



## 9. Activities for February

### 9.1 Logistics for Competition Session

#### 9.1.1 Agenda

Your Program Officer (PO), in consultation with the GSC Chair, will prepare an agenda for the competition session and forward it to you prior to the meetings. The agenda will specify the order in which applications will be considered (new and other applications for Discovery Grants, RTI applications) and will indicate the estimated time to be spent on each category. The agenda will probably start with opening remarks from the Chair, a discussion of key issues on which consensus is needed prior to starting the reviews and a briefing on the mode of operation of the committee. It will also include (probably at the end of the session) a policy meeting and a discussion of membership.

#### 9.1.2 Physical Arrangements

##### Hotel and Travel

The competition sessions are held for a number of committees on NSERC's premises, Constitution Square, Tower II, 350 Albert Street, Ottawa, and for others at the Marriott Hotel, 100 Kent Street, Ottawa. Out-of-town members usually stay at the Marriott Hotel which is located one block away from our offices.

You are required to make your hotel and travel arrangements through Carlson Wagonlit by Global Travel Centre, NSERC's travel agent (see Appendix 4). **Members not requiring travel arrangements must still contact NSERC's travel agent to confirm their hotel reservations.**

Additional information on travel and physical arrangements for the February meetings is sent to you in December. Insert this information in this Manual for easy reference. It contains the details of schedules and meeting rooms for your GSC.

##### Shipping of Documentation (Exhibit Books) Prior to Competition Session

Should you decide to ship your exhibit books ahead of time to our offices, the following instructions should be followed:

- Members may forward boxes to our offices to arrive no earlier than two to three days prior to the start of their competition session. Storage space is limited. **Members must arrange to have their books delivered on a work day, as the Mailroom is not open to receive these packages on weekends.**
- Boxes should be sent to NSERC, Constitution Square, 350 Albert Street, 16th floor, Ottawa, ON K1A 1H5. **Important:** All boxes must clearly indicate



- your name, committee name and number, the meeting room number, and contents: “Research Grants – Competition Session Material.”
- Boxes can be sent by courier. However, we cannot accept C.O.D. charges.

Further instructions regarding billing arrangements for the shipment of documentation (Exhibit Books) will be sent to you in December.

## 9.2 Roles and Responsibilities for Committee Members and NSERC Staff

### GSC Chair

The GSC Chair provides procedural leadership to ensure the orderly and complete evaluation of applications and the transmission of accurate recommendations to NSERC. The Chair ensures that all important aspects of proposals are considered and that a committee consensus is reached for all applications. The Chair leads and stewards the committee’s efforts to maintain the high quality of peer evaluation. This includes advance briefing of GSC members and ensuring the consistency and equity of approach of the GSC in the February meetings.

The Chair will also be the GSC spokesperson in dealings with NSERC on policy issues, new emerging areas of research, particular discipline problem areas, etc. This includes the submission of an annual report to NSERC.

The Chair coordinates the preparation of comments to applicants during the competition session to ensure that they reflect the full committee consensus and not the views of a single member.

### GSC Members

See also Section [1.2](#) of this Manual. Specific responsibilities during the February meetings include:

- Providing in-depth evaluations for a **subset** of all applications (the ones for which you are an internal reviewer) assigned to that GSC and presenting your assessment to the committee (this may entail written comments);
- Reading and being ready to discuss applications assigned to you as a “reader” but not as an internal reviewer;
- Preparing comments that reflect the full committee consensus;
- Adhering to NSERC’s guidelines and regulations on the review of applications, conflict of interest, communication with applicants and confidentiality.

Some GSCs use subcommittees. You may participate on a subcommittee to evaluate RTI, MFA applications, etc.



## Program Officers

- The Program Officer advises on NSERC policies, guidelines and procedures and helps ensure consistency in evaluation of all applications assigned to the GSC;
- Serves as the “committee memory” by bringing relevant documentation to the attention of the committee to aid it in its deliberations;
- Ensures that grant recommendations (level and duration) are accurately recorded and that GSC comments are prepared where they are required;
- Ensures that recommended awards conform with the budget allocated to the GSC and with NSERC guidelines;
- Brings any problem areas to the attention of the committee Chair or the Group Chair, or to the Team Leader or Director;
- Ensures consistency of approach (e.g., use of referees, evaluation of RTI applications, funding policy, etc.) from year to year;
- Assists the GSC in the use of the reference material provided by NSERC;
- Assists the GSC in identifying candidates for committee membership.

Program Officers are not committee members and do not have voting rights on the Committee.

## Group Chairs

Group Chairs are members of the Joint Committee on Grants and Scholarships (COGS). In this capacity, they act in the best interest of all areas of science and engineering, while bringing to the discussion their particular knowledge of the disciplines under their purview. Group Chairs oversee both the grant selection committees and the scholarships and fellowships selection committees.

One of the principal roles of Group Chairs during the competition sessions is to monitor the quality of review in the selection committees under their responsibility and to interact with them as necessary. This includes acting as a constructive critic, advising selection committees on NSERC policies and procedures, and representing their opinions and concerns to COGS and to NSERC. While the Group Chair role is associated with disciplines close to their own field of expertise, Group Chairs are encouraged to sit in on committees in other disciplines to familiarize themselves with those discipline-specific issues or dynamics.

Group Chairs are not members of the selection committees under their purview and do not vote. Group Chairs may attend only part of the competition sessions and normally attend policy meetings of the relevant selection committees.

More specifically Group Chairs will:

- monitor the effect of the budgetary situation on new applicant recommendations, success rates and grant values;



- advise NSERC on special requests by selection committees such as the transfer of funds from one program (e.g., between PGS and PDF) or category to another, requests to carry forward a budgetary surplus, or other exceptional requests;
- attend the discussion of specific cases, as identified by NSERC staff;
- when possible, attend the discussion of applications from GSC members (the Conflict of Interest Guidelines require the presence of a Group Chair or delegate);
- observe the mode of operation of the selection committees, peer review process, group dynamics and other issues (problem areas, overlap with other funding agencies, etc.);
- monitor the quality of the comments to Discovery Grants applicants;
- identify any policy issues that may require discussion at COGS or action by staff;
- participate in the discussion of the membership for the following year. Group Chairs help NSERC to identify next year's Chair for selection committees, in consultation with the NSERC staff, the current Chair and senior members;
- review the statistics on and trends in awards made upon recommendation of the selection committees and the list of any other awards approved by executive action;
- periodically review the jurisdiction of selection committees and recommend changes as appropriate;
- for the PGS and PDF programs, provide input on where to draw the funding cut-off line for committees under their purview and monitor the quality of applications just above and below that line; and
- when applicable, attend the review of RTI – Categories 2 and 3 applications (moratorium this year); they are responsible for presenting some of these cases to the Committee on Grants and Scholarships (COGS) and ensure, by questioning the selection committee, that they have all the justification and information needed.

One Group Chair will preside over the Chairs Selection Committee, which selects winners for the André Hamer Postgraduate Prizes and the Howard Alper Postdoctoral Prize. This committee meets by teleconference two weeks after the February PGS/PDF competition.

The work of a Group Chair, like that of an NSERC staff member, is a delicate balance of advocate, advisor, and critic. The selection committees have full responsibility for the evaluation of grant and scholarship applications assigned to them according to policy guidelines established by NSERC. Only in situations involving a violation of guidelines or “unfair” evaluation is a recommendation overturned. The Group Chairs and NSERC staff work together to monitor the quality of review and to develop policy.



## **Directors**

The Directors (Research Grants) work with Group Chairs to monitor the quality of peer review and the effectiveness of programs. They also identify and monitor policy issues and provide advice to Group Chairs and Program Officers on the interpretation of policies and rules.

As much as possible, Directors attend the policy meetings of the GSCs under their responsibility and identify new Chairs for GSCs.

## **Team Leaders**

The Team Leaders are responsible for discipline groupings. They observe the deliberations of all GSCs under their responsibility, establish good relationships with the GSCs, provide advice to Program Officers and GSCs on policy, specific cases and procedural issues and assist with problems. They attend the February policy meetings of the GSCs and brief members on new developments at NSERC.

## **Program Assistants**

Program Assistants provide support by typing comments and other documents as needed. They also assist with transfers of applications and requests for consultation. They may also replace the Program Officer for short periods of time.

## **Program Operations Unit Staff**

Secretariat Offices will operate throughout the competition, one on NSERC's premises and one at the Marriott Hotel. The Secretariat is the first point of contact for questions/problems regarding logistics and physical arrangements (meeting rooms, food, security and keys, light, photocopying, faxes, changes in travel arrangements, messages, etc.).

## **9.3 Group Dynamics**

In 1994, NSERC commissioned a study of the Research Grants adjudication process. One component of the analysis focused on the patterns of group communication observed in GSCs and examined the kinds of roles played by Chairs, Program Officers and members. The following is a description of the roles observed in NSERC GSCs and a brief discussion of how they can enhance or disrupt the adjudication process. This section was prepared by Dr. Barbara Carroll\* who conducted the study. It is included in the *Peer Review Manual* to alert you to the potential effects of group dynamics and to help you maintain constructive group dynamics throughout the competition session.

\* Copy of analysis available upon request.



Adjudicative fairness is mediated by the kinds of group dynamics that occur in GSCs. Constructive dynamics help ensure fairness by focusing the discussion on the evaluation criteria, detecting and offsetting biases related to the application of NSERC policies, and avoiding the kind of social influence that leads to decisions based on factors that are unrelated to the evaluation criteria. On the other hand, destructive group dynamics provide the kinds of conditions that allow social influence to go unchecked and so they increase the chances that research grants will be awarded on the basis of anything other than rational arguments.

The type of social influence that is most likely to influence a GSC's decision-making process can be blatant and include discussion of factors such as an applicant's personality, marital status, culture, or university politics. Often it is more subtle.

Discussion may centre on factors that have their origins in NSERC's evaluation criteria, but go beyond these criteria to involve judgements based on personal knowledge of the applicant or unsubstantiated inferences (e.g., guesses about the nature of the collaboration between members of a research team, judgements about an applicant's ability based on his/her self-presentation skills during an information session, or inferences about a relationship between an applicant and an external assessor in the absence of supporting evidence). Alternatively, the discussion may be coloured by pervasive positive or negative judgements as can occur, for instance, when an applicant is labelled a "star" or recognized as the recipient of a previous **nil** recommendation.

Whether group dynamics are constructive or destructive depends largely on the roles played by GSC members. Within GSCs there are two prescribed roles: the GSC Chair and the NSERC Program Officer. There are also at least four emergent roles including the more constructive Watchdog and Humorist roles, as well as the potentially destructive Bulldozer and Compulsive roles. These emergent roles may be played by a committee member, or they can be incorporated into the role of Chair or Program Officer.

A major role of the GSC Chair is to provide procedural leadership and, together with the Program Officer, the Chair is officially responsible for ensuring a fair adjudication process. The role of Chair is governed by NSERC guidelines. NSERC's system for selecting Chairs is generally excellent. As a result, most GSCs can rely on their Chairs to provide direction and monitor the fairness of the adjudication process. This excellence cannot be automatically assumed, however. When Chairs are more non-directive by nature, they may be less active in promoting fairness. Under these conditions, the possibility of social influence increases. To counter this, the NSERC Program Officer may work together with the Chair and play an active role in ensuring fairness. Alternatively, the integrity of the adjudication process may be preserved if at least one of the GSC members is willing to assume the role of Watchdog.

**Watchdogs** have the ability to stand back from the content of the committee's discussion, monitor the underlying decision-making process, and detect potential biases and social





influence attempts. When they detect these, they are conscientious about bringing them to the attention of the GSC and restoring fairness by focusing on the evaluation criteria and/or NSERC policies. Good Chairs inevitably play a Watchdog role. When they do not, GSC members should look for evidence of a Watchdog among their colleagues and actively reinforce those playing this role.

Although Watchdogs are generally effective in promoting constructive group dynamics, they can be less effective when they monitor for aspects of the decision-making process that have little to do with the evaluation criteria, (e.g., very fine points of language usage, correct reporting style for journal articles, or for evidence that dissertation supervisors had attended to the more practical aspects of preparing new applicants for an academic career), and when their Watchdog role is moderated by a Bulldozer tendency to believe that these issues should be incorporated into the committee's decision-making process. This type of Watchdog/Bulldozer combination can be neutralized by an effective GSC Chair, an NSERC Program Officer, or a more constructive Watchdog, any of whom can refocus the GSC discussion on more legitimate concerns.

Of all the group roles, the role of **Bulldozer** is the most likely to lead to destructive group dynamics. Bulldozers are very vocal, forceful committee members who have a hidden agenda about what types of applications should be funded. They are generally intent on having their views adopted by the committee and they attempt to persuade others to their viewpoint using social influence as well as arguments based on the evaluation criteria. NSERC committees are generally large enough, structured enough, and well-managed enough to contain full-blown Bulldozers. When they do emerge they are most likely to be seen as a more moderate Watchdog/Bulldozer combination. They are also most likely to surface in GSCs with nondirective Chairs. In these cases, Bulldozers will quickly assume a directive leadership role, and will be unwilling to yield this. They are best managed by Watchdogs who detect their attempt to control the group discussion early, and who stop their attempts at social influence before they become an established committee norm. Bulldozers are most destructive when they are also the GSC Chair because then their attempts at influence have added authority. It is therefore important that GSC members make recommendations to NSERC staff about future Chairs carefully, and that they not confuse dominance with good leadership.

Bulldozers are destructive not only because they can subvert the decision-making process, but also because they lower the morale of the committee by introducing a confrontational tone to the discussion. In general, high morale and group cohesion is essential to maintain the high level of commitment needed to overcome the effects of fatigue. One of the most effective roles for promoting these qualities is that of a Humorist. Often this role is played by the GSC Chair, but it may also be played by another GSC member. Humorists keep the tone of the discussion light, prevent the build-up of any resentment, and help defuse conflict. In these ways they can help offset the frustration caused by Bulldozers and generally foster the kind of positive group climate that helps ensure fair adjudications. In GSC deliberations humour is most effective when it is used between the discussion of consecutive applications, when it is brief and when it



refers to the discussion that has just taken place. It is more destructive if it is prolonged, sarcastic in tone, or unrelated to the committee discussion. In any of these cases, it breaks the committee's momentum and makes it more difficult to remain focused on their task. Thus, it is important for GSC members to encourage constructive humorists but to curb the efforts of their less constructive counterparts.

A final group role that has an impact on group dynamics is that of a **Compulsive** who considers it necessary to engage in very detailed discussions of each application. A love of detail is not, in itself, destructive. It can become so, however, under conditions of high time pressure and when other committee members are more general in their assessments. In these cases, an overemphasis on detail can promote high levels of frustration and so reduce both morale and concerns about fairness. Compulsives do not promote high levels of frustration when other GSC members have a similar style but they do increase time pressure which may, in turn, have a negative impact on adjudicative fairness.

Generally, Compulsives need to have their input curtailed because of its impact on group morale and fatigue. This is sometimes difficult, however, because their intention is to be fair. Many GSC Chairs deal with compulsives by imposing general limits on the length and nature of the comments given by first and second reviewers. In the case of a more non-directive Chair, this kind of procedural intervention would be appropriate for either the NSERC Program Officer or a Watchdog.

## 9.4 Late Transfers and Consultations

During the competition session, GSCs may identify applications which have ended up in the wrong committee. If this happens, bring the application to the attention of your Program Officer and Chair. The Program Officer will consult the Chair and the Program Officer of the other GSCs that could review the application. Since such cases are often at the boundary between the mandates of different GSCs, it may not be possible to transfer the application. The Program Officer must be satisfied that a change in committee at this time will ensure the most appropriate review. If the research program overlaps the two committees, an alternate option would be to request a consultation from the other GSC, rather than transferring the application. Often, the best practice is to invite a member from the other GSC to participate in the deliberation of the original committee for that particular application.

If another GSC agrees that the application falls within its jurisdiction, any concurrent RTI application will also be transferred. The original GSC should provide comments on the applicant(s) and the application. If the application was originally assigned to the GSC and only gets transferred during the competition session, it is likely that at least part of the proposal is relevant to that committee. When renewal applications are transferred from the GSC that last reviewed the application to a new one, the amount of the current award will be transferred to the new GSC's budget. A budget adjustment will also be made in the case of RTI Grant applications.





## 9.5 Procedures for Presenting Applications

The GSC first decides on a modus operandi for the discussion of applications. Before discussion of each case, the Chair will ask if members wish to declare a conflict (see Sections [5.4.4](#), [6.6](#) and [7.4](#)). Refer to your GSC procedures for specific details on presenting applications. While GSCs are not encouraged to set a time limit for each reviewer to speak or for the consideration of each case, Chairs and/or Program Officers must ensure that discussions proceed at a rate that will allow the GSC to get through its work within the time available.

When consideration of all of the Discovery Grant applications is complete, the Chair may invite committee members and the Program Officer to flag for reconsideration the names of individuals for whom there are lingering doubts. A committee member can ask the Chair to reconsider a case as an alternative or additional procedure. A copy of the list of grants recommended will be distributed to all members for final endorsement.

## 9.6 Comments to Applicants

See Section [6.11.3](#) of this manual. Following the discussion of each Discovery Grant application, the Chair will indicate if comments to the applicant(s) are needed and will designate a member to prepare these comments. While internal reviewers may have drafted comments prior to the February GSC discussion, the final version must reflect the consensus of the entire committee. GSCs are encouraged to finalize as many comments as possible during the competition session. Comments are collected regularly from the committee room, typed and returned to the Committee room for verification. Members preparing comments should ensure that they are drafted before the end of each day and should verify the accuracy and completeness of the typed version. Many GSCs reserve a portion of each day to go over comments and verify that they reflect the consensus opinion. The Chair or delegate is ultimately responsible for certifying that the comments represent the committee consensus. All Messages to Applicants forms must be submitted to NSERC within one week of the end of the GSC's meetings in February.

## 9.7 Managing the Budget Envelope

Once all Discovery Grant applications have been reviewed, your Program Officer will tell you whether the award recommendations are within the budget available. Each GSC has its own procedures for dealing with budget overruns or underspending. Your Program Officer will also be able to tell you if competition pressures are expected to be higher or lower in the coming year of the current five-year allocation cycle than they were in this and in the previous years. This will help the GSC to decide if the budget overrun should be tolerated and repaid from next year's competition budget or if unspent funds should be banked for the next competition. GSCs may be asked to develop a contingency plan in case NSERC's budget is cut or increased after the competition meetings (see Section [6.9.1](#)).



## 9.8 Policy Meeting

Each GSC holds a brief policy meeting following the completion of its deliberations. The policy meeting generally includes a discussion of the quality of applications, the number and quality of new applicants, budgetary pressures in the GSC, selectivity, problem cases, comments on NSERC's administrative services, policies, forms, literature, etc. In addition, feedback from the GSC is sought on policy matters currently under review at NSERC. Your Program Officer and Chair will prepare an agenda for the policy meeting portion of the GSC's competition agenda. This agenda will be distributed to members in advance of the February meetings.

## 9.9 Membership Recommendations

The process of identifying new GSC members to replace those whose term ends in June normally starts in September (see Section [3.5](#) and Appendix [1](#)) and continues throughout the fall and winter. To facilitate and accelerate the process of completing the GSC's membership for the following year, all information about the background, stature and experience of nominees should be forwarded to the Program Officer and to the members of the GSC's subcommittee on membership (if one exists) prior to the February meetings. References on the nominees' suitability to participate in the peer review process and to work in a committee setting should also be provided.

The agenda of the GSC's February meetings will include a discussion of the committee membership. Ideally, all potential members should have been identified at that time so that the GSC as a whole can discuss the suggestions and establish priorities.

## 9.10 Confidentiality of GSC Funding Recommendations

GSC funding recommendations are subject to approval by NSERC and may be changed for reasons of budget, administrative error or lack of full adherence to NSERC policies.

NSERC announces decisions on grants in late March following final approval by the President. Master lists are released to each university shortly before, or concurrent with, individual letters of notification. Funding decisions are also posted on the NSERC Web site.

Details of the GSC discussion on a specific applicant are confidential and must **not** be divulged to others. Release of information to applicants **must** be done through NSERC.

**Under no circumstances** should GSC members divulge to anyone the recommendations emanating from the February competition or relating to appeals subsequent to the competition.