



August 10, 2012

Dr. Suzanne Fortier
President
Natural Sciences and Engineering
Research Council of Canada
50 Albert Street
Ottawa, Ontario
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Dear Dr. Fortier,

Greetings from the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA). We are writing to express our concern that the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) will be discontinuing its Research Tools and Instruments (RTI) Program following the 2013 competition. We were relieved to hear that NSERC is working to reconstitute the program in a different form and is seeking the input of researchers on different options via its online RTI Grants Program Consultation Document. According to this document, the two possible options are as follows: 1) Provide an institutional grant for the support of research tools and instruments; and 2) Retain a smaller-scale national competition in support of research tools and instruments. What follows is CPA's perspective on each of the two options for re-working the support mechanism for tools and instrumentation. Note that many among CPA's membership will respond individually to the consultation document as well.

Unfortunately, both options continue an unfavorable trend of shifting adjudication of funding decisions from a neutral scientific review panel to the universities. The challenge here is that it is very difficult to ensure sufficient expertise at a single university to be able to adequately judge the merit of each proposal while still assuring no conflict of interest. If researchers are asked to judge the merit of the work they are most qualified to evaluate, this means that they are evaluating the work of close colleagues and collaborators. Understandably, this can cause friction within faculties and damage collegial relationships. We feel that too much is at stake for everyone – collegial relationships within a single university, needed funding by researchers – to follow this route. CPA's preference is to continue with the expert panel review system currently in place.

Our major concern with Option 1 as articulated is that it leaves all the power in the hands of each institution's administration to determine who gets the funds. This top-down format leaves open the possibility that the institution will distribute funds in accordance with its priorities rather than those of the individual researcher. We are very concerned that the scientific merit of the proposals might be overshadowed by the institution's internal goals. In addition, small institutions would be left with amounts that are too small to be of much use. If Option 1 were to be chosen, the CPA recommends that the model of the funding be proportional to the Discovery Grant funding (Option 1b) rather than to total NSERC funding. We would also like to see NSERC require that institutions have an open and transparent process for awarding funds to individual research programs with a public competition and an equitable chance to all researchers.

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Given the concerns articulated above, CPA recommends Option 2 over Option 1. In particular, we would prefer that requests be initiated by the individual investigator(s) in response to a specific research need. Compared to Option 1, this bottom-up format is more in concert with NSERC's stated goal of supporting programmatic research in the natural sciences and engineering. Again, it would be best if the institutions were required to have a transparent process for selecting award recipients. Whichever option is chosen, we strongly recommend that in order to be eligible to apply for these funds, the applicant currently hold or be applying for an NSERC Discovery Grant. Given the amount of the average grant in this program (approximately \$30,000/year), and the expectation of funding Highly Qualified Personnel (HQP) from those funds, there is little leeway in the budgets. We would like to avoid the situation in which researchers are forced to choose between funding HQPs and buying essential equipment. The ultimate goal of the RTI is to give the researcher the tools to begin or sustain a fundable/funded research program to support curiosity-based research.

Scientific tools are a necessary component of basic research and any decrease in funding for such tools is ultimately counterproductive. The CPA appreciates that the funding councils are seeking ways to find savings as a part of the Government of Canada's efforts to return to balanced budgets. However, Government and Canadian stakeholders are also committed to a thriving and successful society and economy – the advances and innovations of basic research are central to achieving these objectives. Cutting programs such as the RTI compromises research and undermines one of the fundamental aims of NSERC which is "to make Canada a country of discoverers and innovators for the benefit of all Canadians". Thus, we urge NSERC to reconsider funding economies and sustain the funding of this program.

The CPA appreciates the work and commitment that NSERC undertakes on behalf of basic research in Canada. We share in your commitment to supporting researchers and their contributions to a thriving society. The RTI program is critical to this support.

Sincerely,



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Chair, CPA Scientific Affairs Committee



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