

# Canada Biomedical Research Fund and Biosciences Research Infrastructure Fund (CBRF – BRIF Stage 2)

## Guidelines for the Strategic Review Committee

December 2023



## Table of contents

### Contents

What you need to know about this competition.....	3
Description.....	3
Strategic objectives.....	3
Selection process.....	4
Scientific and Technical Review.....	4
Strategic Review.....	5
Strategic Review Committee roles and responsibilities.....	5
Budget recommendations.....	7
Conflict of interest.....	7
How to conduct the review.....	8
Tools.....	8
Strategic Review Committee meetings.....	9
Logistics.....	10
Strategic Review Committee meeting with the research hubs.....	11
Outputs of the Strategic Review Committee.....	11
Appendix 1: Principles of merit review.....	13
Integrity.....	13
Confidentiality.....	13
Bias in merit review.....	13
Official languages.....	14
Responsible conduct of research.....	14
Canadian Human Rights Act.....	14
Appendix 2: Terms and definitions.....	15

## Who should use these guidelines?

These guidelines are for members of the Strategic Review Committee assessing applications for Stage 2 of the integrated Canada Biomedical Research Fund and Biosciences Research Infrastructure Fund (CBRF – BRIF Stage 2).

## A word of thanks

The Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) and the Tri-agency Institutional Programs Secretariat (TIPS) housed at the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in the strategic review process for the 2023 competition of the CBRF – BRIF Stage 2. The review process relies on the dedicated people who generously lend their time and expertise to its success. The CFI, TIPS and Canada’s research community greatly appreciate your efforts.

## What you need to know about this competition

### Description

In alignment with [Canada's Biomanufacturing and Life Sciences Strategy](#) (the Strategy), the [Canada Biomedical Research Fund and Biosciences Research Infrastructure Fund](#) (CBRF-BRIF) will help ensure Canada is prepared for future pandemics by increasing domestic capacity through investments and partnerships across the academic, public, private and non-profit sectors to produce life-saving vaccines and therapeutics.

The CBRF and BRIF are based on an ecosystem approach, designed to build on existing assets and infrastructure, and to forge partnerships across multiple sectors, including industry and government research facilities. To maximize impact and ensure investments complement and reinforce each other, the programs feature a two-stage, integrated competitive process, co-led by the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) and the Tri-agency Institutional Programs Secretariat (TIPS) housed at the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC):

- **Stage 1** (competition closed): selection of [research hubs](#).
- **Stage 2** (current stage): open national call for eligible institutions to submit partnered proposals for high risk and applied research, talent development and research infrastructure funding. Each proposal must be aligned with one of the hubs’ priorities, vision, and program of research, support pandemic preparedness and respond to emerging health threats.

### Strategic objectives

Submitted proposals should be aligned with the following CBRF – BRIF strategic objectives:

- Increase specialized infrastructure and capacity for multidisciplinary applied research.
- Support training and development to expand the pipeline of skilled research and talent.
- Accelerate the transition of promising research into commercially viable products and processes.

## Selection process

Figure 1: The CBRF – BRIF Stage 2 review process

September 2023	November 2023	February 2024	March 2024
Administrative review	Scientific and Technical Review Committee (STRC)	Strategic Review Committee (SRC)	Final approval of awards by the TIPS Steering Committee and CFI Board of Directors
Undertake an administrative review of all materials at all application stages to verify that eligibility requirements and application guidelines have been met  Conduct national security risk assessment of private sector partners	Evaluate the scientific and technical merit of the proposals using the relevant scientific and technical selection criteria	Assess proposals' alignment with the strategic objectives of the funding opportunity and with the priorities of the Strategy  Meet with research hub representatives	Make final funding decisions

## Scientific and Technical Review

Scientific and Technical Review Committees review proposals for research, talent development and research infrastructure against the following criteria:

- **Research and talent development<sup>1</sup>** components:
  - o **Relevance:** extent to which the component's development component's objectives and design meet the hub's vision, priorities, and program of research
  - o **Effectiveness:** extent to which the component is expected to achieve its objectives
  - o **Efficiency:** extent to which the component is likely to deliver results in an efficient and timely manner
  - o **Impact:** extent to which the component is expected to generate significant benefits
  - o **Contribution of partners:** extent to which partners concretely contribute to the component

<sup>1</sup> The sub-criteria for each criterion differ based on the component (research or talent development).

- **Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and early career researchers (ECRs):** extent to which commitment to EDI and ECRs is demonstrated in the component.
- **Research infrastructure** components:
  - **Need:** extent to which the infrastructure component efficiently supports research component(s) submitted by institutions
  - **Building capacity:** extent to which the infrastructure component enhances the research capacity of the institution(s) to support the hub’s vision, priorities, and program of research
  - **Sustainability:** extent to which the infrastructure component will be optimally used and maintained over its useful life.

Reviewers use a seven-point rating scale to rate each selection criterion based on the [criteria descriptions](#) and [ratings matrices](#), and supported by the proposal’s strengths and weaknesses. Proposals with a consensus rating of “good” or above on all criteria are forwarded to the Strategic Review Committee for review.

## Strategic Review

The Strategic Review Committee (SRC) is composed of prominent Canadian and international research and industry leaders from multiple sectors including from the life sciences and from the broader biomanufacturing sector. It is tasked with making arms-length recommendations to the decision-making bodies of the granting agencies and the CFI with regard to research-focused biomanufacturing and life science investments informed by the Strategy. The SRC provided recommendations for Stage 1 of the CBRF-BRIF program, the CFI’s Biosciences Research Infrastructure Fund, and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)’s Clinical Trials Fund.

The mandate of the SRC is distinct from the STRC as it focuses on *strategic* considerations and assesses proposals as a whole rather than individual components. The SRC will assess proposals’ alignment with the strategic objectives of the program and with the priorities of the Strategy, to ultimately recommend a portfolio of proposals that best support the Strategy and benefit Canada.

## Strategic Review Committee roles and responsibilities

**Chairs:** The SRC chair is responsible for leading the SRC meeting, ensuring that it runs effectively and according to schedule and that the committee:

- Considers the views of all members;
- Reviews all applications fairly, consistently and according to the guidelines in this document;
- Discusses each proposal in sufficient detail;
- Sufficiently substantiates the decisions for the committee report;

- Validates the SRC report for each application and ensures it accurately reflects the meeting discussion.

**Members:** SRC members have specific expertise in various aspects of the applications the committee will review. Each member will be assigned a subset of applications to review. Members are required to submit preliminary reviews on the SharePoint site for each application assigned to them. Each application will be assigned to at least three members. Members are encouraged to read all applications to fully participate in the meeting.

**Program staff:** CFI and TIPS staff members attend the SRC meeting to assist the chair, take notes and clarify policies and processes as necessary. Staff members will be responsible for drafting the SRC consensus report for each application, seeking approval of the draft by the chair and finalizing the report.

**Observers:** A representative from Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED) may be invited to observe SRC meetings. Observers do not interact with the committee and attend meetings only for the relevant discussions.

## Strategic criteria

Taking into account the results of the scientific and technical review and provincial priorities (for infrastructure components only), reviewers assess proposals against the following three strategic criteria:

<p><b>Relevance</b> Extent to which the proposal’s objectives and design respond to the strategic objectives and the Strategy</p>	
<p>The proposal supports one or more strategic objectives and is aligned with the <a href="#">Strategy</a>.</p>	<p>The proposal’s objectives are aligned with Canada’s <a href="#">Biomanufacturing and Life Sciences Strategy</a> and one or more of the strategic objectives of the funding opportunity.</p>
<p><b>Impact</b> Extent to which the proposal is expected to generate significant benefits for Canada</p>	
<p>The proposal has the potential to significantly contribute to advancing Canada’s key bio-innovation capabilities</p>	<p>The proposal bolsters Canada’s key bio-innovation capabilities and the Canadian biomanufacturing and life sciences sector by improving Canada’s pandemic readiness and domestic capacity to produce life-saving vaccines and therapeutics. The impacts and benefits to Canada go beyond academic outcomes and include building capacity to accelerate the translation of promising discoveries into products and services by leveraging cross-sector and multidisciplinary partnerships.</p>

<b>Coherence</b> Extent to which the proposal complements other proposals within and across hubs	
Complementarity of the proposal to other proposals within and across hubs	In combination with the proposals submitted within and across hubs, the proposal contributes to a coherent, coordinated and effective program of research. The proposal leverages and complements proposals submitted within and across hubs to bolster areas in which Canadian research is cutting-edge, while addressing critical gaps in the biomanufacturing and life sciences sector.

Reviewers use a seven-point rating scale, identical to that of the STRC to rate each selection criterion based on the [criteria descriptions](#) and [ratings matrices](#), and supported by the proposal’s strengths and weaknesses.

## Budget recommendations

During the STRC meetings, committees review budgets to determine whether the requested amount is appropriate for the project under the Efficiency (research and talent development components) and Need (infrastructure components) criteria. Reviewers assess whether, overall, the proposed budget is reasonable, well-justified and appropriate for carrying out the proposed activities. Weaknesses in the budget are reflected in the Efficiency or Need consensus rating.

In their reports to the SRC, STRC committees may recommend budget reductions or modifications, as applicable, where they determine that the request is inadequately justified and/or not appropriate. For example, committees may recommend the removal of infrastructure or budget line items, removal of budget components or reduction of the overall budget.

The role of the SRC is to make final funding recommendations based on the STRC’s suggested modifications to the proposed budget and the available budget envelopes for the competition. The SRC will be provided with total requested budgets per proposal (per year for CBRF applications) but not detailed budget justifications.

## Conflict of interest

The following definition of a conflict of interest (COI) applies to the SRC:

- A member involved in any proposal in the current competition will not be allowed to participate in the strategic review process;

- A member who is affiliated with one or more institutions/organizations involved in a proposal will not be allowed to review any component of the proposal but may review other proposals assigned to the SRC.

SRC meetings will cover three levels or review:

1. Application-level
2. Hub-level
3. Competition-level

### **Management of conflict of interest at the application-level**

During the application-level strategic review, members of the SRC involved in a proposal or affiliated with an institution/organization/research hub's institution involved in or endorsing a proposal will be required to leave the virtual meeting room during deliberations of the proposal for which they are in conflict.

### **Management of conflict of interest at the hub-level**

To allow SRC members to hear discussions on the suite of applications during the hub-level review<sup>2</sup>, so that they may contribute to further discussions of the entire hub's suite of proposals, all members of the SRC will be allowed to remain in the virtual meeting room during deliberations. However, SRC members involved in a proposal or affiliated with an institution/organization/research hub's institution involved in or endorsing a proposal will not be permitted to provide any input on any proposal for which they are in conflict.

### **Management of conflict of interest at the competition-level**

Similarly, to allow SRC members to hear discussions during the competition-level review, so that they may contribute to further discussions of the entire portfolio, all members of the SRC will be allowed to remain in the virtual meeting room during deliberations. However, SRC members involved in a proposal or affiliated with an institution/organization/research hub's institution involved in or endorsing a proposal will not be permitted to provide any input on any proposal for which they are in conflict.

## **How to conduct the review**

### **Tools**

A SharePoint site is used to access documents and information needed for the SRC review. All information on how to enter preliminary ratings in the SharePoint site will be provided by email. Once reviewers have access, they will find the following documents in the SharePoint site:

- sections of the CBRF-BRIF Stage 2 application that respond to the strategic criteria and strategic objectives of the funding opportunity including:

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<sup>2</sup> The hub-level review will follow each meeting between the SRC and representatives from the research hub.



- Scientific and technical summary; and
- Strategic overview;
- a consensus report for each CBRF-BRIF Stage 2 application summarizing the ratings and comments of the STRC;
- a hub-level endorsement report explaining the linkage, complementarity and interdependencies across the proposals it endorsed and how they align with the hub's vision, priorities and program of research, the strategic objectives of the funding opportunity and the Strategy's priorities;
- and a preliminary report template for their convenience.

### **Strategic Review Committee meetings**

Only applications deemed meritorious by the Scientific and Technical Review Committee will be reviewed by the SRC. Each of these applications will be assigned to at least three members for review. Reviewers are expected to be the primary contributors to start the discussion for each assigned application. Members who are not reviewers but who have familiarized themselves with the application or who have specific expertise in the area are encouraged to participate in the discussions, provided they are not in conflict with the proposal.

The SRC meetings will cover three levels of review:

- Application-level review
  - Assessment of each application against the three criteria and additional strategic considerations. Committee consensus is reached on each application's strategic merit.
- Hub-level review
  - Meetings between the SRC and representatives from each of the research hubs.
  - Review the entire suite of applications endorsed by each research hub to ensure that a coherent suite of meritorious projects is recommended for funding.
- Competition-level review
  - The SRC will also review the entire suite of proposals submitted to the competition focusing on identifying those that best support the Strategy and benefit Canada within the competitions' budget.

Program staff will capture the key points of discussion leading to consensus to inform the SRC committee report. Only the consensus decision and summarized comments will be provided in the report. Comments will not be attributed to a single reviewer. Following the meeting, the SRC chair will be asked to endorse the committee reports drafted by program staff. This consensus report will be provided to applicants along with their notice of decision.

## Logistics

The SRC will meet by videoconference. Given the number of applications the SRC will review, the meetings will take place over multiple sessions. Instructions for connecting to the videoconferencing platform will be provided before the meetings.

Meeting date	Time	Objective
February 5, 2024	2:30 to 6:00 (EST)	Application-level review
February 6, 2024	12:00 to 6:00 (EST)	Application-level review
February 7, 2024	12:00 to 6:00 (EST)	Meeting with the hubs/Hub-level review
February 9, 2024	12:00 to 6:00 (EST)	Competition-level review

**Table 1: Summary of key activities**

Timing	Activities
<b>Before the meeting</b>	<p>Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Attend a briefing session to go over the strategic review material and discuss the strategic review process</li><li>- Access the review materials on the SharePoint site</li><li>- Complete the recommended <a href="#">Bias in Peer Review training module</a> (see <a href="#">Bias in merit review</a>)</li><li>- Evaluate the proposals against the selection criteria</li><li>- Provide a preliminary assessment in the SharePoint site at least three days before the meeting.</li></ul>
<b>At the meeting</b>	<p><b>Application level:</b> The Chair guides the committee in reviewing each proposal in turn.</p> <p>SRC members present highlights of their preliminary assessment with supporting rationale.</p> <p>The committee discusses the strengths and weaknesses for each selection criterion, in addition to other strategic considerations to reach</p>

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consensus on a funding recommendation. The applications' strengths and weaknesses identified by the committee should substantiate the funding recommendation. This discussion informs the SRC report.

SRC members develop questions to pose to research hubs during the SRC/research hub meetings.

**Hub level:** The committee reviews the entire suite of applications endorsed by each research hub to ensure that a coherent suite of meritorious projects is recommended for funding.

Meetings between the SRC and representatives from each of the research hubs.

**Competition level:** The committee will review the entire suite of proposals submitted to the competition focusing on identifying those that best support the Strategy and benefit Canada within the competitions' budget.

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**After the meeting**

Program staff draft the SRC report for each proposal. The chair reviews and approves the reports.

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## Strategic Review Committee meeting with the research hubs

Representatives of the research hubs will meet with members of the SRC to present on the following elements:

- how the suite of proposals leverages known strengths and/or addresses key research gaps to benefit Canada's biomanufacturing and life sciences sector; and
- the linkages, complementarity and interdependencies across proposals within and between hubs including identification of elements most critical to achieving the objectives of the hub.

The presentation will be followed by a question and answer period with questions posed by SRC members. Questions will be developed by members of the SRC following the initial hub review assessment.

## Outputs of the Strategic Review Committee

A Strategic Review Committee Consensus Report will be drafted for each application regardless of outcome, i.e., recommended for funding or not recommended for funding. This report will be written by program staff and approved by the SRC Chair.

A report analysing trends and summarizing the outcome of the SRC meetings will be drafted by program staff and approved by the SRC Chair. This report will serve to inform governance committees of the evaluation process and outcomes.

## Appendix 1: Principles of merit review

The merit-review process is governed by the underlying principles of integrity and confidentiality to ensure continued trust and confidence of the research community, the government and the public. All members of the Scientific and Technical Review Committee must follow our [Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement](#).

### Integrity

We expect reviewers to maintain the highest standards of ethics and integrity. This means that personal interests must never influence, or be seen to influence, the outcome. You are appointed as an individual, not as an advocate or representative of your discipline(s) or organization. If you have a conflict of interest, you should declare it as quickly as possible. We will determine if the conflict of interest is manageable or if we must withdraw your invitation to be a reviewer.

### Confidentiality

Our review process is confidential. When you agree to review, you are bound by our [confidentiality agreement](#). This means that everything we send you is confidential and must be treated as such at all times. You must not discuss or share proposals with anyone. If you do not think you have the expertise to provide a useful review without discussing it with a colleague, you should decline the invitation.

Review documents contain personal information as well as information that, if disclosed without authorization, could reasonably be expected to cause serious injury (such as prejudicial treatment or loss of reputation or competitive advantage) to an individual, organization or government. Therefore, these documents are subject to the [Privacy Act](#), the [Access to Information Act](#) and the [Policy on Government Security](#). You must follow protocols to ensure that information contained in applications, internal and external reviews, and panel discussions remains strictly confidential. Improper or unauthorized collection, use, disclosure, retention and/or disposal of this information can result in a privacy breach. Refer to the [Guide on Handling Documents Used in Peer Review](#) for further details.

Personal information is any information about an identifiable individual. Based on the [Privacy Act](#), personal information provided by applicants must be used only for assessing applications, making funding decisions and describing applicants for related uses at the time that their personal information is collected. Reviewers are reminded that the use or disclosure of this information for any other purpose is illegal. It is important that you adhere strictly to the guidelines set out in the [confidentiality agreement](#).

### Bias in merit review

Merit review is subjective by nature. Bias can be unconscious and show up in several ways. It could be based on:

- A school of thought or ideas about fundamental versus applied (or translational) research, areas of research, subdisciplines or approaches (including emerging ones)
- The size or reputation of a participating institution
- The age, language, identity factors or gender of the applicant.

Committee members must complete the [Bias in Peer Review training module](#) (or equivalent) developed by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). This online module promotes understanding of bias, how it can affect merit review and ways to mitigate bias.

[This practical guide for research evaluators](#) presenting the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](#) is an optional resource for reviewers.

## Official languages

TIPS and the CFI offer their services in both of Canada’s official languages — French and English. Committees must ensure that all proposals in either official language receive a full and detailed review. If you have been assigned a proposal in a language that you cannot understand, contact us immediately and we will reassign the proposal to another reviewer.

## Responsible conduct of research

Canada’s federal research funding agencies — CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC and the Canada Foundation for Innovation — are committed to fostering and maintaining an environment that supports and promotes the responsible conduct of research. The [Tri-Agency Framework: Responsible Conduct of Research](#) sets out the responsibilities and corresponding policies for researchers, institutions, and the agencies that, together, help support and promote a positive research environment.

## Canadian Human Rights Act

The activities of CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC and CFI are subject to the [Canadian Human Rights Act](#). The purpose of the Act is to extend the laws in Canada to give effect to the principle that all individuals should have opportunity equal with other individuals to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have. They should also have their needs accommodated, consistent with their duties and obligations as members of society, without being hindered in or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics, disability or conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted or in respect of which a record suspension has been ordered.

## Appendix 2: Terms and definitions

**Highly qualified personnel (HQP):** Refers to students, research technicians, postdoctoral researchers, research associates and other technical or research personnel.

**Team:** Refers to the individuals who are participating in the application (e.g., project director, co-director, team member(s)).

**Early career researcher (ECR):** A researcher within five years from the start date of their first research-related appointment, minus the length of any eligible delays in research (e.g., illness, maternity, parental), as of the first day of the month in which the competition is launched.

**In-kind contributions:** Include eligible nonmonetary resources that partners or administering institutions provide to support the project. These contributions could be in the form of cash-equivalent goods or services that, if not donated, would have to be purchased with project funds. In-kind contributions could also include the time of individuals within partner organizations (e.g., experts in a specific area) spent providing direction and participating in the project. In some cases, partners may provide specialized skills and advice or access to special equipment, space, data sets, etc.

**Deputy Heads Steering Committee (DHSC):** A core group co-chaired by the deputy ministers of Innovation, Science and Industry, and Health as co-chairs, with the deputy heads of the Public Health Agency of Canada, CIHR and the National Research Council Canada as members.

**Tri-agency Institutional Programs Secretariat (TIPS) Steering Committee:** Comprises the presidents of CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC and the CFI; and the deputy ministers of Innovation, Science and Industry; and Health. The TIPS Steering Committee approves the final award decisions for CBRF-BRIF Stage 2 competition.

**CFI Board of directors:** The CFI Board of Directors is made up of 13 individuals, six of whom are appointed by the Government of Canada, from a variety of backgrounds, each with a unique perspective and understanding of the research enterprise. The Board of Directors makes final decisions on projects to receive CFI support.