

Research Canada: Capstone consultation submission

The health research and innovation ecosystem submits the following principles to uphold and key risks to mitigate in response to the [questions posed to the granting agency presidents in the letters](#) from Ministers Champagne and Holland on June 17, 2024.

This submission was informed by extensive consultation with our membership, our national partners and supporters and with other research and innovation ecosystem stakeholders. We look forward to continuing to work with government as a trusted partner as we take Canada's research and innovation system to ambitious new heights.

Introduction

Research Canada welcomes the government modernizing and strengthening Canada's research and innovation system through Budget 2024 investments and measures that respond to key findings of the report of the [Advisory Panel on the Federal Research Support System](#).

The capstone organization, if implemented effectively, and refined with input from stakeholders, will strengthen the linkages between basic research, clinical research, and commercialization of research for better health and economic outcomes. It will also maximize previous and ongoing infrastructure investments and grants for all types of research and innovation and in so doing pave the way for a modernized and highly productive research and innovation engine in Canada.

Yet, transformational change is complex, nuanced, and can lead to unintended consequences, even in the best of circumstances and with the best intentions. It is not possible in the period given for consultation to provide exhaustive input. Therefore, we strongly suggest that implementation be pursued with due regard for continuity of the research enterprise and ongoing stakeholder engagement to address gaps, avoid or mitigate risks, and maximize desired outcomes.

Guiding principles

1. Sustained investment for federal granting agencies

To realize the promise of modernization, the multi-year and ongoing investments earmarked in Budget 2024 for the granting agencies and talent must flow, even as the new capstone structure, harmonization and governance changes are considered and pursued. The importance and maintenance of peer-reviewed, investigator-initiated research supported by the granting agencies must be enshrined in the new structure. This would ensure the future base and strength of Canadian research. Further, the new capstone agency should have policies that ensure that support to the granting agencies will grow proportionally with inflation, global peers, and overall increases in federal research.

2. New investment for capstone administration and initiatives

A clear and appropriate budget for mission-driven, multi-disciplinary and international research and capstone operations, over and above funds earmarked for investigator-initiated research and under the purview of the granting agencies, is essential. We support clear demarcation between budgets of a capstone and disciplinary agencies.

3. Autonomy of granting agencies within framework

A large part of research activity is well supported within the existing framework. We appreciate the acknowledgement of this and support the principle of granting agency autonomy under the capstone, including CIHR's institute model. Interagency funding and program pathways can be maintained for the research community, keeping grant applications as streamlined as possible.

4. Independent governance, excellence, and peer-review

It is critical that the capstone organization be governed by independent assessment and the guidance of a diverse scientific advisory body of appointed national and international members that protects the principles of excellence and peer-review. An independent Board of Directors (or Governing Council) will also connect the basic research enterprise to outcomes (better treatments, solutions, products, processes, services) that are implemented and available to all Canadians.

We also believe that independent, empowered and discipline-specific advisory bodies should be maintained for each of the granting agencies in the context of capstone's governance model.

5. Health research and the health of Canadians

It is essential that the Institute model of CIHR, given its role in advancing interdisciplinary and integrative health research, be maintained. Further, both the capstone organization and CIHR must retain the mandate to improve the health of Canadians. This means the connections of both organizations to the Minister of Health and their mandate should be upheld in all constructs (e.g. any new legislation for the capstone organization, its governance, leadership decisions). CIHR's transition to a new Ministry must not jeopardize the spirit of its current Act, nor its connection to the policy imperatives of Health Canada, PHAC, and CFIA. At the same time, CIHR's move can give the health research community and the Minister of Health greater access to broader social science and economic research to advance public health and health outcomes as we pursue a truly modernized, interdisciplinary ecosystem.

We encourage using the shift to capstone to create mechanisms that better support research conducted in the context of healthcare delivery at academic medical centres/hospital research institutes, including support for clinician scientists. It is also important that academic medical centres/research hospitals and allied health practices are recognized as eligible funding institutions for all capstone supported research, and that we increase the involvement of patients and their families in health research. This aligns well with the mission-driven aspect of the capstone organization's mandate and will ensure that Canadians benefit from well-supported research at the frontlines of care.

6. Coordination and coherence across the system

If less fragmentation is a key overarching goal, then how capstone will incorporate other research funding programs and organizations, many of which have been designed to tackle mission-driven, international, and multi-disciplinary research efforts, is critical.

Capstone would need to coordinate with federally funded organizations that are legally autonomous governmental entities with independent governance structures (e.g. NRC, CFI). It would also need to work with mission-based, not-for-profit (NFP) organizations funded by ISED or Health Canada (e.g. Mitacs, Genome Canada), as well as other NFP and private sector organizations funded by programs (SIF, SSF), which are currently led by these Ministries without independent oversight. This independent oversight is also absent from certain Tri-agency programs (e.g. CFREF and CBRF/Hubs). Capstone could present an opportunity to, at a minimum, incorporate the ISED-led and Tri-agency programs into the framework.

A clear strategy from the capstone Board and the Council on Science and Innovation should guide collaboration or a longer-term phasing in of programs and organizations into the new framework. As tighter coherence and integration is pursued, appointing leaders from key organizations to positions within the governance structures will help with alignment and strategy.

A special note on CFI: Research infrastructure underpins our research enterprise and is essential for mission-driven, international, and interdisciplinary work. Capstone provides an opportunity to improve granting agency linkages to CFI, and within the context of a new science and innovation strategy, Canada can proactively and strategically consider how to leverage infrastructure to achieve greater outcomes only possible through partnership.

7. Visionary and diverse leadership

Due to this critical and multi-faceted mandate, the capstone CEO should have experience in research and be an integrative, interdisciplinary, and cross-sector leader who understands how to translate research into impact. They should also have access to considerable research and innovation expertise on the capstone Board, and external independent guidance of the Council for Science and Innovation. We deem it important that presidents of each granting agency remain Governor in Council appointments at the DM level to ensure leaders with significant academic and administrative experience can be recruited. GIC appointments should also apply to the Board positions of the capstone organization.

The Board of Directors of the capstone organization should have representatives from each disciplinary area, and selection processes should uphold the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion, including representation of Indigenous research and research in both official languages.

8. Harmonized operations

The capstone provides an opportunity to harmonize agency policies and operations (e.g. single grant management platform, single data management system); increase the coordination and coherence of programs; and improve the coordination between internal and external actors.

9. Expanded impact

In addition to fueling and focusing Canada's approach to mission-driven, international, and interdisciplinary research, we see the capstone as an opportunity to strengthen Indigenous Science within the new structure, to further the work of each granting agency on EDI, as well as enabling platforms that are critical to each agency (e.g. data and infrastructure).

Major risks to mitigate

1. Funding

There needs to be more clarity around funding for the operation of the capstone organization and the research programs it will initiate. Further, the much-needed investments earmarked for the granting agencies and talent in Budget 2024, starting this year, need to flow. While we are improving the system, we need to support and strengthen the system for Canada to: return to a competitive stature with peer countries; remain a destination of choice for investment; retain the best and the brightest; sustain an environment for conducting world-class research.

2. Connection of health research to the health of Canadians

It is more important than ever to harness research and innovation to improve the healthcare system and health outcomes for Canadians. Canadians are increasingly worried and frustrated by their interactions with the healthcare system (from access, quality, cost, and other perspectives). Yet, to consider, as just one example, healthcare human resource issues in isolation from the entire health research and innovation ecosystem is to keep Canada on a path of short-term and patchwork fixes rather than holistic, sustained, and transformational change. How the capstone implementation is pursued, particularly for CIHR, is critical. Protecting its unique mandate, Institute model, and connection to the Minister of Health, Health Canada, and the policy issues that most affect Canadians requires diligence and change management expertise.

3. Independence

We have heard repeatedly through our own consultations and engagements that non-partisan, independent advice and guidance to the capstone organization is critical, as is maintaining discipline-specific counsel and upholding the principles of excellence and peer review. We strongly urge that governance models that best ensure that decisions for investigator-initiated research, as well as mission-driven, international, and multi-disciplinary research are in service of good science, the wellbeing of citizens and our most pressing environmental, technological, economic, and societal issues—free from political interference.

4. Autonomy

There is much within the current operations and programming of the granting agencies that has made Canada a world leader in the creation of knowledge and the development of talent. We believe change must build on this foundation of strength by upholding the autonomy of each granting agency. It is essential that existing pathways that support critical and ongoing work of researchers are maintained. Processes requiring change in the future should be guided adeptly through change management best practices and with continuity, efficiency and effectiveness of Canada's research and innovation systems as primary goals.

5. Structure and strategy

As indicated in Budget 2024, the government intends to “create an advisory Council on Science and Innovation... made up of leaders from the academic, industry, and not-for-profit sectors”. While we are pleased that structural and governance changes are underway, we are concerned that structural changes in the absence of strategy and prioritization could jeopardize the intent of transformative change. We recommend the government pursue the creation of the proposed Council on Science and Innovation in conjunction with the capstone organization implementation.

In keeping with our comments regarding the Board/Council of the capstone itself, this body should be independent and comprised of diverse scientific advisors of appointed national and international members that protects the principles of excellence and peer-review.

6. Careful and cautious pursuit of change

We urge the government to continue to consult the community, within and outside of Canada, throughout this process and to measure ongoing progress, productivity, and performance regularly. We also recommend a steady and deliberately cautious approach in implementing the new capstone structure. It will take time and resources to harmonize policies, procedures, and cultures. In the meantime, we cannot afford any disruptions in Canada’s research funding ecosystem. We suggest the government preserve essential operational aspects of the Tri-agency frameworks, policies, and programming to avoid placing undue burdens or complexities on researchers.

Given a great deal is being contemplated in a brief period, we support a transitional approach, one that builds on fewer, fundamental changes, which can be consolidated and evaluated before scaling up to the full implementation of the capstone organization.

Conclusion / next steps

Research Canada appreciates being consulted on behalf of its members across the health research and innovation ecosystem (universities, colleges, hospitals, academic health science centres, research institutes, private companies, health charities).

If implemented with due regard for complexity and risk of the task as well as the upside benefits and improvements that can accrue, then these new mechanisms have the potential to deliver needed and wanted results for Canadians and the country. We must take bolder, strategic action to be better prepared to face the complex environmental, economic, and social challenges we face as a global society, as peer countries have done.

We look forward to continuing to work in partnership with government on the capstone organization development and implementation. As part of our input on the Canadian research and innovation system, Research Canada can recommend experts for governance, advisory and other positions within the capstone organization and related governance structures to bring vital, strategic, and innovative perspectives of Canada’s health research and innovation ecosystem.

For more information

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