

BRIEFING NOTE

Prepared for: The Standing Committee on Science and Research (SCSR)

Re: Capstone Research Organization

Date: October 25, 2024

As Canada continues to advance its research capabilities, the establishment of a new capstone research funding organization represents a pivotal opportunity to enhance collaboration within the research community. The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada (AFMC), representing Canada's 17 faculties of medicine, is dedicated to advancing medical education, and research, as well as promoting social accountability, which will translate into better health of all Canadians.

In light of the growing complexities surrounding funding and coordination among various granting councils and key stakeholders, this new capstone organization aims to streamline processes and align research initiatives with national health priorities. While it expresses a commitment to diverse representation in decision-making, the initial development stages reveal a need for greater inclusivity, particularly regarding Indigenous representation and broader diversity. The Standing Committee on Science and Research has emphasized the significance of this initiative, outlining a comprehensive approach to assess the organization's mission, mandate, and operational structure. By fostering partnerships with entities like the AFMC, the capstone organization may be able to effectively address gaps in research support and strengthen the integration of interdisciplinary and priority-driven research.

This brief outlines key recommendations designed to maximize the organization's impact, urge caution with regard to timing and implementation, and establish a robust framework that will drive the future of Canada's research landscape, ultimately fostering innovation and improving health outcomes across the country.

Coordination Among Granting Councils and Key Players

To effectively address coordination among granting councils, the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI), and other key players, the new organization should engage in strategic visioning. This includes harmonizing policies and programs, supporting graduate students, and facilitating common data access. Involving partners like the AFMC will enhance collaboration and drive innovation.

Close coordination among federal councils and the CFI is essential. Leadership representation from each council on the capstone entity's board will promote equitable representation across disciplines. Granting councils must also develop complementary strategic plans and harmonized arrangements that balance investigator-driven research with health system research priorities.

It is crucial to clearly articulate the differing mandates of each agency, helping researchers feel they have a "research home." Furthermore, ensuring direct access for academic organizations to senior leadership in granting councils can foster effective strategy development. Establishing transparent principles for coordination will help identify and address research gaps, maximizing the capstone organization's impact.

Interface Between Researchers and Research Support

To improve the interface between researchers and research support, the new organization should implement coordinated consultation and planning, allowing sufficient time to hear all relevant stakeholders. This will create a cohesive vision through effective advocacy. Research support programs must feature seamless access for investigators, providing efficient online resources and clear, accessible information.

Building trust within health research communities is crucial. Understanding their realities will ensure that their needs are supported by granting arrangements. It is also vital to avoid favoring industrial development at the expense of basic and clinical research. Supporting national competitions that encourage collaboration among universities, health authorities, industry, and NGOs can strengthen partnerships.

Establishing direct communication lines with designated individuals in the new organization will address disputes and provide support, while maintaining existing funding mechanisms to minimize disruption.

Support for Modern Research Enterprises

In supporting modern research enterprises, the new organization should include international partners in accountability, oversight, and coordinating committees. New programs focused on interdisciplinary research and partnerships must come with dedicated funding (above and beyond the current funding landscape) and adhere to principles of independent peer review, ensuring that investigator-driven fundamental research remains a priority. It is important to emphasize that this funding should complement existing budgets, addressing a recurring concern among stakeholders.

Strategic plans should provide targeted support for these areas, encouraging proposals that address major national priorities and enhance Canada's international competitiveness in

research. Establishing clear principles regarding the use of Canadian funds, conflict management, and joint funding for international collaborations will further strengthen these efforts. Additionally, providing greater financial support for early-stage companies will foster innovation and development.

Early Priorities for the New Organization

The early priorities must include ensuring a seamless transition with clear communication to the research community while safeguarding existing funding mechanisms. It is important to build trust among the federally funded research community and clarify the status of currently funded projects.

Articulating how the new approach will enhance provincial healthcare delivery through applied research is crucial. Furthermore, supporting efforts to harmonize ethics approvals and data privacy will facilitate smoother research processes. Recognizing the concerns of Indigenous and racialized groups the transition process should ensure their representation within both the development and the operation of the organization to further strengthen its foundation.

An appropriate governance and public-facing accountability structure involving the academic community should be established to clarify operational principles and roles, reinforcing the organization's commitment to inclusivity.

Supporting Mission-Driven Research

To support mission-driven research, the organization should actively seek input from researchers and partners to identify areas of focus for new initiatives ensuring continuing independent research in the Canadian landscape. Funding must be awarded based on excellence and independent peer review, even for mission-driven projects, ensuring that quality remains paramount.

Coordinated strategic plans and clear articulation of roles and goals are essential for effective communication with the research community, provinces, and the public. It is important to clarify whose mission will be prioritized and to engage a diverse range of stakeholders, ensuring that the organization addresses varying perspectives. This includes the concerns some Indigenous communities have raised about the use of the term “mission” in government language, given its historical implications related to residential schools. Aligning CFI with major national research priorities while promoting shared infrastructure investments will maximize benefits for investigators. Furthermore, identifying clear priorities for aligning infrastructure and operational funds is critical, as is promoting opportunities that combine both funding types.

Building Linkages with Disciplinary Communities

Building effective linkages between the new organization, disciplinary communities, and the broader research community requires face-to-face engagement and robust change management practices. Clear communication and broad consultations with members of the healthcare ecosystem regarding proposed programs will foster collaboration.

Creating advisory boards and committees comprised of researchers and healthcare administrators can enhance connections and support, ensuring that all stakeholders have a voice in shaping research initiatives.

Integration of CIHR and Maintaining Health Canada Portfolio Connections

Key considerations for the integration of CIHR into the new organization include maintaining a strong voice for the health sector in relationships with government ministries, with particular attention to preserving ties to Health Canada. Emphasizing the importance of the health research agenda will ensure that the organization provides transformative opportunities for health research.

The capstone organization should report to both the Prime Minister and relevant ministers, retaining the existing tri-council organizations to uphold CIHR's health mandate. Clarity around priorities and principles of resource allocation will be vital, especially since the current major interests of the health portfolio may not align with the innovation concerns of the Science and Innovation portfolios.

Bridging these two areas will require innovative programming and effective communication, ensuring that health research remains a priority within the broader research landscape.

Principles for Design and Implementation

Guiding principles for the design and implementation of the new organization should include good governance, sound reasoning for changes, and early wins in strategic planning. Clarity, transparency, and inclusivity—particularly ensuring Indigenous Peoples and other underrepresented groups are represented from the early stages of planning—are essential for building trust. To foster this trust, it is important to allow adequate time for engagement and input from stakeholders, as rushed processes may inadvertently overlook critical perspectives. Moreover, ensuring that the tri-agency presidents and Indigenous governments are actively involved in decision-making will strengthen the organization's foundation and help mitigate potential challenges.

Finally, maintaining transparency, excellence, and accountability throughout the organization will reinforce stakeholder confidence. It is also critical to ensure that existing

tri-council initiatives are not adversely impacted by the new structure, preserving the integrity of ongoing research efforts.