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Dr. John Murimboh
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I don't think that NSERC really addressed any of the points that I raised in my letter of appeal.

As of March 25, 2011, NSERC no longer allows "having both funded and unfunded established researchers who meet the above conditions, in the last funded quality bin within a given Evaluation Group (EG)" (Isabelle Blain, NSERC - 2011 Discovery Grants Competition Results). This is a tacit admission of procedural unfairness in the 2010 Discovery Grant competition.

Dear Dr. Murimboh,

I am writing in response to your letter dated May 28, 2010, appealing NSERC's decision on your 2010 Discovery Grant application. Our review of your appeal has now been completed. NSERC has concluded that there was no compelling evidence of procedural unfairness in the evaluation of your application and therefore maintains its original decision.

In your letter, you questioned why your proposal was considered in the context of other Established Researchers. In this competition, applicants were classified into two categories of applicants: established researchers and early-career researchers. To be considered under the latter category applicants needed to meet the following definition: "are applicants who are within two years of the start date of their first eligible position at the university and who have no prior academic or non-academic independent research experience." Since you started your first academic appointment in 2004, you were categorized as an established researcher.

You also raised concerns with respect to the fairness in the review process for the Chemistry Evaluation Group where only part of the applicants in the quality Bin J received funding. With the introduction of the Conference Model, the review of Discovery Grant applications is a two step process: a first step where Evaluation Groups perform a quality assessment of applications and a second step where the Evaluation Group's Executive Committee (i.e., the Group Chair and the Section Chairs) makes recommendations on the budget distribution.

Evaluation Groups assess applications on the basis of three selection criteria (Excellence of Researcher, Merit of the Proposal and Training of HQP) and cost of research. Once the quality assessment of all applications has been finalized and their ratings established, applications that have the same quality ratings are grouped in a funding bin regardless of the institution size.

Recommendations for budget distribution within an Evaluation Group are made by the Executive Committee to NSERC, at which point final decisions are made. Funding principles were used by all Executive Committees to guide them in their funding recommendation decision process. For the Chemistry Evaluation Group in the 2010 competition where only part of the applicants in the quality Bin J were supported, funding principles reflected the funding available, the ratings of applications in Bin J and the status of the applicants. Another important principle was to keep Bin levels in a similar range from the previous competition year.

I actually asked to be classified as a researcher at an "early career stage", which was the terminology used by NSERC in the

This violates the rules outlined in the 2009-10 Peer Review Manual which requires that bin levels should be in a similar range from the previous competition year ONLY if the budget permits.

Preferential treatment of 3-year first time renewal applicants contravenes the 2009-10 PRM. As noted above, applicants should be classified as either Early Career Stage or Established Researcher.

This conflicts with the 2009-10 PRM which requires that all quality bins have equal weight.

In the 2010 competition, the number of returning applicants that received ratings that placed them in the quality Bin J for the Chemistry Evaluation Group largely exceeded the funding available to support all applicants in Bin J. After considering several budgetary options, the Executive Committee recommended supporting 3-year first time renewal applicants and applicants with a score of Very Strong on the Excellence of the Researcher. The recommendation of the Executive Committee was discussed at the CCUCC Department Chairs Meeting of May 29, 2010. Participants acknowledged the difficult choices that the Executive Committee had to make in the 2010 competition and will have to consider in future competitions.

While this statement is true, it was made before the recent changes to the NSERC Discovery Grant program.

Finally, your letter highlighted that recent changes to the Discovery Grant program resulted in a bias against researchers from small institutions. NSERC acknowledges the challenges faced by researchers from small universities. The research capacity in such institutions may not be that of larger institutions. When NSERC launched the pilot Research Capacity Development in Small University program a few years ago, representatives from small universities repeatedly argued that they should be measured against the same quality standards as other applicants and that it would be detrimental to the research enterprise if NSERC were to apply different standards for applicants from small institutions. It is important to note that while NSERC reports some of the competition results by institution size, where the definition of size is based on NSERC Grants and Scholarships expenditures, there is no funding policy related to institution size. All applications are evaluated according to the same indicators of quality and excellence.

I assure you that NSERC remains supportive of the role of institutions with limited or no graduate programs. We also agree with the conclusions of the International Review that small grants can produce quality work. It is important to note that the International Review expressed serious concerns about the modest value of Discovery Grants and erosion of purchasing power: "In the opinion of the Committee, the erosion of the value of the average grant is a more serious problem than the 70% success rate." Within a fixed budget, the challenge remains to find the appropriate balance between these competing priorities, for example, when deciding which quality categories ('bins') to support and at what level.

While this statement is true as far as it goes, I believe that the International Review Committee intended that increased grant sizes be funded through additional monies: "(a) the relatively high success rate of DGP applications is not incompatible with, and in fact encourages, a high degree of research excellence across a broad range of fields; (d) the DGP is therefore an exceptionally productive investment and thus deserves additional funding to ensure that the value of its grants keeps pace with the growing opportunity." -- Report of the International Review Committee on the Discovery Grants Program

In that respect, the Chemistry Evaluation Group has consistently recommended maintaining a focus on keeping grant levels at suitable amounts rather than reducing the grant level in favour of a higher success rate. The rationale presented to NSERC has been that a certain base level of funding is required to do meaningful research in Chemistry. With the increased number of applications and a stable budget, the funding landscape has certainly become more competitive.

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,



Anne-Marie Thompson
Director
Physical and Mathematical Sciences