

## **CIHR Internal Peer Review – improving our competitiveness for funding**

### *Background:*

The capacity within national and local research-funding agencies is no longer adequate to support excellent research programs. As a result, research funding for both new and established investigators has become increasingly competitive with extremely low success rates (less than 15%) for any given funding competition. The lack of certainty for ongoing research support means that research programs experience dramatic gaps (or delays) in funding that leads to loss of essential personnel and decreases research productivity for the individual investigator, the University, NSHA and the IWK. Moreover, promising new investigators may be unable to initiate a research program in a timely manner.

In order to strengthen research proposals, an internal peer-review process is necessary to ensure that only high quality-applications are submitted to research funding agencies. Poorly crafted or ill-considered proposals diminish the overall reputation of any research institution with the effect that all applications from that institution may suffer. The reverse is also true in that uniformly high-quality applications improve the reputation and confidence in the institution. Therefore, a collective effort by the University, NSHA and the IWK to improve every submission represents an example of ‘enlightened self-interest’, ensuring that all applications from our faculty are viewed (and reviewed) favourably.

### *Proposed approach:*

Dalhousie University and the Health Centres intend to undertake a formal, concerted and uniform approach to enhance the quality of all research applications through a rigorous internal peer-review process. The objective of internal peer review is to provide applicants with constructive and critical feedback on each application prior to submission to an external funding agency. This approach has been shown to substantially improve the chances of success at other institutions.

The process of peer review at the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) has traditionally (and most appropriately) involved face-to-face discussions with a panel of peer reviewers. Recently, peer review has also involved (partially or completely) the involvement of virtual peer-review panels whereby reviews are submitted electronically without serious discussion among reviewers. It now appears that there will be partial restoration of face-to-face discussions of CIHR proposals that will be held after an initial electronic triage step during which those applications that have significant shortcomings will proceed to intensive discussion. Regardless of how the emerging CIHR review process will occur, the actual recommendations on a proposal will be made by individuals who may not have detailed expertise (an outcome often pointed out by unsuccessful applicants). Everyone must recognize that successful applications are written for the smart (or experienced) non-expert, and failure to write to this audience almost always results in a failed application regardless of the actual merits of the proposal.

To better reflect the emerging review process at the national level, the following internal process is being instituted. This process is clearly a work-in-progress but is intended to give applicants a realistic and constructive evaluation before submission to a national agency such as CIHR.<sup>1</sup>

Ideally, eight (8) weeks in advance of the funding agency's deadline, each Principal Investigator will provide to his/her respective research administrative office a project title, funding program and agency to which the application is targeted, committee/panel (if known), a brief project (lay) summary and general areas of expertise for reviewers.

Five (5) weeks prior to the agency deadline, applicants will submit a copy of their draft proposal. The draft copy need not be a polished version in the sense of a comprehensive reference list, figures, lay summary, etc.

For our internal review, the reviewers will not be anonymous and will draw on a small panel (~15-20) of experienced researchers who represent a general or broad area of investigation. Based on historical CIHR submission levels, it is anticipated that this panel will deal with a manageable number of applications, with ideally three reviewers responsible for intensive examination of any one application. For the initial review, written feedback (bulleted, not formal) based loosely on the criteria set out in the CIHR Project Scheme will be generated. For those applicants not moving on to a face-to-face panel discussion ("triaged" applications), these comments will be provided immediately, with an option to arrange for one-on-one discussions through the applicant's respective research administrative office. For those applications not triaged, – and within two weeks of initial submission, the panel as a whole will meet with each applicant and/or his/her research team, for approximately 20-30 minutes to provide him/her with a critical review of the draft application and with suggestions for improvement. The meeting is expected to involve discussion and clarification among panel members (with the applicant observing), with a subsequent discussion between the panel and applicant. At this time a set of notes will be generated and provided to the applicant together with the initial reviews to guide the applicant in making improvements to the application.

The applicant will be expected to respond to the review process by meeting with the two primary reviewers for their feedback and final comments.

#### Strengths:

This process is less onerous at the onset for the reviewer in that no formal reviews will be necessary. The collective discussion among panel members and the applicant will provide more robust insights about strategies and improvements to the application. The applicant will have the advantage of being part of an intensive and focused discussion about the merits of their proposal. The discussions among reviewers will hopefully more accurately reflect the type of interactions at the funding agency.

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<sup>1</sup> A "compressed" timeline has been proposed for the competition now underway. Please refer to the final page of the document.

The recruitment of reviewers that make up a panel can be done well in advance of funding deadlines.

Weaknesses:

The time commitment for the reviewer during the actual meeting and follow-up with applicants will be significant (probably a full day for the face-to-face meeting).

**Caveat:**

Regardless of how any internal peer review is conducted, there must be appropriate recognition of the value of engaging in peer review from both the standpoint of the reviewer and the applicant. The time commitment of reviewers should be recognized through annual reports with the reviewer's academic head and perhaps relief from other academic responsibilities. The benefit for the applicant (besides the obvious improvement of an application) should be access to bridge funding or other such supports (e.g., trainee stipends) for a proposal that is reviewed favourably by the funding organization but does not make the funding cut-off.

The adoption of any internal peer-review process must be accompanied by an evaluation plan. Administrative support of the peer review process will evaluate the success rates of those proposals that have proceeded through internal peer review. In addition, the success rates of those who choose not to proceed through peer review will be determined. We will also track success rates of those proposals that did not reach the full discussion phase.

**Internal Peer Review Process Timelines (Fall 2016 Competition)**

**September 16<sup>th</sup>:** Title, lay summary, expertise key words

**September 23<sup>rd</sup>:** Draft proposal to research office

**October 3<sup>rd</sup>:** Written, informal (bulleted) feedback provided based on Project grant criteria (2-3 reviewers);

**Week of October 10<sup>th</sup>:** "Strong" applications proceed to face-to-face panel discussion (with applicant present); notes generated by scientific officer will be provided to applicant

***Please observe all DRS internal deadlines***