publish clear evaluation guidelines and scoring procedures as appropriate, to ensure that track	<b>Disagree</b> that there is any problem – guidelines are clear	

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		records of applicants and any other particular variables are considered in the assessment in relation to their career stage or other particular circumstances. Where the evaluation does not consider any particular dimension or where programs target particular types of applicants, the target population should be explicitly described.	and appropriate now. Programs Branch does not “target particular <i>types</i> of applicants.” When particular “populations” of researchers are targeted (e.g., as in the Fine Arts Research / Creation and the Aboriginal Research programs, care should be taken to use language that focuses on research outcomes.	
8.	HIGH	Produce and include in the adjudication manual preliminary feedback and scoring sheets for each program and clearly document the guidelines and procedures for preliminary feedback and scoring in an explicitly labelled section of the adjudication manual.	<b>Agreed.</b> To be included in new or revised Adjudication Manuals. Implementation led by Programs Branch, in coordination with the Public Affairs Division.	Immediate
9.	HIGH	Adopt a step-by-step workflow approach (A, B, C) for each program, and standardize, document and concentrate the roles, tasks and underlying procedures for each of the individuals involved in the adjudication process. This workflow schedule could be incorporated in the adjudication committee manuals and should clearly document for each program the guidelines and procedures pertaining to particular adjudication committee members such as chair, program staff, and evaluators’ (readers) assignments and tasks before, during and after the adjudication meetings. This should include cross-references to the tasks of chairs and program officers, and evaluators, detail the possible risks	<b>Agreed.</b> To be included in new or revised Adjudication Manuals. Implementation led by Programs branch.	Immediate

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		and biases that might be encountered in adjudication process, and include official procedures to mitigate them.		
10.	HIGH	Clearly document in a specific section of the adjudication manual for each program, whether external assessment of applications is mandatory, discretionary, or not applicable. This section should include guidelines and procedures to be followed by the committee in terms of the treatment and consideration of external advice in the adjudication process. In addition, instructions to external assessors should also be included in manuals.	<b>Agreed.</b> To be included in new or revised Adjudication Manuals. Programs Branch to lead implementation, in coordination with the Public Affairs Division.	Immediate.
11.	HIGH	Based on why/how it is used in some programs, assess the usefulness of external review for those programs where it is optional or never used. Integrate this external review process where appropriate.	<b>Agreed.</b> This is already a normal procedure in the Strategic Programs & Joint Initiatives Division when new programs are created.	In progress.
<b>RANKING AND RECOMMENDING THE APPLICATIONS</b>				
12.	HIGH	Clearly document the guidelines and procedures used by each program's adjudication committee to rank and distribute the scores of meritorious applications, to review the budget, and to determine award size and to decide about which applications to fund when several fall on the cutting line. Ranking and recommendation guidelines and procedures should be also available online and should mirror SSHRC's internal documentation. The documentation related to budget rulings should be included in the manual and should provide guidelines	<b>Disagree with parts of this recommendation.</b> However, The Research Grants & Dissemination division will make its scoring grid available online, during the next Grants Guides revisions. Other Divisions to follow suit.	July, 2006 for scoring grid availability

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		and procedures that mitigate risks and biases (personal, linguistic, gender, disciplinary, regional, or institutional preference and bias) during budget allocation and review.		
13.	MEDIUM	Standardize for all programs the guidelines and procedures concerning spoken and written language usage during adjudication committee meetings. Guidelines for applicants on official languages guidelines should be accompanied by language-relevant guidelines and procedures used by adjudication committees and any other relevant committees in evaluating, ranking and recommending eligible applications.	<b>Agreed in principle</b> , with allowances made in certain circumstances, as formally approved by the President of SSHRC. Guidelines and procedures to be clearly indicated within RFPs and in Adjudication Manuals.	Ongoing
14.	MEDIUM	Compile, update and make publicly available detailed program statistics for each grant program competition. SSHRC staff and clients would benefit from a summary table of these statistics being published in the program documentation designed for program officers, applicants and adjudication committee members.	<b>Agreed.</b> Must be coordinated between Programs Branch, Public Affairs Division and Corporate Policy & Planning division. <b>WARNING:</b> statistics from SRGs and Fellowships should not be directly compared to statistics from Strategic Grants or Joint Initiative Grants.	October, 2007, should the necessary coordination be in place by that date.