

# NSERC Accessibility Plan

2023-2025



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## NSERC commitment

**As a federal funding agency, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) promotes the value of science, engineering and the thrill of discovery in Canada, helping to ensure our research ecosystem can meet the talent, industry and technological demands of today and the future. We know that the Canadian research ecosystem will be even stronger when NSERC, and the programs and services we deliver, are made as accessible, inclusive, equitable and diverse as possible. We present our inaugural Accessibility Plan as an important first step towards achieving this goal.**

In developing and implementing this Plan, we aim to become an organization that builds accessibility into the way we do business. Expanding on the [Tri-Agency Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan](#) and our internal People Strategy, this Plan represents the cumulative efforts and advice of members of our research community and staff, and aims to identify and remove barriers that hinder the participation of persons with disabilities in the research ecosystem.

We know that the changes required to meet our objectives will take time to implement fully. This Plan addresses barriers to accessibility for both NSERC staff and the research community and we will hold ourselves accountable to deliver on its content.

The barriers and actions identified in this plan are largely based on recommendations received from members of the research community and of our Persons with Disabilities Network (PwDN). This Plan will continue to evolve as consultations with members of the natural sciences and engineering research community and with PwDN members are ongoing. We want to especially thank everyone involved for their time and generous comments over these past months. We will continue to center the perspectives of all those who experience barriers across all elements of planning and implementation.

General

## Executive summary

This Accessibility Plan aims to chart a path forward to remove and prevent barriers at NSERC, especially for persons with disabilities, by 2040. By identifying barriers and determining actions, this Plan has established the foundation from which more specific measures will be identified in future versions. Collaboration and ongoing consultations, both internally within the Agency and externally with members of our research community, will be essential as we develop an accompanying implementation plan in spring 2023 that provides clear, detailed and concrete timelines and actions. This Plan is an important first step in NSERC's journey and there is much work to be done.

The principle that persons with disabilities be involved in all stages of the design and implementation of the Plan, has been and will continue to be fundamental in the development of this Plan and its evolution. Multiple feedback mechanisms, including an [anonymous form](#), are available to enable staff, members of the research community and the general public to continue contributing to this plan into the future.

Barriers are outlined in relation to seven categories: Employment, Built Environment, Information and Communication Technologies, Communication, Procurement of Goods, Services and Facilities, Design and Delivery of Programs and Services, and Transportation. For Employment, barriers have been identified in relation to hiring, retention and promotion; accommodation policies and practices for NSERC staff; and creating inclusive policies and practices. For the Built Environment, a barrier has been identified in relation to issues with building access, navigation and individual workstations. For Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), barriers have been identified in relation to digital tools, platforms and software; websites and NSERC's intranet; and direct communications. These ICT barriers impact both members of our research community and members of our staff. For Communication, a barrier has been identified in relation to disability awareness. For Procurement of Goods, Services and Facilities, barriers have been identified with regards to accessibility in policies and processes and clarity regarding the availability of accessibility tools. For Design and Delivery of Programs and Services, barriers have been identified in relation to the lack of awareness and implicit bias against researchers with disabilities; hesitation around self-identification; current understandings of research excellence; lack of access to funding for accessibility-related measures needed for research activities; and the provision of continued support for applicants. For Transportation, a barrier has been identified in relation to the prioritization of lower cost of transportation for both staff and members of the research community.

This Accessibility Plan is based on internal and external consultations. Internally, the Persons with Disabilities Network (PwDN) provided guidance and feedback on barriers. Externally, targeted consultations with researchers in the natural sciences and engineering (NSE) who are familiar with (in)accessibility in the NSE (who either have publicly disclosed having a disability, advocate for people with disabilities or conduct research that would support people with disabilities) have helped us expand on barriers and possible actions. Ongoing consultations with members of these communities, subject matter experts and authorities will help prioritize improvements over the short and long term. This plan will be monitored and governed through the Accessibility Steering Committee (ASC) on a biannual basis. In addition to yearly progress reports, an implementation/action plan will be developed in spring 2023, following the publication of this plan. A revised Accessibility Plan will be published in the third year.

# The Accessible Canada Act

The [Accessible Canada Act](#) came into force on July 11, 2019. The objective of the Act is to make Canada barrier-free in areas under federal jurisdiction, especially for persons with disabilities, by January 1, 2040. As part of the Act, federal government organizations must publish an accessibility plan by December 31, 2022.

## A note on language

According to the Act, “disability”:

“means any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person’s full and equal participation in society.”

This plan will use terms like “disability,” “barrier,” and “persons with disabilities” to align with the Act. However, NSERC recognizes that individuals who self-identify as having a disability or as disabled may use different terminology, and that individuals who identify with certain communities—such as some people who are Deaf or neurodivergent—may not identify as having a disability.

For a full list of terms and how we employ them, see [Appendix A](#).

## NSERC’s Accessibility Plan

NSERC’s Accessibility Plan presents a way forward for us as an Agency, including our programs and services, to be accessible to our staff and the Canadian research community. As an employer, we aim to create a work environment that is accessible and inclusive for all staff. As a service provider, we aim to remove and prevent accessibility barriers to accessing federal funding for research. This Plan identifies key barriers to accessibility and provides actions that aim to remove or prevent these barriers in the following areas:

- employment
- built environment
- information and communication technologies
- communication
- procurement of goods, services and facilities
- design and delivery of programs and services
- transportation

This ever-evolving plan, along with the Agency's People Strategy commitment to fostering accessibility, diversity, bilingualism and inclusiveness at work and the [Tri-Agency EDI Action Plan](#) with regards to the research community, will guide NSERC in the achievement of our accessibility vision to:

Achieve universal accessibility (free of accessibility barriers) for members of NSERC's research community and staff, and to continue to proactively eliminate and prevent barriers to ensure greater opportunities for persons with disabilities and all those who experience barriers.

While the Accessible Canada Act established a three-year planning and reporting cycle for this Plan, NSERC will develop an implementation plan in spring 2023 that provides clear, detailed and concrete timelines and actions. Some of the actions outlined below may extend beyond the three-year cycle. This is a journey, and we will continue to engage, review, update and adjust the plan to ensure we achieve our goals to become an accessible organization and deliver accessible services to the Canadian population by 2040. NSERC will continue to collaborate with the other federal funding agencies, CIHR and SSHRC, to align our approaches and respective plans. The Agency will also prepare and publish annual progress reports on the implementation of this plan and develop indicators to support monitoring and reporting. For more information, see [Consultation, monitoring and governance](#).



# Principles

The overarching principle of NSERC's Accessibility Plan is that persons with disabilities are involved in all stages of design and implementation of the plan, including initiatives and activities within the Agency. By engaging those who experience the most persistent barriers and embracing intersectional perspectives and lived experiences, all will benefit. Five sub-principles further guide this Plan:

## **Well-being**

NSERC will target and implement enhancements, changes and improvements that prioritize the well-being of the research community and staff.

## **Transparency and collaboration**

NSERC will work in the open, through collaborative and inclusive means. Our efforts, progress and challenges will be shared across the organization and with our community.

## **Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)**

NSERC's efforts will leverage and support objectives on equity, diversity and inclusion as outlined in the [Tri-Agency EDI Action Plan](#), aiming to provide fair and equitable access to NSERC funding and promote an inclusive and diverse research ecosystem and workplace.

## **Flexibility and innovation**

NSERC understands that progress is a pathway, and it will explore all options to maintain an ever-evolving plan and reach its objectives.

## **Sound stewardship**

NSERC will support sound stewardship of public funds, through transparent and coordinated governance and decision-making.

# Feedback

## Feedback process

### Multiple feedback mechanisms for accessibility purposes

Members of the research community and of NSERC's staff, as well as the general public, can provide feedback at any time through a number of different channels. This includes: email, mail, and telephone, as well as a [questionnaire](#). Feedback can also be submitted anonymously.

Once feedback has been received, a receipt will be provided in the same way the feedback was sent, except for anonymous submissions. For example, emails will be answered by email, mail correspondence will be answered by mail (when a return address is included), and questionnaire submissions will receive a message after the submission confirming that their response has been received. All survey results will be collected in an Excel spreadsheet for review. All feedback will be stored, including scanned versions of any mail received, in a repository with limited access.

Feedback will be integrated into yearly reports and subsequent versions of the plan.

## Contact information

Contact information for asking questions and providing feedback in various forms are found below. You may also request a different format version of this plan and of the feedback process description through these same channels:

- Title of position responsible for receiving feedback: NSERC Accessibility Coordinator
- Mailing address: 125 Zaida Eddy Private, 2nd floor, Ottawa, Ontario K1R 0E3
- Telephone: 1-855-275-1126
- Email address: [accessibility-plan-accessibilite@NSERC-CRSNG.gc.ca](mailto:accessibility-plan-accessibilite@NSERC-CRSNG.gc.ca)
- [Questionnaire](#)

Our context

## **NSERC - Who we are**

Created in 1978, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) funds visionaries, explorers and innovators who are searching for the scientific and technical breakthroughs that will benefit our country. We are Canada's largest supporter of discovery and innovation. We work with universities, colleges, businesses and not-for-profits to remove barriers, develop opportunities and attract new expertise to make Canada's research community thrive. We give Canadian scientists and engineers the means to go further because we believe in research that is not only equitable, diverse, accessible and inclusive, but also without borders and beyond frontiers.

NSERC's main stakeholders are Canada's postsecondary institutions, their faculty, their students and Canadian business enterprises that conduct and fund research and development (R&D). Canadian universities, colleges and polytechnics are challenged by increasing enrolments, changing student demographics, aging faculty and a lack of diversity of faculty and students in some science and engineering disciplines. Postsecondary institutions are striving to better equip their graduates with market-ready skills that employers are demanding.

As outlined in our [2030 Strategic Plan](#), we envision a diverse and inclusive research ecosystem that expands the existing talent pool and research practices. Our mission going forward is to nurture the discoveries and innovations that advance knowledge, improve the lives of the entire Canadian population and help the world find solutions to today's challenges.

## **Common Administrative Services**

In 1994, NSERC and SSHRC created the Common Administrative Services Directorate (CASD), consolidating Human Resources (HR), Finance, Information Management, Information Technology and Security services, headed by one Chief Financial Officer and Vice President, Corporate Services.

The agencies utilize common technology infrastructure, systems (HR/finance) and the vast majority of processes and policies are aligned. To contribute to cost efficiency, the agencies also share office and meeting facilities in the National Capital Region. As a result, the barriers for a majority of the priority areas are common to both agencies, and the responsibility for carrying out the actions to eliminate them is shared.

## A mobile workforce

There are several accessibility issues particularly relevant for NSERC staff. In March 2020, NSERC shifted to remote work and NSERC programs promptly moved all its in-person peer-review committee meetings to online platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While this transition was not seamless, staff were quickly equipped with the technologies needed to work remotely, enabling NSERC to continue to deliver its mandate.

As of January 2023, NSERC staff in the National Capital Region will have just begun their re-entry to their new headquarters following almost 3 years of remote work. Staff will have not only transitioned to a hybrid work model, like most of the federal public service, but will have also moved into a new building designed in accordance with GCworkplace standards. Launched by the Clerk of the Privy Council in 2013, GCworkplace emphasizes a modernized approach to how we work, which promotes mobility, flexibility and connectivity. Although accessibility is a principle in GCworkplace design, barriers to accessibility still exist. NSERC will continue to work towards creating a more inclusive and accessible work environment for staff and members of the research community by:

- leveraging NSERC's Mobile Work Policy and Full-time Telework Directive. This policy framework formalizes the flexibility afforded by hybrid work for NSERC staff and emphasizes digital collaboration to connect us to talent across Canada
- consulting with internal communities on an ongoing basis (such as, but not limited to: the Persons with Disabilities Network (PwDN), Employment Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee (EEDAC) and NSERC's management forum) to discuss and address accessibility barriers as they relate to our new work model and environment at NSERC headquarters, but also taking into account realities at our Regional Office

# Accessibility improvement plan

# 1. Employment

Promote the development of practices that are accessible and inclusive, so that all members of staff, and specifically persons with disabilities, are supported and able to contribute to the organization.

## 1.1 Barrier: Hiring, retention and promotion

The number of persons with disabilities employed and hired at NSERC is below the Labour Market Availability, making persons with disabilities underrepresented in every employment category. Barriers in hiring and promoting include stigma/concerns about disclosing health-related needs, stigma regarding accommodation and job pools not available during medical leave. Contract work is another barrier, as it promotes a fear of reprisal due to job insecurity.

### Actions

- Implement hiring targets for persons with disabilities that are at or above the labour market availability
- Monitor data regarding employment tenure (indeterminate, term and contract) to determine if application differences exist for staff who self-identify as a person with a disability
- Consult with recruitment experts specializing in persons with disabilities when establishing priority hiring
- Develop recruitment plans and strategies for staff with disabilities including the tracking of drop off rates for persons with disabilities at different steps of the recruitment process
- Provide target support to persons with disabilities with respect to career development and leadership
- Track participation in exit interviews with persons with disabilities, measure progress regarding employee hiring and retention, and monitor survey results, feedback received and the employee lifecycle
- Ensure that staffing and assessment tools, approaches and resources are accessible and inclusive, with special attention to increasing awareness of accessibility measures and applying plain-language principles to communications at each stage of the appointment process

## 1.2 Barrier: Accommodation policies and practices for NSERC staff

NSERC's current accommodation policy was last updated in 2000. Accommodations are necessary in many cases regarding workloads, training schedules and hiring. Persons with disabilities associate this inadequate and outdated accommodation policy with a lack of support from management, as there is limited information and guidance for employees and managers on the accommodation process. Finally, the roles and responsibilities to establish accommodations and adjustments are not clear, with much of the responsibility placed on the person with a disability to advocate for their accommodation.

### Actions

- Create a library (i.e. a list or register) of available accommodations that is updated regularly and that acknowledges further accommodations may be possible
- Develop an intranet page covering accessibility and persons with disabilities, and confirm that all staff can easily access it

- Establish streamlined processes and resources for members of staff who are seeking accommodation(s) requests
- Update the Accommodation Policy and raise awareness through ongoing communications to NSERC staff
- Add requirements to follow up on a periodic basis with persons with disabilities who requested work accommodations and adjustments to make sure that they have the materials, equipment and support needed to do their jobs and ensure their physical environment remains suitable for them to do their jobs
- Develop and implement training regarding updated Accommodation Policy, roles and responsibilities

### **1.3 Barrier: Creating inclusive policies and practices**

Overall, there is a lack of knowledge regarding disability. This can sometimes translate to persons with disabilities coming up with their own solutions to barriers. More awareness, destigmatization and understanding of mental, physical, visible and non-visible disabilities is needed for all staff (including at management level). Additionally, not all barriers have been fully identified for persons with disabilities and policies and practices do not reflect an inclusive definition of disabilities. There is no formal process to allow and receive accessibility complaints in an anonymous manner and more mental health supports are necessary. Finally, some staff with disabilities are hesitant to self-identify through the available mechanisms. This hesitation is linked to the stigma around many disabilities and misunderstandings or fears around the use of self-identification data.

#### **Actions**

- Promote the Office of the Ombuds and Workplace Well-being to support staff with mental health needs
- Update definition of person with disability based on consultations or new developments in all cases where this definition appears, where possible
- Develop Disability Awareness training and sensitivity training, making it mandatory for managers and above
- Establish an anonymous feedback mechanism for accessibility-related issues
- Establish a distributed governance and explore dedicated resources (program support and funding structures) to ensure continued support and momentum across all accessibility-related efforts in tandem with other equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives
- Establish a multi-year communication plan and calendar to address the benefits of self-identification for staff



## 2. The built environment

Provide an accessible built environment to support staff through barrier-free access to work spaces, and to support the research community when participating in activities at the work site.

### 2.1 Barrier: Issues with building access, navigation and individual workstations

While new government buildings have been designed in compliance with Government of Canada Accessibility standards, barriers may still exist in NSERC's new workplace and retrofits may be needed. NSERC also has regional offices across Canada to support the development of our local presence and facilitate access to our programs. In all these offices, ramps, elevator controls, accessibility buttons for doors, braille indicators and emergency procedures are some of the features that could be missing or inadequate. Additional actions as part of retrofits may be needed.

#### Actions

- Confirm the accessibility and working order of ramps, elevator controls, braille indicators and emergency procedures for all NSERC's offices
- Work with persons with disabilities and accessibility experts to identify building and workstation issues
- Communicate emergency procedures and other accessibility features to all NSERC staff to ensure that members of the research community and members of the general public who access NSERC's offices are adequately supported
- Identify required retrofits and prioritize retrofit requests for persons with disabilities
- Develop a plan to address accessibility issues that are not addressed in new buildings and regional offices through retrofits

## 3. Information and communication technologies

Promote the development of information and communication technologies that can be used by members of the research community and staff, regardless of disability. This includes communications between NSERC as an employer and its staff, internal and external communications, and services provided to the general public.

### 3.1 Barrier: digital tools, platforms and software

Accessibility issues associated with aging infrastructure exist for agency application and award administration platforms and tools. As well, some of the digital tools and platforms are not interoperable with some assistive technologies and are not or are only partially compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0 AA). When new technological tools become integrated into the workplace, accessibility should be considered to make sure these technologies are accessible by design to everyone.

#### Actions

- Ensure that the Tri-agency Grants Management Solution (TGMS), the new solution under development for managing grants and fellowships and the associated CVs, is accessible by design, and ensure that persons with disabilities are consulted in its development and implementation

- Investigate ways to enhance the accessibility of existing digital tools, platforms and software, including interoperability with assistive technology and compliance with the latest WCAG guidelines, while awaiting the transition to TGMS
- Investigate options to develop and implement accessible templates for all required application attachments, including the requirement that all uploaded attachments employ these templates
- Consider designating an accessibility support person within the information and technology support contact, Support Central

### **3.2 Barrier: External websites and intranet**

While the agency website aligns with Government of Canada web accessibility standards, barriers remain related both to the content and presentation. All content on the agency websites (internal and external) should be available in multiple formats and/or with appropriate supports such as plain language versions to ensure people with visible and non-visible disabilities can access and use them.

#### **Actions**

- Establish and implement a timeline to conduct an accessibility review of all agency websites including considerations related to clarity and inclusivity of content, accessible navigation and formatting
- Establish plans to ensure all materials are available in accessible formats by default with a target of exceeding the Government of Canada standards

### **3.3 Barrier: Direct communications – email, phone and videoconference**

Agency staff supports the research community and their colleagues via email, telephone and videoconferences (for example, webinars and live events). Telephone communications are inaccessible to many members of staff and the research community. For email, there are currently no guidelines on accessible email practices. For live events or webinars, participants must request certain accessibility services well in advance, which poses a barrier to full participation of those with visible and non-visible disabilities.

#### **Actions**

- Provide accessible communication tools (e.g. PowerPoint templates, etc.) to increase accessibility, minimize visual distractions and provide members of the research community, staff and the general public with more flexibility on how they can engage with the Agency
- Prioritize accessibility at agency-hosted live events (such as closed captions). In addition, all communications promoting live events should provide a contact to which attendees can submit requests for additional accessibility services
- Ensure documents sent directly to members of the research community and the public are provided in accessible formats and that additional accessibility requests can be fulfilled, as needed

## 4. Communication, other than Information and communication technologies

Create and maintain an organizational culture of understanding, acceptance and affirmation of the lived experiences and needs of staff that enshrines accessibility in all aspects of work, using communications, collaborations, inclusivity and respectful engagement involving persons with disabilities.

### 4.1 Barrier: Disability awareness

Not all disabilities have been considered in engagement and awareness. Many of the most common disability types declared in the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disabilities are non-visible, such as those related to pain, flexibility and mental health. Overlooking these disabilities means that members of staff may not receive the services, tools and support they require to flourish and participate equally in the workplace.

#### Actions

- Establish a multi-year communications plan and calendar to address a variety of topics and concerns related to accessibility in the agency, including awareness and education on non-visible disabilities
- Stay informed about any communication guidelines as they relate to accessibility and include in staff training as they become available
- Promote National Accessibility week and leverage to support awareness and promote progress and support
- Develop training sessions for staff at all levels on sensitivity and awareness of barriers for persons with disabilities

## 5. Procurement of goods, services and facilities

Implement modern procurement practices so that the goods, services and facilities procured by the Government of Canada are accessible.

### 5.1 Barrier: Accessibility to be considered in policies and processes

New Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) policy requirements emphasize how accessibility is to be considered in procurement processes. Procurement procedures must be updated to support staff with disabilities and those who face accessibility barriers.

#### Actions

- Ensure meaningful consideration of accessibility requirements in new procurement processes
- Support and guide clients to incorporate plain language in procurement processes
- Incorporate plain language in procurement templates and contract clauses as Public Service and Procurement Canada (PSPC) develops and incorporates new standards related to accessibility
- Update internal procedures, based on TBS policies and directives as well as PSPC and Shared Services Canada (SSC) tools and processes, to remove and prevent barriers in procurement

- Review internal procurement processes to identify any additional barriers with suppliers of services and goods
- Support and guide clients to consider accessibility in procurement processes and, where possible, integrate mechanisms in procurement processes, forms and templates to ensure accessibility is considered by default

## **5.2 Barrier: What tools or services are available for those who face accessibility barriers is unclear**

There is a lack of centralized information available to support the procurement of accessibility tools. The Procurement division at NSERC must follow SSC and PSPC guidelines, which are at times limited.

### **Actions**

- Leverage the tools and resources available through the Accessibility in Procurement Resource Centre (APRC) to improve awareness and access to information regarding the availability of accessible tools and standards
- Once a requirement has been identified, guide NSERC staff in the sourcing of accessible equipment and software available through SSC's and PSPC's "Accessibility Hub"
- Source new tools to support persons with disabilities and others who experience barriers and, where possible, implement procurement processes to enable their rapid deployment as needed

## **6. Design and delivery of programs and services**

Fully accessible programs and services contribute to an inclusive research enterprise, leading to the excellent, innovative and impactful research necessary to advance knowledge and understanding, and to respond to local, national and global challenges. This section identifies barriers to accessibility in NSERC's programs and services and actions to address them. For barriers related to NSERC's website, communications with agency staff, and application platforms and tools, please refer to section [3. Information and communication technologies](#).

### **6.1 Barrier: Lack of awareness and implicit bias against researchers with disabilities**

The NSE culture remains unwelcoming to researchers with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are underrepresented in NSE fields within postsecondary institutions. Award rates at NSERC also illustrate this underrepresentation, with people who self-declare having a disability representing 2.4% of awardees in the Talent programs; 1.4% of awardees in the Discovery programs and 1.2% of awardees in the Research Partnership programs, whereas they account for a little over 5% of the PhD students as well as college and university faculty in the NSE.

### **Actions**

- Offer training to staff and peer reviewers on ableism and inclusion, unconscious bias towards people with disabilities, and procedures and tools to increase the accessibility of NSERC programs and services (including best practices around communications)

- Use current external communications mechanisms (for example, NSERC’s Impact Stories) to regularly feature the accomplishments of researchers with disabilities in the NSE, and to contribute to greater awareness of their contributions and reduce stigma
- Continue collecting, monitoring and reporting self-identification data on applicants to agency funding programs, peer reviewers/selection committee members and advisory/governance board members
- Build on the [Unconscious Bias Training](#) module (mandatory for staff and members of peer review committees) to address the realities of researchers with disabilities
- Increasingly invite peer reviewers who identify as persons with disabilities, and peer reviewers with expertise in critical disability studies, as appropriate
- Continue gathering evidence, including through consultations, to better understand the experiences of and barriers faced by persons with disabilities in qualifying for and applying to NSERC’s programs

## 6.2 Barrier: Hesitation around self-identification

Some applicants, members of selection/review committees and members of advisory/governance boards with disabilities are hesitant to self-identify through the Tri-agency self-identification questionnaire. This hesitation is linked to the stigma around many disabilities, the terminology used in the questionnaire and misunderstandings or fears around use and storage of self-identification data. This lack of information limits the Agency’s ability to make data-informed decisions regarding its funding programs.

### Actions

- Continue addressing data gaps around persons with disabilities who opt not to self-identify through the tri-agency questionnaire
- Establish multi-year communications plans and calendars to address the benefits of self-identification for the external community
- Monitor the development of new standards for the collection of self-identification information by agencies such as Statistics Canada and update the questionnaire with new standards as appropriate when questionnaire is revised (2024)

## 6.3 Barrier: NSE research excellence and culture

“Excellence” is used as a driver for scientific research that is meant to be of the highest quality. The research culture in the NSE, combined with current understandings of excellence that do not fully account for the variety of contributions, may penalize researchers with disabilities.

### Actions

- Establish further support for NSERC’s commitment to the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment \(DORA\)](#)
- Put in place mechanisms to review and apply comprehensive criteria used to understand, recognize and assess research excellence, including improved understanding of “non-linear pathways”
- Co-develop a Statement of Principles on research conducted by, with and for people with disabilities (including, where applicable, working with research subjects, trainees and Highly Qualified Personnel (HQP) who have a disability)
- Use existing programs to broadly promote science and career advancement in the NSE

## **6.4 Barrier: Lack of access to funding for accessibility-related measures needed for research activities**

NSERC's funding opportunities do not include measures that specifically consider the needs of persons with disabilities. Researchers' work environments (such as labs and field sites) are often inaccessible, may be hazardous to navigate, may remove researchers from their usual support structures or may negatively impact researchers' mental health. Attending conferences and meetings brings a range of difficulties, including added stress, to some persons with disabilities. While accommodations can be implemented in research activities, work environments and events, these come at additional costs.

### **Actions**

- To support the achievement of an accessible and inclusive postsecondary research system and culture, NSERC, within its area of influence, will seek to increase institutions' awareness of financial support towards accessible research infrastructures and help develop, leverage and disseminate promising practices for faculty, HQP and students with disabilities
- Consider using or adapting the Research Support Fund (TIPS) and other programs to purchase equipment and/or develop initiatives to better support researchers with disabilities in the research system
- Consider other forms of financial support, such as a simple, separate application process for accommodations (for grant holders, their HQP or research subjects) or the addition of a budget line (with added funding) in applications for expenses relating to accommodations
- Require that all events benefiting from direct NSERC funding (sponsorship) are made fully accessible to people with disabilities

## **6.5 Barrier: Provision of continued support for applicants and members of peer review committees**

There is no formal structure in place to support persons with disabilities who may require accommodations in their application process. Further, some persons with disabilities experience intermittent or episodic impairments which makes it difficult to predict when and what accommodations may be helpful. For people in these situations, current agency policies may represent additional barriers that prevent them from having equitable and inclusive access to funding opportunities.

### **Actions**

- Create a dedicated webpage containing all information regarding accommodation and accessibility supports, policies, guidelines for applicants, members of selection/review committees and advisory/governance board members
- Implement a single point of access (designated email and phone number) for accessibility requests from applicants, members of selection/review committees and advisory/governance board members
- Examine the possibility of providing some flexibility around strict administrative deadlines to accommodate personal circumstances that are beyond applicants' control, such as disability
- Consider hiring an accessibility advisor (or include this responsibility in the profile of current staff) to support applicants, members of selection/review committees and advisory/governance board members who have a disability

## 7. Transportation

As part of service delivery, NSERC staff and members of our research community are at times transported to various locations.

### 7.1 Barrier: Prioritizing lower cost of transportation.

When booking transportation, the most economical option is chosen, rather than the most accessible option.

#### Actions

- Explore opportunities to integrate accessibility considerations and options when planning and booking travel.

# Consultations, monitoring and governance



## Consultations

The internal components of this plan were compiled separately from the external components, with consultations taking place separately on both sides.

### Internal consultation

NSERC's internal consultation can be traced back to early 2020 when the agency undertook a preliminary analysis of its workplaces and practices to gain a better understanding of the issues and conditions within the workplace that created barriers for persons with disabilities. Building on the foundation of barriers the preliminary analysis identified, an external consultant was contracted in 2022 to consult with the newly formed Persons with Disabilities Network (PwDN). The PwDN consists of members of staff from various levels at NSERC and from SSHRC. The consultations, which took place between June and August 2022, included surveys, interviews and focus groups, which were conducted confidentially to ensure the safety and comfort of participants and to encourage honest feedback.

Members of the PwDN were also offered accessibility tours in September 2022. The purpose of these tours was to familiarize members with the new headquarters, provide an overview of building and workspace accessibility features, and gather feedback on remaining barriers to accessibility in our built environment. The feedback gathered will help prioritize improvements over the short- and long-term. Members of both the PwDN and EEDAC will be consulted on an ongoing basis on workplace accessibility barriers as we continue to work towards a barrier-free workplace.

### External consultation

Mindful of efforts that were already underway, NSERC first leveraged the work from CIHR's External Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Systemic Ableism and SSHRC's Advisory Committee to Address Barriers to Accessibility. Their findings were supplemented by information gathered during previous consultations (for example, in developing the [Dimensions Charter](#) and in preparing [NSERC's 2030 Strategic Plan](#)) and findings from the literature focussing on the natural sciences and engineering (NSE).

Following these analyses, NSERC consulted with members of its [Committee on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion \(CEDI\)](#). After integrating their feedback, we proceeded with some targeted consultations with members of the NSE community in Canada. Participants were identified through existing contacts, based on publications related to accessibility in research, or through organizations known to work with or advocate for persons with disabilities. A snowball approach was also used to identify more participants for these consultations. Interested parties were invited to discuss barriers in the design and delivery of programs and services; mitigating actions; and the overall implementation of the plan through an online questionnaire or via an interview with a member of NSERC's staff.

The initial response to NSERC's outreach was generally positive, with most respondents opting for an interview and many indicating they remained available to offer further advice and comments. These discussions are ongoing.

## Timeline, monitoring and governance

The progress and success of this plan will be a shared responsibility across the Agency. The development of NSERC's Accessibility Plan has been overseen by a bi-agency (NSERC and SSHRC) committee known as the Accessibility Steering Committee (ASC). This committee includes representatives from senior management, employees with disabilities and subject matter experts. The ASC will continue to:

- Oversee and align internal and external actions on improving accessibility, such as information technology and communications improvements for programs and services
- Endorse implementation plans, costs and timelines for targeted accessibility improvements for programs and services
- Understand and monitor the progress of the plan at an enterprise level (via progress reports)
- Support the identification and prioritization of opportunities to remove barriers to accessibility

Regarding NSERC's work in increasing the accessibility of its programs and services, the Committee on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (CEDI) will monitor improvement and progress made by the Agency, through the annual review of statistics. As appropriate, CEDI may also make recommendations to NSERC's Council or management on program design, delivery and policies, to ensure equitable, diverse and inclusive access and consideration for applicants to NSERC's funding opportunities, as well as on measures that NSERC can take to influence a more accessible natural sciences and engineering (NSE) research system and culture.

Progress on the plan will be provided to the ASC on a biannual basis and will be monitored through several avenues, such as:

- Public Service Employee Survey (PSES)
- Human Resources (HR) staffing and retention data
- Training completion and feedback data
- Regular consultations with the PwDN, EEDAC, the committee on EDI and any future external consultation bodies
- Feedback mechanisms highlighted in the feedback process section of this plan

To guide the detailed implementation of the actions described above, NSERC will develop an implementation plan in spring 2023 that will identify specific actions and milestones against which progress will be monitored. By December 31, 2023, NSERC will publish an annual progress report, and the Accessibility Plan will be updated to take progress and further recommendations from the Committee on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (CEDI) and the Persons with Disabilities Network into account. In the third year after the publication of this Plan, NSERC will again revise the plan to incorporate any new barriers identified and to adjust goals to best reflect the progress already made and the progress still to come.

# Appendix A: Acronyms and definitions

# Acronyms

- **APRC:** Accessibility in Procurement Resource Centre
- **ASC:** Accessibility Steering Committee
- **CASD:** Common Administrative Services Directorate
- **CEDI:** Committee on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
- **CIHR:** Canadian Institutes of Health Research
- **CV:** Curriculum vitae
- **DORA:** San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment
- **EDI:** Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
- **EEDAC:** Employment Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee
- **HQP:** Highly Qualified Personnel
- **HR:** Human Resources
- **NSE:** Natural sciences and engineering
- **NSERC:** Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada
- **PSES:** Public Service Employee Survey
- **PSPC:** Public Services and Procurement Canada
- **PwDN:** Persons with Disabilities Network
- **R&D:** Research and development
- **SSC:** Shared Services Canada
- **SSHRC:** Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
- **TBS:** Treasury Board Secretariat
- **TGMS:** Tri-Agency Grants Management System
- **TIPS:** Tri-Agency Institutional Programs Secretariat
- **WCAG:** Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

## Definitions

**Accessibility:** refers to the quality that enables full participation, without barriers, of all.

**Accommodation:** refers to the removal of barriers on an individual basis.

**Applicant:** for the purpose of this document, includes all persons contributing to the development and submission of an application, including principal investigator/project director, co-applicant/investigator/director, collaborators, referees, team member or partner.

**Barrier:** means anything—including physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal, anything that is based on information or communications or anything that is the result of a policy or a practice—that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with an impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment or a functional limitation.

**Disability:** means any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary, or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society.

**Tri-agencies:** The term used to refer to all three federal funding agencies, including SSHRC, NSERC and CIHR.