

CHA vs SSHRC

Response to the Memorandum from Dr. Veronica Strong-Boag, President of the Canadian Historical Association, dated January 24, 1994.

In a recent issue of *In House/Chez nous* (newsletter of the Canadian Federation of the Humanities), the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) has expressed a critical view of current SSHRC orientations and policies. We have tried to alleviate these concerns in our numerous exchanges with the Association in the recent past and would now like to respond publicly to the CHA's comments on some of our policy and program reforms.

The Council clearly recognizes the diverse needs, interests and expectations of the social sciences and humanities research community. This is demonstrated by our diversified program structure which supports "independent" and strategic research, theoretical and applied studies, individual and team work, disciplinary and interdisciplinary research, provides institutional research support and funds a variety of research communication activities.

The identification of new priorities and the introduction of new initiatives are not, by definition, a threat to our core programs and basic objectives. Support for Standard Research Grants and General Research Grants programs accounts for approximately 48 per cent of our 1994-95 program budget. Our direct support of graduate students and young researchers through the Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellowships programs constitute 32 per cent of our budget and the Research Communications and International Relations program cluster receives 7 per cent.

Over and above our commitment to these traditional forms of research activity which constitute the foundations for the advancement of knowledge in our fields, the Council believes it should also encourage new forms of research which are emerging in Canadian universities. We now offer funding opportunities and evaluation mechanisms for those researchers who wish to pursue collaborative and interdisciplinary research.

The CHA expresses a number of concerns related to the Research Grants program particularly with regard to the allocation of Research Time Stipends and the support of graduate students. I should first like to state that Council's primary goal in reviewing the program and introducing new objectives and criteria was to promote research productivity and ensure stability of support to excellence; in addition, by offering grants for three-year programs of research, the Council intended to facilitate the application process and offer more flexibility to recipients through less strict budgetary controls.

The SSHRC is aware that all social sciences and humanities disciplines develop their own scientific paradigms, trends and practices. Some of these may correspond more closely than others to Council's different program objectives and criteria. This being said, standardized guidelines are an essential aspect for the equitable and efficient treatment of applications. Within the established parameters, adjudication committees can exercise their own judgment in assessing the scholarly merit of proposals and in reviewing budgets in light of the distinctive characteristics and needs of their discipline.

It is common knowledge that the SSHRC has adopted stringent criteria for the review of Research Time Stipends. The Council is well aware that time is an important ingredient of research productivity in the social sciences and humanities. However before the current policy was implemented, the proportion of the Research Grants budget allocated to Research Time Stipends increased systematically, reaching a peak of 20 per cent. In this context, the Council decided that its mandate of promoting and advancing knowledge in the SS&H would be better served by enhancing the overall research activity in our fields through an increase in the number of researchers supported. We believe this approach allows for the best use possible of the budgetary envelope available while contributing to maintaining a viable success rate for the program.

The differences between disciplinary committees in the award rates and the number of RTS recommended are related to the nature of the discipline and of the peer evaluation process. (The higher number of RTS recommended by the archaeology and anthropology committees clearly reflects the need for field work in these disciplines). Committees are of course fully briefed by staff and are asked to apply Council regulations as consistently as possible. The Council does make provisions to offset any wide variations across committee success rates but it systematically endorses committee recommendations, including those related to the funding or not of RTS.

The emphasis on graduate student support in the Research Grants and Strategic Grants programs reflects Council's conviction of the need to promote the research-training interface in Canadian universities. The SSHRC believes that research has a crucial pedagogical function in the training of the next generation of researchers and therefore encourages the integration of students in the research process. The acquisition of research skills, through close collaboration with experts in their disciplines provide students with a unique research experience which complements their formal academic training.

As for the recent changes made to the administration of the Doctoral Fellowships program, I must state that the review process was undertaken in close collaboration with an advisory committee composed of representatives of Graduate Schools and social sciences and humanities departments, from all regions of Canada. Contrary to the statement made by the CHA, the Council does not guarantee a certain number of fellowships to each university; this approach would be clearly inconsistent with the selection criteria for the program which are solely based on academic merit. Rather, in order to encourage equitable participation in the program, the process imposes quotas, defined to provide maximum flexibility to institutions, on the number of applications universities may submit.

The CHA questions Council's decision to establish multidisciplinary committees to adjudicate applications to the program. This measure is designed to achieve more effective cross-disciplinary comparisons of candidates with a view to ensuring a higher level of due consideration and equity by allowing students to compete on the basis of excellence in a larger pool of applicants. It was also seen as a step towards facilitating dialogue between disciplines and helping in some measure to strengthen standards within disciplines with less established research traditions. There is of course no perfect scheme for regrouping disciplines. The current committee structure was introduced following the recommendations of the Advisory Committee which examined a diversity of options.

It is premature to assess the impact of the modifications brought to the Doctoral Fellowships program but the Council is closely monitoring new procedures in consultation with the community and makes the necessary adjustments.

The Council is deeply concerned, as is the CHA, by the limited number of fellowships it can offer to promising social scientists and humanists; however given the strong pressures on our program budget to meet the diverse needs of the research community, we have little flexibility to do so without compromising its commitment to its current program structure and support.

SSHRC also shares the CHA's preoccupation with the low participation rate of historians in the Strategic Grants program. This does not correspond to the important contribution historical studies can bring to contemporary social concerns. We have asked the Association for advice on measures that could be implemented to correct this situation.

I hope these few comments help to clarify the planning and consultation process behind the changes in orientation and approach implemented by SSHRC in order to carry out its mandate. Like all organizations, and like the disciplines whose research it supports, the Council continues to evolve and look for innovative ways to accomplish its mission.

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