



BRIEF PRESENTED TO:

Standing Committee on Science and Research

Subject:

Impact of the criteria for allocating federal funding on excellence of research in Canada.

Submitted by:

The Alliance of Canadian Comprehensive Research Universities

L'Alliance canadienne des universités de recherche
de petite et de moyenne taille.
(ACCRU)

December 11, 2024

Dear Members of the Standing Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a brief to share the perspectives of the Alliance of Canadian Comprehensive Research Universities (ACCRU), representing small and mid-size universities. This brief will build on the comments provided by our members in support of a necessary change of the various criteria for allocating federal funding while maintaining the excellence of research in Canada.

Created in 2011 to support the development of research excellence among Canada's small and mid-sized universities, ACCRU currently represents almost 50% of Canada's universities. Our members include small and medium size universities from all 10 provinces and the Yukon and are lighting rods for opportunity, impact, and training in diverse communities across the nation. ACCRU fully supports the study led by the committee and welcomes the opportunity to represent the perspectives of our membership on the allocation and distribution of federal research funding.

The recommendations below build upon our previous engagement with the committee at the spring meeting on April 24, 2024, as well as extends from information and proposals provided in briefs and pre-budget submissions on behalf of our network. Our proposals are rooted in data, built through engagement, and extend from key reports such as that of the 2002 House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology, which noted the disparity in research funding.

In continuity with that recommendation, and recognizing the persistence of the disparity, we urge the implementation of targeted programs, administered by the granting councils, to empower smaller and under-resourced regional institutions. These programs should provide dedicated funding to enhance research capacity in key areas, ensure administrative and strategic effectiveness, and ultimately position small- to mid-sized universities as drivers for talent development, research discovery, innovation outcomes, and opportunity development within communities and for the benefit of Canadian society.

Canada has the potential to leverage its research talent and critically important research and innovation. To do so we must address the design of a system that has resulted in extreme concentration of funding whereby large and predominantly urban universities receive most of the public funding for both research activity and administration.

ACCRU's institutions significantly contribute to Canada's research excellence, particularly by driving positive change in the regional and rural communities they serve. Understanding and working within the contexts of regional communities is vital in addressing the needs of all Canadians, which is precisely what ACCRU institutions provide. Inequitable public research funding stifles regional economic and intellectual growth and limits the development of future leaders both within and beyond the academy.

To address, this growing gap and mitigate against its long-term implications, ACCRU's brief to this committee on April 24, 2024, included four key recommendations:

- 1- Enhance Merit Review.
- 2- Review and reconsider the use of success rates in allocation decisions.
- 3- Redistribute funding to support research trainees.
- 4- Encourage collaboration.

Our members continue to prioritize these recommendations. Implementing program refinements or redevelopments in these areas will strengthen, diversify, and enhance the impact of the research ecosystem. It will also ensure that small- to mid-sized universities have adequate resources to advance new compliance requirements such as equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), research data management (RDM), and research security. The fiscal considerations for managing or developing these new portfolios within institutions must also now be considered in view of present and projected loss of revenues from foreign students.

Building on the above four recommendations to this committee, ACCRU submitted a Federal Budget Consultation Brief (filed on July 31st, 2024), which included two recommendations to maximize the impact of federal research funding to support a balanced and robust research ecosystem. These two recommendations are equally relevant in this context and are re-presented and updated here for the committee's consideration.

Research Funding Models that Promote Equity and Excellence

Recommendation 1:

To fully realize Canada's research potential, the federal government should adopt a research funding model that prioritizes the equitable allocation of federal research funds for all universities across the country.

ACCRU universities are essential contributors to their communities, driving economic growth, fostering talent, and producing world-class research. These institutions play a pivotal role in regional development, collaborating with industry and government to create jobs and drive innovation.

Canada possesses a wealth of research talent and potential. To maximize this potential, a balanced research ecosystem is essential. While large, research-intensive universities play a crucial role, a well-supported and diverse landscape of institutions is equally important for driving innovation and addressing complex challenges.

The current research funding model and many programs present challenges for truly equitable access for funds to develop and deliver high impact research through small- to mid-sized Canadian universities. By revising program designs and criteria to optimize resource allocation, the government can enhance the nation's research capacity and impact and fully leverage the diverse and distributed network of universities among the ACCRU membership resulting in greater equity and excellence across the full spectrum of universities across the nation.

Furthermore, the reliance on past success rates as a primary determinant of funding extends beyond grants to other crucial areas such as scholarships, Canada Research Chairs, and CFI allocations. This compounding effect exacerbates the existing imbalances in the research ecosystem.

By adopting a more equitable approach to research funding, Canada can optimize its research capacity, foster innovation, and cultivate a diverse pool of research talent. ACCRU is eager to collaborate with government and other stakeholders to build a stronger, more inclusive research landscape, ensuring that research and innovation are not limited by institutional size or location.

Enhancing the Research Support Fund (RSF) and Recalibrating Other Programs with Institutional Allocations

Recommendation 2:

Revise the current research funding allocation model to address the disproportionate allocation to small and medium-sized universities and address the increased complexity of research administration.

The overreliance on past success rates as a primary determinant of research funding has created a systemic inequity, concentrating resources in a limited number of institutions. This approach inhibits innovation, limits the development of research talent, and hinders the ability of smaller institutions to contribute fully to Canada's research landscape through discovery, regionally embedded research, and talent development.

Small and medium-sized universities face significant challenges in competing for research funding. As highlighted above, increased administrative burdens imposed by new compliance requirements must also be accompanied with resource channels to support capacity. Most significantly, the current Research Support Fund (RSF) allocation formula does not adequately reflect the actual costs incurred by these institutions to meet these obligations, resulting in notional and actual amounts disbursed that are misaligned with costs for administration.

Furthermore, the use of RSF as a threshold for eligibility in various funding programs exacerbates existing disparities. This practice excludes many institutions from accessing critical funding opportunities, hindering their ability to conduct research, train highly qualified personnel, and contribute to Canada's economic and social development. This is compounded, for example, in the allocation approach of the Incremental Project Grant (IPG) program, which remains significantly out of reach for the majority of ACCRU members. Despite recent increases to the IPG, the current allocation formula continues to disadvantage smaller and mid-sized universities. Without a critical review and revision, these institutions will continue to be ineligible, ultimately resulting in unrealized opportunity, training, and impact.

To address these issues, we propose the following:

- **Diversify funding criteria:** Implement a more equitable funding allocation model that considers a broader range of factors, including institutional size, geographic location, research capacity, and potential impact.

- **Increase RSF allocation:** Provide adequate RSF funding to support the administrative and infrastructure needs of all institutions, regardless of size.
- **Re-evaluate eligibility thresholds:** Remove or adjust RSF-based eligibility criteria for funding programs to ensure fair access for all institutions (e.g., Incremental Grants Program) or for new/emerging priorities (e.g., EDI, RDM, and research security).

Merit-based evaluation of research proposals remains essential. However, the current funding model, which heavily relies on past success rates, exacerbates existing disparities in research support. ACCRU advocates for a funding structure that prioritizes equity while maintaining rigorous evaluation standards to maximize the overall impact of Canadian research.

By taking such steps, the government can create a more equitable and robust Canadian research landscape, fostering innovation, talent development, and societal benefits across the country.

Conclusion: Unlocking the Potential of Canadian Research Impact & Opportunity

Canada's universities are pivotal to our nation's progress, generating groundbreaking research, cultivating talent, and driving economic prosperity. ACCRU's forty-four (44) member institutions are dedicated to pushing the boundaries of knowledge and creating positive change in all regions from coast to coast to coast.

To fully realize the potential of our research ecosystem, strategic investments are essential as are reconsiderations of current allocations and program design. By empowering universities of all sizes to participate fully in the research landscape and fostering collaborative initiatives, Canada can strengthen its position as a global innovation leader.

ACCRU is committed to working closely with the government to achieve these objectives and build a brighter future for Canada through discovery, impact, and talent development.