Reviewing for the Canada Postdoctoral Research Award program

Title

Welcome to this learning module for peer reviewers of the Canada Postdoctoral Research Award (or CPRA) program.

This module pertains specifically to applications submitted to CIHR. It is designed to ensure that reviewers understand the CPRA program and feel prepared to effectively participate in CIHR's review process.

Navigation

This course is designed to be self paced.

Use the playbar below to resume playback, navigate between slides, mute and unmute audio, and toggle closed captions. You can also browse the full table of contents, and collapse or move the playbar.

Objectives

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- identify key features of the CPRA program;
- apply the selection criteria and considerations to the review of applications;
- understand the rating scale and how to write a high-quality review;
- and summarize the steps in the peer review process for the CPRA program.

Objective 1: The CPRA program

In this section, you will learn about the CPRA program and the eligibility criteria for applicants.

The CPRA program

The CPRA program at CIHR supports and promotes promising talent in all areas of health research. This allows postdoctoral and post health professional researchers, in Canada or outside, to add to their experience and facilitate their transition to the next phase of their career.

The value and term of the award is $70 000 over 2 years.

Eligibility of Applicants

For the CPRA program, applicants must hold or expect to hold a doctorate or a health professional degree before the start date of their award; and must have completed all requirements of their doctorate or health professional degree no more than three years before September 1 of the year in which they are applying. They must also not hold or be on leave from a tenure-track or tenured faculty position.

If interested, you can view all eligibility criteria on the CPRA program webpage.

CIHR staff have reviewed all applications to confirm the eligibility of the applicants – it is not the reviewer's responsibility to assess the applicant's eligibility.

If reviewers note any eligibility flags, they should bring it to the attention of the CIHR staff immediately and must not include it as part of their review.

Formatting Requirements

To ensure that all applicants have the same amount of space to write their applications, applicants must adhere to the formatting requirements outlined by CIHR such as font sizes, spacing, and page limits.

Similar to the eligibility criteria, it is not the responsibility of reviewers to ensure appropriate formatting of the application. However, should a reviewer be assigned an application that may not have followed instructions, this should be brought to the attention of CIHR staff as soon as possible.

For the full list of formatting requirements, consult the Acceptable Application Formats and PDF Attachments webpage.

Objective 2: Selection Criteria and Considerations

In this section, you will learn about the selection criteria and considerations used in the review of applications for the CPRA program.

Assignment of Applications

As a reviewer for the CPRA program, you will primarily be assessing the applicant's research potential and experience and the quality of the proposed research training. As such, it is not essential for your research expertise to align directly with the research area of the application.

Reviewers are asked to assess applications from a generalist's perspective and should not declare conflicts simply because applications are outside their area of expertise. Although you may not be familiar with the field, we ask that each reviewer complete their reviews from the point of a view of a generalist.

When assessing applications, all reviewers are expected to abide by CIHR's principles of peer review: confidentiality, conflict of interest, fairness, and transparency.

Selection Criteria

The evaluation of the application should be based on the following selection criteria: 50% on the research potential and experience of the applicant, and 50% on the quality of proposed research program.

In the following slides you will learn more about the selection criteria.

Review Appendix A of the Reviewers' Guide for the CPRA program, for additional details on the selection criteria.

Research Potential and Experience

For the criterion, Research Potential and Experience, you will assess the applicant's research potential and experience and consider how it relates to their research proposal.

This criterion is divided into 3 sub-criteria: honours, awards, and academic distinctions; research-related contributions and activities; and sponsor's assessment of the applicant's characteristics and abilities.

For information on honours, awards, and academic distinctions, review the Common CV of the applicant including the sections "Recognitions" and "Research Funding History".

For information on research-related contributions and activities, review the Common CV including the sections "Activities" and "Contributions" and attachments including "Most Significant Contributions" and the "Special Circumstances".

For information on Sponsor's assessment of the applicant's characteristics and abilities, refer to the sponsor forms that provide an assessment of the applicant.

It is important to recognize that positive comments are common while negative ones are not. Additionally, applicants have no opportunity within the application to provide a justification for their choices of sponsors.

Quality of Proposed Research Program

For the criterion, Quality of Proposed Research Program, you will assess the project summary and consider how the applicant's previous training and research environment relate to the proposal.

This criterion is divided into 3 sub-criteria: training expectations, proposed research project, and research training environment.

For information on training expectations, refer to the "Training Expectation" section.

For information on proposed research project, refer to the "Research Project Summary" document.

Lastly, for information on the research training environment, refer to the "Research Environment" document.

Broadening your assessment of research contributions and impacts

CIHR is a signatory of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (or DORA), which recognizes the need to improve the ways in which research is evaluated. It is therefore crucial that peer reviewers look broadly, beyond the traditional indicators of productivity, when assessing contributions and impacts. For example, rather than using metrics such as h-index to assess productivity, consider the context of the applicant and focus on assessing quality and impact directly. Some examples of historically valued indicators and additional valuable research outputs are listed here.

Apply the following when assessing productivity in reviews according to DORA.

- Focus on the actual content of the applicant's contributions when assessing quality – including originality, findings, methodological rigour, and clarity.
- Evaluate impact directly by considering how the work has advanced knowledge and/or understanding in the field, practical applications of the work, real-world outcomes (impacts on government, health, social or economic outcomes), relevance, and influence.
- Consider a broad range of outputs and acknowledge disciplinary differences.
- Follow CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC guidance on the assessment of contributions to research.
- Reference the DORA Guidance on the Responsible Use of Quantitative Indicators in Research Assessment

Avoid the following when assessing productivity in reviews according to DORA.

- Use JIF to assess the excellence of the researcher or research quality.

- Don’t rely solely on journal venue or prestige when assessing applications. These should only be considered in conjunction with direct indicators of quality and impact.
- Don’t equate citation counts with the value of the research.
- Don’t reward quantity over quality.

Check out our Skill Builders to practice integrating DORA principles into your reviews

Assessing Sex and Gender Integration

When reviewing applications, reviewers must also assess the integration of sex and gender in the proposed project where applicable.

Learn more about Sex, Gender, and Health Research by exploring the resources on this slide. All links will open in new windows, so you can return to this module when you are ready.

Evaluating Indigenous Health Research

When evaluating applications that involve First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples, reviewers are strongly encouraged to review the following training modules and literature. These resources provide critical context, ethical frameworks, and distinctions-based guidance to ensure respectful, informed, and equitable evaluation.

Question 1

Test your knowledge!

You may refer to Appendix A of the Reviewers’ Guide for the CPRA program to assist you.

In the application you are reviewing, the applicant has justified why they chose their proposed training location and what they expect to learn.

Which sub-criterion of “Quality of proposed research program” does this apply to? Research-related contributions and activities, Training Expectations, Proposed research project, or Research training environment.

Question 2

Which of the following does not apply when considering “Research-related contributions and activities” in your evaluation? Evidence of impactful research contributions, Applicant’s estimated percent contribution to the work, Publications listed with a “Submitted” status, or Applicant’s other professional activities.

Objective 3: Rating Scale and Conducting Quality Reviews

In this section, you will learn about the rating scale and how to write a high-quality review.

The Rating Scale – Eligible for Funding

Reviewers should be assessing each application based on the information provided and should not be seeking additional information or outside opinion to supplement what is contained in the application.

Reviewers will be asked to rate the selection criteria on a scale of 0.0 to 4.9 for their assigned applications. These ratings will then be weighted automatically to produce an overall score for each application you review in ResearchNet.

Applications with an overall weighted score above 3.5 are eligible for funding and are categorized as follows:

Applications with a range of 4.5 to 4.9, excel in most or all relevant aspects and any short-comings are minimal.

Applications with a range of 4.0 to 4.4, excel in many relevant aspects, and reasonably address all others. Certain improvements are possible.

Applications with a range of 3.5 to 3.9, excel in some relevant aspects, and reasonably address all others. Some improvements are necessary.

The Rating Scale – Not Eligible for Funding

Applications with an overall weighted score of 3.4 or less are not eligible for funding and are categorized as follows:

Applications with a range of 3.0 to 3.4, broadly address relevant aspects and major revisions are required.

Applications with a range between 2.9 and 0.0, fail to provide convincing information and/or have serious inherent flaws or gaps.

Please use the full rating scale when evaluating your assigned applications. For more information, refer to the reviewers' guide.

Review Quality Expectations

For each application, you must provide a concisely written assessment highlighting the strengths and weaknesses for each selection criterion that supports their ratings.

When writing your review, you should consider the following aspects to ensure your review is of the highest quality:

1. Appropriateness: Your review comments are fair, understandable, original, confidential and respectful.
2. Robustness: Your review is thorough, complete and credible.
3. Utility: Your review provides feedback that addresses the needs of reviewers, applicants and funders.

CIHR has developed a checklist as a practical tool to assist both applicants and reviewers to apply the review quality criteria to their received or submitted reviews. In addition, all reviewers are expected to complete the Conducting Quality Reviews module.

Writing Reviews

When writing reviews, you can focus your comments on the following elements:

- Use descriptors from the CIHR rating scale that align with your rating.
- Justify and provide context for each comment to ensure clarity and relevance; and

- Consider a broad range of contributions and impacts, balancing quantitative metrics with qualitative aspects to provide a comprehensive evaluation.

It is important to keep your review simple and straightforward. Avoid biased, sarcastic, flippant, or arrogant language to maintain professionalism and objectivity. Additionally, use gender-neutral pronouns such as “they” or refer to “the applicant” instead of using “he” or “she”.

For additional guidance, check out our Skill Builders to help improve the quality of your written reviews.

Artificial Intelligence and Award Review

Reviewers should be aware of CIHR’s current guidance on the use of generative artificial intelligence (or AI) in peer review.

With the rise of powerful AI tools, it is important to remember that peer reviewers remain responsible for reading applications assigned to them, and writing fair and rigorous reviews in their own words. Inputting application information into generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT or DeepL, will result in breaches of privacy and in the loss of custody of intellectual property, as these tools may store and reuse data.

Therefore, the use of publicly available generative AI tools for evaluating applications is strictly prohibited. Reviewers will be asked to confirm their understanding and compliance with the Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Development and Review of Research Grant Proposals guidance in ResearchNet.

Question 3

True or False. To ensure that all applications are treated equally, reviewers should NOT perform additional research in addition to their evaluation on the content of the application.

Question 4

Yes or no? While reviewing an application you find yourself stuck on how to express your feedback. You decide to use ChatGPT to write parts of your review and to compare sections of the research proposal with existing research in the field. Is this acceptable?

Objective 4: The Review Process

In this section, you will learn about the review process for the CPRA program.

Peer Review Process for CPRA program

We will discuss the following steps of the peer review process. For additional information, review the CIHR Reviewers' Guide for the Canada Postdoctoral Research Award (CPRA) program.

1. assigning applications to committees;
2. identifying conflicts and ability to review;
3. conducting reviews of assigned applications
4. submitting written reviews and ratings, and;
5. participating in re-review, if required.

Distribution of Applications by Committee

Applications are assigned to a committee based on the scientific area that has been chosen by the applicant, which aligns most with the proposed research activities. Every application in the committee will be assigned to three reviewers.

PT1 will assess candidates' potential as prospective independent investigators in biomedical and/or clinical research.

PT2 will assess candidates' potential as prospective independent investigators in health services research and/or social, cultural, environmental and population health research.

For more information about each committee, you can refer to their mandates.

Identify Conflicts and Ability to Review

In ResearchNet, you will first need to agree to the Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement, which includes the expanded version of the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Self-identification Questionnaire. Completing this questionnaire is a requirement for peer review committee members, enhancing our ability to understand the degree of diversity in peer review committees.

The questionnaire is accompanied by a Privacy Notice Statement which outlines CIHR's intended purpose and uses of the self-identification data.

Next, to start conducting your reviews, you will click on the "Manage Conflicts/Ability to Review" task.

This will bring you to the set of applications that have been assigned to you.

You'll select each application by clicking on the hyperlinked application numbers.

You will have access to the relevant information to determine if you are in conflict. This is also where you will indicate whether you are in conflict or not in conflict with the application.

As previously mentioned, the assignment of applications is not based on specific expertise of reviewers. As such, the reviewers' mandate is to review each application with a generalist's perspective and assess the overall quality of the research proposed. There should be no conflict declared due to lack of expertise with an application.

Conduct Reviews

Please ensure you are familiar with the selection criteria for the CPRA program. You can now start working on your reviews by clicking on the "Conduct Reviews" task.

To assess the applications, click on the hyperlinked application numbers.

From this screen, insert your numeric rating. Then, you must provide written comments that justify your ratings, and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the application for each selection criteria. We recommend using the selection criteria as titles to section your comments. The written reviews will provide constructive advice to applicants to assist them in improving their future submissions and/or advance their research.

It is advised that reviewers should save their work often in ResearchNet by selecting "Save draft copy" or copy and paste from a word processor as ResearchNet times-out often.

Submit Written Reviews and Ratings

When you are ready to submit your reviews, you will first need to select the reviews and then click on “Submit Selected Final Review”. Once reviews are submitted, reviewers will no longer be able to modify them.

It is critical for reviewers to submit their written reviews and scores by the deadline specified by CIHR staff. If, at any point, you are unable to submit your review on or before the deadline, contact CPRA staff as soon as possible.

Participate in Re-Review, if required

When all reviews are submitted, a calculation is applied to determine which applications have received discrepant scores.

In this instance, CIHR will ask these reviewers to discuss the application in order to reconcile their scores.

If you are requested to do a discrepancy review on an application, you will be notified by e-mail with the contact information of the other reviewers and your access to that specific application on ResearchNet will be re-opened.

The goal of this process is to have all three reviewers listen to and consider each other’s opinions. In the end, you are not obliged to change your score but we ask that you re-submit. While you are not obliged to change your score, you will be required to re-submit your score and ensure that your original and/or updated comments are also re-submitted following your

discussion with the other reviewer. Reviewers must also ensure they select "Submit Final Review" in ResearchNet in order for the re-review to be considered complete.

Once all re-reviews are submitted, the final score for each application will be determined by taking the average of the three scores.

Finally, CIHR will generate ranking lists for each committee.

Applications are recommended for funding by committee from the top down in order of ranking as far as the budget will allow.

Summary

Congratulations! You have now completed the learning module for peer reviewers of the CPRA program.

You should now be able to: identify key features of the CPRA program; apply the selection criteria and considerations to the review of applications; understand the rating scale and how to write a high-quality review and summarize the steps in the peer review process for the CPRA program.

Survey

Before continuing on to explore the Additional Resources, please complete the survey to assist CIHR in tracking progress and improving the quality of our learning. The survey will open in a new window.

Additional Resources

Click on the additional resources below to view important links for peer reviewers of the CPRA program.