

Evaluation of SSHRC's Partnership Funding Opportunities: Management Response and Action Plan

SSHRC's partnership funding opportunities provide grants to support research and knowledge mobilization activities of scholars and researchers working as individuals, in teams, and in formal partnerships with the academic, public, private, and/or not-for-profit sectors. Partnership funding opportunities include Partnership Grants (PG) and Partnership Development Grants (PDG) funding opportunities, along with the much smaller Connection Grants (CG).¹

The purpose of the evaluation was to provide SSHRC senior management with an assessment of the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and delivery of Partnership Funding Opportunities.

The Partnership Funding Opportunities evaluation has been conducted in compliance with the coverage requirements outlined in the 2016 Treasury Board Policy on Results and the Financial Administration Act. As the PG and PDG are the most material funding opportunities within the partnership suite, study resources were primarily devoted to evaluating these two funding opportunities, and evaluation of CG relied primarily on secondary data already available.

The evaluation addressed three broad issues: relevance, effectiveness, and design/delivery. Data was collected, analyzed and synthesized across the following lines of evidence: review of documents and key literature; review of financial data, grant files and administrative data; interviews with key informants; a survey of PG and PDG applicants, co-applicants, partners, and collaborators; and case studies.

The goal of funding partnership research is to support research that is responsive to and has an impact on broader Canadian society. The evaluation confirmed that partnership funding opportunities respond to a need for a range of funding mechanisms to support collaborative research. The evaluation demonstrated that PG and PDG are achieving intended outcomes including impacts on the academic and non-academic spheres and supporting students/postdoctoral researchers to find employment. In comparison to their IG/IDG counterparts, PG/PDG create as many or more types of research outputs, are more likely to disseminate outside of academia, are more likely to increase knowledge, and are more likely to report economic, social, or cultural benefits and changes to public policy. The evaluation also showed that high engagement of non-academics is associated with greater utilization of research findings. A few areas for improvement were identified related to A) clarity of participant understandings of the various participant roles available, B) the demands of the application process on non-academic participants, C) the support project directors receive for non-academic aspects of leading large scale grants.

The evaluation report made the following recommendations:

1. Continue to fund partnership-type funding opportunities that range in grant value and length.
2. Encourage applicants to fully engage non-academics in project leadership and setting research objectives.
3. Continue to ease the burden of the application process for non-academic participants.
4. Develop a means to identify each participant's involvement in grant activities and intended benefits.
5. Establish resources or mechanisms to support project directors in leading a large partnership.

The conclusions and recommendations made are useful. Overall the findings of the evaluation are quite positive, demonstrating that the funding opportunities are meeting their objectives and also providing useful recommendations to continuously improve their delivery. Some examples of the effectiveness of these funding opportunities are noted above, and SSHRC may leverage these strengths for future initiatives:

- development of skills that leads to the employability of students,
- greater utilization of research findings by non-academics, and

¹ A new partnership funding opportunity, Partnership Engage Grants (PEG), was introduced in 2017/18. PEG is outside of the evaluation scope.

- variety of research outputs and knowledge mobilization strategies.

The first recommendation highlights the importance of continuing to offer a range of grant value and scope. SSHRC has recently increased the scope further, launching a smaller partnership funding opportunity—Partnership Engage Grants—to provide even greater variation and options. Other recommendations provide an opportunity for SSHRC to encourage increased engagement with non-academics, clarify participant role categories and provide more ways to support the success of project directors in leading partnerships.

The conclusions and recommendations also help to demonstrate that some of the more recent changes made to the application system in the past competition were needed. For example, SSHRC introduced some new language in the partner instructions about the “Guidelines for the Involvement of Partners” to clarify the role of partners and how they are agreeing to be involved. In response to feedback from the research community, SSHRC made some improvements to help streamline the application process, especially for non-academic partners and participants, by simplifying and reducing the number of steps in the partner invitation process (PG, PDG) and limiting the number of CVs required (PG). There are still opportunities to further streamline, and consider introducing an abbreviated CV given the recommendation “to continue to ease the burden of the application process for non-academic participants”.

Finally, the evaluation highlighted for management the importance of continuing to monitor and ensure support for a diversity of partnerships in terms of:

- size of project/network,
- size of institution,
- sector representation, and
- disciplinary focus.

The following action plan provides specific information on management responses to each of the four recommendations contained in the evaluation report.

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Recommendation	Management Response	Action	Responsibility	Priority/Target Date
Recommendation 1: Continue to fund partnership-type funding opportunities that range in grant value and length.	Agree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to offer the PDG and PG funding opportunities as well as the new Partnership Engage Grant, especially given responses about the importance of offering different size and duration options in partnership suite of funding opportunities 	Not applicable	Not applicable
Recommendation 2: Encourage applicants to fully engage non-academics in project leadership and setting research objectives.	Agree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider creating targeted streams to increase involvement from particular sectors in all partnership funding opportunities. 	Research Grants and Partnerships / Corporate Strategy and Performance / Programs Planning and Operations Division / Information and Innovation Solutions Division / Communications Division	Priority: Medium Timeline: December 2019
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SSHRC will explore the possibility of creating a co-project director category in the application form. 	Research Grants and Partnerships / Corporate Strategy and Performance / Programs Planning and Operations Division / Information and Innovation Solutions Division	Priority: Medium Timeline: December 2020
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify that partnerships may propose their own governance models and that role categories for participants from various sectors are linked to eligibility requirements and access to research funds. These clarifications will be achieved through updates to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> partnership outreach visits and webinars, and program literature (e.g. instructions for partners and participants). 	Research Grants and Partnerships / Programs Planning and Operations Division / Information and Innovation Solutions Division / Communications Division	Priority: Medium Timeline: December 2019
Recommendation 3: Continue to ease the burden of application process for non-academic participants.	Agree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore options for continuing to simplify the application process in the "legacy system", particularly the possibility of introducing an abbreviated CV to ease the burden on non-academic participants. 	Research Grants and Partnerships / Programs Planning and Operations Division / Information and Innovation Solutions Division / Communications Division / Corporate Strategy and Performance	Priority: Medium Timeline: December 2020

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<p>Recommendation 4: Develop a means to identify each participant's involvement in grant activities and intended benefits.</p>	<p>Agree</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SSHRC will consider whether the current template of the partner final achievement could be updated to provide such information for the next evaluation. Currently the report asks about resulting outcomes, but not initial intended outcomes. Since this report is optional, SSHRC will also consider ways to better encourage its completion. • Review the midterm report template and consider ways to identify key participants and partners and their intended benefits. 	<p>Research Grants and Partnerships / Programs Planning and Operations Division / Information and Innovation Solutions Division / Communications Division / Corporate Strategy and Performance / Evaluation</p>	<p>Priority: Medium Timeline: December 2019</p>
<p>Recommendation 5: Establish resources or mechanisms to support project directors leading a large partnership.</p>	<p>Agree</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SSHRC currently provides support and resources to project directors through webinars and the PG annual start-up meetings etc., and encourages project directors to include the salary of a project coordinator in their budgets. SSHRC will increase its support by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ adding information about project management/coordination to webinars, ○ introducing a dedicated session on project coordination/management as a standing item at the annual start-up meeting for PG, and ○ enhancing/updating the Partnership Toolkit section of the website to include better and more concrete best practices from past successful teams. • Support for project directors in large projects is also a shared responsibility with post-secondary institutions hosting these grants. SSHRC will consider updating the requirements in the support letters from host institutions to better emphasize this shared responsibility. 	<p>Research Grants and Partnerships / Programs Planning and Operations Division / Information and Innovation Solutions Division / Communications Division / Corporate Strategy and Performance</p>	<p>Priority: Medium Timeline: December 2019</p>