

Management Response to the Evaluation of the Strategic Network Grants (SNG) Program

Context

The Strategic Network Grant (SNG) Program, which is now called the Strategic Partnership Grants for Networks (SPG-N), funds five year, large-scale, multidisciplinary research projects of around \$5M in NSERC funding in targeted research areas that require a network approach and that involve collaboration between academic researchers and Canadian-based organizations. The Principal Investigators of the networks are established researchers with strong track records in collaborative research and student training, and who have demonstrated the leadership skills necessary for managing a complex, interdisciplinary, multi-institutional project. The evaluation was undertaken to assess the relevance and effectiveness of the program in meeting its objectives, and the efficiency of the management of the program. The evaluation complies with the 2009 Treasury Board Policy on Evaluation.

Overall Comments

Management is pleased with the findings of the evaluation that confirm that the SNG Program is a high profile opportunity that supports prominent researchers and accomplishes impressive results for partnering organizations and for Canada, as illustrated by the results and case studies of the evaluation report. The program was created in 1996 and is a longstanding NSERC partnership program that features regular communications between NSERC staff, the academic community and industry and government partners. Academic researchers and their partners provide feedback that is used by NSERC staff to improve the program literature, evaluation and logistical operations each competition year. Each network has a NSERC staff member as an observer on the Board of Directors which enhances the connection to NSERC as well as aiding in the administration of the network awards.

Overall, the content of the report was helpful in confirming the following: (1) the network approach provides many advantages, in particular, allowing researchers to address complex problems that could not be addressed in isolation, (2) there is no duplication with other funding programs, (3) networks are improving international access for Canadian researchers and Highly Qualified Personnel (HQP) by providing a platform for connection and interaction, (4) the program is meeting partner needs (both private and public) which in turn benefits Canada and (5) the program provides significantly enhanced training opportunities for HQP. The nature of the report's recommendations indicates that the program is meeting its objectives and is being managed in an efficient and cost effective manner.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The SNG program is relevant and is achieving its key intended immediate and intermediate outcomes, as well as demonstrating progress towards meeting its long term outcomes. It should therefore be considered for continued support at the federal level to continue to foster research and innovation.

The SNG program is addressing a continued need using a network approach that has been shown to have many advantages; the program also underscores and supports the federal government's R&D and innovation goals and is delivered in an efficient manner.

Management Response: *Agree*

This program is highly competitive and is of great interest to many Canadian researchers and partners in industry and government, who are able to apply the research results to inform public policy and meet industrial challenges. The program is meeting its objectives and most networks can demonstrate that they have met their intended goals and objectives. Applications are regularly received from large, medium and small institutions, indicating the wide interest in the program across Canada.

The report demonstrates that the Strategic Partnership Grants for Networks (SPG-N) are well matched to the draft NSERC 2020 Strategic Plan for 2015-2020.

Recommendation 2: Best practices in the area of industry engagement and Knowledge Translation (KT) among SNG and other research networks, including tools and resources, should be shared broadly among the networks to embed and maximize translation of network research to meet partner needs. Consideration should be given to including KT resource allocation minimums or greater specificity in the KT approach in applications for funding. The experience of the case study networks suggested that where challenges were encountered, these often occurred in the mobilization of research results and the engagement or receptivity of receptor communities. Surveyed partners also recommended improvements related to greater breadth and more meaningful engagement of industry. Several networks have developed resources or had successful experiences in mobilization which could be beneficial to share and adopted by other networks.

Management Response: Agree

The amount of demonstrated engagement of industry and other partners is an important and necessary requirement for all networks. This aspect is reviewed at the application stage and is actively encouraged and supported throughout the award by the Board of Directors. Management notes the importance of Knowledge Translation (KT) and Knowledge Mobilization (KM) and proposes to adjust the program description to require greater specificity in the KT/KM approach at the application stage (e.g., requirement for a KT/KM plan). This would be very useful and could be considered for the 2016 competition. The Networks of Centers of Excellence (NCE) Secretariat has requirements for Knowledge Mobilization/Knowledge Translation plans when applying to their programs. This documentation could be considered when revising the SPG-N literature.

In terms of adopting KT resource allocation minima, Management notes that the objectives of the networks vary widely, and that setting a minimum amount of funding to dedicate towards KT could reduce flexibility in allocating funding towards the network's priorities. Given the variability in approaches and objectives of the networks, Management considers that the requirement and evaluation of a KT/KM plan at the application stage, that takes into account the specific objectives of individual networks, is a more suitable approach than establishing a minimum amount to dedicate to KT. The Board of Directors also has a role to play in encouraging and planning for KT/KM. NSERC will require the Board of Directors to take on the role of advancing KT as the network progresses.

Sharing of best practices among networks is viewed very positively by NSERC. NSERC has previously supported a regularly occurring meeting of Network Principal Investigators and Network Managers to discuss issues of mutual interest. This approach has not been employed in recent years due to budget constraints and it could be useful to reintroduce this event. NSERC has also encouraged the establishment of an online Network Managers' discussion forum and document sharing library, which

was hosted on an awarded network's website. This is not an NSERC controlled forum, however NSERC staff are able to access and contribute to the forum. The research network that currently hosts the forum is ending shortly and there are discussions in progress by another research network to start a Google group (or equivalent) for all of the Network Managers to continue this forum. This group should be active by September 2015.

Management agrees that networks should have meaningful engagement with a variety of receptor communities, however a standardized approach would be challenging given the vast differences in the nature of partnerships that occur throughout the networks. NSERC encourages advanced planning and early consultation with partners to ensure that the research aligns with their needs. This is addressed in the program literature and explained during outreach sessions, as well as from NSERC staff directly when providing guidance on the preparation of full proposals. Once awarded, this engagement is also guided by the Board of Directors who has representation from all stakeholder groups.

Recommendation 3: The program should examine ways to improve capture and reporting of performance metrics at the program level that would indicate the outputs and outcomes of networks based on common indicators of research outcomes (e.g., publications, mobilization of research, commercialization). While a common network reporting template was introduced in 2005, the ability to report on results at the program level remains limited.

Management Response: Agree

Management Response: Management recognizes the importance of collecting accurate and relevant information to assist in the ongoing evaluation and assessment of programs. NSERC has adopted a new grants management system which, when fully implemented, is intended to ease data capture and improve accuracy of the information that is provided. This will allow for the collection of more accurate and complete data in a streamlined process. In the interim, NSERC is developing online tools to streamline the process for company reporting, including for Strategic Network Grants. This will allow for easier aggregation of the information that would allow for the reporting of performance metrics at the program level.

More generally, Management notes that many significant network outcomes occur outside of the award time period and would therefore not be captured in the final report. Following up 3, 5, 10 years after the awards to look at these metrics could be discussed with the Evaluation Division and potentially integrated into the new online system. In terms of improving the quality of the final reports, Management will consider whether to reserve a portion of a network's funding exclusively for the completion of the final report.

Recommendation 4: The program may wish to explore how to provide increased guidance and identification of best practices to improve network leadership and to ensure that the requisite administrative and oversight skills of the network management team are in place to create a well-functioning and cohesive network. Across the various lines of evidence, strong leadership was identified as a key factor in facilitating network success. This important, yet demanding function was identified as a challenge for some networks that impacted their success. Increased support of leadership skills development or best practices in management recruitment could contribute to improved network functionality and success.

Management Response: Agree

Management agrees that encouraging communication and networking between the Network Principal Investigators and Network Managers will aid in addressing this recommendation (see Action for Recommendation 2). Due to the highly competitive nature of the network program, the lead investigators almost always have the skills to lead the network and are guided by the experienced membership of the Scientific Advisory Committee, theme leaders and Board of Directors.

Network Principal Investigators and their host institutions are encouraged to select a Network Manager who has the required skill set to manage the administration of a large-scale, multi-institutional research initiative. Hiring a qualified person in this role is critical to ensuring the quality of network operations and in reducing the degree to which the Principal Investigator needs to involve themselves in administrative details, rather than on the scientific direction and overall management of the network.

Guidance from NSERC on the selection of Network Managers has been provided in an informal manner in the past. A more formalized document will be provided to the Network Principal Investor applicants at the same time that they are invited to submit a full proposal to the program. This would provide a reasonable amount of time for applicants to carefully consider this issue. This information would also be included in the award letter to remind a successful applicant about this critical decision.

Action Plan

Recommendation	Agree/ Disagree	Proposed Action	Responsibility	Timeline
<p>1. The SNG program is relevant and is achieving its key intended immediate and intermediate outcomes, as well as demonstrating progress towards meeting its long term outcomes. It should therefore be considered for continued support at the federal level to continue to foster research and innovation. The SNG program is addressing a continued need using a network approach that has been shown to have many advantages; the program also underscores and supports the federal government’s R&D and innovation goals and is delivered in an efficient manner.</p>	Agree	Continue to support the SNG program.	RP Management	Ongoing
		Ensure SNG program continues to align well with NSERC 2020 going forward.	RP staff	December 2015/January 2016 with annual literature update
		Consider the integration of activities that are currently supported through the Strategic Network Enhancement Initiative into the Strategic Networks program (e.g., knowledge mobilization, innovation activities, enhanced student training and international networking aspects).	RP staff	December 2015/January 2016 with annual literature update

<p>2. Best practices in the area of industry engagement and Knowledge Translation (KT) among SNG and other research networks, including tools and resources, should be shared broadly among the networks to embed and maximize translation of network research to meet partner needs. Consideration should be given to including KT resource allocation minimums or greater specificity in the KT approach in applications for funding.</p> <p>The experience of the case study networks suggested that where challenges were encountered, these often occurred in the mobilization of research results and the engagement or receptivity of receptor communities. Surveyed partners also recommended improvements related to greater breadth and more meaningful engagement of industry. Several networks have developed resources or had successful experiences in mobilization which could be beneficial to share and adopted by other networks.</p>	Agree	Encourage the networks to have an online forum for sharing information with others.	RP staff	New forum expected to be operational by September 2015.
		Investigate reinstating the in-person meeting of the PIs and managers for sharing of best practices.	RP staff	December 2015
		Introduce greater specificity in the program literature for a Knowledge Translation/Knowledge Mobilization approach that would be reflected in applications.	RP staff	December 2015/January 2016
		NSERC will clarify in the literature documentation the roles and responsibilities of the Board to actively encourage KT, Knowledge Mobilization and meaningful partner engagement (both industry and government) at all stages.	RP staff	December 2015/January 2016

<p>3. The program should examine ways to improve capture and reporting of performance metrics at the program level that would indicate the outputs and outcomes of networks based on common indicators of research outcomes (e.g., publications, mobilization of research, commercialization). While a common network reporting template was introduced in 2005, the ability to report on results at the program level remains limited.</p>	Agree	Finalize the development of online tools to streamline the process for company reporting is underway for different grant types within Research Partnerships, including for Strategic Network Grants	RP Staff	March 2017
		Consider setting aside funds in the network award that can be only used for the final report preparation	RP Management	June 2015 (to include the two new awards that will be made on June 30 2015)
		Engage the Evaluation Division in a discussion regarding better measurement of long-term outcomes and potential integration into the new online system.	RP Management and Evaluation Division	March 2016

<p>4. The program may wish to explore how to provide increased guidance and identification of best practices to improve network leadership and to ensure that the requisite administrative and oversight skills of the network management team are in place to create a well-functioning and cohesive network. Across the various lines of evidence, strong leadership was identified as a key factor in facilitating network success. This important, yet demanding function was identified as a challenge for some networks that impacted their success. Increased support of leadership skills development or best practices in management recruitment could contribute to improved network functionality and success.</p>	Agree	Formalize guidance to Network Principal Investigators on the selection of Network Managers.	RP staff	June 2015 (to include the two new awards that will be made on June 30 2015)
		Encourage active engagement with the Board of Directors and Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC).	Program Staff working with Networks	Ongoing