



9. Activities for February

9.1 Logistics for Competition Session

9.1.1 Agenda

Your program officer (PO), in consultation with the section chair, will prepare an agenda for the competition session and forward it to you prior to the meetings. The agenda will specify the order in which applications will be considered and will indicate the estimated time to be spent on each category. The agenda will start with opening remarks from the section chair, a discussion of key issues on which consensus is needed prior to starting the reviews and a briefing on the mode of operation of the Evaluation Group. It will also include a policy meeting and a discussion of membership.

9.1.2 Physical Arrangements

Hotel and Travel

The competition sessions are held for a number of Evaluation Groups on NSERC's premises, Constitution Square, Tower II, 350 Albert Street, Ottawa, and for others at the Marriott Hotel, 100 Kent Street, Ottawa. Out-of-town members usually stay at the Marriott Hotel which is located one block away from our offices.

Information regarding travel and physical arrangements for the February meetings will be sent to you in December. At such time, you will be required to confirm your hotel and travel arrangements through Carlson Wagonlit by Global Travel Centre, NSERC's travel agent (see [Appendix 4](#)). **Members not requiring travel arrangements must still contact NSERC's travel agent to confirm their hotel reservations.**

9.2 Roles and Responsibilities for Evaluation Group Members and NSERC Staff

Section Chair

The section chair provides leadership to ensure the orderly and complete evaluation of applications and the transmission of accurate recommendations to NSERC. The section chair ensures that all important aspects of proposals are considered and that an Evaluation Group consensus is reached for all applications.

The section chair leads the Evaluation Group's efforts to maintain the high quality of peer evaluation. This includes advance briefing of EG members and ensuring the consistency and equity of approach of the EG in the February meetings.



The section chair will also be the EG spokesperson in dealings with NSERC on policy issues, new emerging areas of research, particular discipline problem areas, etc. This includes submitting an annual report to NSERC.

The section chair coordinates the preparation of comments to applicants during the competition session to ensure that they reflect the full Evaluation Group consensus and not the views of a single member.

EG Members

See also Section [1.2](#) of this Manual. Specific responsibilities during the February meetings include:

- Providing in-depth evaluations for a **subset** of all applications (the ones for which you are a 1st or 2nd reviewer) assigned to that EG and presenting your assessment to the Evaluation Group (this may entail written comments);
- Reading and being ready to discuss applications assigned to you as a “reviewer” in addition to those for which you are 1st or 2nd reviewer;
- Preparing comments that reflect the full Evaluation Group consensus;
- Adhering to NSERC’s guidelines and regulations on the review of applications, conflict of interest, communication with applicants and confidentiality.

Some EGs use sections. You may participate as part of a section to evaluate RTI, MRS applications, etc. This will be confirmed by your program officer.

Program Officers

- The program officer advises on NSERC policies, guidelines and procedures and helps ensure consistency in evaluation of all applications assigned to the EG;
- Serves as the “Evaluation Group memory” by bringing relevant documentation to the attention of the Evaluation Group to aid it in its deliberations;
- Ensures that grant recommendations (level and duration) are accurately recorded and that EG comments that reflect the consensus of the Evaluation Group are prepared where they are required;
- Ensures that recommended awards conform with the budget allocated to the EG and with NSERC guidelines;
- Brings any problem areas to the attention of the section chair or the Evaluation Group chair, or to the team leader or director;
- Ensures consistency of approach (e.g., use of referees, evaluation of RTI applications, funding policy) from year to year;
- Assists the EG in the use of the reference material provided by NSERC;
- Assists the EG in identifying candidates for Evaluation Group membership.

Program officers are not Evaluation Group members and do not have voting rights on the Evaluation Group.



Evaluation Group Chairs

Evaluation Group chairs are members of the Committee on Grants and Scholarships (COGS). In this capacity, they act in the best interest of all areas of science and engineering, while bringing to the discussion their particular knowledge of the disciplines under their purview. Evaluation Group chairs oversee both the Evaluation Groups and the scholarships and fellowships selection committees.

One of the principal roles of Evaluation Group chairs during the competition sessions is to monitor the quality of review in the Evaluation Group(s) under their responsibility and to interact with them as necessary. This includes acting as a constructive critic, advising Evaluation Groups on NSERC policies and procedures, and representing their opinions and concerns to COGS and to NSERC. While the Group chair role is associated with disciplines close to their own field of expertise, Evaluation Group chairs are encouraged to sit in on Evaluation Groups in other disciplines to familiarize themselves with those discipline-specific issues or dynamics.

Evaluation Group chairs are not members of the Evaluation Groups under their purview and do not vote. Evaluation Group chairs may attend only part of the competition sessions and normally attend policy meetings of the relevant Evaluation Groups. More specifically Evaluation Group chairs will:

- monitor the effect of the budgetary situation on new applicant recommendations, success rates and grant values;
- advise NSERC on special requests by Evaluation Groups such as the transfer of funds from one program (e.g., between PGS and PDF) or category to another, requests to carry forward a budgetary surplus, or other exceptional requests;
- attend the discussion of specific cases, as identified by NSERC staff;
- when possible, attend the discussion of applications from EG members (the Conflict of Interest Guidelines require the presence of a Group chair or delegate);
- observe the mode of operation of the Evaluation Groups, peer review process, group dynamics and other issues (problem areas, overlap with other funding agencies, etc.); monitor the quality of the comments to Discovery Grants applicants;
- identify any policy issues that may require discussion at COGS or action by staff;
- participate in the discussion of the membership for the following year. Evaluation Group chairs help NSERC to identify next year's section chair(s) for Evaluation Groups, in consultation with the NSERC staff, the current section chair(s) and senior EG members;
- review the statistics on and trends in awards made upon recommendation of the Evaluation Groups and the list of any other awards approved by executive action;
- periodically review the jurisdiction of Evaluation Groups and recommend changes as appropriate;



- for the PGS and PDF programs, provide input on where to draw the funding cutoff line for committees under their purview and monitor the quality of applications just above and below that line.

One Evaluation Group chair will preside over the Chairs Selection Committee, which selects winners for the André Hamer Postgraduate Prizes and the Howard Alper Postdoctoral Prize. This committee meets by teleconference two weeks after the February PGS/PDF competition.

The work of an Evaluation Group chair, like that of an NSERC staff member, is a delicate balance of advocate, advisor, and critic. The Evaluation Groups have full responsibility for the evaluation of grant and scholarship applications assigned to them according to policy guidelines established by NSERC. Only in situations involving a violation of guidelines or “unfair” evaluation is a recommendation overturned. The Evaluation Group chairs and NSERC staff work together to monitor the quality of review and to develop policy.

Directors

The directors (Research Grants) work with Evaluation Group chairs to monitor the quality of peer review and the effectiveness of programs. They also identify and monitor policy issues and provide advice to Evaluation Group chairs and program officers on the interpretation of policies and rules.

As much as possible, directors attend the policy meetings of the EGs under their responsibility and identify new section chairs for EGs.

Team Leaders

The team leaders are responsible for discipline groupings. They observe the deliberations of all EGs under their responsibility, maintain relationships with the EGs, provide advice to program officers and EGs on policy, specific cases and procedural issues and assist with problems. They attend the February policy meetings of the EGs and brief members on new developments at NSERC.

Program Assistants

Program assistants provide support to program officers in all aspects of the competition, e.g., by typing comments and other documents as needed, by assisting with transfers of applications and requests for consultation, by replacing the program officer for short periods of time, as required.

Program Operations Unit Staff

Secretariat Offices will operate throughout the competition, one on NSERC’s premises and one at the Marriott Hotel. The Secretariat is the first point of contact for



questions/problems regarding logistics and physical arrangements (meeting rooms, food, security and keys, light, photocopying, faxes, changes in travel arrangements, messages, etc.).

9.3 Group Dynamics

In 1994, NSERC commissioned a study of the Research Grants adjudication process. One component of the analysis focused on the patterns of group communication observed in EGs and examined the kinds of roles played by chairs, program officers and members. The following is a description of the roles observed in NSERC EGs and a brief discussion of how they can enhance or disrupt the adjudication process. This section was prepared by Dr. Barbara Carroll* who conducted the study. It is included in the Peer Review Manual to alert you to the potential effects of group dynamics and to help you maintain constructive group dynamics throughout the competition session.

* Copy of analysis available upon request.

Adjudicative fairness is mediated by the kinds of group dynamics that occur in EGs. Constructive dynamics help ensure fairness by focusing the discussion on the evaluation criteria, detecting and offsetting biases related to the application of NSERC policies and avoiding the kind of social influence that leads to decisions based on factors that are unrelated to the evaluation criteria. On the other hand, destructive group dynamics provide the kinds of conditions that allow social influence to go unchecked and so they increase the chances that research grants will be awarded on the basis of anything other than rational arguments.

The type of social influence that is most likely to influence a EG's decision-making process can be blatant and include discussion of factors such as an applicant's personality, marital status, culture or university politics. Often it is more subtle.

Discussion may centre on factors that have their origins in NSERC's evaluation criteria, but go beyond these criteria to involve judgments based on personal knowledge of the applicant or unsubstantiated inferences (e.g., guesses about the nature of the collaboration between members of a research team, judgments about an applicant's ability based on self-presentation skills during an information session, or inferences about a relationship between an applicant and an external assessor in the absence of supporting evidence). Alternatively, the discussion may be coloured by pervasive positive or negative judgments as can occur, for instance, when an applicant is labelled a "star" or recognized as the recipient of a previous **nil** recommendation.

Whether group dynamics are constructive or destructive depends largely on the roles played by EG members. Within EGs there are two prescribed roles: the section chair and the NSERC program officer. There are also at least four emergent roles including the more constructive Watchdog and Humorist roles, as well as the potentially destructive Bulldozer and Compulsive roles. These emergent roles may be played by a Evaluation Group member, or they can be incorporated into the role of section chair or program officer.



A major role of the EG Chair is to provide procedural leadership and, together with the program officer, the chair is officially responsible for ensuring a fair adjudication process. The role of section chair is governed by NSERC guidelines. NSERC's system for selecting section chairs is generally excellent. As a result, most EGs can rely on their section chairs to provide direction and monitor the fairness of the adjudication process. This excellence cannot be automatically assumed, however. When section chairs are more non-directive by nature, they may be less active in promoting fairness. Under these conditions, the possibility of social influence increases. To counter this, the NSERC program officer may work together with the section chair and play an active role in ensuring fairness.

Alternatively, the integrity of the adjudication process may be preserved if at least one of the EG members is willing to assume the role of Watchdog.

Watchdogs have the ability to stand back from the content of the Evaluation Group's discussion, monitor the underlying decision-making process and detect potential biases and social influence attempts. When they detect these, they are conscientious about bringing them to the attention of the EG and restoring fairness by focusing on the evaluation criteria and/or NSERC policies. Good section chairs inevitably play a Watchdog role. When they do not, EG members should look for evidence of a Watchdog among their colleagues and actively reinforce those playing this role.

Although Watchdogs are generally effective in promoting constructive group dynamics, they can be less effective when they monitor for aspects of the decision-making process that have little to do with the evaluation criteria, (e.g., very fine points of language usage, correct reporting style for journal articles, or for evidence that dissertation supervisors had attended to the more practical aspects of preparing new applicants for an academic career), and when their Watchdog role is moderated by a Bulldozer tendency to believe that these issues should be incorporated into the Evaluation Group's decision-making process. This type of Watchdog/Bulldozer combination can be neutralized by an effective section chair, an NSERC program officer, or a more constructive Watchdog, any of whom can refocus the EG discussion on more legitimate concerns.

Of all the group roles, the role of **Bulldozer** is the most likely to lead to destructive group dynamics. Bulldozers are very vocal, forceful Evaluation Group members who have a hidden agenda about what types of applications should be funded. They are generally intent on having their views adopted by the Evaluation Group and they attempt to persuade others to their viewpoint using social influence as well as arguments based on the evaluation criteria. NSERC Evaluation Groups are generally large enough, structured enough, and well-managed enough to contain full-blown Bulldozers. When they do emerge they are most likely to be seen as a more moderate Watchdog/Bulldozer combination. They are also most likely to surface in EGs with nondirective section chairs. In these cases, Bulldozers will quickly assume a directive leadership role, and will be unwilling to yield this. They are best managed by Watchdogs who detect their attempt to control the group discussion early, and who stop their attempts at social influence before they become an established Evaluation Group norm.



Bulldozers are most destructive when they are also the section chair because then their attempts at influence have added authority. It is therefore important that EG members make recommendations to NSERC staff about future section chairs carefully, and that they not confuse dominance with good leadership.

Bulldozers are destructive not only because they can subvert the decision-making process, but also because they lower the morale of the Evaluation Group by introducing a confrontational tone to the discussion. In general, high morale and group cohesion is essential to maintain the high level of commitment needed to overcome the effects of fatigue. One of the most effective roles for promoting these qualities is that of a Humorist. Often this role is played by the section chair, but it may also be played by another EG member. Humorists keep the tone of the discussion light, prevent the build-up of any resentment, and help defuse conflict. In these ways they can help offset the frustration caused by Bulldozers and generally foster the kind of positive group climate that helps ensure fair adjudications. In EG deliberations humour is most effective when it is used between the discussion of consecutive applications, when it is brief and when it refers to the discussion that has just taken place. It is more destructive if it is prolonged, sarcastic in tone, or unrelated to the Evaluation Group discussion. In any of these cases, it breaks the Evaluation Group's momentum and makes it more difficult to remain focused on their task. Thus, it is important for EG members to encourage constructive humorists but to curb the efforts of their less constructive counterparts.

A final group role that has an impact on group dynamics is that of a **Compulsive** who considers it necessary to engage in very detailed discussions of each application. A love of detail is not, in itself, destructive. It can become so, however, under conditions of high time pressure and when other Evaluation Group members are more general in their assessments. In these cases, an overemphasis on detail can promote high levels of frustration and so reduce both morale and concerns about fairness. Compulsives do not promote high levels of frustration when other EG members have a similar style but they do increase time pressure which may, in turn, have a negative impact on adjudicative fairness.

Generally, Compulsives need to have their input curtailed because of its impact on group morale and fatigue. This is sometimes difficult, however, because their intention is to be fair. Many section chairs deal with compulsives by imposing general limits on the length and nature of the comments given by first and second reviewers. In the case of a more non-directive section chair, this kind of procedural intervention would be appropriate for either the NSERC program officer or a Watchdog.

9.4 Late Transfers and Consultations

During the competition session, EGs may identify applications which have been assigned incorrectly to the Evaluation Group. Should this happen, bring the application(s) to the attention of your program officer and section chair. The program officer will then consult with the appropriate section chair and program officer to determine where the most



appropriate review can take place. Since such cases are often at the boundary between the mandates of different EGs, it may not be possible to transfer the application. If the research program overlaps the two Evaluation Groups, an alternate option may be to request a consultation from the other EG, rather than transferring the application. Often, the best practice is to invite a member from the other EG to participate in the deliberation of the original Evaluation Group for that particular application.

If another EG agrees that the application falls within its jurisdiction, any concurrent RTI application will also be transferred. The original EG should provide a consultation report to the other EG. If the application gets transferred during the competition session, it is likely that at least part of the proposal is relevant to that Evaluation Group.

9.5 Procedures for Presenting Applications

The EG first decides on a modus operandi for the discussion of applications. Before discussion of each case, the section chair will ask if members wish to declare a conflict (see Sections [5.4.4](#), [6.9.1](#) and [7.4](#)). Refer to your EG procedures for specific details on presenting applications. While EGs are not encouraged to set a time limit for each reviewer to speak or for the consideration of each case, section chairs and/or program officers must ensure that discussions proceed at a rate that will allow the EG to get through its work within the time available.

The section chair may invite Evaluation Group members and the program officer to flag applications for reconsideration when there are lingering doubts.

9.6 Comments to Applicants

Following the discussion of each Discovery Grant application, the section chair will indicate if comments to the applicant(s) are needed and will designate a member to prepare these comments.

While reviewers may have drafted comments prior to the February EG discussion, the final version must reflect the consensus of the entire Evaluation Group. EGs are encouraged to finalize as many comments as possible during the competition session. Comments are collected regularly from the Evaluation Group room, typed and returned to the Evaluation Group room for verification. Members preparing comments should ensure that they are drafted before the end of each day and should verify the accuracy and completeness of the typed version.

Many EGs reserve a portion of each day to go over comments and verify that they reflect the consensus opinion. The section chair or delegate is ultimately responsible for certifying that the comments represent the Evaluation Group consensus. All Messages to Applicants forms must be submitted to NSERC within one week of the end of the EG's meetings in February.



9.7 Policy Meeting

Each EG holds a brief policy meeting following the completion of its deliberations. The policy meeting generally includes a discussion of the quality of applications, the number and quality of new applicants, selectivity, problem cases, comments on NSERC's administrative services, policies, forms, literature, etc.

In addition, feedback from the EG is sought on policy matters currently under review at NSERC. Your program officer and section chair will prepare an agenda for the policy meeting portion of the EG's competition agenda. This agenda will be distributed to members in advance of the February meetings.

9.8 Membership Recommendations

The process of identifying new EG members to replace those whose term ends in June normally starts in September (see Section [3.7](#) and [Appendix 1](#)) and continues throughout the fall and winter. To facilitate and accelerate the process of completing the EG's membership for the following year, all information about the background, stature and experience of nominees should be forwarded to the program officer. References on the nominees' suitability to participate in the peer review process and to work in a Evaluation Group setting should also be provided.

The agenda of the EG's February meetings will include a discussion of the Evaluation Group membership. Ideally, all potential members should have been identified at that time so that the EG as a whole can discuss the suggestions and establish priorities.

9.9 Confidentiality of EG Funding Recommendations

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. NSERC announces decisions on grants in late March following final approval by the president. Master lists are released to each university shortly before, or concurrent with, individual letters of notification. Funding decisions are also posted on the NSERC Web site.

Details of the EG discussion on a specific applicant are confidential and must **not** be divulged to others. Release of information to applicants **must** be done through NSERC. **Under no circumstances** should EG members divulge to anyone the recommendations emanating from the February competition or relating to appeals subsequent to the competition.