

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO REVIEW OF THE NSERC POSTGRADUATE SCHOLARSHIPS (PGS) PROGRAM

CONTEXT

This evaluation was undertaken as part of a more general mandate to evaluate the Canada Graduate Scholarships (CGS) program and related programs at the three granting agencies involved in the program: NSERC, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Management Response

Overall, NSERC feels that this evaluation exercise has been effective and useful. The recommendations identify areas of the PGS program design that should be revisited, as well as the recommendation for further study on certain aspects of the program, and it is felt that the analysis and consultations that will result from these will have positive effects on the fine-tuning and continuing relevance and impact of this key investment program in graduate studies, research and the innovation system in Canada.

An Action Plan, which summarizes the evaluation recommendations, the action resulting from the management response and the general timelines and considerations associated with delivery of the proposed actions may be found at the end of this management response.

Recommendation 1: *NSERC should maintain its nationally competitive, merit-based student award programs.*

Response:

Agreed. The PGS is a key instrument within a program continuum aimed at financially supporting and encouraging the development of the most promising research professionals in Canada. Funding students through merit-based award programs is one of a number of measures designed to directly support the training of highly qualified personnel (HQP). With the introduction of the tri-agency CGS program in 2004, and of the prestigious Vanier program in 2008, the NSERC PGS awards are now part of a suite of awards that support graduate research training. The awards bestow prestige on the individual, since they are awarded after a rigorous competitive national peer review selection process. All three awards support students directly and, therefore, give them the freedom to pursue graduate studies at the eligible university of their choice. The amount of flexibility of that choice is inversely related to the value of the award. For Canadian or permanent resident doctoral awardees, the Vanier award (\$50,000 a year) must be held at the Canadian university that nominated them, the CGS-D awards (\$35,000 a year) can be held at any eligible Canadian university and the NSERC PGS award can be held at any eligible university worldwide. This increased flexibility is valued by those students who having completed one degree in Canada, want to gain some international experience.

Recommendation 2: *NSERC should revisit its umbrella logic model for its Scholarships and Fellowships programs, mapping program specific outcomes and modeling indirect forms of support for students as well.*

Response:

Agreed. NSERC will review its umbrella logic model for its Scholarships and Fellowships programs, to better attribute program specific outcomes and to delineate further the impacts of the indirect forms of support of training of students both through new initiatives like CREATE and through NSERC Discovery Grants and Research Partnership programs like CRDs and Industrial Research Chairs.

Recommendation 3: *NSERC should consider the possibility of setting the duration of a master's award to two years and that of a doctoral award to four years.*

Response:

Disagree. Assuming no additional funds were to be invested in the PGS program, extending the duration of awards would lead to a reduction in the number of award recipients over time. Decisions on the duration of the awards should be made on the basis of the intent of the program. It is not the intent of the program to support students through to completion of their studies, but rather to provide an incentive to pursue graduate studies and to assist in reducing the financial burden of doing so. It is expected that other funding sources at the university or provincial level, for example, will be accessed by the graduate student.

After a strategic review in 2008, NSERC had shortened its master's awards to one year only, with no extension; matching that of the CGS awards. NSERC devotes a large proportion of its budget to support students both directly, through scholarships, and indirectly through virtually all of our other programs. Indeed, the amount of funding that is used annually to support students is approximately \$500 million, representing almost 50 percent of our total funding. Our scholarships can support graduate students for up to four years in their graduate studies. This has not changed, i.e., NSERC is maintaining its overall duration of support to graduate students to four years with one year at the master's level and three years at the doctoral level. The optional two years each at the master's and doctoral level model is no longer available.

As noted above, the Canada Graduate Scholarships (CGS) program provides support for only one year at the master's level. Thus, the change to NSERC's PGS-M brings the program in alignment with the CGS. As well, in comparison with many other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Canada has relatively few PhD graduates in the natural sciences and engineering disciplines. The shift to three years of support at the PhD level was, therefore, seen as a more appropriate balance for Canada.

One of the currently stated intentions of the PGS program is to encourage timely completion of degrees. Extending the duration of non-repayable funding could be seen as an incentive for students to take longer to complete their degree. Ultimately, the duration of awards must be established in relation to the PGS program objectives. Consequently, NSERC does not foresee taking any action at this time.

Recommendation 4: *NSERC should consider conducting additional research on the relative merits and impacts of direct and indirect methods of supporting students.*

Response:

Agreed. NSERC supports students directly through the provision of scholarships, as well as through grants to researchers, which are used to support graduate students conducting research (which translate into stipends and research assistantships). Because NSERC has no direct contact with students paid from grants, it has been more challenging to follow-up with this cohort of students. While NSERC regularly follows-up with the students it supports directly, less outcome information has been collected from students receiving indirect support. To address this, NSERC plans to undertake a study of students receiving indirect support paid from research grants in the coming year. This study will be designed to provide evidence that can be compared to the findings from the PGS and CGS evaluations.

Action Plan				
Recommendation	Response	Action	Responsibility	Timeline
1. NSERC should maintain its nationally competitive, merit-based student award programs	Agreed.	N/A		
2. NSERC should revisit its umbrella logic model for its Scholarships and Fellowships programs, mapping program specific outcomes and modeling indirect forms of support for students as well	Agreed.	NSERC will review the umbrella logic model of its Scholarships and Fellowships programs to better attribute program specific outcomes and indirect forms of support for students.	NSERC S&F Division	2010-2011
3. NSERC should consider the possibility of setting the duration of a master's award to two years and that of a doctoral award to four years.	Disagree.	No action will be taken. NSERC has just confirmed that the duration of support for a master's award to be one year and that of a doctoral award to be three years for the reasons stated in the text above.	NSERC S&F Division	N/A
4. NSERC should consider conducting additional research on the relative merits and impacts of direct and indirect methods of supporting students	Agreed.	NSERC will conduct a study of students receiving indirect support paid from research grants. This study will be designed to provide evidence that can be compared to the findings from the PGS and CGS evaluations, in order to provide insights into the relative merits of direct and indirect support.	NSERC Evaluation Division	June 2010 – May 2011