



SSHRC Accessibility Plan

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SSHRC commitment

As a federal research funding agency that promotes and supports research and research training in Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) delivers programs that help Canada's researchers develop talent, generate insights and build partnerships, with the ultimate goal of delivering social, cultural and economic outcomes for Canadians. We know that the Canadian research enterprise is stronger when this agency, and the programs and services it delivers, are as accessible, inclusive, equitable and diverse as possible. SSHRC presents its inaugural accessibility plan as an important first step toward achieving this goal.

In developing and implementing the SSHRC Accessibility Plan, SSHRC aims to become an organization that builds accessibility into the way it does business. Expanding on the [Tri-Agency Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan](#) and our internal People Strategy, this plan represents the cumulative efforts and advice of members of our research community and staff, and aims to identify and remove barriers that hinder the participation of persons with disabilities in the research ecosystem.

SSHRC acknowledges that the changes required to meet our objectives will take time to implement fully. We will hold ourselves accountable to our research community and our staff to deliver on this goal. Indeed, this plan addresses barriers to accessibility for both internal staff and the external research community.

The barriers and actions identified in this plan are based largely on recommendations received from our external Advisory Committee on Accessibility and System Ableism (ACASA), our internal Persons with Disabilities Network (PwDN), as well as internal and external focus groups and other sources. Consultations with these groups have been and will continue to be an integral element of this inaugural plan. It is important to note that this plan is SSHRC's response to the interim recommendations of ACASA and PwDN; however, SSHRC takes full responsibility for the content of this plan. SSHRC would like to especially thank the committee and the network for their considerable intellectual and emotional labour over the past months. We are committed to continuing to work with and learn from ACASA and PwDN and will review and update our plan following further engagement and the publication of ACASA's final recommendations in 2023.




I. General

1. Executive summary

The SSHRC Accessibility Plan aims to chart a path forward to remove and prevent barriers at SSHRC, especially for persons with disabilities, by 2040. This plan is the foundation on which SSHRC will identify more specific actions in future versions, after first identifying barriers and determining initial actions the agency will take to remove or prevent them. Collaboration and ongoing consultation, both within SSHRC and with our research community, will be essential as we develop an accompanying implementation plan in spring 2023 that provides clear, detailed and concrete timelines and actions.

The principle that persons with disabilities be involved in all stages of the design and implementation of the plan, has been and will continue to be fundamental in the development of this plan and its evolution. Multiple feedback mechanisms, including an anonymous form, are available to enable staff, members of the research community, and the general public to continue contributing to this plan into the future.

Barriers are outlined in relation to seven categories: employment; the built environment; information and communication technologies; communication; procurement of goods, services and facilities; design and delivery of programs and services; and transportation. For employment, barriers have been identified in relation to hiring, retention and promotion; accommodation policies and practices for SSHRC staff; and creating inclusive policies and practices. For the built environment, a barrier has been identified in relation to issues with building access, navigation and individual workstations. For information and communication technologies, barriers affecting both SSHRC staff and the research community have been identified in relation to digital tools, platforms and software; websites and the employee intranet; and direct communications. For communication, a barrier has been identified in relation to disability awareness. For procurement of goods, services and facilities, barriers have been identified with regard to new policy requirements and clarity around what barriers exist in the procurement process. For design and delivery of programs and services, barriers faced by the research community have been identified in relation to eligibility and application-stage requirements; lack of transparency on adaptive measures, including policies related to deadline extensions; evaluation criteria; “special circumstances” / “career interruptions” / “allowable inclusions”; committee member workload and committee meetings; and direct costs of research. For transportation, a barrier has been identified in relation to the prioritization of lower-cost transportation for both staff and the research community.



This accessibility plan is based on internal and external consultations. Internally, the PwDN provided guidance and feedback on barriers. Externally, ACASA identified barriers within SSHRC’s programs and services, and its research ecosystem more broadly, and recommended actions the agency could take, guided by a series of focus groups. The committee will continue to meet regularly until June 2023, with final recommendations set to be published in spring 2023. Ongoing consultations with these communities, subject matter experts and authorities will help prioritize improvements over the short and long term. This plan will be monitored and governed through the Accessibility Steering Committee on a bi-annual basis. In addition to yearly progress reports, an implementation/action plan will be developed in spring 2023 following publication of this plan. A revised accessibility plan will be published in the third year.

2. The Accessible Canada Act

The [Accessible Canada Act](#) came into force on July 11, 2019. The objective of the Act is to make Canada barrier-free in areas under federal jurisdiction, especially for persons with disabilities, by January 1, 2040. As part of the Act, federal government organizations must publish an accessibility plan by December 31, 2022.

3. A note on language

According to the Act, “disability”:

“means any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person’s full and equal participation in society.”

This document will use terms such as “disability” or “barrier,” or descriptive phrases such as “persons with disabilities,” as they are defined or used in the Act. However, SSHRC recognizes that the definitions in the Act contain problematic terminology, and that some people self-identify as disabled (disability-first language), while other people regard their disability as secondary to who they are (person-first language). As well, some individuals who identify with certain communities, such as those who are Deaf or neurodivergent, may not identify as having a disability.

In addition, SSHRC currently uses terminology to describe its programs and services, such as “merit review,” “capability” and “productivity,” that ACASA has advised, reinforces an ableist perspective. While SSHRC may still need to use these terms as part of the analysis of barriers, SSHRC is endeavouring to contribute to the Canadian research enterprise by eliminating words that can cause harm.

For a full list of terms and how we use them, see [Appendix A](#).



4. SSHRC Accessibility Plan

The SSHRC Accessibility Plan presents a way forward to make the agency and its programs and services accessible to both agency staff and the Canadian research community. As an employer, we aim to create a work environment that is accessible and inclusive for all staff. As a service provider, we aim to remove and prevent accessibility barriers to federal funding for research. This plan identifies key barriers to accessibility and provides actions that aim to remove or prevent barriers in the following areas:


- employment
- built environment
- information and communication technologies
- communication
- procurement of goods, services and facilities
- design and delivery of programs and services
- transportation

The plan reinforces the agency's commitment to fostering accessibility, diversity, bilingualism and inclusiveness at work, as stated in our People Strategy, and with regard to the research community, as stated in the Tri-Agency Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan. As an ever-evolving plan, it will guide us in the fulfillment of our vision to achieve universal accessibility (free of accessibility barriers) for SSHRC's research community and staff, and to continue to proactively remove and prevent barriers to ensure greater opportunities for persons with disabilities and all those that experience barriers.

While the *Accessible Canada Act* established a three-year planning and reporting cycle for this plan, SSHRC will develop an implementation plan in Spring 2023 that provides clear, detailed and concrete timelines and actions. Some of the actions outlined below may extend beyond the three-year cycle. This is a journey, and we will continue to engage, review, update and adjust the plan to ensure we achieve our goals to become an organization that integrates accessibility into all aspects of our work and delivers barrier-free accessible services to Canadians by 2040. SSHRC will continue to collaborate with the other federal research funding agencies, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), to align our approaches and respective plans. The agency will also prepare and publish annual progress reports on the implementation of this plan and develop indicators to support monitoring and reporting. For more information, see [IV. Consultation, monitoring and governance](#).

5. Principles

The overarching principle of the SSHRC Accessibility Plan is that persons with disabilities are involved in all stages of design and implementation of the plan and in all initiatives and activities of the agency. By engaging those who experience the most persistent barriers and by embracing intersectional perspectives and lived experiences, all will benefit. This plan is based on five sub-principles:



Well-being

SSHRC will target and implement enhancements, changes and improvements that prioritize the well-being of the research community and staff.

Transparency and collaboration

SSHRC will work in the open, through collaborative and inclusive means. Our efforts, progress and challenges will be shared across the organization and with our community.

Equity, diversity and inclusion

SSHRC's efforts will leverage and support objectives on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to provide fair and equitable access to SSHRC funding and promote an inclusive and diverse research ecosystem and workplace.

Flexibility and innovation

SSHRC understands that progress is a pathway, and it will explore all options to maintain an ever-evolving plan and reach its objectives.

Sound stewardship

SSHRC will support sound stewardship of public funds, through transparent and coordinated governance and decision-making.

6. Feedback

6.1 Feedback process

Many feedback mechanisms for accessibility purposes


The research community, SSHRC staff and the general public can provide feedback through several channels. These include: email, mail, telephone, and a questionnaire found [at this link](#). Feedback can also be submitted anonymously.


Once feedback has been received, a receipt will be provided in the same way the feedback was sent, except for anonymous submissions. For example, emails will be answered by email, mail correspondence will be answered by mail (when a return address is included), and questionnaire submissions will receive a message after submission confirming that the response has been received. All survey results will be recorded in an Excel spreadsheet for review. All feedback will be stored, including scanned versions of any mail received, in a repository with limited access.

Feedback will be integrated into yearly progress reports and subsequent versions of the plan.

6.2 Contact information

Contact information for asking questions and providing feedback in various forms is provided below. You may also request this plan and a description of the feedback process in a different format, such as audio or braille, through these same channels:

- 
- **Title of position responsible for receiving feedback:** SSHRC accessibility coordinator
 - **Mailing address:** 125 Zaida Eddy Private, Second Floor, Ottawa, Ontario K1R 0E3
 - **Telephone:** 1-855-275-1123
 - **Email address:** accessibility-plan-accessibilite@sshrc-crsh.gc.ca
 - [Link to questionnaire](#)



II. Our context

1. SSHRC—Who we are

Created in 1977, SSHRC is the federal research funding agency that promotes and supports research, research training and knowledge mobilization activities in the social sciences and humanities. Through its Research Training and Talent Development, Insight Research and Research Partnerships programs, and through partnerships and collaborations, SSHRC funds tens of thousands of researchers and students across Canada. Through the Tri-agency Institutional Programs Secretariat, SSHRC also manages several large programs on behalf of the three federal research funding agencies, SSHRC, NSERC and CIHR.

The research community interacts with SSHRC not only through grant, fellowship and scholarship programs, but also as reviewers, partners and advisors, and through governance, in addition to many other roles. SSHRC also engages regularly with research administrators in postsecondary institutions and not-for-profit research organizations.

An arm's length agency of the federal government, SSHRC awards funds through review processes conducted by members of the research community (a process often referred to as "merit review"). Over 900 volunteer reviewers, including committee and panel members, external reviewers and observers, participate in these processes to rank applications so that SSHRC can award funds based on the projects that are the most promising in terms of advancing knowledge and creating impact.


2. Common Administrative Services Directorate

In 1994, SSHRC and NSERC created the Common Administrative Services Directorate, consolidating the Human Resources, Finance, Information Management, Information Technology, and Security divisions. The Common Administrative Services Directorate is headed by one chief financial officer and vice-president, Corporate Services.

The agencies use common technology infrastructure as well as human resources and finance systems, and the vast majority of processes and policies are aligned. To contribute to cost efficiency, the agencies also share office and meeting facilities in the National Capital Region. As a result, the barriers for a majority of the priority areas are common to both agencies, and the responsibility for carrying out the actions to eliminate them are shared.

3. A mobile workforce

There are a number of accessibility issues particularly relevant for SSHRC staff. In March 2020, SSHRC went into a remote work setting, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and promptly moved all in-person review committee meetings and adjudication to online platforms. While the transition was not seamless, staff were quickly equipped with the technologies needed to work remotely, enabling SSHRC to continue to deliver its mandate.



As of January 2023, SSHRC staff will have just begun their re-entry into their new headquarters following almost three years of remote work. Staff will have not only transitioned to a hybrid work model, like most of the federal public service, but also will have moved into a new building designed in accordance with GCworkplace standards. Launched by the Clerk of the Privy Council in 2013, the GCworkplace initiative emphasizes a modern approach to how we work that promotes mobility, flexibility and connectivity. Although accessibility is a principle in GCworkplace design, barriers to accessibility still exist. SSHRC will continue to work toward creating a more inclusive and accessible work environment for employees and members of the research community by:

- leveraging SSHRC’s Mobile Work Policy and Full-time Telework Directive. This policy framework formalizes the flexibility afforded by hybrid work for SSHRC employees and emphasizes digital collaboration to connect us to talent across Canada; and
- consulting with internal communities on an ongoing basis (such as, but not limited to, the PwDN and the Employment Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee [EEDAC] and informal management forums) to discuss and address accessibility barriers as they relate to our hybrid work model and work environment at headquarters.

III. Accessibility improvement plan

1. Employment

Promote the development of practices that are accessible and inclusive, so that all employees, and specifically persons with disabilities, are supported and able to contribute to the agency.

1.1 Barrier: Hiring, retention and promotion


The number of persons with disabilities employed and hired at SSHRC is below the labour market availability, making persons with disabilities underrepresented in every employment category. Barriers in hiring and promoting include stigma/concerns about disclosing health-related needs, stigma regarding accommodation, and job pools not available during medical leave. Contract work is another barrier, as it promotes a fear of reprisal due to job insecurity.

Actions

- Implement hiring targets for persons with disabilities that are at or above the labour market availability.
- Monitor data regarding employment tenure (indeterminate, term and contract) to determine if application differences exist for staff who self-identify as a person with a disability.
- Consult with experts specializing in persons with disabilities when establishing priority hiring.
- Develop recruitment plans and strategies for employees with disabilities, including the tracking of drop-off rates for persons with disabilities at different steps of the recruitment process.
- Provide targeted support to persons with disabilities with respect to career development and leadership.
- Track participation in exit interviews with persons with disabilities, measure progress regarding employee hiring and retention, and monitor survey results, feedback received and the employee lifecycle.
- Ensure that staffing and assessment tools, approaches and resources are accessible and inclusive, with special attention paid to increasing awareness of accessibility measures and applying plain-language principles to communications at each stage of the appointment process.

1.2 Barrier: Accommodation policies and practices for SSHRC staff

SSHRC's current accommodation policy was last updated in 2004. Accommodations are necessary in many cases regarding workloads, training schedules and hiring. Persons with disabilities associate this inadequate and outdated accommodation policy with a lack of support from management, as there is limited information and guidance for employees and managers on the accommodation process. Finally, the



roles and responsibilities to establish accommodations and adjustments are not clear, with much of the responsibility placed on the person with a disability to advocate for their accommodation.

Actions


- Create a library (i.e., a list or register) of available accommodations that is updated regularly and that acknowledges further accommodations may be possible.
- Develop a resource covering accessibility and persons with disabilities, post it on the intranet, and confirm that employees and managers can access it easily.
- Establish streamlined processes and resources for employees seeking accommodation requests.
- Update the agency’s accommodation policy and raise awareness through ongoing communications with SSHRC employees.
- Add requirements to follow up, on a periodic basis, with employees with disabilities who requested accommodations and adjustments, to ensure they have the materials, equipment and support needed to do their jobs and that their physical environmental remains suitable for them to do their jobs.
- Develop and implement training regarding the updated accommodation policy that clarifies roles and responsibilities.

1.3 Barrier: Creating inclusive internal policies and practices

Overall, there is a lack of knowledge regarding disability. This can sometimes translate to persons with disabilities coming up with their own solutions to barriers. More awareness, destigmatization, and understanding of mental, physical, visible and nonvisible disabilities is needed at both the employee and management level. Additionally, not all barriers have been fully identified for persons with disabilities, and policies and practices do not reflect an inclusive definition of disabilities. There is no formal process to allow and receive accessibility complaints in an anonymous manner and more mental health supports are needed. Finally, some staff with disabilities are hesitant to self-identify through the available mechanisms. This hesitation is linked to the stigma around many disabilities and misunderstandings or fears around use of this data.

Actions

- Promote the Office of the Ombuds and Workplace Wellbeing to support staff with mental health needs.
- Update the definition of “persons with disabilities” based on consultations or new developments in all cases where this definition appears, where possible.

- 
- Develop disability awareness training and sensitivity training, making it mandatory for managers and above.
 - Establish a distributed governance structure and explore dedicated resources (program support and funding structures) to ensure continued support and momentum across all accessibility-related efforts, in tandem with other EDI initiatives.
 - Establish a multiyear communication plan and calendar to address the benefits of self-identification for staff.

2. The built environment

Provide an accessible built environment to support staff through barrier-free access to workspaces, and to support the research community when participating in activities at the work site.

2.1 Barrier: Issues with building access, navigation and individual workstations

While new government buildings have been designed in compliance with Government of Canada accessibility standards, barriers may still exist in SSHRC's new workspace and retrofits may be needed. Ramps, elevator controls, accessibility buttons for doors, braille indicators and emergency procedures are some features that could be missing or inadequate.

Actions

- Confirm the accessibility and working order of ramps, elevator controls, braille indicators and emergency procedures.
- Work with persons with disabilities and accessibility experts to identify building and workstation issues.
- Communicate emergency procedures and other accessibility features to all SSHRC staff to ensure that the research community and general public accessing SSHRC's offices are adequately supported.
- Identify required retrofits and prioritize retrofit requests for persons with disabilities.
- Develop a plan to address accessibility issues through retrofits that are not addressed in new buildings.

3. Information and communication technologies

Promote the development of information and communication technologies that can be used by the research community and staff, regardless of disability. This includes communications between the research community and SSHRC, between employee and employer, and with the general public.

3.1 Barrier: Digital tools, platforms and software

Accessibility issues associated with aging infrastructure exist for agency application and award administration platforms and tools. Also, some of the digital tools and platforms are not interoperable with some assistive technologies and are not or are only partially compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (2.0 AA). When new technological tools become integrated into the workplace, accessibility should be considered to make sure these technologies are accessible by design to everyone.

Actions

- Ensure that the Tri-agency Grants Management Solution, the new solution under development for managing grants, fellowships and associated CVs, is accessible by design, and ensure that persons with disabilities are consulted in their development and implementation.
- Investigate ways to enhance the accessibility of existing digital tools, platforms and software, including interoperability with assistive technology and compliance with the latest Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, while awaiting the transition to the Tri-agency Grants Management Solution.
- Investigate options to develop and implement accessible templates for all required application attachments, including the requirement that all uploaded attachments employ these templates.
- Investigate the possibility of designating an accessibility support person within the agency's information and technology support contact network, Support Central.

3.2 Barrier: External websites and intranet

While the agency website aligns with Government of Canada web accessibility standards, barriers related both to content and presentation remain. All content on the agency websites (internal and external) should be available in multiple formats and/or with appropriate supports, such as plain language versions to ensure people with visible and non-visible disabilities can access and use them.

Actions

- Establish and implement a timeline to conduct an accessibility review of all agency websites, including considerations related to clarity and inclusivity of content, accessible navigation and formatting.

- Establish plans to ensure all materials are available in accessible formats by default, with a target of exceeding the Government of Canada standards.

3.3 Barrier: Direct communications—email, telephone and videoconference

Agency staff support the research community and their colleagues via email, telephone and videoconference (for example, webinars and live events). Telephone communications are inaccessible to many members of staff and the research community. For email, there are currently no guidelines on accessible email practices. For live events or webinars, participants must request certain accessibility services well in advance, which poses a barrier to full participation for those with visible and nonvisible disabilities.

Actions


- Provide accessible communication tools (e.g., PowerPoint templates, etc.) to increase accessibility, minimize visual distractions and provide the research community, employees and the general public with more flexibility in how they can engage with staff.
- Prioritize accessibility at agency-hosted live events (such as closed captions). In addition, all communications promoting live events should provide a contact to which attendees can submit requests for additional accessibility services.
- Ensure documents sent directly to members of the research community and the public have accessible content and formats and that additional accessibility requests can be fulfilled, as needed.

4. Communication, other than information and communication technologies

Create and maintain an internal organizational culture of understanding, acceptance and affirmation of the lived experiences and needs of staff. Ensure the organizational culture enshrines accessibility in all aspects of work, by using communications, collaborations, inclusivity and respectful engagement involving persons with disabilities.

4.1 Barrier: Disability awareness

Not all disabilities have been considered in engagement and awareness initiatives at SSHRC. Many of the most common disability types declared in the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disabilities are non-visible, such as those related to pain, flexibility and mental health. Overlooking these



disabilities means that employees may not receive the services, tools and support they require to flourish and participate equally in the workplace.

Actions

- Establish a multiyear communications plan and calendar to address a variety of topics and concerns related to accessibility within the agency, including awareness of and education on non-visible disabilities.
- Stay informed about any communication guidelines related to accessibility and include in staff training programs as they become available.
- Promote and leverage National Accessibility week to support awareness and promote progress and support.
- Develop training sessions for staff at all levels on sensitivity and awareness of barriers for persons with disabilities.

5. Procurement of goods, services and facilities


Implement modern procurement practices so that the goods, services and facilities procured by the Government of Canada are accessible.

5.1 Barrier: Accessibility to be considered in policies and processes

New Treasury Board Secretariat policy requirements emphasize how accessibility must be considered in procurement processes. Procurement processes must be updated to best support employees with disabilities and those who face accessibility barriers.

Actions

- Ensure meaningful consideration of accessibility requirements in new procurement processes.
- Support and guide clients to incorporate plain language in procurement processes.
- Incorporate plain language in procurement templates and contract clauses as Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) develops and incorporates new standards related to accessibility.
- Update internal procedures, based on Treasury Board Secretariat policies and directives as well as PSPC and Shared Service Canada (SSC) tools and processes, to remove and prevent barriers in procurement.
- Review internal procurement processes to identify any additional barriers with suppliers of services and goods.
- Support and guide clients to consider accessibility in procurement processes and, where possible, integrate mechanisms in



procurement processes, forms and templates to ensure accessibility is considered by default.

5.2 Barrier: What tools or services are available for those who face accessibility barriers is unclear

There is a lack of centralized information available to support the procurement of accessible tools. The Procurement division at NSERC/SSHRC must follow SSC and PSPC guidelines, which creates limitations for procurement.

Actions

- Leverage the tools and resources available through the Accessibility in Procurement Resource Centre to improve awareness and access to information with regard to the availability of accessible tools and standards.
- Once a requirement has been identified, guide employees in the sourcing of accessible equipment and software available through SSC's and PSPC's "Accessibility Hub."
- Source new tools to support persons with disabilities and others who experience barriers and, where possible, implement procurement processes to enable their rapid deployment as needed.

6. Design and delivery of programs and services

Fully accessible programs and services contribute to an inclusive research enterprise, leading to the excellent, innovative and impactful research necessary to advance knowledge and understanding, and to respond to local, national and global challenges.

The following section identifies barriers to accessibility in SSHRC's externally facing programs and services and actions to address them. SSHRC has identified actions that we hope will begin to address systemic barriers in the research enterprise; however, we are aware that more work remains to be done, particularly in engagement with and understanding of persons with visible and non-visible disabilities, including from intersectional perspectives. We recognize the role SSHRC plays not only as a participant, but also as a leader to advance accessibility in the research ecosystem and/or culture, and we will continue to reflect on how we can engage with institutions and the broader research community to achieve this goal. For barriers related to SSHRC's website, communications with agency staff, and application platforms and tools, see section [3. Information and communication technologies](#).

6.1 Barrier: Eligibility and application-stage requirements

An applicant's eligibility for a funding opportunity can be affected by life circumstances. For example, eligibility criteria limiting the number of years a person can apply for scholarships and fellowships or for early-career research grants may disadvantage those whose studies or early career have been impacted by visible or non-visible disabilities. While SSHRC provides flexibility in how these criteria are applied, variation among funding opportunities can lead to uneven implementation at SSHRC and the institution. For early career researchers and/or those who are precariously employed, eligibility to apply is often affected by the person's employment status within an institution. Additionally, some fields of research related to disability are not delineated in the Canada Research and Development Classification that SSHRC and the other federal research funding agencies use to identify which review committee should assess an application. This can result in some applications related to disability studies going to the wrong committees. As well, self-identification data is currently collected from applicants on several identify factors, including disability. The language of this questionnaire can be outdated or not inclusive of all lived experiences.

Actions


- Consult with institutions, NSERC and CIHR regarding eligibility requirements from an EDI perspective and ensure that requirements are clearly and publicly communicated to all.
- As part of the updating of Canadian research classifications, consider adding disability-specific subject matter areas.
- To address possible gaps in data for persons with disabilities, monitor the development of new standards for the collection of self-identification information by agencies such as Statistics Canada, and update the questionnaire with new standards, as appropriate, when the questionnaire is revised (2024).

6.2 Barrier: Lack of transparency on adaptive measures, including extensions to deadlines

SSHRC has an "Accommodation inbox," where the research community can submit accessibility concerns and requests, but it does not have a single point of access for information on accessibility and related adaptive measures in SSHRC programs. Adaptive measures for visible and non-visible disabilities, including deadline extensions, are available, but they are not transparently communicated and are provided on a case-by-case basis, which can introduce inequities.

Actions

- Establish a single point of access for information on accessibility in SSHRC programs. In addition, rename the current "Accommodation inbox" the "Accessibility inbox."
- Consult with institutions, CIHR and NSERC in the development of an accessible, equitable, inclusive and transparent policy



framework that addresses requests for adaptive measures and deadline extensions.

- Provide a nonexclusive list of the types of adaptive measures available (e.g., extension requests or support submitting an application through alternate means or format), and clearly and publicly communicate the process to make such a request.
- Monitor changes in accessibility requests in the “Accessibility inbox” to help the agency identify where barriers continue to exist.

6.3 Barrier: Evaluation criteria


The criteria used to evaluate an applicant and their research proposal can present barriers to accessibility by prioritizing certain experiences or research outputs over others, and contributes to a culture of “publish or perish.” Obtaining an equitable evaluation can be challenging in the case of early career researchers and/or those with disabilities who are precariously employed and who may face obstacles in establishing their research credentials or having them recognized, securing research resources, or competing for a limited number of research positions. The language that SSHRC uses in its evaluation criteria and program literature may contribute to an inequitable evaluation process.

Actions

- Review the use of terms in evaluation criteria, including but not limited to “merit review,” “ability,” “capability” and “productivity,” that may prejudice the assessment of applications from persons with disabilities.
- In partnership with NSERC and CIHR, review the use of evaluation criteria that assess an applicant’s “capability,” particularly in the case of early career researchers, to ensure consideration of a broad range of research outputs and alignment with the agencies’ commitments to the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](#), which aims to improve how the outputs of scholarly research are evaluated.
- Consider removing the assessment of researcher “capability” for funding opportunities for early career researchers and putting greater weight on the quality of the research proposal.
- In concert with NSERC and CIHR, review the use of letters of support across applicable funding programs.

6.4 Barrier: “Special circumstances”/ “career interruptions” / “allowable inclusions”

Applicants are sometimes provided with an optional section (variously named, depending on the funding opportunity) to describe life circumstances that have impacted their research. For some funding opportunities, this may be at the expense of space available to describe research contributions. This information is viewed by institutions (typically the applicant’s employer), SSHRC staff and reviewers.



Applicants may be in a position where it is not possible or safe to share this information, and, further, sharing personal information may introduce negative bias and stigma during the review process. This can be particularly applicable to those who share information about non-visible or not apparent disabilities, such as a cognitive or mental health disability. Reviewers are required to complete, at minimum, an [unconscious bias training module](#); however, at present, SSHRC does not provide specific directions or training on how to equitably consider information about an applicant's life circumstances, including considerations such as the impact of disability.

Actions

- Review and implement changes to the life circumstances section of an application, including the name of the section(s), from an EDI, accessibility and privacy perspective. This could include considerations such as developing guidelines and training for applicants and reviewers, and/or establishing alternative means to ensure the equitable assessment of the impact of life circumstances on research.

6.5 Barrier: Committee member workload and committee meetings


SSHRC relies on volunteers to serve on the committees that review applications. Committee members are required to review between 10 and 50 applications, depending on the funding opportunity. The volume of work and the time constraints to submit scores can present a barrier to accessibility for people with both visible and non-visible disabilities. Aspects of an in-person meeting and the space itself can also be inaccessible. Finally, any kind of meeting that is scheduled for extended periods of time without regular breaks is not accessible for all members.

Actions

- Develop standard practices to maximize the accessibility and inclusiveness of review meetings, including the provision of hybrid meeting options.
- Establish a process to address barriers to accessibility for reviewers.
- Train reviewers, especially committee chairs where applicable, on the standard practices of accessible meetings.
- Investigate ways to increase the participation and inclusion of researchers with disabilities as reviewers.

6.6 Barrier: Direct costs of research

While direct research costs associated with accessibility are eligible in research grants, the current application process does not include a dedicated budget line for these costs. As such, all accessibility-related expenditures decrease the amount available for other research costs. In the case of scholarships and fellowships, award holders must cover all accessibility expenses, for both them and any participants in their



research, from within their funds. If claiming personal accessibility costs, the applicant must share their disability status with reviewers, who may not have the expertise or supporting information needed to fully assess these expenses, each time they apply.

Actions:

- Work with institutions, CIHR and NSERC to ensure guidelines on eligible accessibility expenses are clear and a transparent and streamlined process exists for approving these requests.
- Explore options to more transparently include accessibility-related costs in application budgets and reporting.
- Include, as part of the application instructions, a nonexclusive list of pre-approved accessibility expenses.
- Investigate ways to have SSHRC staff approve accessibility-related costs administratively, separate from the overall budget, for a grant, and/or a process for managing accessibility-related costs at institutions without sharing personal information.
- Investigate, with NSERC and CIHR, whether to create a dedicated budget allocation to support the accessibility expenses of researchers, research trainees (including scholarship and fellowship holders) and all others involved in the research, rather than covering those costs through individual research grants (similar to support for paid parental leave).

7. Transportation

As part of service delivery, employees and members of the research community are at times transported to various locations.

7.1 Barrier: Prioritizing lower-cost transportation

When booking transportation, staff and members of the external community are required to choose the most economical option, rather than the most accessible option.

Actions

- Explore opportunities to integrate accessibility considerations and options when planning and booking travel.



IV. Consultation, monitoring and governance

1. Consultations

The internal components of this plan were compiled separately from the external components, with consultations taking place separately on both sides.

Internal consultations

SSHRC's internal consultation can be traced back to early 2020 when the agency undertook a preliminary analysis of its workplace and practices to gain a better understanding of the issues and conditions within the workplace that created barriers for persons with disabilities. Building on the foundation of barriers the preliminary analysis identified, an external consultant was contracted in 2022 to consult with the newly formed the PwDN. The PwDN consists of employees from various levels at SSHRC and NSERC. The consultations, which took place between June and August 2022, included surveys, interviews and focus groups, which were conducted confidentially to ensure the safety and comfort of participants and to encourage honest feedback.

Members of the PwDN were also offered accessibility tours in September 2022. The purpose of the tours was to familiarize members with the new headquarters, provide an overview of building and workspace accessibility features, and gather feedback on remaining barriers to accessibility in our built environment. The feedback gathered will help prioritize improvements over the short- and long-term. Members of both the PwDN and EEDAC will be consulted on an ongoing basis on workplace accessibility barriers as we continue to work toward a barrier-free workplace.

External consultations

An external advisory committee, composed of researchers and students from across Canada and with a diverse range of lived experience and self-identification, was formed in June 2022 to identify barriers to accessibility in SSHRC programs and recommend actions to reduce and prevent those barriers. The committee, named the Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Systemic Ableism (ACASA), held 10 meetings between June and December and will continue to meet regularly until June 2023 to fulfill its one-year mandate. As consultations are still ongoing, the plan is SSHRC's inaugural response to the committee's interim recommendations. It does not necessarily reflect the committee's full advice, which will be finalized in 2023. SSHRC is committed to continuing to work with and learn from ACASA, and will review and update its plan following the publication of the committee's final report. In addition, SSHRC undertook a series of focus groups in November 2022 that included almost 50 researchers who expressed an interest in participating in SSHRC's consultations.

2. Timeline, monitoring and governance

The progress and success of this plan will be a shared responsibility across the agency. The overall development of SSHRC's accessibility plan has been overseen by a bi-agency (NSERC and SSHRC) committee known as the Accessibility Steering Committee. This committee includes representatives from senior management, employees with disabilities, programs and services representatives and liaisons, and subject matter experts. The committee will continue to:

- oversee and align internal and external actions on improving accessibility, such as information technology and communications improvements for programs and services;
- endorse internal implementation plans, as well as costs and timelines for targeted accessibility improvements for programs and services;
- understand and monitor the progress of the plan at an enterprise level (through progress reports); and
- support the identification and prioritization of opportunities to remove barriers to accessibility.

Regarding programs and services, the Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Systemic Ableism will continue its current mandate until June 2023. The committee will provide guidance on the implementation plan that includes prioritization and timelines, as well as the mechanism that would be most appropriate to monitor progress and provide ongoing feedback.

Progress on the plan will be provided to the committee on a bi-annual basis and will be monitored through several avenues, such as:

- Public service employee survey
- Human resources staffing and retention data
- Training completion and feedback data
- Consultation with the PwDN, EEDAC and the research community
- Feedback mechanisms highlighted in the feedback process section of this plan

To guide the detailed implementation of the actions described above, SSHRC will develop an implementation plan in Spring 2023 that will identify specific actions and milestones, against which progress will be monitored. By December 31, 2023, SSHRC will publish an annual progress report, and the accessibility plan will be updated to take into account progress and further recommendations from ACASA and the PwDN. In the third year after the publication of this plan, SSHRC will revise the plan to incorporate any new barriers identified and to adjust goals to best represent the progress already made and the progress still to come.

Appendix A: Definitions and acronyms (as defined by the *Accessible Canada Act*, 2019)

Acronyms used in this document:

- **ACASA:** Advisory Committee on Accessibility and System Ableism
- **CIHR:** Canadian Institutes for Health Research
- **CV:** Curriculum vitae
- **EDI:** Equity, diversity and inclusion
- **EEDAC:** Employment Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee
- **GC:** Government of Canada
- **NSERC:** Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada
- **PSPC:** Public Services and Procurement Canada
- **PwDN:** Persons with Disabilities Network
- **SSC:** Shared Services Canada
- **SSHRC:** Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

Definitions:

Accessibility: refers to the quality of being able to fully participate without barriers.

Accommodation: refers to the removal of barriers on an individual basis.


Applicant: for the purpose of this document, includes all persons contributing to the development and submission of an application, including principal investigator / project director, co-applicant/ investigator/director, collaborators, referees, team member or partner.

Barrier: means anything—including anything physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal, or based on information or communications, or that is the result of a policy or practice—that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with an impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment or a functional limitation.

“Capability”: currently, the name of an evaluation criterion employed by several SSHRC funding opportunities.

Disability: means any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person’s full and equal participation in society.

Extranet: the website-based platform used by SSHRC for multiple purposes.



Institution: a public or private not-for-profit degree- or diploma-level university, university college or college established in accordance with appropriate provincial or territorial legislation that may apply to SSHRC to become eligible to administer funds on behalf of an award recipient.

Merit review: the term used by SSHRC to describe the evaluation process, including committee scoring and ranking of applications.

Tri-agencies: the term used to refer to all three federal funding agencies, SSHRC, NSERC and CIHR.