



Natural Sciences and Engineering
Research Council of Canada

350 Albert Street
Ottawa, Canada
K1A 1H5

Conseil de recherches en sciences
naturelles et en génie du Canada

350, rue Albert
Ottawa, Canada
K1A 1H5

File #312584-09

July 31, 2009

John Murimboh
Department of Chemistry
Acadia University
ELLIOTT HALL RM 217
6 UNIVERSITY AVE
WOLFFVILLE NS B4P 2R6

Dear Dr. Murimboh:

I am writing in response to your letter dated May 28th, 2009 appealing NSERC's decision on your 2009 Discovery Grant application. Our review of your case has now been completed.

NSERC has concluded that there was no compelling evidence of unfairness in the evaluation of your application and therefore maintains its original decision.

As you may know, appeals of decisions are in some instances reviewed by external advisors who are senior members of the research community with experience in NSERC peer review. The advisor's report is attached.

I would like to take this opportunity to provide some clarification regarding one point raised in your letter of appeal. In particular, you highlighted the fact that the difference in opinion between the external referee reports and the GSC Message to Applicant with regards to the Excellence of the researcher. As you know, referee reports are written in isolation of the context of a competition for limited funds and are only one tool used by the GSC members, who ultimately base their recommendations on their proper assessment. The onus is on the applicant to provide sufficient information to allow the committee to make a fair assessment of your file.

This concern was raised because applicants were not informed of the change in policy until AFTER the results from the 2009 Discovery Grant Competition were announced.

Your letter also highlighted the fact NSERC unfairly considered initial three-year grant holders. It should be noted that it was a long standing practice for Chemistry Grant Selection Committees to award successful early career researchers with two shorter term grants to monitor the progress of the research program. Although some researchers with an initial three-year award received a notable increase in funding, most were renewed at a level similar to the initial grant. Marked reductions or unsuccessful applications were less common but occurred, for example, when there were concerns raised through the evaluation, as was the conclusion following the review of your 2009 application.

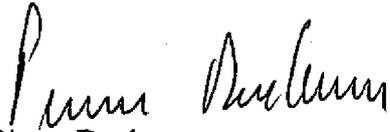
Canada

The only announcements that I could find were related to the introduction of the conference model. I also attended the University Information Session at Acadia and was not informed of any changes to the evaluation process.

In addition, you commented on NSERC's "Enhancements to Peer Review in the 2009 Discovery Grant Competition" that were not communicated to the applicant until April of 2009. NSERC did provide information about the planned changes to the program through various communications, for example announcements posted in June of 2008 as well as the University Information Sessions that took place in September of the same year. The review criteria i.e. Excellence of the Research, Merit of the Proposal and the contribution to Highly Qualified Personnel remained unchanged.

I understand that you will be disappointed with the result of your appeal, but I hope that these comments will help you to better understand the decision.

Sincerely,



Pierre Duchesne
Team Leader
Research Grants

Encl.

Ref # 007-26

J. D. Murimboh, Acadia University

Professor Murimboh is appealing the decision by the GSC not to fund his NSERC Discovery Grant essentially on two main arguments: 1.) the GSC misread his CV with respect to his publication record and 2) that the GSC relied too heavily on one referee's comments which the applicant feels misrepresents the science.

The applicant asks that his rating of "strong" for HQP not be changed.

1.) Excellence of the Researcher.

Dr. Murimboh indicates that the GSC incorrectly counted the number of independent publications. He indicates that he has published 4 independent papers, not 3.

I will grant him the provisional patent listed as item 1 as an independent work especially as it is important to his NSERC DG proposal. I found paper 2 as an online but not yet paginated paper on the Water Air and Soil Pollution journal web site. I have no problem classifying this as an independent work. Paper 15 (published in the Canadian Journal of Analytical Science and Spectroscopy details a pilot study was conducted in the city of Ottawa to establish sampling and analytical protocols for the determination of airborne metal concentrations in residential environments, with focus on indoor environments. His co-author P. E. Rasmussen is the starred and corresponding author. This suggests strongly that the paper is not a wholly independent work coming out of Acadia.

NSERC's regulations for the appeals process clearly indicates that new supporting material or information will NOT be taken into consideration.

I have searched for manuscript 6 which was submitted to Science of the Total Environment on the journal web site, on the ISI Web of Science, Google Scholar and SciFinder Scholar to no avail. I conclude that the paper is not yet accepted. I can not comfortably count that as an independent paper. I also note that N. O'Driscoll on this paper is a Tier 2 Canada Research Chair at Acadia who has set up an environmental biogeochemistry laboratory. Therefore at best this work if it ever gets published would be classified as collaborative. Nevertheless, I would count it if it were published. As an aside, I could find no mention of collaborators in Dr. Murimboh's PD100. This is probably (hopefully) an oversight on his part.

The paper in question was actually accepted on July 20, 2009 (albeit in a different journal). This highlights the inherent unfairness in not following NSERC regulations.

Therefore it would appear that 3 is the correct number of publications and even then, not all these papers appear to be entirely independent.

Dr. Murimboh has attracted good funding into his lab as a PI including CFI money for equipment and is a member on several group grants. While this is very good it also is just an "input" parameter, and one I would argue that is based more on Dr. Murimboh's potential than track record. This infusion of cash and equipment has not yet translated into a sustained record of independent publications. I do not place a huge weight on Dr. Murimboh's Directorship of the KC Environmental Science Labs because it is a logical appointment given his research expertise within a small chemistry department. Also in a

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MS does provide metal ion speciation but not the other information. In short, comparing ICP-MS and CLE-AdCSV sensitivities may be a case of comparing apples and oranges. Together the two techniques appear to be complementary. On this basis Referee A, who is an established expert in ICP-MS, appears to make criticisms as if the two techniques are equivalent in what they measure. Therefore I agree with the applicant that this seems to be incorrect. At the same time, Referee A's question of what the actual chemical form of each element is to me is understandable.

Lastly, I think Dr. Murimboh has somewhat misinterpreted Referee A's comments. He indicates that Referee A stated that he should place more emphasis on ICP-MS. That is not exactly the way I read it. What Referee A wrote is that Dr. Murimboh is continuing his previously NSERC-funded research *instead* of emphasizing ICP-MS. The GSC simply commented that they like the referee feel that ICP-MS strengthens the research plan. Clearly Referee A prefers ICP-MS but as far as I can tell, neither the referee nor the GSC recommended dropping CLE-AdCSV as an analytical technique.

Therefore, I reluctantly feel that the score here should remain as "moderate".

Why reluctantly? This pertains to Dr. Murimboh's criticism of the new NSERC model and his perception of unfairness for those who did not go through the standard (3+2) cycle which was the norm for GSC 26. I strongly believe that the NSERC system is one of fairest if not the fairest in the world. However I also supported the (3+2) model for Chemistry because it allowed new individuals to garner more experience in writing proposals, and to get useful feedback with less risk of being locked in at a lower level for 5 years. It also gave applicants more time to genuinely start to produce. Dr. Murimboh's productivity and scientific maturity are being evaluated early compared to those who are up this year with an extra 2 years under their belt, and it shows unfortunately in this case negatively. At the same time I recognize that his situation is no more onerous than that for an individual coming up for the first time and getting a five year grant. With good mentoring I am confident Dr. Murimboh can return successfully next year.

I also see the issue of fairness to small undergraduate institutions versus larger universities with Ph.D. programs as an important one but not germane to the issue at hand in this appeal.