



**Discovery Grants
Peer review manual
2023-24**

Discovery Grants peer review manual 2023-24

Foreword

This manual is designed as a guide for Evaluation Group members for the **Discovery Grants program**. It outlines activities to be undertaken by members, section chairs, and group chairs and describes the policies, guidelines, and deliverables relevant to these activities. The manual is updated every year.

Applicants who refer to this manual should note that the content is intended to guide peer reviewers and outline principles rather than provide them with a set of rules.

For more information regarding Discovery Grants program, policies, and guidelines contact us at resgrant@nserc-crsng.gc.ca.

The evaluation of Subatomic Physics applications contains some differences compared to what is described in these guidelines. Supplemental procedures for the Subatomic Physics Section (SAPES) can be found in the current Internal Procedures document for SAPES. For more information, contact subatomic@nserc-crsng.gc.ca.

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1. Discovery Grants program

1.1 Program objectives

Discovery Grants assist in:

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

1.2 Program description

The Discovery Grants Program supports ongoing programs of research with long-term goals rather than a single short-term project or collection of projects. These grants recognize the creativity and innovation that are at the heart of all research advances. Discovery Grants are typically 5 years in duration and are considered ‘grants in aid’ of research as they provide long term operating funds and can facilitate access to funding from other programs. They are not meant to support the full costs of a research program.

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 the research training and activities of individuals working at the frontier of science and engineering.

Recipients of Discovery Grants are not restricted to the specific activities described in their applications, and may pursue new research interests, provided they are within NSERC’s mandate and adhere to the principles and directives governing the appropriate use of grant funds as outlined in the [Tri-Agency Guide on Financial Administration](#). This provides researchers with the flexibility to pursue promising research avenues as they emerge and the opportunity to address higher-risk (higher reward) topics. Researchers can use their grants to participate in collaborative efforts.

NSERC is acting on the evidence that achieving a more equitable, diverse and inclusive Canadian research enterprise is essential to creating the excellent, innovative and impactful research necessary to advance knowledge and understanding, and to respond to local, national and global challenges. This principle informs the commitments described in the [Tri-agency statement on equity, diversity and inclusion](#) (EDI).

Applicants are expected to increase the inclusion and advancement of under-represented groups in the natural sciences and engineering, as one way to enhance excellence in research and training. Applicants should refer to the Discovery Grants application instructions and the [NSERC guide on integrating equity, diversity and inclusion considerations in research](#).

1.3 Nature of research supported

Research in the NSE encompasses a broad spectrum of activities. These activities range from curiosity-driven investigations with no immediate or even midterm application, as their importance stems from the intellectual structure of the discipline, right up to applied research or 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 activities that position Canada as a participant and leader in global science and engineering. In this sense, it can be both a flexible resource for Canada and create a favourable environment for the development of research personnel.

Increasingly, research on the most significant problems in the natural sciences and engineering requires the combined knowledge, expertise, and contributions of many researchers, often from various disciplines. Creativity and innovation are at the heart of all research advancements. NSERC strives to fully value the role of collaborative endeavours and interdisciplinary work as a means to greater achievement in research through the peer review system.

1.4 Research involving Indigenous Peoples and Communities

NSERC values research in any field or discipline related to the natural sciences and engineering that is conducted by, grounded in, or meaningfully engaged with First Nations, Inuit, Métis or other Indigenous Nations, communities, societies or individuals, and their wisdom, cultures, experiences or knowledge systems, as expressed in their dynamic forms, past and present.

Indigenous communities have unique approaches to research that often differ from Western methodologies in terms of planning and execution. Engagement with these communities must be conducted in a way that is agreed upon by all partners involved in order to be considered meaningful.

1.5 Subject matter eligibility

NSERC supports research whose major challenges lie in the natural sciences and engineering (NSE), other than the health sciences, which could eventually lead, among other applications, to the treatment or prevention of human disease. Therefore, research primarily in the NSE that advances NSE knowledge is eligible for support, even though it may have potential future applications in human health, such as diagnosis or treatment. Proposals that include the use of methodologies, tools, techniques and knowledge from the NSE are not automatically considered eligible.

For the Discovery Grants Program, decisions on subject matter eligibility (SME) are the responsibility of NSERC staff. The review of SME is done independently from the peer review assessment. To determine whether work contributes to the NSE or not, reviewers are asked to consider the Tri-Agency (CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC) document **Selecting the Appropriate Federal Granting Agency** and the supporting **Addendum to the guidelines for the eligibility of applications related to health**. Members who have doubts as to whether the research proposed is

eligible for support by NSERC must inform NSERC staff of the potential concern as soon as possible. While NSERC aims to identify these cases early in the review process, decisions on ineligibility due to SME can be made at any stage of the review process.

2. Membership

2.1 Overview

The review of Discovery Grant applications is achieved using a conference model peer review structure. Expert scientists and engineers from academia, industry, and government form the membership of twelve discipline-based Evaluation Groups (EGs), providing quality assessment and funding recommendations for applications assigned to them.

The EGs have full responsibility for the evaluation of applications assigned to them according to policy guidelines established by NSERC. The section chairs, group chairs, and NSERC staff work together to monitor the quality of review and to develop and refine policy.

2.2 Membership selection process

New members are appointed every year. Potential new members can be established researchers or early-stage scientists and engineers from universities, government, or industry. Potential new members are approached by program officers regarding their willingness to serve on EGs; they need not be NSERC grantees.

Past members may be approached by program officers to provide recommendations and references for potential new members. These recommendations can include comments on the background, stature, and experience of nominees, as well as references on their suitability to participate in the peer review process and work in a committee setting. Factors such as the nominee's involvement in collaborative and interdisciplinary research may also be considered. In making suggestions for membership, the recent history and current membership of the EG is taken into account.

To learn more about the selection of EG members consult the [Guidelines Governing Membership of NSERC's Peer Review Committees](#).

The following documents must be read and agreed to by all members of NSERC's EGs, selection committees, or panels upon appointment and on an annual basis thereafter:

- [Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers](#)
- [Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Policy](#)

Acceptance of a term as a member brings with it a commitment to participate in the evaluation of applications assigned to an EG within guidelines established by NSERC. Members, section chairs, and group chairs must adhere to NSERC policies and guidelines including those on conflict of interest, diversity and gender equality, communication with applicants, and confidentiality.

2.3 Roles and responsibilities

2.3.1 Members

Members participate in the review of Notifications of Intent to apply (NOI) and the assessment of full applications, and make recommendations to NSERC based on their assessment. Specific responsibilities of members include:

- participating in preparatory meetings/discussions and information sessions prior to the peer review meetings;
- submitting comfort ratings for the NOI and the full applications;
- identifying applications needing additional input (e.g., joint reviews, subject matter eligibility, etc.);
- suggesting external reviewers for applications where they are assigned first internal reviewer;
- reading all assigned application material according to their **role**;
- participating in deliberations during competition meetings;
- presenting in-depth evaluations for the applications assigned to them as first and second internal reviewer;
- voting on all assigned applications; and
- preparing messages from the Evaluation Group that reflect the group's assessments and recommendations.

2.3.2 Section chairs

Section chairs (also referred to as co-chairs) provide leadership to ensure the orderly and complete evaluation of applications and the transmission of accurate recommendations to NSERC. Within each EG, there are multiple section chairs who often represent different sections or research streams. In addition to their commitments as a member, their responsibilities include:

- leading efforts to maintain a high-quality peer review process;
- ensuring a consistent and equitable approach during the peer review meetings;
- ensuring that all important aspects of applications are considered and comprehensively discussed;
- assisting with the preparation of messages from the Evaluation Group;
- participating on the EG chairing committee;
- contributing to discussions on policy issues, new emerging areas of research, particular discipline concerns; and
- participating in the discussions of the membership for the following year.

2.3.3 Group chairs

There is one group chair for each of the twelve EGs. Group chairs are not considered members of the EGs under their purview and do not review or vote on applications. However, they are members of the **Committee on Discovery Research** (CDR). In this capacity, they act in the best interest of all areas of the natural sciences and engineering, while bringing to the discussion their

particular knowledge of specific disciplines. While the group chair's role is associated with disciplines close to their own field of expertise, they are encouraged to familiarize themselves with other discipline-specific issues or dynamics. Specific responsibilities also include:

- monitoring the quality and consistency of peer review in the EG under their responsibility;
- advising members on NSERC policies and procedures;
- participating on the EG chairing committee;
- reviewing the research topics and disciplines covered by the EGs and recommending changes as appropriate;
- representing opinions and concerns of the EG related to the peer review process to CDR and to NSERC;
- participating in the discussions regarding the membership for the following year; and
- participating in the Group Chair Roundtable as needed (typically pre- and post-competition).

2.3.4 NSERC staff

NSERC staff are not EG members and do not vote on applications. Staff oversee membership, provide advice on NSERC policies, guidelines, and procedures and help ensure consistency in the evaluation of all applications submitted to the Discovery Grants Program.

2.4 Information sessions and meetings

Throughout their term, members are required to attend a number of information sessions and meetings. Depending on the EG and discipline, the frequency, format, and lengths of these meetings will vary. Where possible, meetings are combined to make optimal use of members' time. An overview of the information sessions and meetings is highlighted in the sections below.

2.4.1 Orientation sessions

An orientation session for members is typically held near the end of August or early September, once the membership slate has been approved. This session provides an opportunity for new members to ask questions and to familiarize themselves with NSERC policies and guidelines for the review of applications.

A second orientation session is held for all EG members, section chairs, and the group chair typically in late November or early December. The purpose of this session is to provide information on NSERC policies and guidelines, best practices, and provides an opportunity for members to ask specific questions. Often, this session includes more details surrounding the review process and a preliminary calibration session.

Orientation sessions are held virtually, by teleconference or video conference.

2.4.2 Calibration session(s)

Calibration session(s) are held prior to and/or on the first day of the peer review meetings. These sessions provide all members the opportunity to standardize their reviewing principles.

Calibration sessions include a mock review of a selection of applications with the objective of familiarizing members with the peer review meeting process, the evaluation criteria, and the **Discovery Grants Merit Indicators**. These sessions also help to achieve the highest level of consistency among members within the EG on interpretation and use of the ratings.

2.4.3 Peer review meetings

The EG members, section chairs, and group chair participate in the peer review meetings (also referred to as ‘competition weeks’). These meetings take place over three weeks each year (usually in February). For each EG, this involves a meeting of up to one week. Activities that take place during the peer review meetings include calibration sessions and deliberations.

Some members may be asked to participate in **joint reviews** with other EGs that take place during the two other weeks.

Travel and living expenses of members, while on NSERC business, will be reimbursed by NSERC. Members will receive details on travel arrangements prior to the peer review meeting.

2.4.3.1 Deliberations

During the three weeks of peer review meetings, members discuss and vote on all assigned applications. Each application is allocated fifteen minutes for deliberation and voting. An important consideration for making the conference model work is adhering to EG schedules. Section chairs and program officers must ensure that discussions proceed at a rate that will allow the EG to get through its work within the time available. Members must be aware of this while preparing and presenting.

2.4.4 Policy meeting

EGs may hold a policy meeting following the completion of their review of applications. Possible topics include a discussion of NSERC administrative processes, policies, forms, membership, budget, and literature. In addition, feedback from the EG may be sought on policy matters currently under review at NSERC.

2.5 Time commitment

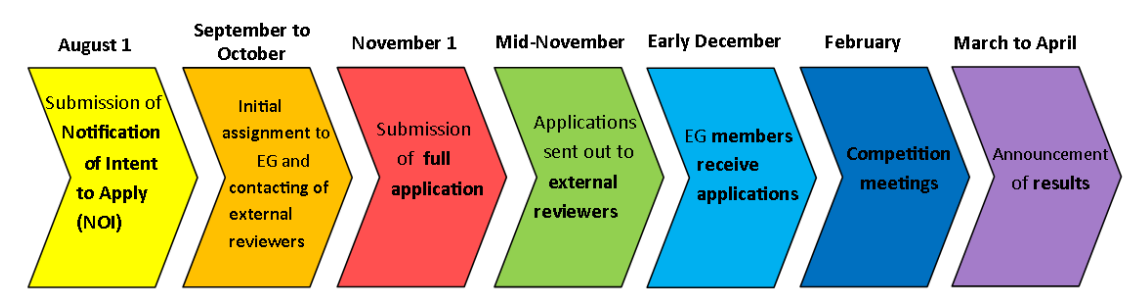
Participation of experts in the peer review of Discovery Grant applications is crucial to the success of the program; serving in this capacity involves a significant time commitment. Contributing as a member in a peer-review evaluation group demands periods of intense activity that may compete with regular responsibilities. In general, a member’s preparation for the peer-review meetings involves the following:

- in-depth reading of those applications and external reviewer reports where assigned as first or second internal reviewer;
- reading all other applications and external reviewer reports where assigned as other internal reviewers;
- arriving at preliminary ratings for each of the three selection criteria.

The time required for this preparation is substantial. It is strongly recommended that an appropriate amount of time is set aside for the thorough review of all applications, recognizing that a more in-depth analysis is required for first and second internal reviewer assignments.

Members are expected to be available for the entirety of the competition week for their Evaluation Group (EG) and may be asked to participate in joint reviews with other EGs that take place during the other two weeks. They must attend and participate in all deliberations for their assigned applications.

3. Review procedures



3.1 Application assignment

3.1.1 Evaluation Group assignment

At the Notification of Intent to apply (NOI) stage, applicants to the Discovery Grants Program are asked to suggest an EG, as well as **research topic(s)** that best reflect the subject of their proposal. In most cases, the suggested EG is maintained, however members may suggest that the EG be changed if appropriate. The final decision resides with NSERC. The research topics are chosen by the applicant and identified along the lines of discipline groupings, and accordingly labelled (e.g., PHYS for Physics). Applicants can select Research Topics from more than one EG. These are reviewed when considering the need for joint reviews.

3.1.2 Joint reviews

When applications cross the boundaries of two or more EGs, measures such as a joint review can be undertaken to ensure fair evaluation. Joint reviews occur when members with needed expertise from other EGs participate in the review of an application. Members and NSERC staff identify NOIs where a joint review with another EG may be useful. Potential applications that would benefit from joint review could be discussed with the section chairs and/or group chairs at the NOI stage, when appropriate. Final decisions on joint reviews may occur after the receipt of full applications.

3.1.3 Assignment of internal reviewers

In order to aid in the assignment of internal reviewers, members are asked to provide their comfort levels (level of expertise) for the NOIs received by the EG. Comfort levels include high (H), medium (M), low (L), very low (VL), cannot review due to language proficiency (X), or conflict of interest (C).

NSERC staff, in collaboration with the chairing committee members, use the identified comfort levels, information about possible conflicts of interest, consideration of linguistic abilities, and the need to balance workload to finalize the assignments of the internal reviewers to each application.

Near the end of November or early December, each member is provided with the final list of applications that they are responsible for reviewing, and their role for each application is indicated (first reviewer, second reviewer, or other internal reviewers). Note that members may be asked to review applications that are not in their primary research field. In such cases, the member is usually assigned as one of the other internal reviewers. Members are responsible for preparing an assessment for each application assigned to them and should be ready to discuss and vote at the peer review meetings regardless of their role.

Members should advise NSERC if they think that an application may have been improperly assigned to them (i.e., if they have a conflict of interest, do not have the appropriate expertise or linguistic capability to review the proposal, etc.) or if they find that it would particularly benefit from a joint review. Any problem with assignment of applications should be brought to the program officer's attention as soon as possible. In exceptional circumstances, issues with the assignment of an application can be flagged as late as the peer review meetings.

3.1.4 Internal reviewer roles

Each application is assessed by five members with different roles; first internal reviewer, second internal reviewer, and three other internal reviewers. All assigned members, regardless of role, are expected to participate in the deliberations and vote.

The **first internal reviewer** identifies potential external reviewers, carries out an in-depth review of the application and the external reviewers' reports. During deliberations, the first internal reviewer leads the presentation of the application and makes a rating recommendation for each of the three selection criteria.

The **second internal reviewer** also carries out an in-depth review of the application and the external reviewers' reports. During deliberations, the second internal reviewer follows up on the presentation made by the first internal reviewer and makes a rating recommendation for each of the three selection criteria.

The other internal reviewers carry out a review of the full application and external reviewers' reports. They participate in the deliberations and make rating recommendations for each of the three selection criteria.

3.1.5 Selection of external reviewers

Input from external reviewers is an important part of the peer review process. During deliberations, internal reviewers present and discuss external reviewer reports that have been received for an application.

The first internal reviewer is responsible for identifying potential external reviewers from the applicant's suggestions in the NOI and their knowledge of the community, while watching for conflicts of interest and linguistic ability. NSERC may seek additional suggestions based on the responses received.

NSERC strongly recommends that members use a cross-section of external reviewers with expertise in the applicant's area of research (i.e., international and Canadian reviewers, from **early career to established researchers**, including under-represented groups, researchers at a variety of academic and non-academic institutions).

Members are also asked to consider the following guidelines when selecting external reviewers:

- The best possible external reviewers for each application (i.e. those closest to the specific field(s) of research, who are likely to provide a comprehensive, unbiased, and critical review) should be selected.
- A variety of external reviewers for different applications should be suggested by members. To ensure that the same reviewer is not contacted repeatedly, NSERC tries not to assign more than three proposals for review to any given external reviewer. Members can help with this process by not suggesting the same reviewer too many times.
- Refer to the External Reviewer Databank (a list of researchers who have agreed to review over the last 5 years). It is also acceptable to suggest names not on this list.
- For interdisciplinary research, members should ensure that the external reviewers selected have (individually or collectively) expertise in all the relevant disciplines and aspects of the proposal.
- Members should not rely solely on the list of external reviewers suggested by the applicant. Names suggested by the member as well as names from the applicant's list (typically two), if appropriate, should be included.
- Include a balance between the applicant's and your own suggestions.
- For French applications, ensure your selected external reviewers can read French. When in doubt, contact your program assistant for assistance.
- Choose a cross-section of external reviewers with expertise in the applicant's area of research (i.e. international and Canadian reviewers, from early career to established

researchers, including under-represented groups, researchers at a variety of academic and non-academic institutions).

External reviewers must strictly comply with the [Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers](#).

- To avoid suggesting external reviewers with conflicts:
 - Do not select reviewers from the applicant's institution,
 - Do not select more than one person from a particular institution (i.e. two people from McGill for the same application),
 - Do not select reviewers who have collaborated with the applicant in the past 6 years (refer to CCV by clicking on NOI title).
- Current EG members cannot be selected as external reviewers. In addition, applicants to the current Discovery Grants competition cannot be selected as external reviewers for applications in the same EG.

3.2 Applications and review material

3.2.1 Incomplete or non-adherent application

The onus is on the applicant to provide complete and sufficient information that adheres to [Research Portal Presentation and Attachment Standards](#) and [Instructions for Completing an Application](#). Problems related to the application content should be brought to the attention of the program officer. In order to maintain the principle of fairness in the competition, applicants must adhere to the guidelines in the preparation of application materials. Should NSERC staff determine that the information provided is incomplete or non-adherent to NSERC guidelines or instructions, the application may be rejected.

3.2.2 Eligibility of applicants

Eligibility decisions are the responsibility of NSERC staff. Members who have doubts as to a researcher's eligibility should review the application on the same basis as all others and should alert NSERC staff to the potential problem(s) as soon as possible. The eligibility criteria for applicants can be found in the [Eligibility](#) section of the NSERC website.

3.2.3 Applicant categories

Applicants to the Discovery Grant program are categorized as either Early Career Researchers (ECR) or Established Researchers (ER).

Early career researchers (ECR) are applicants who have held their first independent academic position within the last five years. For example, to be classified as an ECR, a researcher submitting an NOI in August 2023 would have been hired on or after July 1, 2018.

The five-year window for being considered an ECR is adjusted to take into account instances where a researcher has had an eligible delay in research. For applicant categorization, all eligible

leaves (e.g., maternity, parental, personal illness, leave taken by applicants for family-related illness, bereavement), as well as delays related to COVID-19 are credited as twice the amount of time taken. For example, a researcher submitting an NOI in August 2023 and who took a seven-month parental leave within the past five years must have been hired on or after May 2017 in order to be considered an ECR. Professional leaves (e.g., training, sabbatical, administrative) are not credited.

Established researchers (ER) are applicants who have held an independent academic position with a start date before the last five years.

An independent academic position is a position that:

- is a university faculty appointment (tenured or non-tenured);
- requires that the researcher engages in research that is not under the direction of another individual;
- authorizes the researcher to supervise or co-supervise the research of students registered in an undergraduate or graduate degree program, or postdoctoral fellows.

Applicant categorization is the responsibility of NSERC staff and is based on the information provided by the applicant in the Canadian Common CV (CCV) and application. Members can contact NSERC if they have questions about the classification of an applicant.

3.2.4 Review materials

In early December, members will have access to the application material. Throughout January and February, external reviewer reports will become accessible. The following information will be available for members in a secure electronic environment:

- **Instructions** given to applicants on how to prepare an application;
- Discovery Grant applications; and
- **Rating forms** for Discovery Grant applications. The Discovery Grants Rating Form is available in **Appendix 5**.

NSERC provides members with a rating form to help with the process of reviewing applications. The rating form focuses on the selection criteria and allows members to integrate, where appropriate, external reviewer comments and other relevant information (e.g., delays in research). The rating form is provided only as a tool to help ensure that all three selection criteria are taken into account when formulating preliminary ratings.

Members are reminded that according to the **Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers**, they must ensure that review documentation is stored in a secure manner to prevent unauthorized access. When no longer required, review documentation must be destroyed in a secure manner.

4. Evaluation of applications

4.1 Overview

Discovery Grant applications are assessed on the basis of the following three, equally weighted, 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 by the applicant over the past six years (applicants with eligible **leaves of absence** may include contributions from their most recent active research period prior to the last six years for a period equivalent to the duration of the leave).

The evaluation is based only on the information contained in the review material provided. Members must not research or access additional information about publication status, other funding requests, prizes, HQP outcomes, or impact factors that are not included in the review material.

After an application is reviewed, each internal reviewer submits a rating for each of the three selection criteria. The outcome is decided by the median rating for each criterion.

Based on the rating outcomes, applications of comparable merit are grouped into ‘bins’, determined by the combination of an applicant’s ratings for the three selection criteria. Values are assigned to each of the funding bins of the various EGs. Successful applications receive funding based on the value of their final bin, resulting in applications of comparable merit receiving comparable funding.

4.2 Merit indicators

The **Discovery Grants Merit Indicators** are a scale of qualifiers that contain statements with reference to major points of consideration, to guide members towards arriving at a rating for each selection criterion.

All applicants, both early career and established researchers, are 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 expected to discuss and justify their ratings during the peer review meeting. Following discussion, members vote on a rating that corresponds to the indicator which best reflects their complete assessment for a given criterion.

Members must make every effort to review applications without bias; such as: biases based on schools of thought or approaches, fundamental versus applied research, certain sub-disciplines or areas of research, size or reputation of an institution, personal factors, age, sex or gender of the applicant should not influence an assessment.

4.3 Distribution of ratings

The **Discovery Grants Merit Indicators** are absolute in that they refer to the entire research community. Merit indicators are expected to be interpreted the same way from one competition year to the next. The weakest 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*. EGs calibrate the use of the merit indicators through various opportunities prior to the peer review meeting.

4.4 Selection criteria

Several elements are considered in the evaluation of each selection criterion. Details are provided below for instances when failure to sufficiently address a specific element can warrant a rating of *Insufficient* for the criterion. There is no prescribed weighting of elements within any criterion. Evaluation Group members should use their expertise and judgment in conjunction with the merit indicator grid text when determining the relative importance of elements for any particular case.

4.4.1 Scientific or engineering excellence of the researcher

This criterion comprises several elements that consider the researcher's contributions to the natural sciences and engineering (see **Guidelines on the assessment of contributions to research, training and mentoring**). Reviewers consider a variety of contributions made over the past six years and the associated impacts. For contributions made more than six years ago, where the impact is being felt now (e.g., exploitation of patent, inclusion in a code, etc.), applicants are provided the opportunity to highlight and discuss these in the Most Significant Contributions section. Additionally, applicants with eligible **leaves of absence** may include contributions from their most recent active research period prior to the last six years for a period equivalent to the duration of the leave as indicated in their CCV. Ratings should always be reflective of the actual research experience of the applicant.

When assessing an applicant's previous work, members are asked to only consider the relevance of the NSE contributions. These contributions can have impacts to users from all sectors including academia, industry, government and the public (e.g. policy makers, Indigenous Peoples).

The merit indicators for the *Scientific or Engineering Excellence of the Researcher* criterion are listed in **Appendix 1**. The following elements are considered in the evaluation of the Excellence of the Researcher (see the **Guidelines on the assessment of contributions to research, training and mentoring** for further examples of evidence and indicators of impact):

- Knowledge, expertise, and experience of the researcher in the NSE. Possible evidence of stature in the field includes:
 - grants, awards, and/or prizes received;
 - invitations to give lectures, write review articles, and/or chair conference sessions;

- membership on committees, editorial boards, and/or advisory boards not directly related to the applicant's research activities;
- involvement in public outreach activities (e.g., organizing NSE promotional events, taking on leadership positions in NSE outreach, being involved in Indigenous outreach activities etc.);
- contributions to the promotion of equity, diversity and inclusion in the research enterprise; and/or
- other applicable 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 and impact of contributions to the proposed research and/or other areas of research in the NSE. Possible evidence of research accomplishments includes:
 - publications;
 - conference presentations and/or proceedings;
 - books or book chapters;
 - patents or technology transfer;
 - technical reports;
 - other methods of dissemination as appropriate to the type of research (e.g., for Indigenous research, reports prepared by and with Indigenous communities for which researchers have no formal authorship)

Assessment must be based on the quality and impact of all contributions, not only on the number of publications or conference presentations. Venues with the highest impact (as measured by readership or attendance) may not be the most appropriate for an applicant's research results and it is the responsibility of the applicant to explain the choice of venues for dissemination.

The contributions submitted as samples by the applicant are evidence of the quality of the applicant's work in the past six years (applicants with eligible **leaves of absence** may include contributions from their most recent active research period prior to the last six years for a period equivalent to the duration of the leave). The samples are typically chosen to represent significant and recent contributions, or those most relevant to the proposed work. Members' knowledge of a particular journal's review procedures may be helpful in assessing the quality of a publication. However, applicants should not be disadvantaged for publishing in journals that are not familiar to the members. 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.

Where publications are prepared in collaboration with students, postdoctoral fellows, or other researchers, the assessment must take into account the overall quality and impact of the work. In these instances, the applicant should have clearly described their role and intellectual contribution to collaborative work or joint publications.

Impact can be seen as, but is not limited to, advancing knowledge, developing technology, addressing socio-economic or environmental needs, engaging in meaningful knowledge co-creation with Indigenous Peoples, or contributing to increased diversity and equity in research. Members should be aware that the relevance of such considerations may differ depending on the discipline and the nature of the research being conducted.

- 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 (e.g. created significant changes in thought within the research area, impacted public policy, advanced reconciliation and the decolonization of research, promoted the inclusion and advancement of under-represented groups in research, and/or influenced activities of users such as industry or the general public); and/or
 - the extent of contributions to the development of standards or codes of practice.

EGs that only have a small proportion of applied science applications will often be more familiar with the track record indicators used for basic/fundamental science. Members must use caution and be conscious of placing too much emphasis on basic/fundamental science and engineering indicators of achievement and excellence, such as publications in refereed journals, and ignoring or de-emphasizing indicators of applied research achievements such as patents. See the [Guidelines on the assessment of contributions to research, training and mentoring](#) for further details.

4.4.2 Merit of the proposal

A program of research must be of high quality to warrant support. This criterion encompasses the assessment of the proposed program of research with long-term goals, rather than a single short-term project or collection of projects. The program must not be limited to the development of specific applications of existing knowledge; it must represent an original and innovative contribution.

The proposed program of research must be assessed based on its merit in the NSE and not human health or social sciences and humanities. To determine whether work is in the NSE or not, reviewers are asked to consider the Tri-Agency (CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC) document [Selecting the Appropriate Federal Granting Agency](#) and the supporting [Addendum to the guidelines for the eligibility of applications related to health](#). Members must evaluate only the NSE content of the proposal. If the program is not in the NSE and/or if the projects are defined without being placed in the broader context of an NSE program, a rating of *Insufficient* for the Merit of the Proposal (MoP) is warranted.

The merit indicators for the MoP criterion are listed in [Appendix 2](#). In assessing the MoP, the following elements should be considered:

- Originality and innovation:
 - the extent to which the proposal suggests and explores novel or potentially transformative concepts and lines of inquiry in the NSE; and
 - the extent to which the proposal will lead to advances in the NSE.
- Significance and expected contributions to NSE research; potential for policy- and/or technology-related impact:
 - the likely impact of the research, including the potential to advance knowledge in the field and influence the direction of thought and activity;
 - the potential for innovation in the discipline(s) or achievement of results with importance to a broad range of applications;
 - the suitability of results for dissemination and critical appraisal for use in the research community and/or by stakeholders;
 - the significance of developed applications to general and/or limited end users (firms, institutions, etc.).

In any peer review system, there is a risk towards conservatism or excessive caution. Members should be open to new research problems and innovative approaches, and should focus their discussions on whether the problems addressed are challenging, interesting, could potentially have a transformative impact on the field, and whether the methodologies proposed could yield new and useful knowledge.

- Clarity and scope of objectives:
 - the articulation of long-term goals and short-term objectives and a clear description of their relationship;
 - specific, well-focused, and realistic statement(s) of objectives;
 - the articulation of goals with sufficient breadth and scope that reflects a high-quality research program;
 - the demonstration of a cohesive research vision that is greater than simply plans and objectives.
- Clarity and appropriateness of methodology:
 - clear and detailed description of the proposed methodology;
 - current, justified, and appropriate methodology that contributes to the stated research goals; and
 - for Indigenous Research, the proposed approaches and methods, must reflect Indigenous values and ways of knowing and sharing.
- Feasibility:
 - the complementarity of the applicant's expertise and the proposed methodology which would allow the objectives to be reached within the proposed timeframe;
 - accessibility to necessary equipment and resources;
 - the applicant's anticipation of potential problems and mitigating measures as it relates to stated objectives or potential access to funds; and

- the applicant's capacity to undertake the planned program given their commitments to other research endeavours, as presented in the application.
- Extent to which the scope of the proposal addresses all relevant issues, including the need for varied expertise within or across disciplines:
 - summary of recent progress in research activities related to the proposal;
 - framing of the research with appropriate reference(s) to other relevant work in the field; and
 - consideration of relevant areas of knowledge and the applicant's proposed approach to addressing research questions.
- Consideration of equity, diversity and inclusion in the research process:
 - Equity, diversity and inclusion considerations in the research process (e.g. the research questions, design of the study, methodology, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of results) are integrated where relevant.

For further information, refer to the [Equity, diversity and inclusion considerations at each stage of the research process](#) web page.

- Consideration of interdisciplinary methods or practices in research, if applicable:
 - Collaborative activities are encouraged through the Discovery Grants program and reviewers should be particularly careful to give adequate credit to effective research interaction(s). Proposals that relate to interdisciplinary endeavours may appear somewhat unfocused when compared with other applications. 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, members should recognize and appreciate the additional challenges inherent in interdisciplinary research. Members are also asked to keep an open mind to the practices and methodologies of disciplines other than their own.

For further information about the review of applications in interdisciplinary research, refer to the [Guidelines for the Preparation and Review of Applications in Interdisciplinary Research](#).

- Appropriateness of, and justification for, the budget:
 - suitability of the budget in relation to the proposed methodology and expected results in terms of scale and feasibility of research plans (e.g., number of research personnel in relation to available equipment/resources, etc.); and
 - demonstration that funds requested in the current application are not for expenses supported or submitted for support through other sources.

Discovery Grant applicants can receive research support from other sources for the same research ideas/objectives, as long as it is used to cover different expenses and that the funding sources are not CIHR or SSHRC. Other sources of research support include grants and contributions (held and applied for) from federal and provincial funding agencies, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, universities (e.g., institution

start-up funds), the primary place of employment (for adjunct professors employed outside of the university sector), and/or others. The onus is on the applicant to indicate that the requested Discovery Grant funding will be for expenses that are distinct from those planned with support held. For funding applied for, applicants must indicate that there will be no duplication of funding for the same expense(s) and explain how funds will be used if all applications are successful. Failure to meet these requirements may warrant a rating of *Insufficient* for the Merit of the Proposal or the application may be rejected.

Evaluation Group members must notify NSERC staff of any application requesting funds for expenses already funded or applied for through other sources.

- Demonstration that the Discovery Grant proposal is distinct conceptually from research support held or applied for through CIHR and/or SSHRC.

The Discovery Grants Program supports research ideas/objectives that are entirely distinct from those supported or submitted for support through CIHR and/or SSHRC. Applicants must clearly explain:

- how the proposed ideas, objectives and expenditures of the Discovery Grant application are entirely distinct from those supported or submitted for support through CIHR and/or SSHRC; and
- how the anticipated contributions to research resulting from the proposed Discovery Grant will be distinct from the ones resulting from CIHR and/or SSHRC support.

In addition to proposing research that is entirely distinct, applicants who hold or receive funds from a **CIHR Foundation Grant** must clearly explain why the Discovery Grant funding is essential to carry out the research proposed in the DG application.

The onus is on the applicant to provide sufficient information for the Evaluation Group to determine whether the application meets these requirements. Failure to clearly demonstrate that the research proposed in the Discovery Grant application is entirely distinct from research support held or applied for through CIHR and/or SSHRC warrants a rating of *Insufficient* for the Merit of the Proposal criterion. For applicants who hold or receive funds from a **CIHR Foundation Grant**, failure to provide convincing evidence that support from the Discovery Grants Program is essential to carry out the research proposed also warrants a rating of *Insufficient* for Merit of the Proposal criterion.

The evaluation of other sources of funds is limited to research support that will be, or may become, active within the funding period of the proposed Discovery Grant. A summary table of explanations about other sources of research support is listed in **Appendix 4**.

4.4.3 Contribution to the training of Highly Qualified Personnel

The training of Highly Qualified Personnel (HQP) is an essential criterion for the Discovery Grants program (see [Guidelines on the assessment of contributions to research, training and mentoring](#)). Contributions to quality research training at all levels are valued, including undergraduate students involved in research and graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, technicians and research associates. HQP includes all research personnel involved in the applicant's research program, whether from academia, government, or industry.

The assessment of contributions to training of HQP is based on both the past training of HQP and the future plans for training. The merit indicators for the *Contributions to the training of Highly Qualified Personnel* criterion are listed in [Appendix 3](#). The following elements should be considered in the evaluation of this criterion:

- **Past contributions to the training of HQP**

In assessing the training of HQP over the past six years (applicants with eligible [leaves of absence](#) may include supplemental contributions from their most recent active research period prior to the last six years for a period equivalent to the duration of the leave), EG members must focus on the quality and impact of the research training. The level, content, and involvement of supervision or co-supervision in the training must be described. Where applicable, the applicant's role as co-supervisor must be clearly explained. Training must not be assessed solely in terms of the number and level of individuals supervised; it should be assessed by the quality and impact of training demonstrated through the following three components:

- **Training environment**

The research training and development opportunities provided for HQP can include, but are not limited to:

- participation and involvement of HQP in science outreach activities, interdisciplinary research, promoting EDI in the NSE, collaborations, and/or interaction with the private and public sectors

If applicable, considerations of equity, diversity and inclusion in the training environment, can include, but is not limited to:

- discussion of challenges or barriers encountered in ensuring an inclusive research and training environment;
 - a qualitative description of **specific actions** implemented to support equity and inclusion in recruitment practices, mentorship approaches, and initiatives aimed at ensuring an inclusive research and training environment and trainee growth.

Important: trainee demographic data **is not requested**, nor required to assess impacts related to equity, diversity and inclusion in the research and training environment.

For guidance on building and maintaining a high-performing diverse team and how the research environment can be made more accessible and inclusive, refer to [Equity, diversity and inclusion considerations for research teams](#).

For more information on equitable and inclusive recruitment practices, refer the CRC's [Creating an Equitable, Diverse and Inclusive Research Environment: A best practices guide for recruitment, hiring and retention](#) and NFRF's [Best practices in equity, diversity and inclusion in research](#).

- **HQP awards and research contributions**

This can include, but is not limited to:

- HQP collaboration in the applicant's research contributions (usually as co-authors, depending on the discipline), which can include but is not limited to conferences, presentations, publications, patents, and/or technical reports; and/or
- awards, scholarships and fellowships won by HQP.

- **Outcomes and skills gained by HQP**

This can include, but is not limited to:

- progression of HQP into further studies or careers that have impact, whether as professionals in the private, public sectors, and/or academia. Impact can be either in the NSE or not in the NSE, but it needs to be clear how the skills gained in the applicant's research training environment are being used by the HQP;
- training in traditional knowledge or Indigenous ways of knowing including cultural practices in the NSE context;
- professional development skills and experiences gained; and/or
- HQP completion of degree requirements within a reasonable amount of time.

Past HQP training can be in the NSE or non-NSE domains (e.g., health, social sciences), but must be in a research training environment that generates new knowledge or insights.

All applicants are evaluated using the same criteria. The only difference in the assessment of **ECRs** and ERs is the role of the training record in determining the final rating. ECRs should not be rated as *Insufficient* solely due to the lack of training record; the review should focus on the plan for future training. To compensate for the fact that ECRs have little to no training record and generally receive a lower HQP rating than most ERs, ECRs are usually funded to a lower quality threshold.

At the same time, it is unacceptable for an ER to have no training record and a rating of *Insufficient* is warranted in such cases. When evaluating applicants who have previously worked in government, industry or the international community, it is especially important to consider all types of research personnel. This could include interns, junior staff or visiting students who are directly under the applicant's supervision or co-supervision and involved in the applicant's research. The members should take into consideration the level of the applicant's involvement in these interactions. The applicant should clearly

explain their role in the research training.

A pattern of prolonged periods of study or frequent student withdrawal from programs should be explained by the applicant, while providing only minimal personal information needed to explain the issue. Members must consider eligible HQP delays that are beyond the control of the applicant (e.g., maternity, parental, personal illness, chronic illness, mental illness, or disability associated with reduced research activity, leave taken by HQP for family-related illness, bereavement, delays related to COVID-19).

- **Training plan**

The HQP training plan must be in the NSE otherwise a rating of *Insufficient* is warranted. A suitable training plan should provide details on the activities or projects in which HQP will be involved and how these relate to achieving the objectives of the proposed research program. DG applicants are expected to increase the inclusion and advancement of under-represented groups in the natural sciences and engineering, as one way to enhance excellence in research and training. In assessing the quality, suitability and clarity of the plan for training, members should consider these two components:

- **Training philosophy**

Beginning in 2020 the applicant's Training Philosophy **must** include:

- A qualitative description of existing challenges or barriers to the inclusion and advancement of under-represented groups in the NSE, which are specific to the context of the applicant's program of research:
 - An inclusive research environment exists where all people are respected and have access to the same opportunities, where all individuals can reach their full potential, unimpeded by inequitable practices;
 - Barriers to participation can be physical, procedural, visible, invisible, unintentional or other;
 - Context specific to the applicant's program of research can relate to the field of research (e.g., extended periods of travel, field work requirement or others) or aspects related to the institution (e.g., geographic region in Canada, urban centre or remote location, department size, type of degrees granted or others);
- The planned approach to promoting the participation of a diverse group of HQP, taking into account equity and inclusion in recruitment practices, mentorship approaches and initiatives aimed at ensuring an inclusive research and training environment and trainee growth.

Other aspects of the applicant's recruitment practices, mentorship approach and enhancement of the research and training environment can include:

- how the applicant interacts with research personnel, the approach taken to train and impart knowledge to future scientists/engineers, the skillsets imparted to ensure HQP success;
- intellectual involvement of HQP in the research program and its anticipated projects (i.e., the proposed research should leave room for growth and

development and HQP should be more than simply extra hands for the researcher);

- quality and extent of interactions with collaborators in academia, private and public sectors (e.g., industry, government agencies, etc.);
- involvement in interdisciplinary research;
- promotion of HQP participation in science outreach activities, supporting EDI in the NSE, professional development workshops, etc.;

For guidance on building and maintaining a high-performing diverse team and how the research environment can be made more accessible and inclusive, refer to [Equity, diversity and inclusion considerations for research teams](#).

For more information on equitable and inclusive recruitment practices, refer the CRC's [Creating an Equitable, Diverse and Inclusive Research Environment: A best practice guide for recruitment, hiring and retention](#) and NFRF's [Best practices in equity, diversity and inclusion in research](#).

- **Research training plan**

The research training plan can include, but is not limited to:

- appropriateness of the level and mix of HQP for the proposed program and its anticipated projects (e.g., are the projects suitable for an undergraduate student, a master's student, PhD candidate, or postdoctoral fellow?);
- description of anticipated outcomes in terms of future contribution to NSE knowledge and the training value of the proposed projects;
- explanation of how the work will contribute to the development of new skills or knowledge; and/or
- capacity of the researcher to supervise the proposed number and type of HQP.

ECRs and ERs with a meritorious research program but with no intent to train HQP (i.e. without an integrated HQP training plan), should receive a rating of *Insufficient* for this criterion. 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 EG when determining an appropriate rating for this criterion.

For further information on the assessment of contributions to the training of HQP, refer to the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) document. Additional information will be provided to Evaluation Group members in advance of the review.

4.4.3.1 Names of HQP in the CCV and application

In keeping with its obligation under the *Privacy Act*, NSERC requires applicants to obtain **consent** before including the names of research personnel in the CCV and application. As this is not always feasible, applicants can provide information on research personnel without providing names. This information, though more generic, should be sufficient to enable the reviewers to consider the above-mentioned points.

4.4.4 Additional considerations in the evaluation of applications

All applicants are evaluated against the same expectations in terms of the quality of the contributions that have been, or will be, produced. Some additional considerations which may influence the evaluation of any or all selection criteria are detailed below.

4.4.4.1 External reviewer reports

External reviewers help provide a deeper overall assessment of an application. External reviewers may be familiar with a particular research area or technique and may be able to comment on an applicant's contributions to the field. EGs should focus on the content and credibility of external reviewer reports as inputs into the evaluation process, but must ultimately base their recommendations on their own relative assessments.

External reviewer reports contribute to these assessments, but must not be used on their own to either accept or reject a proposal. EGs should be sensitive to any real or perceived conflict of interest or relationship between the external reviewer and the applicant that might influence the review (e.g., professional interactions, potential competition). These must be brought to the attention of NSERC staff and, if needed, addressed in the [Message from the Evaluation Group](#). EGs should also recognize that the background of an external reviewer might influence the review (e.g., school of thought bias, lack of familiarity with the Canadian research funding environment, etc.)

4.4.4.2 Implicit or unconscious biases

NSERC asks EG members to consistently guard against the possibility of unconscious bias influencing the decision-making process, 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, or applicants' personal identity such as age, sex, gender, Indigenous identity, person with a disability, visible minorities. NSERC cautions members against any judgment of an application based on such factors. To assist members in recognizing potential bias, all members are asked to complete the [Bias in Peer Review online learning module](#).

NSERC is acting on the evidence that achieving a more equitable, diverse and inclusive Canadian research enterprise is essential to creating the excellent, innovative and impactful research necessary to advance knowledge and understanding, and to respond to local, national and global challenges. This principle informs the commitments described in the [Tri-agency statement on equity, diversity and inclusion](#) (EDI).

4.4.4.3 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. NSERC monitors the success rates for ECRs to ensure they are acceptable and may implement a different quality cut-off for funding ECRs. NSERC considers it important to allow early career researchers to demonstrate their

potential for quality contributions to research and training.

All applicants are evaluated using the same criteria. The only difference in the assessment of ECRs and ERs is the role of the training record in determining the final rating. ECRs should not be rated as *Insufficient* merely for having no training record; the plan for future training should be taken into consideration. It is possible for an ECR to be rated *Insufficient* if the plans for research personnel are not appropriate or are not described with enough information to predict likelihood of HQP success. However, 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.

NSERC devotes additional funds to ECRs through their Discovery Grants (DG) and through the Discovery Launch Supplement program. NSERC offers ECRs who are scheduled to apply for their second DG the option of requesting an additional year of funding on their existing DG at the same level. This optional one-year extension is meant to provide additional time for ECRs to establish their research programs before reapplying to the Discovery Grants program as ERs.

4.4.4.4 Delays in research and dissemination of research results

Applicants are asked to give start and end dates of any eligible leaves of absence or delays and to clearly explain the impact on their research activity or in the dissemination of research results. Eligible leaves of absence (e.g., maternity, parental, personal illness, chronic illness, mental illness, or disability associated with reduced research activity, leave taken for family-related illness, bereavement, extraordinary administrative duties, delays related to COVID-19) are those taken within the last six years.

Applicants reporting a period of reduced research and training for an eligible reason **must** calculate and provide the full-time equivalent duration of the delay in the CCV: the affected time period and a percentage of reduction in time devoted to regular research and training activities.

Applicants who have reported an eligible leave of absence or delay in their CCV are entitled to an attachment that must be used to list only supplemental contributions to research (list of presentations, interviews and media relations, publications, intellectual property and recognitions) and to training (list of supervisory activities) beyond the last six years, for a period equivalent to the duration of the leave or delay reported in their CCV.

Supplemental contributions must be taken from the most recent active research period prior to the last six years and must be listed in the attachment along with their dates (month and year).

This attachment may also be used to list supplemental contributions to research and to training for a period equivalent to the duration of delays related to COVID-19. For further guidance on how to describe and consider the impacts of COVID-19 delays, refer to **Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on research: NEW guidelines for NSERC's community**.

Examples given to applicants on the use of the leaves of absence attachment:

Leave of absence during period of assessment	For a four month leave in the last six years (i.e., between January 1, 2017 and November 1, 2023), the applicant can list supplemental contributions to research and training in the attachment for a period of four months immediately prior the period of assessment (i.e., between September 1, 2016 and January 1, 2017).
Leave of absence during period of assessment <u>and</u> immediately prior	For a four month leave in the last six years (i.e. between January 1, 2017 and November 1, 2023) where the applicant was also on leave immediately prior to the period of assessment (e.g. applicant was on leave from September 1, 2016 to January 1, 2017), the applicant should list their contributions for the four months of active research immediately prior to the earlier leave (i.e., between May 1, 2016 and September 1, 2016).
Period of reduced research and training	When reporting a loss of two-thirds of normal productivity for a year due to illness, the applicant is entitled to list supplemental contributions in the attachment for a period of eight months immediately prior to the last six years (i.e., between May 1, 2016 and January 1, 2017).

Members are expected to recognize the impact of eligible delays and assess the quality of research activity as described by the applicant. The impact of eligible delays may be more than lost research time; the focus of the assessment should not be based on quantitative measures alone. If additional contributions prior the last six years are not included, members should still consider the impact of the delay. In this case, members are expected to assess the active period of research only, and prorate the quality and impact of contributions.

NSERC recognizes that research productivity and contributions to the training of HQP may be disrupted due to delays incurred either by the applicant or by HQP. While applicant delays are taken into account in both the assessment of the Scientific or Engineering Excellence of the Researcher and the Contributions to HQP Training, HQP delays are taken into account in the assessment of the Contributions to HQP Training only.

4.4.4.5 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.

Applications from adjunct and emeritus professors are evaluated using the same selection criteria, scale, indicators, and time frame as all other applications. 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 members to assess this appropriately. This could include information on the university's policy with respect to co-supervision of HQP and information on the type/level of possible interactions with HQP.

Specifically in the case of adjunct professors whose primary place of employment is outside the university sector (e.g., government, industry or colleges), NSERC will award funds only for the direct support of students (salaries or stipends and student travel costs). All other costs must be covered through other sources of funding. Members should notify NSERC staff of any application where ineligible expenses are being proposed.

5. Funding Decisions

The EG's peer review of applications and NSERC's decision on funding occur in two separate steps. First the EG performs a merit assessment of each application on the basis of the **selection criteria** and the **Discovery Grants Merit Indicators**. Then, once all applications have been evaluated and their ratings have been established, applications that have the same overall rating are grouped in a funding bin. The combination of an applicant's ratings for the three selection criteria determines the overall rating and the funding bin.

The following guiding principles apply when determining funding decisions:

- To be successful, applications have to meet a minimum quality threshold;
- Ratings of *Insufficient* under any of the three selection criteria for both early career and established researchers will result in no funding;
- Ratings above moderate are usually expected for established researchers in order to receive funding;
- Applicants will not be awarded more than the requested amount regardless of the funding level assigned to each bin.

With each competition, the funding thresholds and grant values can change based on the final bin distribution of applications and the available budget.

Final decisions on funding are the responsibility of NSERC.

6. Confidentiality

Details of the EG discussion and recommendation on a specific application are confidential and must never be divulged. Release of information must be done by NSERC. Under no circumstances should members divulge to anyone the recommendations emanating from the peer review meetings or subsequent to the competition.

EG funding recommendations are subject to approval by NSERC and may be changed for reasons of budget, administrative error, or lack of full adherence to NSERC policies.

In accordance with the **Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers** (Federal Research Funding Organizations) and the **Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers** (NSERC), members are not permitted to discuss specific results or the deliberations. Requests from applicants or enquiries on competition results,

individual cases, or EG discussions must be redirected to NSERC staff. If approached, members may wish to point out that they are required to leave the room during the discussion of an application where they are in conflict of interest.

7. Communication of results

NSERC typically communicates the funding results to applicants and universities in April following final approval. Funding decisions and related statistics are also posted on the NSERC website at a later date.

7.1 Message from the Evaluation Group (MEG)

Following the review of an application, EGs can provide written comments to the applicant as they see fit. These written comments are conveyed within the Message from the Evaluation Group (MEG) and are provided to the applicant by NSERC at the time of notification of decision.

Constructive comments within the MEG are of importance to enable researchers to improve future applications and/or research programs. MEGs should comment primarily on aspects of the application that were important in arriving at the EG's recommendation. Both strengths and weaknesses are appropriate for inclusion. MEGs can also provide information on the external reviewer reports received. Members should be aware that all applicants, including those who do not receive comments within their MEG, will automatically be sent any external reviewer reports received. If comments within the external reviewer report were a factor in arriving at the final recommendation, the MEG should state the specific points of agreement or disagreement.

While written comments from the EG can be provided in the MEG for any application, NSERC requires that comments be provided when there is a rating of *Moderate* or *Insufficient* on any selection criteria.

NSERC recommends that comments also be provided in the following cases:

- An external reviewer report is perceived to be particularly biased and the members wish to reassure the applicant that it did not influence the evaluation; and/or
- NSERC **instructions** or **presentation guidelines** have not been followed.

7.1.1 Preparation of Message from the Evaluation Group (MEG)

Following the discussion of each application, NSERC staff will indicate if a MEG is needed and will designate a member to prepare it. When preparing comments, the designated member should consult with other internal reviewers to ensure that comments accurately reflect the EG's recommendation. Consulting with the other internal reviewers also helps to ensure accuracy and completeness before submitting the MEG to NSERC. Members preparing comments should ensure that they are drafted promptly, so that MEGs can be finalized during or shortly after competition.

The time available to prepare the MEGs during the peer review meetings is limited. For this reason, internal reviewers should prepare notes which highlight the strengths and weaknesses of applications in advance.

While reviewers may have drafted comments prior to the peer review meetings, the final version of the MEG provided to NSERC must reflect the EG's assessment and recommendation.

7.1.2 Approval of final Messages from the Evaluation Group (MEG)

The section chairs review and approve all MEGs before they are sent to applicants to ensure that each reflects the EG's recommendations and is clear and detailed enough to improve future applications and/or research programs.

NSERC staff also reviews all MEGs to ensure that feedback to applicants is consistent with NSERC policies and guidelines, and is appropriate for transmission to the applicant.

Occasionally, NSERC staff may identify issues or inconsistencies within the MEG. These issues may be resolved by clarifying with the author or by discussing the case with the section chair.

8. Legal and ethical information

8.1 Responsible conduct of research

Canada's federal granting agencies—Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)—are committed to fostering and maintaining an environment that supports and promotes the responsible conduct of research. The new **Tri-Agency Framework: Responsible Conduct of Research** sets out the responsibilities and corresponding policies for researchers, institutions, and the agencies that together help support and promote a positive research environment.

Committee member's role

The agencies expect the highest standards of integrity in the research that they fund and in the review process they manage. The electronic submission of an application to the agencies commits the applicant(s) to a number of principles, including compliance with the *Tri-Agency Framework: Responsible Conduct of Research*. **Should members identify, during the evaluation process, what appears to be a lack of integrity** (e.g., a misrepresentation in an agency application or related document such as providing incomplete, inaccurate or false information), **they should bring their concerns to the attention of agency staff at the earliest opportunity**. The agency will then refer any allegations to the Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research for follow-up. Such allegations should not be a consideration during the review process, nor should they be part of the committee's evaluation discussions.

Committee members who raise concerns should rest assured that the matter will be addressed by the Secretariat in accordance with the **Tri-Agency Framework: Responsible Conduct of Research**; however, members will not be privy to the outcome of the matter, as the findings are confidential and no personal information is shared.

In addition, committee members should notify the agencies of any conflict of interest - financial or otherwise - that might influence the agencies' decision on what applications the members can review. Committee members and external reviewers are responsible for respecting the confidentiality of application material and for declaring conflicts of interest. Should committee members become aware of a situation that violates the integrity of the review process, they should discuss this immediately with agency staff.

8.2 Ethical and other considerations

NSERC requires that researchers adhere to a number of policies and guidelines governing research in particular areas, as described in Section 2.4 of the Tri-Agency Framework: Responsible Conduct of Research:

- Research requiring the use of animals
- Research involving human subjects
- Research involving human pluripotent stem cells
- Research involving controlled information
- Research involving biohazards
- Research involving radioactive materials
- Research that potentially has an effect on the environment

These are described in the section “**Requirements for Certain Types of Research**” in the NSERC **Program Guide for Professors**.

It is the responsibility of NSERC staff, with the support of administrators from research institutions, to ensure that the researchers adhere to these guidelines. However, reviewers must alert NSERC to any potential ethical concerns or problems that are observed in information sessions or during the evaluation process. Here are some examples:

- Inadequate sensitivity to the potential concerns of human subjects and/or inadequate provisions for the participation of human subjects in experiments, as required by the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
- Use of animals in experiments where the significance of the proposed research does not appear to justify either the use of animal subjects or the proposed experimental protocol
- Inclusion of controlled information in an application
- Inadequate training of graduate students in the handling of hazardous chemicals or biological substances
- Potentially harmful effects on the environment, or an inaccurate or incomplete assessment of these effects.
- Research that involves the use of human pluripotent stem cells.

If an EG or panel raises serious ethical concerns, these concerns should be discussed immediately with NSERC staff to determine if there is a means of resolving any apparent problems quickly, or if the release of any grant funds should be delayed pending resolution of the problem.

8.3 Confidentiality

Members appointed to the EG must read and sign the **Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers** describing NSERC's expectations and requirements.

All application material is provided to members in strict confidence and must be used for review purposes only. Such material should be kept in a secure place that is not accessible to colleagues or students.

At the end of the competition cycle, members must destroy by a secure process all review materials, including their own notes and electronic files on their personal computers. If NSERC requires assistance to provide additional information for particular cases after the peer review meetings, the relevant information will be provided to the members.

8.4 Communication with applicants

Members **must not** enter into direct communication with applicants to obtain information on their proposals or for any other purpose related to the application, and must refer all enquiries from applicants to NSERC staff.

8.5 EG/Panel members under investigation

As required by 6.3.2.i of the **Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Policy of the Federal Research Funding Organizations**, members of an NSERC EG or panel who find themselves in the position of having to respond to formal allegations of financial or professional impropriety **cannot** participate in the work of the EG or panel while an investigation is under way.

8.6 Privacy Act

Personal information means any information about an identifiable individual. Based on the **Privacy Act**, personal information provided to NSERC by applicants must be used only for the purpose of assessing NSERC applications, making funding decisions and for certain related uses described to applicants by NSERC at the time that their personal information is collected. Members are reminded that the use or disclosure of this information for any other purpose is illegal.

In most cases, NSERC collects personal information directly from the individual to whom it relates. NSERC may also collect it from other sources, such as external reviewers, as part of the formal peer review process. For this reason, EGs must not use or consider information about an applicant that has been obtained in any other way, for example, by an EG member by virtue of

his/her involvement in non-NSERC activities.

An applicant has the legal right to access personal information in NSERC files, including, for example, the full texts of external reviewer reports or EG feedback. The *Privacy Act* allows NSERC to edit a peer reviewer's name from a review before disclosing it to the applicant; however, lists of EG members are published regularly by NSERC, so applicants know who the EG members are.

It is important for EG members to adhere strictly to the guidelines set out in the **Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers**.

8.7 Canadian Human Rights Act

The activities of NSERC are subject to the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. The purpose of the *Act* is to give effect to the principle that every individual should have equal opportunity with other individuals to make the life that he or she is able and wishes to have, consistent with the duties and obligations as a member of society, without being hindered or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices.

For all purposes of the *Act*, race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, marital status, family status, disability and conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted are prohibited grounds for discrimination. Where the grounds for discrimination are pregnancy or childbirth, the discrimination is deemed to be on the grounds of sex.

It is a discriminatory practice to deny a service to an individual, or to differentiate adversely in relation to any individual in the provision of that service.

8.8 Official Languages Act

NSERC ensures that its EGs or panels and staff are fully aware of their obligations and rights regarding official languages as legislated in the *Official Languages Act*.

In accordance with its active offer of bilingual service to the public, NSERC strives to appoint an appropriate number of experts with the appropriate language capabilities to serve on EGs and panels. EGs must ensure that all applications receive a full and detailed evaluation, regardless of the official language of presentation. On occasion, this may entail consultation with NSERC staff to identify EG members or external reviewers with adequate linguistic capability.

In accordance with its active offer of bilingual service to the public, upon request and with advanced notice, NSERC will provide the service of simultaneous translation for the EGs during the peer review meetings. EG members who wish to make use of this service should advise NSERC well in advance of the meeting to allow for the preparations.

Important Links

1. [Discovery Grants Merit Indicators](#)
2. [Guidelines Governing Membership of NSERC's Peer Review Committees](#)
3. [Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers](#)
4. [Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers](#)
5. [Guidelines on the assessment of contributions to research, training and mentoring](#)
6. [Guidelines for the Preparation and Review of Applications in Engineering and the Applied Sciences](#)
7. [NSERC guide on integrating equity, diversity and inclusion considerations in research](#)
8. [Tri-council policy statement 2: Chapter 9: Research involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.](#)

Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym	Definition
CCV	Canadian Common CV
CDR	Committee on Discovery Research
CIHR	Canadian Institutes of Health Research
EA	Environmental Assessment
ECR	Early Career Researcher
EG	Evaluation Group
EoR	Excellence of the Researcher
ER	Established Researcher
HQP	Highly Qualified Personnel
MEG	Message from the Evaluation Group
MoP	Merit of the Proposal
NOI	Notification of Intent to Apply
NSE	Natural Sciences and Engineering
NSERC	Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada
SME	Subject Matter Eligibility
SSHRC	Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Appendix 1 – Excellence of the Researcher merit indicators

Exceptional	Acknowledged as a leader in terms of research excellence, accomplishments, and service. Contributions presented in the application are of the highest level of quality . Impact and importance of the work is clearly evident and groundbreaking .
Outstanding	Research excellence, accomplishments and service are far superior to others. Contributions presented in the application are of high quality . Impact and importance of the work is clearly evident and influential .
Very Strong	Research excellence, accomplishments, and service are superior to others. Contributions presented in the application are above average in quality . Impact and importance of the work is clearly evident .
Strong	Research excellence, accomplishments, and service are significant . Contributions presented in the application are of good quality. Impact and importance of the work is evident .
Moderate	Research excellence, accomplishments, and service are reasonable . Contributions presented in the application are of reasonable quality. Impact and importance of the work is somewhat evident .
Insufficient	Research excellence, accomplishments, and service are below an acceptable level . Contributions presented in the application are limited in quality. Impact and importance of the work is not clearly evident .

Appendix 2 – Merit of the Proposal merit indicators

Exceptional	Proposed research program is clearly presented, is extremely original and innovative and is likely to have impact by leading to groundbreaking advances in the area and/or leading to a technology or policy that addresses socio-economic or environmental needs. Long-term vision and short-term objectives are clearly defined. The methodology is clearly defined and appropriate. The application clearly demonstrates how the research activities to be supported are distinct from those funded (or applied for) by other sources.
Outstanding	Proposed research program is clearly presented, is highly original and innovative and is likely to have impact by contributing to groundbreaking advances in the area, and/or leading to a technology or policy that addresses socio-economic or environmental needs. Long-term goals are clearly defined and short-term objectives are well planned. The methodology is clearly described and appropriate. The application clearly demonstrates how the research activities to be supported are distinct from those funded (or applied for) by other sources.
Very Strong	Proposed research program is clearly presented, is original and innovative and is likely to have impact by leading to advancements and/or addressing socio-economic or environmental needs. Long-term goals are defined and short-term objectives are planned. The methodology is clearly described and appropriate. The application clearly demonstrates how the research activities to be supported are distinct from those funded (or applied for) by other sources.
Strong	Proposed research program is clearly presented, is original and innovative and is likely to have impact and/or address socio-economic or environmental needs. Long-term goals and short-term objectives are clearly described. The methodology is described and appropriate. The application clearly demonstrates how the research activities to be supported are distinct from those funded (or applied for) by other sources.
Moderate	Proposed research program is clearly presented, has original and innovative aspects and may have impact and/or address socio-economic or environmental needs. Long-term and short-term objectives are described. The methodology is partially described and/or appropriate. The application clearly demonstrates how the research activities to be supported are distinct from those funded (or applied for) by other sources.
Insufficient	Proposed research program, as presented lacks clarity , and/or is of limited originality and innovation. Objectives are not clearly described and/or likely not attainable. Methodology is not clearly described and/or appropriate. The application does not clearly demonstrate how the research activities to be supported are distinct from those funded (or applied for) by other sources or does not clearly demonstrate a program of research in the NSE.

Appendix 3 – Contributions to the training of HQP merit indicators

Exceptional	<p>Past training is at the highest level in terms of the research training environment provided and HQP contributions to research. Most HQP move on to highly impactful positions that require skills gained through the training received.</p> <p>Training philosophy and research training plans are of the highest quality: highly appropriate, clearly defined and expected to produce top quality results in terms of the overall approach and specific projects for HQP.</p> <p>Challenges related to equity, diversity and inclusion specific to the institution and field of research are clearly described.</p> <p>Specific actions to support the recruitment of a diverse group of HQP and an inclusive research training environment are clearly defined.</p>
Outstanding	<p>Past training is far superior to other applicants in terms of research training environment provided and HQP contributions to research. Most HQP move on to impactful positions that require skills gained through the training received.</p> <p>Training philosophy and research training plans are far superior: highly appropriate, clearly defined and expected to produce high quality results in terms of the overall approach and specific projects for HQP.</p> <p>Challenges related to equity, diversity and inclusion specific to the institution and field of research are clearly described.</p> <p>Specific actions to support the recruitment of a diverse group of HQP and an inclusive research training environment are clearly defined.</p>
Very Strong	<p>Past training is superior to other applicants in terms of the research training environment provided and HQP contributions to research. HQP generally move on to impactful positions that require skills gained through the training received.</p> <p>Training philosophy and research training plans are superior: highly appropriate, clearly defined and expected to produce quality results in terms of the overall approach and specific projects for HQP.</p> <p>Challenges related to equity, diversity and inclusion specific to the institution and field of research are described.</p> <p>Specific actions to support the recruitment of a diverse group of HQP and an inclusive research training environment are defined.</p>

Strong	<p>Past training compares favourably with other applicants in terms of the research training environment provided and HQP contributions to research. HQP generally move on to positions that require skills gained through the training received.</p> <p>Training philosophy and research training plans are appropriate and clearly defined in terms of the overall approach and specific projects for HQP.</p> <p>Challenges related to equity, diversity and inclusion specific to the institution and/or field of research are described.</p> <p>Specific actions to support the recruitment of a diverse group of HQP and/or an inclusive research training environment are defined.</p>
Moderate	<p>Past training is modest relative to other applicants in terms of the research training environment provided and HQP contributions to research. Some HQP move on to positions that require skills gained through the training received.</p> <p>Training philosophy and research training plans are partially appropriate and partially defined in terms of the overall approach and specific projects for HQP.</p> <p>Challenges related to equity, diversity and inclusion specific to the institution and/or field of research are partially described.</p> <p>Specific actions to support the recruitment of a diverse group of HQP and/or an inclusive research training environment are partially defined.</p>
Insufficient	<p>Past training is below an acceptable level in terms of the research training environment provided and HQP contributions to research. HQP rarely move on to positions that require skills gained through the training received.</p> <p>Training philosophy and research training plans are not appropriate and not clearly defined in terms of the overall approach and specific projects for HQP.</p> <p>Challenges related to equity, diversity and inclusion specific to the institution and/or field of research are inaccurate or not described.</p> <p>Specific actions to support the recruitment of a diverse group of HQP and/or an inclusive research training environment are not appropriate or not defined.</p>

Appendix 4 – Other sources of research support

GRANT	Ideas/Objectives and anticipated contribution to research	Expenses from funding	
		Applied for	Held
CIHR – Foundation Grants	Entirely distinct & justification that DG is essential	Not applicable (program phasing out)	Different
CIHR or SSHRC – All Grants	Entirely distinct	Different	Different
All sources of support other than CIHR or SSHRC: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other federal grants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NSERC – all Grants (incl. CHRP) - Tri-Agency initiatives: NFRF, CRC, CERC • Provincial • Private • Other* (e.g. NGO, university) <p>*This list is not exhaustive</p>	No restriction	Confirm that there will be no duplication of funding for the same expense(s); otherwise, explain how funds will be used if all applications are successful	Indicate that expenses are different

Note: The evaluation of other sources of support is limited to research support that will be, or may become, active within the funding period of the proposed Discovery Grant.

Appendix 5 – Discovery Grants Rating Form

Applicant:		Applicant status:	
University:			
Title of proposal:			
Selection criteria (See DG Peer Review Manual for complete details)			
Excellence of the researcher	<input type="checkbox"/> Exceptional	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Strong
	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong	<input type="checkbox"/> Moderate	<input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge, expertise, and experience of the researcher in the NSE • Quality and impact of contributions to the proposed research and/or other areas of research in the NSE • Importance of contributions to, and use by, other research and end-users 	Rationale for rating:		
Merit of the proposal	<input type="checkbox"/> Exceptional	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Strong
	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong	<input type="checkbox"/> Moderate	<input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Originality and innovation • Significance and expected contributions to NSE research; potential for policy- and/or technology-related impact • Clarity and scope of objectives • Clarity and appropriateness of methodology • Feasibility • Extent to which the scope of the proposal addresses all relevant issues • Equity, diversity and inclusion considerations in the research process (e.g. the research questions, design of the study, methodology, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of results), are integrated where relevant. • Consideration of interdisciplinary methods or practices in research • Appropriateness of, and justification for, the budget • Demonstration that the DG proposal is distinct conceptually from research supported (or submitted for support) through CIHR and/or SSHRC • Clear explanation why DG funding is essential to carry out the research proposed in the DG application (for applicants who hold or receive funds from a CIHR Foundation Grant) 	Rationale for rating:		

Contributions to the training of highly qualified personnel	<input type="checkbox"/> Exceptional	<input type="checkbox"/> Outstanding	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Strong
	<input type="checkbox"/> Strong	<input type="checkbox"/> Moderate	<input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality and impact of past training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training environment • HQP awards and research contributions • Outcomes and skills gained by HQP • Quality, suitability and clarity of the planned training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training philosophy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentorship approach and enhancement of the research and training environment • Challenges or barriers to inclusion and advancement of under-represented groups • Planned approach to promote participation of a diverse group of HQP • Research training plan for individual HQP 	Rationale for rating:		
Other comments (e.g., eligible delays that were considered, quality of samples of contributions provided, etc.):			
Comments from external reviewer (please highlight any comments that would be deemed inappropriate for the members to have considered in their discussions, undisclosed COI, reports to be disregarded, etc.):			
Message from the Evaluation Group :			
<p>This form is provided by NSERC as an aid to members for reviewing applications. Once completed, the form contains personal information, and like all other review material, must be stored in a secure manner to prevent unauthorized access (refer to Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers).</p> <p>The rating sheet focuses on the selection 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 preliminary ratings (refer to 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 peer review meetings.</p>			

(2023 version)