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## **Peer Review Manual 2011-12**

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## 6.0 Discovery Grant Applications

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## 6. Discovery Grant Applications

### 6.1. Program Objectives

Discovery Grants assist in:

- promoting and maintaining a diversified base of high-quality research capabilities in the natural sciences and engineering in Canadian universities;
- fostering research excellence; and
- providing a stimulating environment for research training.

With respect to the first objective, diversity relates mainly to supporting research across the spectrum of natural sciences and engineering (NSE) disciplines. The renewal of research capabilities is also necessary and is achieved through guidelines for the support of early career researchers (see Section [6.6.2](#)).

The objective of achieving a diversified base can sometimes be perceived to be in conflict with that of fostering excellence; however, to be successful, applications have to meet a minimum quality threshold.

### 6.2. Program Description

As NSERC's largest program, the Discovery Grants program is a major source of funding for NSE research at Canadian universities and constitutes the foundation of a large part of Canada's research effort. Discovery Grants are investments in both the research activities of individuals and groups working at the frontier of science and engineering, and the provision of stimulating environments for research training.

Recipients of Discovery Grants are not restricted to the specific activities described in their application and included in their budget proposal; they may pursue new research interests as they arise, provided these are within NSERC's mandate and adhere to the accepted use of grant funds documented in the [Financial Administration Guide](#).

### 6.3. Nature of Research Supported

Research in the NSE encompasses a broad spectrum of activities. These activities range from investigations with no immediate or even mid-term application, as their importance stems from the intellectual structure of the discipline, to solutions to problems suggested by social and industrial needs. The Discovery Grants program is open to activities across the entire spectrum. The program aims to foster the full mix of activities that maintain Canada's university research establishments as healthy participants in world science and engineering, as a flexible resource for Canada and as favourable environments for the development of research personnel.

**Researchers in health or social science-related fields:** NSERC accepts that research in the NSE may lead to advances in the health, social sciences or humanities. To determine whether work contributes predominantly to the NSE or not, reviewers are asked to consider the tri-agency (NSERC, SSHRC and CIHR) policy entitled [Selecting the Appropriate Federal Granting Agency](#). NSERC supports research programs that are first and foremost addressing research challenges, and clearly advancing knowledge and training, in the NSE. A research effort in the NSE that is a component of a larger program whose focus is outside NSERC's mandate does not qualify.

If you have any questions about subject matter eligibility, please raise this with your Program Officer. Eligibility decisions are the responsibility of NSERC staff.

#### **6.4. Eligibility of Individuals**

Eligibility decisions are the responsibility of NSERC staff. Evaluation Group members who have doubts as to a researcher's eligibility should review the application on the same basis as all others, but should alert NSERC staff to the potential problem(s) as soon as possible. The rules governing the eligibility of individuals can be found in the [Eligibility](#) section of the NSERC Web site.

#### **6.5. Categories of Researchers**

Researchers fall into two categories:

a) **Early Career Researchers** are applicants who are within two years of the start date of their first eligible position at the university (from July of the year of the application deadline) and who have no prior academic or non-academic independent research experience.

b) All other applicants are **Established Researchers**.

#### **6.6. Evaluation of Applications**

The evaluation of Discovery Grant proposals is based on the information contained in the applications and on a comparison to the entire research community in the discipline. The onus is on the applicant to submit a complete application and one that conforms to the presentation standards and instructions established by NSERC. Incomplete applications and applications that do not meet the presentation standards may be rejected by NSERC. Pages in excess of the number permitted are removed.

Discovery Grant applications are assessed on the basis of the following three selection criteria:

- Scientific or engineering excellence of the researcher;
- Merit of the proposal; and
- Contributions to the training of highly qualified personnel (HQP).

The assessment of each criterion is based on the achievements demonstrated over the past six years. Each criterion is important and has equal weight when determining the overall quality category (bin) for the application. The process for determining funding recommendations is separate and described in Section [6.7.2](#). The Discovery Grants Merit Indicators (see Section 6.11) contain statements, with reference to major points of consideration, to guide members towards arriving at a rating for each criterion. The evaluation of applications in subatomic physics may differ from these guidelines and is described in the current internal procedures of the Subatomic Physics Evaluation Section.

**All applicants, both early career and established researchers, are to be evaluated using the same merit indicators.**

Members are encouraged to use the full range of quality ratings, as appropriate, to achieve a distribution of ratings that reflects the quality of the applications being evaluated. Members are reminded that, during competition week, they will be expected to discuss and justify their ratings and then vote on a rating corresponding to the indicator that best reflects, on balance, their complete assessment of an application for a given criterion.

Members must guard against the possibility of hidden bias influencing the peer review. NSERC asks members to make every effort to review any application without bias, whether this bias is based on a school of thought, on fundamental versus applied research, certain sub-disciplines, areas of research or approaches, size or reputation of an institution, age, personal factors or the gender of the applicant(s).

### **Distribution of Ratings**

The merit indicators are absolute in that they refer to the entire research community and are expected to be interpreted the same way from one competition year to the next. Ratings should reflect the quality of a proposal relative to the merit indicators. The worst application in a year of truly remarkable applications is not automatically given a rating of *Insufficient*. Similarly, the best application in a year where the overall cohort is not as strong is not automatically *Outstanding* or *Exceptional*. Evaluation Groups will calibrate their interpretation and use of the merit indicators through various opportunities prior to competition, including the fall Orientation Session.

With respect to the three separate criteria, it is expected that few applicants will be designated *Exceptional* from one competition to the next; this designation should be reserved for those individuals who have demonstrated and continue to demonstrate extraordinary achievements.

### **6.6.1. Selection Criteria**

The merit indicators contain key points of consideration to rate an application on each criterion. These, and other points of consideration for each selection criterion, are discussed in detail below, together with important advice regarding the merit assessment.

#### ***6.6.1.1. Scientific or Engineering Excellence of the Researcher(s)***

This criterion comprises several elements that consider the researcher's contributions to the NSE. Reviewers consider contributions made over the past six years. Ratings should always be reflective of the actual research experience of the applicant, taking into consideration any delays (see Section [6.6.3.1](#)). For researchers with only a non-academic background in research and training (e.g., government or private sector), reviewers can consider the last 10 years.

The following elements are considered in the evaluation of the Excellence of the Researcher(s):

- Knowledge, expertise and experience of the researcher(s) in the NSE:
  - Stature in the field. Possible evidence includes awards and prizes received; invitations to lectures, write review articles and chair conference sessions; membership on committees, editorial boards and advisory boards; involvement in public outreach activities; and other less tangible recognition factors. Current stature should be assessed based on recent accomplishments described in the application and should be judged in the context of the applicant's research community.
- Quality of contributions to, and impact on, the proposed and other areas of research in the NSE:
  - Research accomplishments, as evidenced by the quality of recent contributions and overall level of contribution (impact) to research. Contributions may take the form of publications, conference presentations, patents and other methods of dissemination as appropriate to the type of research.
  - Assessment must be based on the quality and impact of all contributions, not only on the number of publications or conference presentations. The contributions submitted by the applicant are evidence of the quality of the applicant's work. Similarly, applicants should not be summarily disadvantaged for publishing in journals that are not familiar to the Evaluation Group. It must be demonstrated that past contributions have achieved maximum impact and reached the appropriate target audiences. In this context, impact does not refer to quantitative indicators such as the

- impact factor of journals or h-index, but on the influence that results have had on other researchers, on the specific field, the discipline as a whole, or on other disciplines.
- Publications are often prepared jointly with students, postdoctoral fellows, other researchers, etc. The application should describe the applicant's intellectual contribution to collaborative work or joint publications. The assessment of "Scientific or Engineering Excellence" must fully take into account the overall quality and impact of collaborative activities.
  - Impact can be in advancing knowledge, developing technology, or addressing socio-economic or environmental needs. All are valid, though the relevance of such considerations may differ depending on the discipline and the nature of the research being conducted.
  - Applicants are provided an opportunity in the Most Significant Contributions section to discuss contributions made more than six years ago, but for which the impact is being felt now (e.g., exploitation of patent, inclusion in a code), may be considered.
- Importance of contributions to, and use by, other researchers and end-users:
    - This can be measured by the extent to which the applicant's work has advanced the field; i.e., created significant changes in thought within the research area and/or influenced the activities of users (including industry and the general public).
    - Contributions in the form of patents and technical reports, as well as involvement in the development of standards or codes of practice must be considered. For further details regarding contributions in engineering and the applied sciences, please see the [Guidelines for the Preparation and Review of Applications in Engineering and the Applied Sciences](#).
  - For team applications, the complementarity of expertise and synergy of the members of the team should be assessed:
    - To assess team applications, it is important to determine the expertise required to achieve the goals of the proposed research and evaluate each team member's potential to contribute to the research goals, their track record and the extent of their proposed contributions. The focus should be on the added value of combining the researchers' expertise and experience in advancing the common long-term goals and short-term objectives of the research program. All contributors (applicants and co-applicants) must be considered on the same footing; the applicant is simply the researcher responsible for administering the award. The ratings should reflect a group score and an assessment of the blend of individuals. The overall significance and impact of the team activities must be assessed and integrated in the evaluation of the application.
    - Funding recommendations for team applications are determined by the funding bin in which they are ranked, based on quality assessment. Where appropriate, Evaluation Groups can assess the Cost of Research factor as higher than would otherwise be the case, given that a larger program of

research can be carried out by a team rather than an individual. On the grounds of fairness toward research teams, Evaluation Groups may indicate to NSERC an appropriate and relative funding range at the time the application is reviewed. NSERC may adjust the grant amount accordingly, where appropriate, when funding recommendations are finalized at the end of competition.

#### ***6.6.1.1.1. Points of Reflection***

##### **Impact:**

Contributions may take the form of publications, conference presentations, patents and other methods of dissemination as appropriate to the type of research. For example, a member's knowledge of a particular journal's review procedures may be helpful in assessing the quality of a publication. Venues with the highest impact (as measured by readership or attendance) may not be the most appropriate for an applicant's research results; it is up to the applicant to explain the choice of venues for dissemination.

When assessing an applicant's previous work, members are reminded to consider the relevance of their contributions to users from all sectors (i.e., academic researchers, industry and government researchers, policy makers and the public).

##### **Collaborative Endeavours and Interdisciplinary Research –**

Increasingly, research on the most significant problems in science and engineering requires the combined knowledge, expertise and contributions of many researchers, often from various disciplines. Such collaborative and concerted activities should be actively encouraged through the Discovery Grants program, and reviewers should be particularly careful to give adequate credit to effective research interaction. Creativity and innovation are at the heart of all research advances, whether made individually or in groups. The role of collaborative and interdisciplinary work as a means to greater achievement in research must be fully valued by the peer review system. The indicators of achievement and excellence in interdisciplinary research, or in emerging areas, are often not as evident as those for research in the mainstream of a given field. Therefore, Evaluation Groups should recognize and appreciate the additional challenges inherent in interdisciplinary research.

**Applied Science** – Evaluation Groups that only have a small proportion of applied science applications will often be more familiar with the track record indicators used for “pure” science. They must guard against placing emphasis on “pure” science indicators of achievement and excellence, such as publications in refereed journals, and ignoring or de-emphasizing indicators of applied research achievements. See the [Guidelines for the Preparation and Review of Applications in Engineering and the Applied Sciences](#) for further details.

**Previous grant amount** – As per the recommendation in the [Report of the International Review of the Discovery Grants Program](#), the amount of an applicant's previous grant is not the starting point for a new grant. Evaluation Groups must not consider an applicant's previous Discovery Grant amount as a measure of excellence.

#### ***6.6.1.2. Merit of the Proposal***

A program of research must be of high quality to warrant support. It must be clear that genuine research problems in the NSE are addressed. The program must not be limited to the development of specific applications of existing knowledge; it must promise an original and innovative contribution. In assessing the merit of the proposal, the following elements should be considered:

- Originality and innovation:
  - To what extent does the proposal suggest and explore novel or potentially transformative concepts and lines of inquiry?
- Significance and expected contributions to research; potential for technological impact:
  - What will be the likely impact of the research? Will it advance knowledge in the field? Will it influence the direction of thought and activity?
  - Does the program show potential for a notable advancement or innovation in the discipline(s) or results of importance to a broad range of applications?
  - Will the results be appropriate for open dissemination to, critical appraisal by, and use in the research community or stakeholders?
  - In the case where the significance of the work depends upon the development of applications, are these general or limited to a particular user (firm, institution, etc.)?
- Clarity and scope of objectives:
  - Are there long-term goals as well as short-term objectives?
  - Is the relationship between short-term objectives and long-term goals clear?
  - Are the objectives specific, well-focused and realistic?
  - Has the application articulated goals of sufficient breadth and scope in line with a high quality research program?
  - Is there a vision of greater breadth and scope than simply plans and objectives?
- Clarity and appropriateness of methodology:
  - Does the proposal clearly outline the methodology to be used?
  - Is the proposed methodology current and appropriate (i.e., will it contribute to the stated research goals, has the applicant justified the methodological approach)?

- Feasibility:
  - Will the applicant’s expertise and the proposed methodology allow the objectives to be reached within the proposed time frame?
  - Does the applicant have access to the necessary equipment and resources?
  - Has the applicant anticipated potential problems and proposed mitigating measures?
  
- Extent to which the scope of the proposal addresses all relevant issues, including the need for varied expertise within or across disciplines, where applicable:
  - Does the application sufficiently outline recent progress in research activities related to the proposal?
  - Has the applicant framed the research with appropriate reference to other relevant work in the field?
  - Do the research questions and proposed approaches include consideration of all appropriate areas of knowledge?
  
- Appropriateness of, and justification for, the budget:
  - Does the budget request relate well to the proposed methodology and expected results in terms of scale and feasibility of research plans (e.g., number of trainees in relation to available equipment/resources)?
  - Discovery Grants may only be used to pay the direct costs of research. Funds must not be used to pay for the indirect or overhead costs of research. More detailed information on eligible expenses is provided in the [Use of Grant Funds](#) section of the NSERC Web site. Eligible expenses for Adjunct Professors are discussed in section 6.6.3.2. Any concerns should be discussed with your Program Officer.
  
- Explanation of the relationship between the current proposal and research supported by other sources of funding; and the extent to which it is clear:
  - Is there a clear explanation of the conceptual and budgetary relationship between the proposed work and the applicant’s research programs funded by other grants? Is there any conceptual or budgetary overlap?

**6.6.1.2.1. Relationship to research supported by other sources of funds**

NSERC encourages researchers to obtain funds from other sources, but does not allow duplication of funding for the same research.

The relationship to research supported by other sources of funds is considered within the “Merit of the Proposal” criterion. The availability of other sources of funding should not systematically lead to a lower or higher assessment of the “Merit of the Proposal.” As long as the applicant explains clearly the relationship between the research being supported with these funds and how it is distinct from that which will be supported with the requested funding, and as long as the contributions to the NSE field described in the research

proposal are commensurate with the funds requested, the availability of other sources of funding should be viewed positively.

The principles to assess overlap with other sources of funds are as follows:

- NSERC supports research programs that are first and foremost addressing research challenges, and clearly advancing knowledge and training, in the NSE. A research effort in the NSE that is a component of a larger program whose focus is outside NSERC's mandate does not qualify. Proposals that include the use of methodologies, tools, techniques and knowledge from the NSE to address questions or issues related to health science or a social sciences or humanities should be submitted to CIHR or SSHRC respectively.
- Access to Discovery Grant funds should be fair for all eligible researchers, regardless of other sources of funding. This is also true for researchers who receive funding from other NSERC programs.
- All applications are to be evaluated according to the three selection criteria.
- There are two types of overlap: conceptual and budgetary:
  - Conceptual overlap: conceptual overlap occurs when the ideas in the proposal are, or appear to be, the same ideas that are funded by other sources. However, complementary parts of the same NSE research program can be supported from different sources. Applicants should make clear which aspects make up the discovery program of research and what differentiates these aspects from activities supported through other grants. In other words, the applicant should clearly differentiate between the program of research covered by the Discovery Grant and other research programs or projects supported from other sources.
  - Budgetary overlap: applicants should explain how funding received from various sources is being used. The Discovery Grant is a grant-in-aid and usually does not pay for the entire research program. It is expected that other sources of funding will be required and the applicant should make it clear how these funds are being used.

The onus is on the applicant to provide information on the relationship (conceptual and budgetary), between the proposed research and other research for which support is held or sought. The applicant must also explain perceived duplication in funding or, if applicable, indicate how the NSERC application complements research funded by other sources. For each grant currently held or applied for, applicants must clearly indicate the main objective, a brief outline of the methodology, budget details, the support of highly qualified personnel and the relationship to the NSERC application. Such information may be provided as a brief summary of the necessary details for each grant and attached as additional pages to the budget page of Form 101.

If an applicant fails to provide adequate information to assess the relationship between the proposed research and other research currently being done or for which support is being sought, members may recommend a lower rating for the "Merit of Proposal"

criterion. Reviewers should consult the tri-agency policy entitled [Selecting the Appropriate Federal Granting Agency](#).

#### **6.6.1.2.2. Points of Reflection**

**Program versus Project** – The Discovery Grants Program supports ongoing programs of research (with long-term goals) rather than a single short-term project or collection of projects. If projects are defined without being placed in the broader context of a program, the indicators show that a rating of *Insufficient* is warranted. The issue of whether the request is for support of a program or a project can be examined in the context of the “Merit of Proposal” criterion when evaluating the “Clarity and Scope of Objectives” (e.g., long-term goals as well as short-term objectives), and the “Significance and Expected Contributions to Research.”

**Creeping Conservatism versus Risk Taking** – Members should be open to new research problems and innovative approaches, and should focus their discussions on whether the problems addressed are challenging, interesting and could potentially have a transformative impact on the field, and whether the methodologies proposed could yield new and useful knowledge. In any peer review system, there is a risk towards conservatism or excessive caution. In light of the limited availability of program funds, this can manifest itself as a failure to recognize innovation and outstanding potential in a researcher or unwillingness to take risks, particularly if the research area is not well known to the reviewer.

**Biases** – There is always concern that an Evaluation Group may exhibit a bias, whether this bias is based on a school of thought, fundamental versus applied research, certain sub-disciplines, areas of research or approaches (including emerging ones), size or reputation of an institution, age, personal factors or gender of the applicant(s). NSERC cautions members against any judgment of an application based on such factors, and it asks them to constantly guard against the possibility of hidden bias influencing the decision-making process.

**Interdisciplinary Research** – Proposals that relate to interdisciplinary endeavours may appear somewhat unfocused when compared with other applications. Evaluation Groups are asked to take this into account when assessing interdisciplinary applications, as well as to keep an open mind to the practices and methodologies of disciplines other than their own.

**Capacity to Undertake the Proposed Activities** – The proposed research activities and the related budget justification should be considered relative to the applicant’s capacity to undertake the planned program given their commitments in other research endeavours, as presented in the application (Form 101 and Form 100).

### ***6.6.1.3. Contribution to the Training of Highly Qualified Personnel***

The Training of Highly Qualified Personnel (HQP) is an essential criterion for the Discovery Grants program. Contributions to quality training at all levels, including undergraduate and graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, technicians and research associates are valued.

It is not sufficient for a researcher to have a solid track record of research contributions and propose a worthy research program. For a meritorious rating, the application must convince reviewers of the impact and quality of research training activities. **Assessment of contributions to training of HQP includes both the record (past) and the plans for future training.**

In assessing Contributions to the Training of HQP, the following elements should be considered:

- Quality and impact of past contributions to the training of HQP during the last six years:
  - Training supported by NSERC ranges from undergraduate theses and summer projects to postdoctoral levels, and includes technical and other research personnel. Contributions to training must not be assessed solely in terms of the number and level of individuals supervised; it must be assessed in terms of its quality and impact. The suitability of the HQP contributions need to be considered in context of its suitability for the research program. The level and content of supervision or co-supervision should have been suitable for the research program. Applicants must provide details regarding their role as co-supervisors. Contextual information provided by the applicant will be used during the evaluation process only to assess the suitability of the research proposed and HQP plans. Ratings should not be adjusted based on the context of the research environment.
    - It is usually unacceptable for an established researcher to have no training record; however, an exception could be made in the case of delays that are beyond the control of the applicant. See section 6.6.3.1 for more information on delays.
    - It is expected that effective training of HQP results in completion of degree requirements within a reasonable amount of time. A pattern of prolonged periods of study or frequent student withdrawal from programs should be explained by the applicant. Committees must be careful to acknowledge delays that are beyond the control of the applicant, such as parental leaves by trainees. If provided, this should be taken into consideration when determining an appropriate rating for this criterion.
  - The training of HQP is expected to have lead to high quality contributions to knowledge:
    - Evidence that past HQP have collaborated in research contributions (conferences, publications, patents, technical reports, etc.), usually as

- co-authors, is to be considered an indicator of their intellectual involvement and success. The quality of such contributions should also be taken into account, where appropriate. The onus is on the applicant to explain the involvement of trainees in past activities.
- HQP are expected to move on to careers related to the fields of science and engineering, whether as professionals in the private or public sectors or academia:
    - The pursuit of further studies by former HQP, or employment in any sector related to the NSE, can be considered evidence of the quality of their training.
  - A researcher's involvement in science outreach activities (e.g., general outreach activities and/or NSERC-funded activities) should also be recognized as a valuable contribution to research and training.
- Appropriateness of the proposal for the training of HQP in the NSE:
    - Discovery Grants are intended to support programs of research rather than single projects. It is expected that applicants describe how the training of HQP will fit into the proposed program of research. This may be accomplished by describing projects for HQP within the program of research.
    - The appropriateness of a proposed plan to train particular trainees should be considered; i.e., is the project suitable for an undergraduate student, a master's student or a PhD student?
    - For technicians and others who are in long-term positions, the applicant should explain how the work will contribute to the development of new skills or knowledge.
    - The capacity of the researcher to supervise the proposed number and type of HQP should be considered.
    - It is expected that HQP be intellectually involved in the research program.
      - The proposed research should leave room for growth and development; HQP should not simply be extra hands for the researcher.
    - For an established researcher with no intent to train HQP, the rating for this criterion should be *Insufficient*. Applicants must provide justification if training of HQP will be limited with respect to the proposed research program. The justification should be taken into consideration by the Evaluation Group when determining an appropriate rating for this criterion.
  - Enhancement of training arising from a collaborative or interdisciplinary environment, where applicable:
    - The quality and extent of interactions and collaborations, with respect to the resulting effect on training of HQP, should be taken into consideration.
    - Opportunities for interaction with the private and public sectors (e.g., industry, government agencies) should also be considered.

- Some researchers participate in co-supervision arrangements to increase the interdisciplinary nature of the training experience.

#### **6.6.1.3.1. Points of Reflection**

**Researchers with Non-Academic Background** – For researchers with a non-academic background in research and training (e.g., government or private sector), research training experience can be considered over the last ten years.

**Names of Trainees in Form 100** – NSERC requires applicants to obtain consent before including the names of trainees in Form 100. As this is not always feasible, applicants can provide information on trainees without providing names. This information, though more generic, should be sufficient to enable the reviewers to consider the above-mentioned points. However, every effort should be made to include names where feasible.

**HQP Training in non-NSE Domains** – Proposed training under the Discovery Grant plan must be in the NSE domain. However, HQP training in other domains (e.g., health, social sciences) may be considered as part of the demonstrated commitment of the applicant to training and the quality of the training environment, particularly when there have been opportunities for training synergy or interdisciplinary training.

#### **6.6.2. Early Career Researchers**

NSERC is committed to supporting early career researchers (ECRs) who have the training and expertise to make valuable research contributions in the NSE fields.

**All applications are evaluated against the same expectations for the three selection criteria.**

Following the evaluation of all applications, the Executive Committees will aim to support at least 50 percent of early career applicants, subject to the assurance of high quality and may establish a lower quality cutoff for this group. NSERC considers it important to allow early career researchers to demonstrate their potential for quality contributions to research and training. Funding levels for like-rated early career or established researchers are expected to be similar. The duration of funding would normally be for five years, to allow sufficient time for the applicant to demonstrate research excellence.

As ECRs are being evaluated using the same rating scale as established researchers, it is expected that they will not normally be rated in the range of *Outstanding* or *Exceptional*.

ECRs should not be rated as *Insufficient* due solely to the fact of not having a training record; the review can focus on the plan for future training. At the same time, it is unacceptable for an established researcher to have no training record.

ECRs who continue to collaborate with previous supervisors, or who carry out research as part of a group, should clearly define their contributions to the collaborative work.

### **6.6.3. Special Considerations**

All applicants are evaluated against the same expectations in terms of the quality of the contributions that have been, or will be, produced. There are, nonetheless, circumstances which require careful consideration by members during the evaluation of Discovery Grant applications. The most common ones are listed below.

#### ***6.6.3.1. Delays in Research and Dissemination of Research Results***

In the instructions applicants are asked to explain and give dates for any significant delays in the research activity or in the dissemination research results (e.g., parental leave, bereavement, single parent situations, illness, or other circumstances beyond the applicant's control).

NSERC recognizes that research productivity and contributions to the training of HQP may be disrupted during periods of pregnancy or early child care (parental leave), or as a result of special circumstances. In these cases the applicant's productivity would be assessed over the active period (i.e., excluding the period of leave).

Members are asked to be sensitive to the impact of these circumstances on the level of productivity while ensuring that the quality of research programs supported by NSERC remains competitive.

#### ***6.6.3.2. Adjunct and Emeritus Professors***

It is NSERC's policy to recognize and support the important role played by adjunct and emeritus professors in university-based research and research training at Canadian universities. Adjunct and emeritus professors are required to submit Appendix C of Form 100, addressing their research and training activities, which is intended to help committees assess the commitment of these professors to their university research and training activities.

Applications from Adjunct and Emeritus professors are evaluated using the same criteria, scale, indicators and timeframe (past six years) as all other applicants. Where

the terms of an individual's appointment do not permit sole supervision of HQP, it is expected that a satisfactory plan for co-supervision will be presented and clearly described in the application.

The onus is on the applicant to provide sufficient information to enable Evaluation Groups to assess this appropriately (e.g., does the university require co-supervision of HQP? What interactions with HQP are possible?).

In the case of adjunct professors with a position in industry or government, NSERC will normally award funds only for the direct support of students (salaries or stipends and student travel costs). Members should bring to the attention of the Program Officer any application where other types of expenses are being proposed.

Members should also be aware that not all adjunct professors have other positions in industry or government. In such circumstances, regular expenses may be eligible.

### ***6.6.3.3. Evaluation Group Members***

Researchers who hold a Discovery Grant when they are appointed to an Evaluation Group are given the option of extending their grant at the same level for the duration of their membership (see Section 1.3). However, if a member elects to submit an application as scheduled, the member's application will normally be reviewed at the end of the Evaluation Group's review of Discovery Grant applications and in the presence of a Group chair or senior NSERC official. Arrangements will be made to ensure that the member does not learn the identity of the internal reviewers. The member will be informed of the Evaluation Group's recommendation and of NSERC's decision through a Notification of Decision letter according to the usual process for all applicants. Special arrangements should be made with the Program Officer if the Section chair is an applicant in the competition.

### **6.6.4. Relative Cost of Research**

In addition to the selection criteria discussed previously, applications are also assessed with regard to the cost of the proposed research, relative to the normal costs in the discipline. The "Cost of Research" relates to individual circumstances, but in the context of an area of research. These costs can include special needs related to the nature of collaborative activities or infrastructure costs such as user fees. Evaluation Groups will collectively determine the parameters for considering the cost of research. Members will be asked to first gauge the budget in terms of justification, and then to rate the relative cost of the proposed research program (High, Normal, Low) as compared to the norm for the research areas represented in the applications considered by the Evaluation Group(s).

The merit indicators for the “Relative Cost of Research” can be used by members to arrive at a rating. It is expected that the majority of applications will be deemed to have normal costs of research. While some applicants might have higher costs of research in one budget category, these may be lower in another, leading to an overall assessment of a Normal relative cost for the research program.

Factors to consider include:

- Salaries and benefits (e.g., extent of stipend support, trainee level)
- Equipment and/or facilities (e.g., need for equipment, access to facilities)
- Materials and supplies (e.g., type and extent of consumables)
- Travel (e.g., collaborations, field work, conference attendance):
  - In consideration of the costs associated with travel, the appropriateness of the proposed travel should also be judged. For example, above average attendance at conferences may be disregarded if attendance is unsubstantiated by the research program.
- Dissemination:
  - Charges associated with dissemination may include charges for publications (per page or reprints), conference fees and fees associated with the preparation of technical reports and filing of patents.
- Other:
  - Special costs related to the proposed work can also be considered.

The appropriateness of and justification for the funding requested is considered within the Merit of the Proposal not the Relative Cost of Research.

### **6.6.5. Discovery Accelerator Supplements**

The Discovery Accelerator Supplements Program (DAS) provides substantial and timely additional resources to accelerate progress and maximize the impact of superior research programs.

Awards are determined by Evaluation Groups in a two-step selection process. First, while reviewing Discovery Grant applications, Evaluation Groups nominate applicants whose research proposals suggest and explore novel or potentially transformative concepts and lines of inquiry, and are likely to have impact by contributing to groundbreaking advances in the area. The timeliness of DAS support represents the potential for the researcher at this time to capitalize on an opportunity, such as a recent research breakthrough, a paradigm shift or a new strategy to tackle a scientific problem or research question.

In the second step, after the evaluation of Discovery Grant applications is concluded, the Executive Committee for each Evaluation Group conducts a final analysis of the DAS nominees to select those who best meet the objectives of the DAS Program, within the quota of DAS awards allocated to the Evaluation Group. The quotas are determined based on proportional representation and are also based on research conducted in strategic areas.

Universities, through their Vice-President of Research, are allowed to request a reduction in the duration of the Discovery Grant for a limited number of researchers from their institution who they believe would best meet the objective of the DAS Program. This is to allow some of the very best researchers the possibility of being nominated for a DAS earlier than their normal Discovery Grant duration would have allowed. These applications should be reviewed as all others, and only be put forward for a DAS if they meet the objectives of the program.

## **6.7. Policies and Guidelines**

### **6.7.1. Conflict of Interest**

**The final decision on conflicts of interest rests with NSERC.**

A conflict of interest is deemed to exist in the following situations:

- a member is the applicant, co-applicant or co-signer;
- a member is, or was in the last six years, from the same university, organization or department, or belongs or belonged, in the last six years, to the same research unit as the applicant(s);
- there is an administrative or family link between the member and the applicant(s) (e.g., head of the department, dean of the faculty);
- an industrial or government representative on a committee is, or was, in the last six years directly involved in collaborative activities with the applicant(s);
- a member is a former research supervisor or graduate student of the applicant(s) or has collaborated or published with the applicant(s) within the past six years;
- the member is uncomfortable with reviewing the proposal due to previous conflicts or any other reason (e.g., past student or supervisor, even if more than six years ago, or personal, financial conflict); or
- NSERC staff have reason to believe that a specific member should not be involved in the review.

NSERC guidelines require that:

- the member must not be assigned the application for review; and
- the member must leave the room before discussion of the application without commenting and not participate in any discussion pertaining to the application.

The members must notify the Program Officer of all conflicts of interests. If an applicant is a family member (or someone especially close to them); extra steps will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of reviewers. Conflicts arising from adjunct positions or from individuals belonging to a large regional or national network should be discussed with the Program Officer. Conflicts of interests can be declared at any time.

### **6.7.2. Framework for Funding Recommendations**

The review of Discovery Grant applications and the recommendation of grant amounts occur in two separate steps. In the first, the Evaluation Group performs a merit assessment of each application on the basis of the selection criteria and evaluation indicators (see Section 6.6). In addition, the Evaluation Group determines whether the proposal has normal, lower than normal or higher than normal associated costs of research relative to others in the field (see Section 6.6.4). In the second step, once all applications have been evaluated and their ratings established, applications that have the same overall rating are grouped in a funding bin. The combination of an applicant's ratings for the three criteria determines the overall rating and the funding bin. Final recommendations for budget distribution within an Evaluation Group are made by the Executive Committee in consultation with NSERC staff. The Evaluation Group Executive Committee is comprised of the Group Chair and the Section Chairs.

The Executive Committee may have to make difficult choices with respect to recommending funding within the budget of the Evaluation Group. It may consult the Evaluation Group on the strategy that would guide such choices. This consultation should take place prior to the Executive Committee's deliberations, preferably in advance of the competition session.

With each competition, bin values can change somewhat based on the final bin distribution of applicants and the available budget, but to ensure consistency among cohorts the starting bin values at the beginning of the competition are reset back to the pre-established reference values for the EG. The amounts for applications falling in Bin A, receiving ratings of *Exceptional* for all selection criteria, represent a minimum grant amount and may require specific funding recommendations from the Executive Committee. This provides the flexibility to award higher levels to researchers truly performing at the highest levels internationally, if warranted. Applicants will not be awarded more than the requested amount regardless of the funding level assigned to each bin.

### **6.7.3. Duration of Grants**

The normal duration of a Discovery Grant for all applicants is five years.

A rating of *Moderate* for the merit of the proposal will normally result in a one-year award.

Grants of shorter duration can also be recommended on a case-by-case basis. During discussion of a particular application for which concerns have been identified in one or more of the criteria, an Evaluation Group can vote on the duration for which a grant would be made, should it fall within a “fundable bin.” Members should note that when a one-year award is recommended, the applicant will have about six months to address any problems noted by the Evaluation Group, before submitting a new application.

## **6.8. Time Commitment**

A member’s preparation for the February competition session involves the following:

- Reading in-depth those proposals on which you are an “internal reviewer”;
- Complementing your assessment by reading the samples of contributions provided;
- Reading all other applications that you have been assigned to as a “reader” so that you will be able to participate in the discussions and vote;
- Integrating comments made by referees into your assessment;
- Identifying DAS candidates;
- Preparing notes on applications, particularly those on which you are an internal reviewer, using the rating form provided by NSERC, if desired;
- Arriving at a preliminary rating for each of the three selection criteria;
- Arriving at a preliminary recommendation for the cost of research (High, Normal, Low) and, where warranted, for the duration of funding;
- Preparing draft comments for the Message to Applicant for cases where you recommend a rating of *Moderate* or *Insufficient*, or where a message would particularly benefit an applicant; and
- Providing your ratings to NSERC staff in advance of competition week, if required.

The time required for this preparation is substantial and will vary according to the Evaluation Group workload and the workload of the individual member.

You should set a schedule in advance of the competition that allows for a thorough review of all applications, recognizing that a more in-depth analysis is required for first and second internal reviewer assignments. NSERC asks members not to discuss any application with other Evaluation Group members outside the time allocated for its review during competition (not prior or after competition, and not during competition outside the formally allocated time).

## 6.9. Deliverables

### 6.9.1. Integration of Referee Comments and Past Message to Applicant

External reviewers, or “referees,” help provide a deeper overall assessment of an application. Referees may be familiar with a particular research area or technique and may be able to comment on an applicant's contributions to the field. Evaluation Groups should focus on the content and credibility of referee reports as inputs into the evaluation process, but **must ultimately base their recommendations on their own relative assessment**. External referee reports contribute to these assessments, but must not be used on their own to either accept or reject a proposal (see Section [6.9.2](#), on preparing the Message to Applicant). Evaluation Groups should be sensitive to any real or perceived conflict of interest or relationship between the referee and the applicant(s) that might influence the review (e.g., professional interactions, potential competition). These should be brought to the attention of the Program Officer and, if needed, addressed in the Message to Applicant. Evaluation Groups should also recognize that the background of a referee might influence the review (e.g., school of thought bias, lack of familiarity with the Canadian research funding environment).

In cases of returning applicants who were unsuccessful in the past, received an award of shorter duration, or where ratings of *Moderate* or *Insufficient* were awarded in previous competitions, the previous Message to Applicant may be shared by the Program Officer with the Evaluation Group members, at the end of the Evaluation Group discussion. This is done only when there is a need to ensure that the current Evaluation Group is not sending confusing or contradictory messages to the applicant. The Evaluation Group may comment on issues raised previously that have or have not been addressed adequately in the current application.

### 6.9.2. Preparing the Message to the Applicant

There will be little opportunity to prepare careful and constructive comments (for inclusion in the Message to Applicant) during the competition session. Consequently, in advance of the competition, internal reviewers should prepare draft comments (or keep a record of personal notes which highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the application) to applicants if they anticipate these being required. In February, when applications are reviewed by the Evaluation Group, these comments should be discussed and carefully vetted. The final version of the Message to Applicant form provided to NSERC must reflect the Evaluation Group's consensus. The rating form is an excellent tool on which to base the formulation of balanced and helpful comments.

Constructive comments are of vital importance to enable researchers to improve future applications and/or their research programs. Evaluation Groups are asked to

provide specific and constructive comments to applicants especially in the following cases:

- Rating of *Moderate* or *Insufficient* on any criteria;\*
- Recommended grant duration is less than five years;\*
- NSERC instructions have not been followed (e.g., font size, reporting of HQP, page limits); and
- A referee report is perceived to be particularly biased, and the members wish to reassure the applicant that it did not influence the evaluation.

\* NSERC requires comments in such cases.

Evaluation Groups should comment primarily on those aspects of a proposal that were important in arriving at the Evaluation Group's recommendation. Both strengths and weaknesses are appropriate for comment (for inclusion in the Message to Applicant). The comments should also address any apparent discrepancy between the Evaluation Group's recommendation and the referee reports in order to provide a clear understanding of the Evaluation Group's assessment. The comments should explicitly discuss specific points in external referee reports with which the Evaluation Group particularly agrees or disagrees, if these are a factor in the final recommendation. The Message to Applicant must be in accordance with NSERC guidelines and appropriate for transmission to the applicant. If at all possible, the Evaluation Group should write the comments in the applicant's preferred language. If not possible, it will be translated following deliberations.

The following are examples of problems sometimes encountered in Messages to Applicants prepared by Evaluation Groups:

- Lack of clarity (e.g., it is not clear what message the Evaluation Group is trying to send);
- Message too general to be of use (i.e., "applicant did not rate as highly as others in the competition");
- Abusive or belittling language; and
- Messages which appear to be inconsistent with external referees' comments without acknowledging those comments and explaining the Evaluation Group's rationale.

In the past, there have been appeals based on the applicant's perception of an age or gender bias in the recommendation of the Evaluation Group. Members must make sure not to introduce such biases in the review process and that the comments conveyed to the applicant do not imply that there were such biases.

## **6.10. Rating Form – Discovery Grant Applications**

The rating form provided by NSERC is an excellent aid for reviewing applications (see Rating Form – Discovery Grant Application; a form-fillable version is available on the extranet). The rating form focuses on the evaluation criteria and allows you to integrate, where appropriate, external referee comments and any other relevant information (e.g., delays in research). Although the rating form is only provided as a tool, and will not be collected by NSERC, using it will help you to ensure that you take all criteria into account when formulating your preliminary ratings. Once completed, rating forms should be treated as protected information.

## **6.11. Discovery Grants Merit Indicators**

**6.13. DISCOVERY GRANTS MERIT INDICATORS<sup>1</sup>**

	<b>Exceptional</b>	<b>Outstanding</b>	<b>Very Strong</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Insufficient</b>
<b>Excellence of the Researcher</b>	Acknowledged as a <b>leader</b> who has continued to make, over the last six years, <b>influential accomplishments</b> at the highest level of quality, impact and/or importance to a <b>broad community</b> .	The accomplishments presented in the application were deemed to be <b>far superior</b> in quality, impact and/or importance to a <b>broad community</b> .	The accomplishments presented in the application were deemed to be of <b>superior</b> quality, impact and/or importance.	The accomplishments presented in the application were deemed to be <b>solid</b> in their quality, impact and/or importance.	The accomplishments presented in the application were deemed to be of <b>reasonable</b> quality, impact and/or importance.	The accomplishments presented in the application were deemed to be <b>below an acceptable level</b> of quality, impact and/or importance.
<b>Merit of the Proposal</b>	Proposed research program is clearly presented, is <b>extremely original and innovative</b> and is <b>likely to have impact by leading to groundbreaking advances</b> in the area and/or <b>leading to a technology or policy</b> that addresses socio-economic or environmental needs. <b>Long-term vision and short-term objectives are clearly defined.</b> The methodology is <b>clearly defined and appropriate.</b> The budget <b>clearly demonstrates</b> how the research activities to be supported are distinct from and complement those funded by other sources.	Proposed research program is clearly presented, is <b>highly original and innovative</b> and is <b>likely to have impact by contributing to groundbreaking advances</b> in the area, and/or <b>leading to a technology or policy</b> that addresses socio-economic or environmental needs. <b>Long-term goals are clearly defined and short-term objectives are well planned.</b> The methodology is <b>clearly described and appropriate.</b> The budget <b>clearly demonstrates</b> how the research activities to be supported are distinct from and complement those funded by other sources.	Proposed research program is clearly presented, is <b>original and innovative</b> and is <b>likely to have impact by leading to advancements</b> and/or addressing socio-economic or environmental needs. <b>Long-term goals are defined and short-term objectives are planned.</b> The methodology is <b>clearly described and appropriate.</b> The budget <b>demonstrates</b> how the research activities to be supported are distinct from and complement those funded by other sources.	Proposed research program is clearly presented, is <b>original and innovative</b> and is <b>likely to have impact</b> and/or address socio-economic or environmental needs. <b>Long-term goals and short-term objectives are clearly described.</b> The methodology is <b>described and appropriate.</b> The budget <b>demonstrates</b> how the research activities to be supported are distinct from and complement those funded by other sources.	Proposed research program is clearly presented, has <b>original and innovative aspects</b> and <b>may have impact</b> and/or address socio-economic or environmental needs. <b>Long-term and short-term objectives are described.</b> The methodology is <b>partially described and/or appropriate.</b> The budget <b>demonstrates</b> how the research activities to be supported are distinct from and complement those funded by other sources.	Proposed research program, as presented, <b>lacks clarity</b> and/or is of <b>limited originality and innovation.</b> <b>Objectives are not clearly described</b> and/or likely not attainable. Methodology is <b>not clearly described and/or appropriate.</b> The budget <b>does not clearly demonstrate</b> how the research activities to be supported are distinct from and complement those funded by other sources.
<b>Training of HQP</b>	Training record is <b>at the highest level</b> , with HQP contributing to <b>top quality research.</b> <b>Most</b> HQP move on to positions that require <b>highly desired skills</b> , obtained through training received. Research plans for trainees in the NSE are <b>appropriate and clearly defined.</b> HQP success is <b>highly likely.</b>	Training record is <b>far superior</b> to other applicants, with HQP contributing to <b>high-quality research.</b> <b>Most</b> HQP move on to positions that require <b>highly desired skills</b> , obtained through training received. Research plans for trainees are <b>appropriate and clearly defined.</b> HQP success is <b>highly likely.</b>	Training record is <b>superior</b> to other applicants, with HQP contributing to <b>quality, original research.</b> <b>Many</b> HQP move on to appropriate positions that require <b>desired skills</b> , obtained through training received. Research plans for trainees are <b>appropriate and clearly described.</b> HQP success is <b>likely.</b>	Training record compares <b>favourably</b> with other applicants. HQP <b>generally</b> move on to positions that require <b>desired skills</b> , obtained through training received. Research plans for trainees are <b>appropriate and described.</b> HQP success is <b>likely.</b>	Training record is acceptable but may be modest relative to other applicants. <b>Some</b> HQP move on to programs or positions that require <b>desired skills</b> , obtained through training received. Plans for trainees are <b>described</b> and <b>should contribute to HQP success.</b>	Training record is <b>below an acceptable level</b> relative to other applicants. HQP do not, in general, move on to positions that require skills obtained through training received. Plans for trainees are <b>not appropriate</b> or are <b>not described</b> with enough <b>information to predict the likelihood of HQP success.</b>

<sup>1</sup>The Discovery Grants Merit Indicators should be used in conjunction with the *Peer Review Manual* (Chapter 6) which outlines how reviewers arrive at a rating.

### 6.13. DISCOVERY GRANTS MERIT INDICATORS<sup>1</sup>

Cost of Research <sup>2</sup>	High	Normal	Low
		Majority of justified expenses represent costs <b>higher than the norm</b> for the research area.	Majority of justified expenses are within the <b>norm</b> for the research area.

<sup>2</sup> Possible examples include: cost of training of HQP; equipment for intensive research and/or high users fees; particularly expensive or frequent consumables; travel (for collaborations, field work, access to facilities, conferences, etc.).

## Rating Form - Discovery Grants Application

<b>Applicant</b>	<b>Department/University</b>		
<b>Applicant Status:</b>			
<b>Title of proposal</b>			
<b>Evaluation criteria</b> (See Instructions for complete details)			
<b>Excellence of researcher</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Exceptional</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Outstanding</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Very Strong</b>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Strong</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Moderate</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Insufficient</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge, expertise and experience</li> <li>Quality of contributions to, and impact on, the proposed and other areas of research in the NSE</li> <li>Importance of contributions</li> <li>(For group applications) Complementarity of expertise between members and synergy</li> </ul>	<b>Rationale for rating:</b>		
<b>Merit of the proposal</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Exceptional</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Outstanding</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Very Strong</b>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Strong</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Moderate</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Insufficient</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Originality and innovation</li> <li>Significance and expected contributions to research</li> <li>Clarity and scope of objectives</li> <li>Clarity and appropriateness of methodology</li> <li>Feasibility</li> <li>Discussion of relevant issues</li> <li>Appropriateness / Justification of budget</li> <li>Relationship to other sources of funds</li> </ul>	<b>Rationale for rating:</b>		
<b>Contributions to training of highly qualified personnel</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Exceptional</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Outstanding</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Very Strong</b>
	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Strong</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Moderate</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Insufficient</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quality and impact of past contributions</li> <li>Appropriateness of the proposal for the training of HQP</li> <li>Training in collaborative and interdisciplinary environment (if applicable)</li> </ul>	<b>Rationale for rating:</b>		
<b>Cost of research</b> (relative cost of the proposed research program as compared to the norms for the field)	<b>Low</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Normal</b>
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>High</b>
<b>Rationale for Cost of Research:</b>			

**Other comments** (e.g., duration should be less than norm, special circumstances, quality of samples of contributions provided, Environmental impact, ethical concerns. Your Program Officer should be notified accordingly):

**Comments from external referees (please also highlight any comments that would be deemed inappropriate for the members to have considered in their discussions):**

**Message to the applicant:**

**Discovery Accelerator Supplement (DAS)**

- Regular DAS: Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_
- DAS in Targeted Areas : Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_

**Rationale for DAS Recommendation:**

This form is provided by NSERC as an aid to members for reviewing applications. The form contains personal information, and like all other review material, should be stored in a secure manner to prevent unauthorized access (please refer to Section 5 of the Peer Review Manual and to the text of your Confidentiality and Non-disclosure Declaration for more details on the Privacy Act.)

The rating sheet focuses on the evaluation criteria and integrates, where appropriate, external reviewer comments and any other relevant information, e.g., delays in research. Using the rating sheet will help to ensure that you take all selection criteria into account when formulating your recommendation (see Section 6 of the Peer Review Manual for details). Note that NSERC does not collect these forms, and they should be destroyed in a secure manner after the competition. (2010 version)