

Dear CIHR and H RTP Program Committee,

We value Canada's response in helping researchers achieve scientific success. While we welcome the focus on supporting trainees and Early Career Researcher (ECRs, here defined as those within 5 years of their first Faculty appointment) and recognize the success of previous training programs and networks (e.g. KRESCENT, SCOLAR, STIHR, and NCEs), **we have significant equity concerns** with the recently announced pilot Health Research Training Platform (H RTP <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/52278.html>). Unfortunately, the H RTP program has attempted to combine support for two groups that each have distinct needs. Canada needs interdisciplinary training programs, but by confusing two different target groups via this program, we feel it is unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes. The funding earmarked for H RTP can be more effectively used to support both ECRs and trainees; **re-consideration of how to target these funds is warranted**. After numerous discussions with ECRs across Canada, we are presenting constructive suggestions to the H RTP program:

Our Recommendations

1. In the future, consult with ECRs more broadly in Canada to ensure that funding initiatives targeting ECRs are in line with their needs.
2. Clarify the role of ECRs in the H RTP funding call.
3. Clarify that these training platforms should be run by integrated teams that include ECRs, historically underrepresented groups, and non-U15 members in a meaningful way, to avoid the perpetuation of scientific empires and the lack of diversity ingrained into them.
 - a. One way to do this could be to equalize success for ECR NPAs, as is done with project grants.
4. All ECRs, including applicants, identified as team members should be eligible to access funds for teaching release.
 - a. All ECRs, who are members of training platform teams, should have the same role and benefits regardless of whether their name was on the original application.
5. The salary support for the dedicated platform manager should be specified to support the entire platform and not only the NPA.
6. Clarify the post-award assessment of both individual training platforms and the H RTP pilot project itself.

For your reference, we have expanded on our recommendations and have included additional information below.

1. Scope, Purpose and Objectives with respect to Early Career Researchers.

We agree that building capacity, improving training pipelines and developing transdisciplinary/collaborative research communities is critical to trainee skill development,

networking, and career planning. We also recognize that many CIHR-led successful training programs have been defunded as part of CIHR restructuring and emergent needs relating to the pandemic response. However, from the HRTP program description, it is still unclear how it is intended to support ECR career development. The stated specific objective(s) are: “*Support the development of structured, openly accessible and sustainable training and mentoring platforms that build capacity in areas of major health issues, scientific opportunities and critical gaps*”. We argue that the main objective of HRTP could be met more effectively by directly supporting ECR’s research programs or by increasing funding of trainee competitions. **The funds delineated for this opportunity could support 44 average ECR project grants, keeping 44 labs going for five years while also funding trainee salary and mentoring.** In our opinion, the best support for ECRs remains to fully implement the Fundamental Science Review (often referred to as the “Naylor Report”) and increase funding rates for project grants at CIHR across the board.

A salient problem with this call is its grouping of trainees (graduate students and post-docs) with ECRs, despite the fact that their training needs differ significantly. The list of expected training within HRTP includes “*developing resources or tools that will enable enhanced training (e.g., training modules, learning material, protocols, best practices, guidelines); enabling access to training resources by hosting (or otherwise providing access to) training opportunities; and/or facilitating experiential learning opportunities by connecting trainees and ECRs with mentors from across a variety of disciplines and sectors*”. A large number of ECRs have communicated to us that being perceived as a group that requires additional “training” without separation from post-docs and graduate students was deemed provocative and triggered an emotional response within the ECRs given the widespread view that independence, accomplishment and proficiency are required to earn grant success in the current Canadian research ecosystem. This was particularly acute for all ECRs currently struggling in the Project grant competitions where success rates are below 20%, together with the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has acutely stunted the upward trajectory of many ECRs and will have lasting impacts on productivity and growth.

2. Building ECR Independence.

Demonstrating independence is a key step in ECR career development, for securing CIHR funding (common note for ECRs in Project grant rejections - “*needs to demonstrate independence from previous mentors*”) as well as tenure and promotion considerations. A training program structured in a way where senior “mentors” are in charge of disbursing large amounts of funds including salary funds, could seriously damage a reviewer’s view of an ECR’s independence. As an example - an ECR can exist in the application in the role of a trainee (where they can receive funds as stipends or salary) OR in the role of an NPA, PA or Co-Applicant (where they will not receive funds for stipends or salary). We agree with the value of reducing teaching commitments in order to increase time to conduct research by providing salary, but this would only be available to the “trainee” ECRs. There appears to be a reduced incentive for ECRs to serve as applicants, if they cannot access these salary funds, and would create inherent inequities within the training program itself between ECRs in different roles.

Additionally, it has been published in the CIHR Evaluation Report on STIHR (December 2016) that PIs within a STIHR consistently identified a number of challenges including workload/time pressures, increased administrative burden and negative impacts on career advancement. It is also noted in the current H RTP allowable costs that “*costs incurred for a dedicated platform manager to alleviate the administrative responsibilities of the Nominated Principal Applicant are permitted*” but not the PAs (the position most likely allotted to ECR). This increase in workload is likely to be impactful for all ECRs but especially damaging to those who already face well-established obstacles and disadvantage, including women, BIPOC, and persons with disabilities (Barber *et al.* Systemic racism in higher education, *Science*, 2020). The lack of clarity on the training benefit for ECRs while expecting these faculty to shoulder a significant burden of administrative work to plan and develop these programs as to be meaningful involved seems to dilute the purpose of supporting them, as the structures that support ECRs and trainees are very different. We question how this idea actually builds independence or the capacity to increase research diversity in our fragile research ecosystem.

3. Equity.

The detailed inclusion requirements of this program and narrow scope of focus in the specific calls from some Institutes appear purpose-built to reinforce existing networks and tokenism. Rather than promote equity, we feel it is likely to create more barriers for those who are not already integrated into existing networks. While we appreciate the requirement for the need of ECRs to be principal applicants, their dependence on the NPA to control/ access funds implies that ECRs (a) are not trusted with handling research funds or (b) unable to effectively train mentees.

Additionally, the evaluation criteria as currently stated seem to reinforce this concern. For example, points a and c in the Excellence and Innovation in Mentorship Evaluation Criteria includes “*Appropriateness of the expertise and experience of the applicants to lead and deliver the proposed platform*” and “*Appropriateness of the expertise and experience of the mentors in training and supporting trainees and ECRs*”. An emphasis on experience suggests that ECRs are unlikely to rank highly and success in this program will be limited to established researchers, reinforcing deep-rooted inequities (e.g. how many trainees have graduated, or how many have attained independent faculty positions). As such, we feel that, as is, this call overlooks and undervalues the contribution of ECRs to training excellence and innovation.

Thank you for your support and consideration in this important matter.

Sincerely,

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