Evaluation of the Strategic Project Grants Program
Management Response

General

Management is pleased, although not surprised, with the overall positive evaluation of the Strategic Project Grants program. SPG is a longstanding partnership program with a continuous view to improvements. The consistently high number of applications to annual competitions is testament to the attractiveness of the program within the research community. Below is the management response to the specific recommendations arising from the evaluation.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Continue the SPG program, giving consideration to making minor adjustments to ensure continued relevance, and supporting new and ongoing research partnerships within the program's niche.

- *Create strategic flexibility in accepting promising projects that fall outside the current target areas.*

- *Attract or support new partner organizations to participate in the program by connecting potential partners with university researchers and vice versa.*

Management Response

Management recognizes the desire of researchers and their partners to have as much flexibility in the target areas as possible. However, the goal of the Strategic Project Grants program is to increase research and training in areas that could strongly enhance Canada's economy, society and/or environment within the next ten years. To ensure that the program remains aligned with Canadian needs and current research priorities, the target areas and research topics are developed and revised on a periodic basis following extensive consultation with industry, academia and government. This review process allows NSERC to be responsive to changing needs and government priorities.

With this in mind, the target areas are selected on the basis of the following criteria:
- There must be a critical mass of research expertise in Canada and a need for that expertise to be strengthened in order to take advantage of Canada's leading role or niche position.
- The target area must face a pressing or anticipated need for more qualified personnel in Canada.
- There must be a strong potential to lead to an identified application or opportunity for Canadian industry or address the priorities of government.

These target areas are further focused into a number of research topics, given that the program is already oversubscribed relative to the limited funds available. Expansion of the target areas would increase the number of applications and reduce the funding success to undesirable levels.

Nevertheless, applicants are allowed to make a compelling case for research within the target area but outside the specified research topics. Such applications are considered "exceptional" and may be funded subject to the peer review and availability of funds. The large number of applications, the relatively few applications rejected for not fitting the target areas and the low number of "exceptional" opportunity applications speaks to the inherent flexibility within the program. It can be noted that other programs are available for research that does not fit the target areas, e.g., Collaborative Research and Development grants, and Discovery grants.

The need to help new partner organizations connect with university researchers was identified in NSERC's Strategy for Partnerships and Innovation (SPI). Since the implementation of this Strategy began in the latter years of the period covered by the SPG evaluation (late 2009), the impact may not have been reflected in the partners' comments. Given that only 15% of partners in Strategic Project

grants are new to collaborative research with academics, and with the addition of new mechanisms that are explicitly designed to attract new partners, Management believes that establishing new connections should not be stated as a goal of the program, and instead be considered as an unintended outcome.

Recommendation #2: Modify existing performance measurement systems to collect additional performance data in support of ongoing monitoring and program evaluation.

Additional information that, if collected and recorded electronically, would support both on-going program monitoring and future evaluations includes:

- *contact information for HQP participating in Strategic projects;*

- *information about which proposals and projects include international collaborations or non-NSE co-applicants;*

- *information on whether or not an organization is a key partner or is less involved in the project (to assist in analysis of administrative data and in the development of sample frames); and*

- *more detailed, consistent and structured information on how partners have applied research results for economic gain or to strengthen public policy–this could be collected through the partners' end of project reports with follow-ups from program officers in cases where relevant information is missing.*

Future evaluations would also benefit if NSERC undertook efforts to improve the completeness and accuracy of the following information that is currently being collected and entered into the Council's administrative database:

- *information on the size of partner organizations (i.e., small, medium or large) as this information was missing in a third of the cases; and*

- *information on actual cash and in-kind contribution amounts, directly drawn from the final statement of accounts in the project files.*

Management Response

Management recognizes the importance of collecting accurate and relevant information to assist in the ongoing evaluation and assessment of programs. However, Management also recognizes that the burden on the researcher to provide the information must be weighed against the usefulness of the information. NSERC is in the process of piloting a new grants management system which, when fully implemented, is intended to ease data capture and improve accuracy of the data. We have also introduced standardized on-line templates for the completion of final reports that are intended to streamline the information captured among the various programs. Collecting accurate and complete data on company size and their final cash and in-kind contributions to projects can likely be addressed. Tracking of Highly Qualified Personnel will require further study, given the need to balance Privacy Act provisions as well as pragmatic considerations (students are a highly mobile group). Management will commit to working with program evaluation staff over the next year to review and revise the performance measurement strategy for the Research Partnership Programs addressing the above points.

Strategic Project Grants Program Evaluation

Management Response - Action Plan

Recommendation	Agree/ Disagree	Action	Responsibility	Timeline
1: Continue the SPG program, giving consideration to making minor adjustments to ensure continued relevance, and supporting new and ongoing research partnerships within the program's niche. Based on the findings, a few suggestions for NSERC to consider can be made:				
• Create strategic flexibility in accepting promising projects that fall outside the current target areas.	Disagree	No action required. The program is intended to be focused on a limited number of areas. The number of applications remains high relative to the available budget and the "exceptional opportunity" category already provides the desired level of flexibility. The next review of the target areas will be for 2016.	Not applicable	Not applicable
• Attract or support new partner organizations to participate in the program by connecting potential partners with university researchers and vice versa.	Agree	Given the results of the evaluation and the recent introduction of the Engage and Interaction mechanisms designed for attracting new partner organizations to collaborate with academics, the SPG program description will be updated to remove this as an explicit goal.	RPP Management	December 2012

Recommendation	Agree/ Disagree	Action	Responsibility	Timeline
2: Modify existing performance measurement systems to collect additional performance data in support of ongoing monitoring and program evaluation.	Agree	A review of the Research Partnership Programs performance measurement strategy will be undertaken and revisions made to collect complete and accurate data on company size as well as cash and in-kind contributions. Other changes such as the tracking of Highly Qualified Personnel will be taken into consideration given the need to balance privacy provisions as well as pragmatic considerations (highly mobile nature of students and reporting burden).	RPP Management with support from the Evaluation Division	April 2013