



GSC Structure Review Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why is NSERC changing the structure of its peer review committees?

The goal is to improve the assessment of Discovery Grant applications, particularly in areas that cross-over disciplines, those that are developing or that may not match very well (or find a home in) the existing structure. We want to retain the elements of the system that underlie its high reputation, while making improvements where these will have the most impact.

In essence, NSERC will restructure its 28 Grant Selection Committees (GSCs) into 12 new broad panels called “Groups.” Each Group will be broken down into a number of “Sections” that will carry out the evaluation of Discovery Grants applications in specific areas of research. Members of the Groups will meet in different combinations (based on the match between their expertise and the areas of a subset of applications) to form these sections. This new process is referred to as the “conference model.”

2. What difference will this make to my discipline, or to my current GSC?

This will depend on the extent to which your discipline interacts with other disciplines, and thus needs the involvement of others in reviewing applications. For those disciplines that are fairly homogeneous, the proposed changes will likely not be significant. For example, some GSCs may become a string of Sections under a particular Group. Other disciplines may be combined somewhat differently than they are in the current GSCs.

In all cases, the driving concern will be to obtain a structure that is flexible enough to continue ensuring the highest quality review for each application.

3. What happens to GSC members, and GSC chairs?

In general terms, GSC members become members of Groups and of the appropriate Sections that make up the Groups. GSC Chairs become the Section Chairs. The new structure will likely result in an increased number of members, adding depth in areas currently not, or only thinly, covered. Since there are expected to be more Sections than the current number of GSCs, we will need more Chairs rather than fewer. Of course, the terms of many current GSC members will expire before the new system is in place, so not all individuals will be part of this transition or new structure.

4. What will happen to my GSC’s current budget?

The current GSC budgets will be superseded by budgets for the larger Groups, and a new budget process will be introduced. This process was not part of the



GSC Structure Review, rather it originated from a 2006 decision by NSERC's Council to adopt a new method of allocation, replacing the Reallocation Exercises that took place in the period 1994-2007. Instead, NSERC is considering a reallocation process in part based on discipline dynamics and on the relative cost of doing research in these areas. NSERC staff are still exploring various options and working on models for how this will be done, and how changes in individual disciplines will be managed.

5. How will NSERC determine the cost of research for individual disciplines?

NSERC already uses studies of research costs to earmark funding for First-Time Applicants in each GSC. The intent is to broaden the approach to set the budgets for GSCs in the future. Currently, NSERC is using information from various sources including Statistics Canada and grant recipient expenditure data, and is comparing this with data from the United States. The new methodology, when ready, will be validated by the Committee on Grants and Scholarships (COGS), the standing committee of NSERC that oversees the Discovery Grants program.

6. How will these changes address the problem that the purchasing power of flat average grant sizes has been eroding, which many people regard as the biggest problem?

It is true that these changes will not result in increased funding for the Discovery Grants program, and they were not intended to do so. They are intended to produce improvements in the process of reviewing applications and making funding recommendations. NSERC will continue to promote the key role played by Discovery Grants in Canada's innovation system as documented and underlined in the report of the International Review Committee chaired by Dr. Peter Nicholson.

7. If the system isn't broken, why try to fix it?

The current system is not broken, but it has been showing signs of stress for some time. Applications in emerging and cross-disciplinary areas do not always have an optimal review compared to proposals in well established, disciplinary areas. Workload is still a serious issue for several GSCs, despite splits made over the years in areas such as mathematics, electrical and computer engineering. These pressure points need to be addressed in order to maintain the high credibility of the program.

That said, it is important to note that the fundamental parts of our system – the features that have earned it such a good reputation – were not even considered for change. These include review by both external referees and committees of



peers, and the program-based, rather than project-based, orientation of the program.

8. How do you know you can organize the logistics around this system?

It certainly will be more complex than scheduling the current GSCs. Our experience to date has been in scheduling two-stream conferences (i.e., two sessions within one GSC running in parallel where members move between the two streams as appropriate for the review of specific topics); though we have modeled some three-stream conferences and we know it can be done. To help us move to the full-scale system we are enlisting the help of those with expertise in the scheduling of complex processes.

9. Who will make the funding recommendation on my grant application?

As of the 2010 competition, this will be done in two steps. First, Section members will review the excellence of the researcher, the merit of the proposal and the training of highly qualified personnel. A rating or score will be given for each criterion, resulting in a classification of applications into quality categories (or “bins”) qualified by a cost of research factor.

Second, this information will be relayed to the Group’s “Executive Committee.” Comprised of Section chairs and members of the Committee on Grants and Scholarships (Group Chairs), it will have the responsibility for making the final funding recommendations. A specific tool has been designed to assist the Groups in their ratings.

NSERC is implementing the rating system in the February 2009 competition, with current GSCs also playing the role of the Executive Committee.

10. Is it possible that researchers will not want to participate as panel members if they cannot decide on the funding for applicants?

This might be true for some researchers. However, this debate is somewhat moot as the Section evaluations will have a very significant influence on the funding recommendations. These evaluations, along with the Sections’ advice on the relative cost of the research programs as outlined in applications, will be translated in a transparent way into the Group funding decisions. In other words, there will be tables or grids that link quality and cost of research into funding bins, subject to the availability of funding. The intent is to focus on the assessment of each application first, and then assign a grant level in the subsequent phase of evaluation.

11. Why would NSERC want to take away the focus on the previous grant level in the evaluation process? After all, Discovery Grant holders should expect continuity in their level of funding.



An applicant's funding history plays too much of a role in the awarding of a new grant. Funding is often incremental and new grants within a few thousand dollars of the previous grant. This has resulted in a level of inertia that is too high in the program overall. The new model preserves stability and continuity of funding for researchers who maintain a strong record of contributions to research and training, but it also permits a rapid ramp up of funding for applicants with exceptional contributions, no matter their history in the program.

12. Why the rush? Why not phase in the changes?

The process has not been rushed. NSERC has always held that it was more important to do this well than to do it quickly. In fact, the review has been in progress since 2004, and it moved to its final more intensive phase in January 2007 with the creation of the external GSC Structure Advisory Committee chaired by Dr. Adel Sedra. Extensive community consultations, in various forms, have now been going on for more than a year.

In addition, in the course of the review period, four GSCs moved to a conference-based structure and during the 2008 competition some experimented with systems of assigning ratings for each criterion. So we already have completed trials of key elements of the new system.

The current plan is to implement the revised structure in the 2010 competition year.