

Management's Response to the PDF Evaluation

Introduction

The evaluation found that the Postdoctoral Fellowships (PDF) Program is relevant and meets an ongoing need. The postdoctoral experience provided through an NSERC fellowship is seen as being critical to obtaining employment in academe, particularly for science disciplines. The PDF program is well designed, although there is some dissatisfaction with the current award amount (as the award remains the primary source of income for most fellows) and timing of award notifications. Postdoctoral experience, either through PDF or other fellowships, helps fellows develop various skills, especially those related to research ability and potential. At the same time, NSERC PDF recipients have engaged in more varied research dissemination activities and more frequently since application to the program in comparison to unfunded applicants. Evaluation findings also point to positive employment impacts specifically from the PDF program. The vast majority of PDF fellows are employed full-time and most often within universities (typically in tenured or tenure track positions).

Context

Since NSERC's inception in 1978, the NSERC Postdoctoral Fellowships (PDF) Program has been providing financial support to a core of the most promising Canadian researchers in the natural sciences or engineering at a pivotal time in their careers. This support allows fellows to seek out the best research programs in their chosen fields both within Canada and abroad. These fellowships are intended to secure a supply of highly qualified Canadians with leading-edge scientific, engineering and research skills for Canadian industry, government, and universities. Overall, NSERC acknowledges the positive outcome of the evaluation which confirmed the program's relevance as a significant source of postdoctoral funding in Canada and its impact on funded applicants who are able to access the best possible postdoctoral training in light of their career objectives and whose success in obtaining employment in academe is increased. Nonetheless, the recommendations have highlighted certain aspects of the program that could be strengthened.

Recommendation 1: *Explore options to increase the financial support available to PDFs. While this may not be completely within the control of NSERC, it would be worthwhile to explore any potential means of increasing the financial support available to PDFs.*

NSERC Response: The evaluation report has highlighted several options that could be considered in response to this recommendation:

- *Increasing the award amount through an increase in program resources;*
- *Possible relocation or travel stipends for those moving to distant locations or centers where the cost of living is high, such as provided within the USRA*
- *The possibility of requiring a modest top-up from all supervisors and/or tenure organizations (who indicate that supervising a PDF fellow increases their research productivity)*

- *Encourage or explore ways in which universities could extend benefits to fellows within their institution and work towards greater standardization in the treatment of postdoctoral fellows*

It is unlikely that additional funds will be available for the PDF program, at least in the short term. Therefore, any increase in the award level with current resources would reduce the number of PDF awards offered, which is not a desirable outcome. Nevertheless, NSERC will continue to explore ways to increase funding for PDFs through consultation with the community and through efficient program management, i.e. relying on outcomes of program evaluations and efficient budget monitoring. At this time, it would be preferable to direct any new funding for the program towards increasing the award level rather than towards relocation or travel costs.

NSERC will also explore the possibility of requiring a modest top-up from supervisors and/or tenure organizations who host a PDF. Currently, approximately 40% of the recipients receive a top-up (median top-up is \$10,000).

NSERC recognizes that many universities are currently in discussion/negotiation with their respective post-doctoral communities, and that current policies regarding the status of postdocs within institutions and their access to benefits vary greatly by institution; however, these are dependent on provincial and federal legislative requirements and outside of NSERC's sphere of influence.

Recommendation 2: *Consider increasing development and networking opportunities for PDF fellows.*

NSERC Response: The evaluation report notes, as a key finding (page 34), that “most postdoctoral fellows report increasing their personal research network as a direct result of their fellowship. Furthermore, the report also notes that “most [postdoctoral fellows] report maintaining this network to at least some extent, and collaborating on research with members of this network since completion of their fellowship”. Respondents added that additional travel funds from NSERC would help in this regard.

The recommendation's wording in the evaluation report (page 38) focuses mainly on the need for fellows to obtain additional opportunities for professional development activities such as financial and project management as well as furthering their leadership skills. The report adds that consistent training in this regard from institution to institution would be beneficial, especially in the context of a career that may not be in academia.

NSERC recognizes the importance of professional skills for postdoctoral fellows, and avenues for gaining professional skills exist through other NSERC program, e.g. the Collaborative Research and Training Experience (CREATE) program, and through formal and informal initiatives within universities. For the time being, NSERC does not intend to modify the PDF program requirements in order to incorporate a professional skills component. Rather, the Council will continue to monitor this key training aspect as part of the CREATE program and through ongoing discussion with key stakeholders.

Recommendation 3: *Consider moving up the time-frame of decisions to accommodate PDF applicants.*

NSERC Response: Although a minority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the timing of the announcement of the PDF award, this is a concern that has been expressed repeatedly by applicants, supervisors and scientific/engineering societies. The timing of award announcements has also been raised as an issue by the Vanier-Banting Board at its 2012 March meeting. NSERC is currently reviewing its timelines and processes in order to be able to announce PDF competition results earlier in future competitions.

Summary of Recommendations and Actions

Recommendation	Agree/ Disagree	Action	Responsibility	Timeline
#1 : Explore options to increase the financial support available to PDFs.	Agree	NSERC will explore the possibility of requiring modest top-ups for PDFs from their host(s).	Scholarships and Fellowships program staff.	Consultation and analysis to be completed by Spring 2013.
#2 : Consider increasing development and networking opportunities for PDF fellows.	Agree in principle.	Although no change in the PDF program requirements is foreseen, NSERC will continue to monitor the aspects of professional skills as part of the CREATE program. It will also undergo a study to assess the number of students and fellows with PGS/CGS and PDF funding who are part of CREATE funded teams.	Scholarships and Fellowships and Innovative Collaboration program staff.	Analysis to be completed by Fall 2013.
#3 : Consider moving up the time-frame of decisions to accommodate PDF applicants.	Agree	NSERC considers advancing the announcement of results by 2 months, i.e. from March to January; accordingly, the feasibility of advancing the deadline by one month, to September 15 will be considered.	Scholarships and Fellowships and Program Operation staff with support from Information and Innovation Solutions Division.	Ongoing. Consultation has been started and implementation is set for 2014.