

29 March 2010

Chad Gaffield, President
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
350 Albert Street
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Ottawa, ON K1P 6G4

Dear President Gaffield:

I am writing on behalf of the Executive of the Canadian Political Science Association in response to your call for feedback on the document, *Briefing on SSHRC's Renewed Program Architecture*.

The CPSA endorses the goal of developing a simpler and more flexible suite of programmes. However, we also have serious reservations about specific aspects of the proposals. Our concerns are rooted in a conviction that the proposals will weaken two shining qualities for which SSHRC has been recognized internationally. The first is a high-quality adjudication process. The second is an openness to both investigator-inspired research and strategic forms of research. Both of these core qualities are at risk.

The Adjudication Process

Our first concern is the radical downplaying of "capability" or the research record of applicants. The Report of the International Blue Ribbon Panel, Promoting Excellence in Research (December 2009) recommended putting the primary emphasis on the quality of the research proposal, commenting that "track record should, on its own, entitle no one to receive another research grant." We agree. But the Council's proposals go too far. In the new Research Grant program, the weight placed on capability will be only 20 percent; in the proposed Research Development Grants, it is set at 10 percent, including for established scholars. At these levels, the proven capability of applicants will become a trivial consideration. It is too low to fulfil the role described by the Blue Ribbon Panel of "permitting peer evaluators to decide whether the applicant has a shown ability to take charge and bring research to completion."

If the intent is to protect younger scholars, there other ways of doing so. We have been very supportive of the "new scholar" category in the existing program. If that is not proving sufficient, then perhaps a separate envelope within the Research Grants program would be appropriate. The proposed Research Development Grants do have a separate funding envelope for new scholars, and a lower weighting for research record is appropriate there. But a 10 percent weighting is clearly too low, especially for established scholars in that program.

• We recommend that the Council rethink this aspect of the new architecture. We would suggest 60% for the quality of the project and 40% for capability. There is a precedent for this weighting within the Council, as it was the balance established for new scholars when the current system was introduced into the Standard Research Grants.

The adjudication process in Research Development Grants and Partnership Development Grants is further weakened by two other proposals: the elimination of external letters of assessment, and the nature of the proposed adjudication committees.

We understand the problem of "peer-review fatigue." Nevertheless, the elimination of external letters for Research Development Grants and Partnership Development Grants goes too far. The scale of these grants means that Partnership Development Grants of up to \$500,000 will be awarded without external assessment. We find this surprising in light of the Council's own support, in its Framing Our Direction paper, for the government's emphasis on "the importance of independent expert evaluation to ensure the non-partisan transparency in the allocation of public funds."

The new adjudication committee structure for Research Development Grants will compound the problems. Political science is combined with economics, industrial relations, law, management, business, and administrative studies. The theoretical orientation and methodological approach of these disciplines are very diverse, and people in other fields will not be able to assess the quality and innovativeness of proposals. Given the breadth of the committee, it is likely there will be one political scientist at the table. Inevitably, a lot of weight would fall on the solitary representative from political science, which would be undesirable for the quality of decision-making and extremely awkward for the committee member.

In sum, the adjudication process for Research Development Grants is stunningly weak. The research accomplishment of the applicants is virtually irrelevant; there are no external letters of assessment; and decisions will be made by committee members most of whom have no background in the field. Throwing new scholars into this process is especially undesirable. (The Briefing document is less clear on the committee structure for Partnership Development Grants, but the language is similar.)

- *We recommend that the Council rethink this aspect of the proposals. New scholars might continue to be adjudicated by the Research Grants committee, with a separate funding envelope established for them. If the Council is reluctant to do that, Committee 5 should be divided in two, with one committee for political science, law and administrative studies and a separate committee for economics, industrial relations and business. (We note that this view is shared by the Canadian Economics Association.)*

- *We recommend that external letters of assessment be retained. If the Council cannot manage this process for all applications to the two development programs, letters should certainly be required for Partnership Development Grants above the \$100,000 ceiling set for Research Development Grants.*

The Balance between Investigator-inspired and Strategic Research

SSHRC has long struggled to maintain a balance between investigator-inspired research and strategic research. In the past, this balance has been maintained by having separate programs for both types of research, with budgetary allocations designed to produce comparable success rates. The new architecture threatens to undo the balance. In the Research Grants program, the inclusion of priority themes in the same pool as other applications may well generate tensions, especially if committees are required to give priority to theme applications which then trump regular applications considered better on the standard criteria.

- *We recommend that SSHRC rethink this aspect of its proposals. The cleanest option would be to retain two separate programs for research grants and priority themes. An alternative would be to create a separate committee and envelope within the Research Grants program for priority theme applications. We note that this possibility is anticipated in the Briefing document (p. 20).*

In the case of the Partnership Grants, we are strongly opposed to the requirement that “the minimum cash and/or in-kind contribution is 50 per cent of the total budget submitted.” This would be simply devastating for political science. Research on our collective political life is seldom if ever a priority for the private sector. Public-sector organizations, such as major governments departments, are extremely hesitant to fund research that may prove politically sensitive. Non-government organizations, which can sometimes offer valuable partnership opportunities, rarely have anything like the required level of resources.

The final page of the Briefing Document makes clear that Partnership Grants are seen as replacing the Major Collaborative Research Initiatives. The MCRI program has helped political scientists carry out excellent research in recent years. But Canadian political scientists will be unable to take advantage of the new Partnership Grants. The scope for independent research on a large-scale in our discipline will be radically diminished in Canada.

- *We recommend dropping the rigid requirement that Partnership Grants have a minimum of 50% of the total budget committed by external partners. The language used for Partnership Development Grants should be used here as well.*

We trust that these comments have been helpful, and we look forward to the debate in the months to come.

Sincerely,

Keith Banting

President
CPSA