

# **Evaluation of the SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowships Program**

Executive Summary

February 23, 2012



## PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### SSHRC POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIPS PROGRAM

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The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) is the federal agency that promotes and supports university-based research, training and knowledge mobilization in the humanities and social sciences. One of the main aims of SSHRC's Talent program is to develop the next generation of researchers and leaders needed in academia and across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. As a result, SSHRC's scholarships/fellowships programs support the best and most promising graduate students and postdoctoral researchers in developing research skills, and assist in the training of highly-qualified personnel in the social sciences and humanities.

SSHRC implemented the SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowships program in 1980-81. Its purpose was to support new and outstanding Canadian PhD graduates in the social sciences and humanities. Such assistance is critical in establishing a research base at an important time in their research careers. In 2010-11, SSHRC's investment in research training through the Postdoctoral Fellowships surpassed \$10 million, representing 3% of the total SSHRC expenditures. This program is aligned with SSHRC's strategic outcome focusing on People – "Achieving a First-class research capacity in the social sciences and humanities".

In keeping with SSHRC's five-year Evaluation Plan, this summative evaluation assessed program relevance, design and delivery and performance. It was also focused on evaluating longer-term outcomes and trends over time. The evaluation methodology ensured a high-quality product that demonstrates to Canadians the social and economic benefits linked to this program.

While the context in which the SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowships program has changed significantly since 1994, most of these changes reinforce the relevance of supporting postdoctoral research in the social sciences and humanities. Overall, evaluation findings indicate that the program does fund the most promising postdoctoral researchers and contributes to research outputs and knowledge advancements in all disciplines. Furthermore, this knowledge is being disseminated in academia and beyond. The evaluation also found that SSHRC was the major source of funding for postdoctoral research in Canada. It concluded that there is a continuing need for the program, with opportunities to align its objectives in light of the changing context.

Eight recommendations were put forth by the evaluation team. The primary suggestion was continued support for the SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowships program. SSHRC's Performance and Evaluation Committee accepted the evaluation report and the majority of proposed recommendations. The proposed recommendations also support the renewal of SSHRC's program architecture. Management's response to the recommendations are presented in the *Summary Management Response*.

The evaluation study was conducted by independent consultants contracted by SSHRC's Corporate Performance and Evaluation Division. The views expressed in this evaluation are those of the external team, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of SSHRC. At this time, I would like to thank the external team from Goss Gilroy Inc. (Sandy Moir, Tim Dugas, Nansy Jean-Baptiste, Samantha Evans) and Natalie Kishchuk. Their professional diligence, dedication and hard work are demonstrated throughout the study.

The work of the consulting team was ably supported and guided by SSHRC's Corporate Performance and Evaluation staff who actively participated in conducting parts of the study, including: Shannon Clark-Larkin, H el ene Gauthier, Patrick Kashala, Michael Kirk, Karl Klockars, Nicole Michaud, Karla Nieves and Mom Yem.

Appreciation is equally extended to Brent Herbert-Copley, Vice-president, Research capacity, and staff of the Research Training Portfolio for their tremendous commitment to this evaluation. Similarly, special thanks to members of the Evaluation Advisory Committee that included: Dr. Christopher Manfredi, Dr. Les Monkman, Vicki Crossley (external advisor with the UK Economic and Social Research Council), Brent Herbert-Copley, Gordana Krcevinac, Boris Stipernitz, Sylvie Paquette and Holly Peel. The knowledge and insights provided by both advisory committee members and SSHRC staff were instrumental to the successful completion of this study.

As well, special acknowledgement must be extended to members of the Expert Panel who assessed the overall quality of research outputs as a line of evidence for the evaluation study. The Panel included Dr. St ephane Castonguay, Dr. Jean C ot e, Dr. Lucie C. Hotte, Dr. Dominic McIver Lopes, Dr. William C. (Bill) Reimer and Dr. Jane Toswell (Chair). Panel members reviewed a sample of 75 postdoctoral files with a keen interest in the questions central to the SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowships program. I would especially wish to thank Dr. Jane Toswell for her thoughtful advice and generous support throughout the process that led to the production of the Panel's final report.

Finally, while too numerous to acknowledge individually, I would also like to thank former/current postdoctoral researchers who contributed their time and thoughts to this evaluation. In a world filled with many demands for information, their views were most appreciated.

Taken together, the conscientious and respectful collaboration of all made this timely evaluation of the program possible.

Wayne MacDonald  
Director  
Corporate Performance and Evaluation  
Social Science and Humanities Research Council  
Email: [wayne.macdonald@sshrc-crsh.gc.ca](mailto:wayne.macdonald@sshrc-crsh.gc.ca)

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Prepared for:  
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

Prepared by:  
Goss Gilroy Inc.  
Management Consultants  
Suite 900, 150 Metcalfe Street  
Ottawa, ON K2P 1P1  
Tel: (613) 230-5577  
Fax: (613) 235-9592  
E-mail: [ggi@ggi.ca](mailto:ggi@ggi.ca)

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Goss Gilroy Inc. was contracted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's (SSHRC), on behalf of the Performance and Evaluation Committee, to conduct an evaluation of the SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowships (S-PDF) program. The evaluation addressed three issues: program relevance and continued need; success and results; and design, delivery and cost-efficiency. The design for the evaluation was completed in 2011, while data collection and reporting were conducted in 2012. SSHRC implemented the S-PDF program in 1980-81 to provide financial support for recently graduated scholars who did not hold a permanent university appointment and who wished to undertake a specified program of research. The rationale for implementing the S-PDF program—to meet Canada's current and future research needs—emphasized the need to support for new and particularly outstanding PhD graduates to help provide highly trained researchers in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) and help meet Canada's current and future research needs. The principal objective of the S-PDF program is to support the most promising new Canadian scholars in the social sciences and humanities and to assist them in establishing a research base at an important time in their research careers.

This evaluation employed multiple lines of evidence to examine the evaluation questions, with responsibility shared between the external consultant, Goss Gilroy Inc., and SSHRC's internal evaluators. The following methods were used during the data collection phase: literature/document review, key informant interviews, survey of applicants, focus groups of award holders, case studies, an expert panel and data analysis (e.g., applicant profile data, cost-efficiency, job postings and analysis of final reports). The key findings of the evaluation report are summarized below under three main headings: Program Relevance and Continued Need; Success and Results; and Recommendations.

### *Program Relevance and Continued Need*

The evaluation found that, while the context in which the SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowships program has been delivered since 1994—and since the last evaluation of the program—has changed in many respects, most of these changes reinforce the relevance of supporting postdoctoral research in the social sciences and humanities (SSH). These contextual changes include the increased emphasis on developing highly qualified personnel (HQP) to meet the following challenges: the anticipated demand for skilled workers in the knowledge economy (including a continued commitment on the part of the federal government); increased funding for university research; the need to prepare Canadian students and Canadian academic institutions for the globalization of research talent; an increased demand for the S-PDF program, shown by the significant increase in applications since 2006; and the increasingly competitive academic job market.

Postdoctoral research was found to be valuable to SSH generally in terms of meeting the needs of academic institutions for faculty who are skilled and have networks to enable them to collaborate effectively. In addition, examination of the context in which the S-PDF program is delivered confirmed that the program is consistent with the goals and priorities of both SSHRC and the federal government. As well, the vast majority of those consulted for the evaluation saw a role for the federal government in funding postdoctoral research. SSHRC itself is seen by most to be a leader in this respect. However, teaching is one possible area where the link between SSHRC's S-PDF program's objectives and broader goals/priorities is less clear.

Some of the contextual changes also suggest areas where the program could be strengthened in order to be more responsive to the current needs of postdoctoral researchers. Key motivating factors for PhD graduates to pursue postdoctoral research are the opportunity to improve their chances of getting the job they want (for most, this means securing a tenure-track position within academia) and the opportunity to develop a broader and more diversified research profile, including the development of skills and research networks to compete for research-intensive careers. As well, the potential for an S-PDF award was perceived as significant to SSHRC postdoctoral researchers in their decision to undertake postdoctoral research.

Currently, the great number of PhD graduates corresponds to increased funding from government funding agencies and institutions. However, this number of PhD graduates far exceeds the number of available tenure-track academic positions, as revealed by anecdotal evidence shared by interviewees and focus group participants. The evaluation also found a negative correlation between the demand for an S-PDF award and the employment opportunities at universities: the number of job postings at universities fell dramatically between 2006 and 2010, while the number of applications to the S-PDF program increased steadily to 891 applications in 2010, its highest total to date.

Recent changes announced in Budget 2010 (federal) related to the taxation of postdoctoral fellowships as well as inflation adjustments have seriously affected the value of the S-PDF. As well, postdoctoral researchers holding their awards abroad can face high cost-of-living expenses (e.g., insurance, health care, accommodation, etc.) for which they deem the current award is insufficient; they also have to offset any research-related expenses not covered by the research allowance. Moreover, the evaluation found that not all SSH research projects require the same level of research allowance; for example, the requirements for onsite research, travel and equipment vary by discipline and by areas of research. Similarly, the evaluation also found that teaching is not necessarily an instrumental part of every postdoctoral experience.

The evaluation showed that SSHRC was the major source of funding in Canada for postdoctoral research in SSH. There are no comparable alternatives to SSHRC postdoctoral funding support within the country, with the exception of the Banting program. However, the Banting program funds only 23 postdoctoral researchers in SSH each year and has different objectives and eligibility criteria. The evaluation also found that there are many international programs for which Canadians are eligible to apply, representing potential alternatives to the S-PDF program. However, given the high demand for S-PDF awards and the associated low success rate, coupled with the fact that students from around the world are eligible for most of the international awards, the evaluation confirmed that the S-PDF program remains the key source of postdoctoral funding in SSH for Canadians.

The evaluation concludes that there is a continuing need for the S-PDF program, along with opportunities to revisit the program's objectives to ensure that they reflect the changing context for SSH postdoctoral research.

### ***Success and Results***

Based on the evaluation findings, it can be concluded that the S-PDF program does fund the most promising postdoctoral researchers of those who apply to the program. However, the evaluation was not able to determine the extent to which the program attracts applications from the most promising

postdoctoral researchers in general, since limited information is available about the potential population of PhD graduates who are eligible to apply to the program. The expert panel's assessment of research outputs by the successful S-PDF applicants did support the reportedly high quality of research funded by the program. The survey findings indicated that the majority of S-PDF award holders were employed full-time in research-intensive careers (more so than were the unsuccessful applicants).

The evaluation found that both the overall postdoctoral experience and the overall learning experience are highly regarded by past and current award holders. The quality of the training, quality of mentoring, and the institutional environment all received lower scores. Those consulted for the evaluation reported that they had increased their research and professional skills as a result of the S-PDF support they received.

The evaluation also found that the S-PDF program contributes to the development and expansion of postdoctoral researchers' skills—research and professional—as well as to the development and expansion of research networks in Canada and abroad. The host institution and the supervisor/mentor play significant roles in facilitating or hindering the overall postdoctoral experience, including the development of skills and networks. The evaluation also found that international experiences positively impact postdoctoral researchers' career development and that the program provides award holders with opportunities to develop research networks, conduct research abroad and disseminate research results. However, there were concerns raised about the amount of the award and research allowance being insufficient for pursuing international experiences and about the fact that international experiences are not always relevant for all research topics and disciplines.

S-PDF award holders reported that the support had been pivotal in helping them advance their careers and in giving them time to focus on their own research (which was also considered to positively impact their career). The development of networks was also a positive outcome of the program for most award holders, and was mentioned by most of those consulted as being important for their overall development as researchers. The evaluation found mixed evidence regarding the relative importance of teaching experiences for career development and found that the role/importance of teaching will vary based on individuals and their interests.

Overall, most lines of evidence indicate that the S-PDF program contributes to research outputs and knowledge advancements in all disciplines and areas of SSH and that these outputs and advancements were being disseminated in academia and beyond. The significant number of publications in peer-reviewed journals seems to demonstrate that the program supports original research, although award holders did not specifically address this objective when reporting on their outputs and outcomes resulting from their S-PDF.

In terms of longer-term outcomes such as influencing changes in knowledge, understanding and/or attitudes, or influencing public policies, practices and/or behaviour, the evaluation was able to find only limited evidence, and case studies suggest that these longer-term outcomes are in fact occurring as a result of continued research following from the funded postdoctoral research. That being said, survey respondents were more likely to report changing knowledge, understanding and/or attitudes rather than influencing public policies, practices and/or behaviour.

### ***Design, Delivery and Cost-Efficiency***

Most applicants are satisfied with the delivery of the S-PDF program (except for the online application system with which applicants reportedly struggled, in 2009 in particular). There were a few suggestions for SSHRC to improve the application evaluation process and the scoring system. Three key design features were found to influence outcomes for award holders: the lack of guidance/expectations regarding institutional support; limitations regarding the location where fellows may hold their awards (in Canada or abroad); and the restriction that postdoctoral researchers may not hold their fellowship at the institution where they completed their doctoral research.

The evaluation also found that award holders are concerned about the value of the award. As mentioned above in the section Program Relevance and Continued Need, the purchasing power of the award has deteriorated over time, and more recently due to new taxation regulations.

While award holders felt that progress reports and final reports might be appropriate and effective in confirming continuing eligibility, other lines of evidence confirmed that these tools do not provide SSHRC with meaningful information on the outcomes of the funding provided through the S-PDF program. In fact, it was noted that there were opportunities to improve the reporting tools, specifically in terms of ensuring they are more closely linked to the program objectives and application form. In the context of SSHRC's program architecture renewal initiative, a new achievement reporting system is currently being developed, including an achievement report form (formerly the Final Report form) that will capture data on S-PDF results and outcomes. It was also noted by the expert panel that progress reports should have a distinct purpose and continue to be used for purposes relating to continuing eligibility for subsequent installments of the S-PDF award, and to award administration and monitoring.

The evaluation found that the S-PDF program is delivered efficiently. Opportunities to increase the program's cost efficiency are limited by costs incurred in program delivery—namely, the peer review process and direct salary costs to operate the program. However, comparisons with other SSHRC funding opportunities, such as the former Standard Research Grants (SRG), did not find sufficient evidence to suggest that these cost areas should be addressed.

The evaluation also found that the S-PDF program fits appropriately within SSHRC's new program architecture under the Talent umbrella program. As part of the ongoing program architecture renewal initiative, opportunities for further coherence between the S-PDF program and the Talent, Insight and Connection programs should be explored.

### ***Recommendations***

1. While the context for the S-PDF program has changed since 1994, the program should be continued. Given the contextual shifts, SSHRC should revisit the program objectives to ensure that they reflect the reality that some future PhD graduates will end up in sectors other than academia. The program's objectives should be adjusted to:
  - enable outstanding early-career social sciences and humanities researchers, in partnership with their host institutions/organizations, to expand their skill set for a research-intensive career in and beyond academia;
  - support individuals who have recently graduated from doctoral programs to consolidate and

- broaden the scope of their research;
- fund excellent social sciences and humanities research projects; and
  - foster broader career pathways for emerging scholars to enable them to move into stimulating and dynamic research environments beyond academia, such as corporate environments, public sector and government organizations, not-for-profit organizations, and university-affiliated service centres.
2. In its 2007 strategic plan *Framing our Direction*, SSHRC committed to improving its suite of funding opportunities through the renewal of its overall program architecture. The ongoing renewal of the Talent Program, which supports graduate students and postdoctoral fellows in order to develop the next generation of researchers and leaders, should provide opportunities for greater coherence of the S-PDF program within SSHRC's new program architecture. This entails opportunities for postdoctoral researchers to develop new and original approaches to research (including in relation to SSHRC's priority areas); to cultivate a global outlook (e.g., international experiences related to their research program); and to develop networks and use new and creative modes of knowledge dissemination within and beyond the academic community.
  3. SSHRC should reconsider the amount of the award for successful S-PDF applicants. In line with the recommended revised objectives, the award should be increased to between \$40,000 and \$50,000 to allow researchers to focus on their postdoctoral experience rather than looking for additional sources of income.
    - 3.1 It is acknowledged that the total S-PDF program funding envelope may not change. For postdoctoral awards held abroad, the amount of the award could be increased by an additional \$5,000, based on location of tenure. The incremental amount requested in the application would need to be fully justified.
    - 3.2 To address diverse research needs across all SSH disciplines, the amount of the research allowance should be increased and awarded based on full justification of research needs. The allowable amount would range between \$2,000 and \$7,500.
  4. The S-PDF program's design and delivery features should be tailored to align with proposed program objectives (Recommendation 1). Key elements, based on evaluation findings, are listed below. Award holders should be allowed to tailor their overall postdoctoral experience to their learning and research needs relative to their career path, whether in or beyond academia (e.g., the degree to which teaching is required and/or appropriate, and the degree and/or nature of international experiences).
    - 4.1 Application requirements (including letters of appraisal), eligibility criteria, as well as other delivery tools and mechanisms, should be adjusted to reflect the new program objectives.
    - 4.2 The evaluation and adjudication processes—namely, committee membership, evaluation criteria, scoring scheme and relevant documentation—should also be reviewed to reflect the new program objectives.
  5. SSHRC should place greater emphasis on securing the host institution's commitment to developing the award holder's research potential, as well as positioning him/her for a successful research-intensive career. As such, host institutions should provide evidence of the following:
    - institutional support for the proposed program of work; and

- institutional commitment to developing research potential and positioning the award holder for a successful research-intensive career, including an individualized learning and development plan, to be discussed with the award holder.
- 5.1 In support of this recommendation, SSHRC should develop, in consultation with key stakeholders (e.g., institutions, selection committees), a guidance document for potential host institutions regarding S-PDF program requirements; for example, office space, access to faculty, library, professional development, networking opportunities, etc. As well, SSHRC should monitor implementation of institutional commitments with appropriate reporting tools and mechanisms.
6. A performance measurement strategy (PMS) should be developed for the S-PDF program, linked to the revised program objectives within the context of the ongoing renewal of the Talent program. This PMS strategy should be consistent with the one developed for the Banting program and be based on the revised program's logic model in reflecting the expected outcomes and logical links between program activities and benefits.
7. With respect to performance measurement reporting tools, SSHRC should advance its development and implementation of the new achievement reporting system within the context of its renewed program architecture. This new achievement reporting system will be used to collect achievement results data for the Talent, Insight and Connection umbrella programs, and therefore for the S-PDF program as well.
- 7.1. The Achievement Report for Talent development will capture data on research results, skills acquired/expanded, mobility, other funding sources, work experience, knowledge mobilization and recognition. The new reporting system will allow better communication of results and outcomes to award holders, researchers, institutions and partners.
- 7.2. Progress Reports should continue to be used for purposes related to determining continued eligibility and to administration and monitoring.
8. The evaluation found that there were limited research and data regarding postdoctoral researchers in the social sciences and humanities in Canada and internationally. As such, there was great interest expressed by a number of organizations and groups currently exploring the issue of the incremental value of the postdoctoral experience (e.g., CAGS, CAPS, Conference Board, Industry Canada, etc.) in addressing the context of SSH disciplines more specifically. It is recommended that SSHRC should do the following:
- 8.1 SSHRC should liaise with the above-mentioned organizations/groups to explore opportunities to contribute to and benefit from potential initiatives and/or studies related to the SSH postdoctoral experience.
- 8.2 SSHRC should lead and coordinate specific studies, or components thereof, if there are remaining issues that need to be addressed. Possible topics could include the state of hiring practices for SSH within the academic and other sectors (and the related impact of an S-PDF); indirect support for postdoctoral researchers in SSH; and gaining a better understanding of the current trends in the SSHRC postdoctoral population (e.g., reasons for not applying for funding, employment outcomes, cultural/disciplinary differences, etc.).