U15 Canada

Submission to the Standing Committee on Science and Research

Study on the Mission, Mandate, Role, Structure and Financing of the New Capstone Research Funding Organization Announced in Budget 2024

Submitted by U15 Canada

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Recommendations:

1. **Prioritize Scientific and Scholarly Excellence:** Ensure that funding decisions across all research support organizations prioritize scientific and scholarly excellence. These decisions must continue to be based on rigorous merit-based evaluations of proposals to advance knowledge and understanding.

2. **Uphold Peer/Merit Review:** Ensure peer/merit review remains a foundational element in the evaluation of all funding decisions, ensuring consistency across programs and adherence to transparent, discipline-based review processes that have been the foundation of Canada's world-class research system.

3. **Mobilize the Council on Science and Innovation:** Launch the announced advisory Council on Science and Innovation to provide independent advice on national science and research priorities and develop a national science and innovation strategy for mission-driven, interdisciplinary and international research.

4. **Fully Commit to Inclusive Excellence:** Membership of the board of directors and governance structures should reflect the research ecosystem in keeping with the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion, including representation of Indigenous research and research in both official languages. The three major disciplinary groupings (health, social sciences and humanities, and the natural sciences and engineering) should be equally represented on the Capstone organization's board to ensure multi-disciplinary perspectives in the pursuit of inclusive excellence in programming decisions.

5. **Uphold the Role of Social Sciences and Humanities:** Recognize the critical role of research on human thought and behaviour in shaping Tri-Agency policy and programs and the critical interdisciplinary contributions of the social sciences and humanities. Ensure the governance structure of the new organizations reflects the value of research on people in addressing societal challenges.

6. **Preserve the Role of Health Research:** Maintain and enhance connections between health research and the health portfolio, to ensure that health delivery, patient outcomes and the activities of other federal health organizations such as PHAC and CFIA inform the research funding activities of the organization.

7. **Safeguard Independence from Political Influence:** Establish strong governance measures to protect the independence of funding decisions from political interference, maintaining Canada's commitment to academic freedom and the non-partisan support of research.

Introduction

U15 Canada is pleased to provide additional written feedback on the Standing Committee on Science and Research's study on the Mission, Mandate, Role, Structure and Financing of the New Capstone Research Funding Organization Announced in Budget 2024.

Alongside important new investments into Canada's research system in Budget 2024, the commitment outlined in the budget to evolve the federal research support system is a chance to better prepare Canada for the opportunities and expectations of the 21st-century scientific and scholarly environment. U15 Canada welcomes these efforts and supports the plan, as described in the joint ministerial letter of June 17, to establish an organization with a clear mandate to promote collaborative, international and interdisciplinary research activities.[1] This plan reflects the vision presented in the Bouchard Report and we are encouraged by the government's efforts to act on the principles of the advisory panel's recommendations.[2]

However, it is crucial to underscore the significant negative impacts these changes could have on our system if pursued without caution for unintended consequences and careful protection of the policies and systems that have successfully underpinned Canadian research for many decades. The proposed changes must build on the existing strengths of Canada's research ecosystem without diminishing the independence, commitment to excellence and foundational grant programs that have made Canada a world leader in advancing knowledge and developing talent.

We urge the federal government to minimize disruptions to essential research programs, communicate this commitment clearly, and maintain ongoing consultation with the research community. Our goal is to build a dynamic research support system that empowers Canadian researchers and amplifies their impact. We recommend that the Capstone organization's mission, mandate, and structure incorporate the below core principles that build on Tri-Agency successes, fostering world-leading research and innovative talent for 21st-century challenges.

Core Principles

Principle 1: Scientific and Scholarly Excellence

- **Major Principle:** Funding decisions must prioritize scientific and scholarly excellence. The governance of research in Canada should aim to uphold the principle that researchers and projects are supported based on the merit of their ideas, reflecting a thorough assessment of the scientific and scholarly value of the research for advancing knowledge and understanding.

Principle 2: Peer/Merit Review

- **Major Principle:** Peer/merit review must be the foundation for assessing scientific and scholarly excellence across all programs, not just agency-specific activities. Any programs

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[1] Letter to Presidents of the federal research granting councils: https://science.gc.ca/site/science/en/interagency-research-funding/letter-presidents-federal-research-granting-councils

[2] Bouchard Report: https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/panel-federal-research-support/en/report-advisory-panel-federal-research-support-system

delivered directly by the new organization must continue to respect this principle and this process must be built into the evaluation of funding decisions at the new organization.

Principle 3: Independence

- **Major Principle:** Funding decisions must remain free from political interference, including those that are mission-driven. Canada has long prided itself on a core commitment to academic freedom and the free pursuit of knowledge. The non-partisan independence of the new organization to support research must respect this principle.

Principle 4: Health Research

- **Major Principle:** The connections between health research and the health portfolio, including Health Canada, should be maintained and ideally enhanced. This will ensure that health delivery, patient outcomes and the activities of other federal health organizations, such as PHAC, inform the research funding activities of the organization.

Principle 5: Infrastructure Alignment

- **Major Principle:** New governance structures should align infrastructure requirements and lifecycles with the research ecosystem's requirements, as well as the infrastructure and equipment requirements of research teams.

Principle 6: Connectivity between TC3 and the new Organization

- **Major Principle:** Governance should foster both strength and connectivity across the agencies (TC3). Each of the three agencies of TC3 should continue to benefit from their advisory councils or equivalent structures that reflect disciplinary knowledge. To enhance connectivity, some advisory members should be asked to serve on both discipline-specific and the new organization's board of directors with equal weighting for the disciplinary groupings of the social sciences and humanities, the natural sciences and engineering, and health. Consideration should be given to how the Research Institutes in CIHR can have input into the new governance structure.

Principle 7: Ongoing Consultation

- **Major Principle:** Proposed changes should be developed and implemented with ongoing consultations with the research community to reflect feedback and avoid disruption to granting agency programming. The consultation process should match the available timeline, with a staged approach being the most appropriate.

Principle 8: Commitment to Effective Practices

- **Major Principle:** Successful current practices should be preserved and supported, building on the long-standing success of the tri-agencies in supporting fundamental research and discipline-specific programming knowledge. This principle reflects the findings of the Bouchard Report on the excellence of the agencies in their core mission of knowledge creation and talent development. Similarly, the interdisciplinary health research initiatives performed through the thirteen institutes within CIHR should be preserved.

Principle 9: Additional Funding

- **Major Principle:** Additional funding for granting programs should be provided for the new organization and its strategic initiatives, ensuring that new mission-driven, international or interdisciplinary programs do not disrupt successful existing granting agency funding that is directed towards fundamental and discipline-specific activities. In addition, appropriate funding should be provided for any increased administration expenses within the new organization as a result of new initiatives. For example, additional operational funding (as well as the announced grant funding) to support Canada's associated status to Horizon Europe should also be allocated.

Principle 10: Inclusive Excellence and Diverse Representation

- **Major Principle:** Membership of the new organization's board of directors should be drawn from various parts of the research ecosystem in keeping with the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion, including representation of Indigenous research and research in both official languages, as recommended in the Bouchard Report. It is also important to ensure that the three disciplinary groupings reflected in health, the social sciences and humanities, and the natural sciences and engineering are equally represented on the board to provide a comprehensive and multi-disciplinary coverage of the research community and, thereby, inclusive approaches to programming excellence.

Potential Risks

In addition to the core principles that should guide the design of the Capstone organization, it is equally important to be aware of potential risks that could arise during its implementation.

Risk 1: Disruption-delays

- **Major Risk:** Rapid changes, if not handled with care and wisdom, could lead to disruption and-or delays in ongoing program and policy delivery. Such occurrences would destabilize the entire research ecosystem with negative consequences across Canada and beyond, including the possibilities to leverage new opportunities such as Horizon Europe. In particular, the creation of this new organization must not disrupt the important and vitally needed funding increases committed in Budget 2024. This funding must flow within the current fiscal year to deliver the support mechanisms researchers require for the benefit of Canada.

Risk 2: National Strategic Vision through an Advisory Council

- **Major Risk:** As the implementation of the new organization advances, it is crucial that this occurs simultaneously to the creation of an advisory Council on Science and Innovation as proposed in Budget 2024. Successfully achieving the goals for coordinating tri-agency programming and promoting mission-driven, interdisciplinary and international research should be complemented by the proposed Council composed of leaders from the academic, industry and not-for-profit sectors to provide independent advice. This Council would recommend priorities for the new organization and develop a national science and innovation strategy. This would include setting out a clear and diverse set of research areas for mission-driven funding delivered through the new organization.

Risk 3: Maintaining the Status of Agency Presidents

- **Major Risk:** As GIC appointments, the current Deputy Minister equivalent status of Tri-Agency Presidents enables the recruitment of highly qualified talent with senior academic and administrative experience. The establishment of the Capstone organization should avoid any downgrading of these GIC appointments. Maintaining the current GIC levels will be crucial both for recruitment possibilities and substantive leadership capacity in the new governance and management structure.

Risk 4: Health Research and Linkages to Clinical Care

- **Major Risk:** Diminished interactions between CIHR and key components of Health Canada (e.g., PHAC, CFIA) could result in decreased preparedness for health emergencies and reduced knowledge mobilization for health solutions to the detriment of all Canadians.

Risk 5: The Social Sciences and Humanities

- **Major Risk:** In the past, SSHRC has taken the lead in tri-agency programming and policy development. This role has helped ensure that research on human thought and behaviour has not been submerged by research on other topics within interdisciplinary research programs and policies. It is essential that the governance structure and staffing priorities of the Capstone appropriately reflect the importance of the natural sciences, engineering, humanities, social sciences and health to avoid diminishing the vital contributions of the social sciences and humanities.

Risk 6: HR Management Challenges

- **Major Risk:** Managing the diverse governance, management structures and staffing of CIHR as a distinct organization, in comparison to NSERC and SSHRC, which have already successfully integrated many operational functions, will require serious change management attention beyond the disciplinary activities of health research.

Conclusion

Canada's renewed research support system will advance knowledge, drive innovation, and prepare the country for future challenges. With significant investments in research, talent, and infrastructure in Budget 2024, and proposals to improve coordination and support international, interdisciplinary, and mission-driven research, U15 Canada welcomes these initiatives and is committed to supporting their success.

To ensure these changes meet the needs of the research community, we urge careful planning and thorough consultation to avoid disruption and maximize the benefits for Canada and beyond.

About U15 Canada

U15 Canada is an association of fifteen leading research universities across Canada. U15 Canada works to optimize research and innovation policies and programs that advance knowledge, develop highly qualified leaders for all sectors, and mobilize knowledge for the benefit of all Canadians. In this way, U15 Canada seeks to help Canadian universities and partners make a prosperous, sustainable and just future for all.