

## CIHR UD Meeting (Webcast) February 4, 2021

Hello everyone,

The February CIHR-UD meeting was held by webcast on February 4, 2021. Here are the highlights:

*Chair: Adrian Mota, Associate Vice President, Research Programs*

### **1. CIHR Updates**

#### **UDEC Appointment Process**

The call for nominations for new members of UDEC has closed and a poll will soon be sent to UD members allowing for voting on the nominees. The successful nominee should expect to be informed of their appointment in late February and UD members will be advised at the next UD meeting.

#### **Registration and Application Notification**

Research Granting Offices can request a test registration for funding opportunities with more than one stage (i.e. registration and application stages). A request must be submitted for each new funding opportunity (e.g., the test account does not carry over from the Spring Project Grant competition to the Fall Project Grant competition).

#### **Vacancies on CIHR's Governing Council**

Privy Council Office is looking to fill vacancies on various Government of Canada commissions, boards and advisory bodies, including on CIHR's Governing Council. Review of applications started on January 22, 2021, but applications will continue to be reviewed until all positions are filled.

#### **College Chairs Resignations**

The College Chairs provided strategic guidance in building the College of Reviewers, including the development and oversight of a continuous improvement process. They have also played an important role in repairing trust and strengthening linkages between the research community and CIHR following the Reforms. As the CIHR leadership transitioned, the College Chairs' mandate was expanded to focus on peer review broadly and they made important contributions in helping CIHR shift back to face-to-face peer review. Several Chairs felt that the group was obsolete once the College membership base of ~4,000 members was established and CIHR's relationship with the research community was beginning to improve. CIHR has been increasingly relying on peer review panel Chairs and Scientific Officers for advice to best serve our research community, as well as engaging the Scientific Directors and the University Delegates Executive Committee (UDEC) for peer review advice to support the work of the College. The remaining eight College Chairs felt that collectively it would be an appropriate time to retire from their existing terms and allow CIHR an opportunity to decide what the future advisory and governance requirements should be.

#### **Spring 2021 Reviewer- in-Training Program**

CIHR is pleased to announce the launch of the new Reviewer in Training (RiT) program for the Spring 2021 Project Grant competition. The RiT program expands on and replaces the Observer program. RiT participants will be assigned three applications to conduct practice reviews, attend peer review meetings,

present one of their reviews, and participate in the committee discussion of their assigned applications. Following completion of the RiT program, participants will be promoted within CIHR's Reviewer Pathway and are expected to participate in peer review when requested and available to do so. The application period for the RiT program opens on February 1, 2021 and closes on February 26, 2021.

## ***2. Spring 2021 Project Grant Competition***

Registration opens: February 4, 2021; Registration deadline: March 4, 2021; Application deadline: April 1, 2021; Peer review meetings: June 1-30, 2021; Anticipated notice of recommendation: July 8, 2021; Anticipated notice of decision: July 22, 2021; Funding start date: October 1, 2021

### **Application Changes**

In response to feedback from the community, CIHR has made some changes to the Project Grant program, starting with the Spring 2021 competition. Those changes include:

**Summary of progress page:** returns as integral part of the application. Free-form, two-page (maximum) document will be mandatory for all applicants. It can include progress/productivity; impact of COVID-19; ECR concerns; proposed budget in relation to your overall program of research and funding history, including all funding currently held and pending. It is up to the applicant to determine how to utilize this space. CIHR plans to delegate greater discretion to peer review committees on budget allocations.

**Removal of weighted scores in the evaluation criteria:** In response to this feedback, reviewers will now provide one score that reflects all three evaluation criteria: (1) significance and impact of the research, (2) approaches and methods, and (3) expertise, experience, and resources.

**Applicant Profile CV:** CIHR is aware that the Canadian Common CV (CCV) requirements are a barrier to application for some groups. To address this issue, CIHR has developed a new PDF CV template based on the NIH Biosketch. This template, referred to as the Applicant Profile CV, was piloted in several competitions. Spring 2021 Project grant competition will continue to evaluate the utility of this approach for knowledge users, Indigenous applicants and international applicants. This does not really impact most applicants, as Canadian academic applicants (i.e., independent researchers) will still be required to submit the standard CCV.

**Sex and Gender Based Analysis (SGBA):** Reviewers will be explicitly required to include their assessment of whether SGBA is appropriate for the research being proposed. If so, the overall application score and written evaluation will reflect if SGBA has been suitably addressed.

### **Entry of Foundation Grant Holders**

This is the first competition where non-ECR Foundation grant-holders (n=134) will be eligible to apply to the Spring 2021 Project grant program. CIHR will be investing the funding previously allocated for the Foundation Grant Program, as it becomes available, directly back into the Project Grant Program. When CIHR sunset the Foundation Program, the planned amount to be invested per annual competition was \$100M. That means that, starting with the Spring 2021 Project Grant competition, approximately

\$50M will be added to each twice-yearly Project Grant competition. Total budgets for Project Grant competitions will therefore increase from \$275M to approximately \$325M.

### **Competition Budget**

The budget for the Spring 2021 Project Grant competition is \$325M. Within the investment allocated to each Project Grant competition, there will be a funding envelope for:

Large grants: Large grants are defined as those within the top 2% of total grant amounts requested by all applicants within the competition and varies with each competition.

Indigenous health research: 4.6% of the total competition budget is dedicated to supporting applications with an Indigenous health research focus.

Equalization: A portion of the competition budget is reserved to ensure the proportion of grants funded is at least equal to the proportion of applications received from ECRs, females NPIs and applications submitted in French. Any unused funding is re-invested in the competition to fund additional Project Grants.

### **Decision process for Spring Project grant competition**

The process for funding applications submitted to the Project competition involves several steps:

1. Within each peer review committee, applications are ranked based on the final ratings (0-4.9) for each application.
2. An application ranking is then transformed into a percentile rank score that enables comparison across committees. For example, the first-ranked application in every committee receives a percent rank of 100 %. An application that was ranked 5/57 within its committee has been ranked higher than all but four of the other 56 applications in the committee and therefore has a percent rank of 92.9 % (percent rank =  $1 - (4/56)$ ).
3. Applications are then funded across committees in order of percentile rank until insufficient funds remain to fund the next highest ranked application.

### **Upcoming Engagement Sessions**

To support participants with the requirements of the Spring 2021 Project Grant Competition and to answer any questions on how to apply:

English sessions: Tuesday, February 23 from 1-2pm and Wednesday, March 10 from 11am-12pm

French sessions: Tuesday, February 23 from 11am-12pm and Wednesday, March 10 from 1-2pm.

### ***Questions and Answers:***

*Some of our Principal Investigators have expressed concerns about the proposed eligibility and mechanism for the rollout of new COVID-19 strategic funding. Their concerns relate to equitable eligibility and whether the plan necessarily captures all of the best currently available research. Funding additional COVID-focused grants from the Fall Project grant competition is an easy approach*

*but these grants were not designed as rapid response/strategic programs with a focus on COVID-19 and the new SARS-CoV-2 variants. In contrast, there is a cohort of highly ranked but unfunded applications from round 2 of the rapid response funding (announced last June). Those applicants did not benefit from the high success rates in round 1 that resulted from the late-added extra funding, and round 1 awardees are now going to be eligible for a supplement. Can you please provide some insight into the thinking behind the eligibility decisions for the new funding? Would CIHR consider including highly ranked but unfunded applications from COVID-19 round 2 among the candidates for priority funding? Or is there a possible future priority opportunity that would properly capture new proposals specifically designed to capture research that takes full advantage of a rapidly changing situation?*

In CIHR's pre-announcement for the CIHR funding for SARS-CoV-2 variant research, the following streams were identified:

1. Variant: A supplement to those who have received a COVID-19 grant from the COVID competitions that we have launched. There is a supplement component and a network component. This funding opportunity should be launched soon. It has been restricted to those who have received COVID grants. This potentially excludes people who may be interested in contributing to research on COVID variants who did not get a COVID grant. The idea is to focus on those who have already received grants with the understanding that these individuals will be able to ramp up their research quickly. We are looking for people who are poised to start working on COVID variants with the goal of having an impact in as close to real-time as possible.

2. Project: This will leverage the Fall 2020 Project Grant competition and investments will be made in applications that specifically address SARS-CoV-2 variants across all pillars of research. The announcement was focused on characterizing variants; however, there are other priorities that CIHR is looking at and that we may focus on in the future.

*Is there more coming?*

It is highly likely. All the COVID funds are 'new funds' received from the Government of Canada. Future competitions prioritizing COVID research will be open to everyone. Future investments will likely depend on how the pandemic continues to evolve. Therefore, we will continue to observe where the research needs are and investments would be made based on those needs.

*Would we consider going to the COVID 2 Projects?*

It is highly unlikely as we are 6-8 weeks past that now. The reason CIHR looked at the Project Grant program is because those projects were submitted later in the year and are therefore more recent. It is important to note that the funds need to be spent by March 31st.

*Can those who previously participated in the (old) reviewer training apply?*

Yes, past Observer Program participants can apply to the Reviewer in Training program.

*Will the 'Reviewers-in-Training' be matched to Peer Review committees? We have had some who were way outside our mandate.*

Yes, they will be matched to a committee based on area of expertise.

*The current guidelines online for Spring 2021 competition refer to Biosketch CV for applicants - not the applicant profile CV.*

The Applicant Profile CV is intended for those who are knowledge users, Indigenous and international applicants. They may use the Applicant Profile CV or continue to use the Biosketch CV. Canadian academic applicants must continue to use their CIHR Biosketch CV, which is also known as the CCV.

*There is a lot of variability in SGBA evaluations.*

Yes, this is correct and a very important point. This is something that Dr. Cara Tannenbaum, her team at the Institute of Gender and Health, and our Science Policy group have been focusing on. Presentations have been made to every peer review panel to share data to help reviewers understand what CIHR is looking for. An analysis is underway on the impact of that evaluation and we will analyze the link between the extent to which SGBA is evaluated in a given application and its likelihood of being funded. It is important to mention that if you do notice reviews that are not of the quality CIHR expects, please send them to CIHR, so that we can follow up.

*Success rates for women depend on pillar from my quick analysis of data. Is it equalized across pillar and/or committee?*

Equalization does not occur across pillars or by committee. It is done across the competition.

*I also noticed last competition that some investigators had 5 years of pubs and some had 7. Which is it supposed to be?*

Applicants are allowed to list up to five publications (relevant to the proposal) from the past 7 years. The reason you may see applicants list publications from more than five years ago is that, if a researcher has been on leave (i.e., parental, medical), that period of leave is not counted in the window. Applicants will describe this in their leave section, and we would allow them to include an extra year to account for this disruption to their career.

*I saw a few COVID grants in last competition that clearly had been rolled over from COVID competition to regular projects, so those may be picked up through this mechanism.*

Yes, those individuals who had previously applied to our rapid research COVID competitions were welcome to apply to the Project competition.

*As part of the Applied Health Research Chair, the eligibility states that: The NPA must also provide a confirmation from their institution that they are in a tenure track position or will be able to apply for a tenure-track position (or equivalent) in their department or faculty during the six-year award period. However, Researchers based at Hospital Research Institutes would never be tenure-tracked as this option is not available. It seems strange to eliminate Hospital based researchers for an Applied Health Research Chair. Could these eligibility requirements be amended?*

CIHR will look into this and provide information at a further date.

*If a grant is written by a female ECR in French, will this be counted once or three times towards the equalization?*

This will be counted three times as we look at the variables individually.

*In terms of equalization, is there a mechanism or guideline to address racialized research teams, particularly Black researchers and teams working on health issues affecting Black Canadians and racialized communities?*

At this time, we do not collect the data to make these interventions. We do collect self-identification data on age, gender, and whether applicants identify as Indigenous, a visible minority or a person with a disability. CIHR does not currently use the self-identification data it collects for the purposes of equalization. Rather, we use it at the aggregate level for purposes of program design. We acknowledge that we need better data, and this has been under discussion. CIHR will provide more information at a later date.

*Rushing to get \$25 million out of the door by March 31 is likely not the best use of dollars. The variants of concern "competition" from III looks smells performative due to the limitations.*

As with all Health Research Rapid Response competitions, CIHR is trying to balance the need for high quality evidence to inform decision making with the reality that high quality science takes time. We want to ensure that we give people enough time to submit high quality applications and ensure that reviewers have enough time to do high quality reviews. Decision-makers want to incorporate science and evidence and have ultimately seen the value of doing so. We acknowledge this is complex, but hope the community understands that everyone is doing their best to balance all of this and make wise investments.

*The return of the first Foundation grantees to the Spring 2021 competition will not be equivalent across the panels. I know you have given this a lot of thought. How will this be dealt with at the panel level so that the pressure on certain fields is balanced?*

When the Foundation Grant competition was implemented, it was done without the panel structure. CIHR completed some modelling using past competitions, and attempted to model their behaviour when coming back in. This exercise indicates that Foundation Grant recipients will likely come back to panels in an uneven way. It is possible that application pressure will be higher on some panels. From the equalization perspective, CIHR will not intervene at the panel level for this competition and will continue to monitor this closely, modifying the approach in the future if necessary.

*Are the funding decisions monitored at the level of the committee to determine if there appears to be bias, and thus a potential need for equalization at the committee level?*

This is something CIHR will monitor over time because the committees are smaller entities. A panel with 20-60 applications suggests a small sample size, and therefore one lower or one higher can skew that percentage. CIHR will continue to monitor this from a number of different dimensions.

*A primary objective of the research community should be to work together to increase the funding for the project scheme to increase success rates (this will also reduce how different 'bias' affects the review process to some extent). Increasing the success rate is the key to make sure excellent science is funded across the country at all institutions, yet we never seem to work towards this as a group.*

We intend to remove the across-the-board budget cuts in the Fall 2021 competition. If nothing else changes and we do remove the cut, the success rate could go down. CIHR heard through our engagement on the Strategic Plan ideas for how to approach the issue of increasing success rates. Discussions will continue as the Strategic Plan is implemented, and one of our top priorities going forward will be strengthening our investigator-initiated research program.

*I think 22-25% success rate would be much better instead of cutting off among the top grants.*

We agree that there is a lot of excellent science that remains unfunded. The amount of money that CIHR has available will likely not change. CIHR cannot lobby the federal government directly for more funds; however, discussions are ongoing.

### ***3. Updates on Funding Opportunities***

#### **Strategic Funding Opportunities**

A list of current funding opportunities with deadlines was provided as well as recent competition results. Discussions have continued between CIHR and NSERC on the Collaborative Health Research Projects (CHRP) that had previously been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will update the group as soon as more information is available. CIHR is also not yet ready to provide updates for the Institute Community Support (ICS) program but discussions are ongoing and updates should be available shortly.

#### **Fall 2020 Project Grant competition**

The peer review committee meetings for the Fall 2020 Project Grant competition wrap up February 5, 2021. CIHR has received generally positive feedback on the virtual format. Feedback from panels will be categorized into themes and analyzed for purposes of continuous improvement.

### ***4. Upcoming Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Online Discussion***

In December, CIHR announced an upcoming online discussion on the topic of systemic racism in Canada's health research funding system. This online discussion launched February 4th and will be open until April 9th, 2021. The purpose of the online discussion is ultimately to identify specific measures that CIHR can implement to address barriers faced by racialized and Indigenous communities. CIHR acknowledges that we must listen to those communities most affected by systemic racism in the research funding system to better understand the ways in which our policies and programs may reinforce systemic barriers or biases and inequities, whether explicit or unconscious. We specifically invite the engagement of racialized and Indigenous communities with lived experience of systemic racism in the health research sector although the online discussion will be open to all. An email was sent directly to the University Delegates Network with the online discussion link on February 4th. Starting in spring/summer 2021, CIHR will hold virtual small group listening sessions with racialized communities on systemic racism in the health research funding system that will build upon themes and suggestions from the online discussion. Furthermore, CIHR will also hold dedicated engagement activities with Indigenous communities to discuss how CIHR can supplement our action plan to build a healthier future for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples in a way that further recognizes and addresses systemic racism. We will share more details about these dedicated engagements in the near future. Following the engagement activities, CIHR will develop, implement and monitor an action plan, or plans, to address systemic racism in the health research funding system.

### ***5. Health Research Training Platform (H RTP) Pilot***

In early January, CIHR launched the Health Research Training Platform (H RTP) Pilot funding opportunity. Nine CIHR Institutes and one CIHR Initiative support this priority-driven funding opportunity. The H RTP Pilot competition was created to fill a gap in the career development

opportunities available to trainees and ECRs. Through the H RTP Pilot, trainees and ECRs will have access to interdisciplinary training environments (i.e., “platforms”) where they will benefit from high-caliber mentors and gain the skills required for academic and non-academic careers.

Next CIHR-UD meeting is on March 4, 2021.

Roger McLeod  
CIHR University Delegate  
Associate Dean (Research)  
Faculty of Medicine