



This program is intended to build on the capacity of world-class postsecondary institutions in Canada to recruit leading researchers, to secure promising partnerships and to advance breakthrough discoveries. During the first two competitions, 18 seven-year grants were awarded through a competitive peer-review process to 17 postsecondary institutions.

About the evaluation:

This constitutes the first evaluation of CFREF, covering the period from 2015-16 to 2018-19. The purpose of the evaluation was to provide an assessment of the relevance and performance of the CFREF program, as well as aspects of design and delivery. This evaluation focused on immediate outcomes, as it was too early in the program life-cycle to assess intermediate and long-term outcomes.

Evaluation questions

1. To what extent does CFREF continue to address a unique need and align with government priorities?
2. How, and to what extent, have institutions implemented structures and processes for prioritizing funding to research in CFREF priority research areas?
3. To what extent has high-caliber, diverse and interdisciplinary research talent been attracted, retained and trained?
4. To what extent have funded institutions created or strengthened partnerships, collaborations and infrastructure to enhance research capacity?
5. To what extent are the design and delivery of CFREF effective and efficient?



Lines of Evidence:

- Administrative Data, Document and Literature Reviews
- Key Informant Interviews
- Case Studies with Competition 1 grantees (N=5)
- Survey of CFREF participants (faculty and HQP)

Design and delivery

- The flexibility that CFREF offers grantees to build their own governance structure was identified as a strength of the program by many key informants.
- Areas identified for improvement include: reviewing reporting templates to ensure greater consistency and enhance quality of data collected; encouraging grantees to clearly articulate a long-term vision for what they want to accomplish through their grant; and exploring the possibility of instituting an end-of-grant report to better document outcomes and contributions of the grants.
- Securing funding to sustain transformational changes brought by the CFREFs could be a challenge following the end of the granting period.
- The CFREF program has been delivered by the Tri-agency Institutional Programs Secretariat (TIPS) in a very cost-efficient manner to date.
- Grantees and applicants identified some challenges, which could be mitigated by improving communications between TIPS and grantees/applicants.

Relevance

- CFREF continues to be relevant as it provides the government with a unique vehicle for strategically investing in priority research areas that have the potential to create long-term economic advantages for Canada.
- The CFREF program is well aligned with government priorities on innovation and talent recruitment.
- Support for early career researchers (ECRs) was introduced as a government priority in 2018. Since the launch of CFREF predates this priority announcement, the expected impact of CFREF on ECRs has yet to be defined.

Participants, partnerships, collaborations and infrastructure

- CFREF-funded activities have engaged more than 6,700 individuals, including graduate students (36%), faculty (23%) and postdoctoral fellows (13%)
- CFREF participants identified access to interdisciplinary research and training environments and access to state-of-the-art research facilities as key benefits of participation in grant-funded activities.
- Grantees have engaged >600 partners and ~1,500 collaborators, both national and international, enabling greater visibility and international recognition, as well as access to a wider range of infrastructure, equipment and expertise.
- While institutions are working to implement their equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) plans, this work needs to continue in order to improve representation and diversity among CFREF teams.

Although it was too early in the program life-cycle to assess long-term outcomes and impacts of funding at the time of this evaluation, CFREF appears to be performing well to date. Funded grants have largely met immediate outcomes, and have demonstrated progress towards achieving intermediate outcomes.

Recommendation 1: Improve alignment of the CFREF program with government priorities on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and support for early career researchers (ECRs), by:

- a) continuing to ensure that grantees have implemented plans related to the representation of individuals from the four designated groups and monitoring the participation of these groups. If the distribution of CFREF participants does not improve on pace with program expectations, consider implementing more specific guidance or EDI targets in future competitions; and
- b) clarifying the CFREF program's role and expectations of grantees in supporting early career researchers, given that it is a current priority for the government.

Recommendation 2: Continue to track the rate at which grants are being expended and consider no-cost extensions as required, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic may cause additional delays.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen monitoring and reporting activities undertaken by grantees in order to improve the ability to understand and assess longer-term impacts, by:

- a) reviewing the annual progress and mid-term report templates to ensure that key definitions are clarified, and that the same format is used for common data elements across these reporting tools in order to enhance consistency in reporting and comparability of data;
- b) improving the utility of the performance measurement plans for both TIPS and grantees by requiring applicants to clearly articulate what the grant is expected to achieve in the short and long term and how (i.e., its post-grant legacy), and to identify relevant grant-specific performance indicators based on the grant's transformational logic, in addition to common CFREF program-level indicators; and
- c) instituting an end-of-grant report, based on the current model for the mid-term report, in order to better understand and document outcomes and results achieved over the life of each grant.

Recommendation 4: Further enhance communications and support to applicants and grantees by:

- a) ensuring that comprehensive guidance is provided by TIPS to funding applicants, should there be a new competition
- b) maintaining sustained communication with grantees during the implementation phase of their grant.

