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Research Tools and Instruments

Peer review manual

2023-24



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Foreword

This manual is designed as a guide for Selection Committee members for the **Research Tools and Instruments (RTI) Grants Program**. This document outlines the activities to be undertaken by members and Chairs during each competition year, and also describes the policies, guidelines and deliverables relevant to these activities. The manual is updated annually.

Applicants who refer to this manual should note that the content is intended to guide Selection Committee members and outline principles, rather than provide them with a set of rules.

For more information regarding the RTI program, policies and guidelines, please contact resgrant@nserc-crsng.gc.ca.

The evaluation of RTI applications in **Subatomic Physics** differs from these guidelines and is described in the current internal procedures of the Subatomic Physics Evaluation Section. For more information, please contact subatomic@nserc-crsng.gc.ca.

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1. Research Tools and Instruments program

New: As of last competition year (i.e., competition 2023, with a deadline of October 2022) Research Tools and Instruments (RTI) grants applicants and co-applicants who were successful in the previous year's RTI competition are ineligible to apply for one year. Eligibility will be reinstated the following competition year. This change is being implemented to increase access to the RTI program to the largest number of eligible researchers. This decision, as well as the recent changes to the selection criteria, are informed by the recent evaluation of the Discovery research program and the results of the gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) of the RTI program.

1.1 Program objectives

The **Research Tools and Instruments (RTI) Grants** Program fosters and enhances the discovery, innovation and training capability of university researchers in the natural sciences and engineering (NSE) by supporting the purchase, fabrication or rental of research equipment.

1.2 Program description

The RTI Grants Program provides the primary avenue for university researchers in the natural sciences and engineering to obtain up to \$150,000 in support for research tools and instruments with a **net** cost between \$7,001 and \$250,000. Net cost is defined as the purchase cost of the equipment after any discount from the vendor and before taxes, customs and importation fees, transportation and shipping charges, and assembly and installation costs. The vendor discount cannot be offered in exchange for services from users benefiting the vendor company. The research community is also encouraged to explore other avenues for funding research tools and instruments; including NSERC's other programs that allow the purchase of equipment as eligible expenses.

NSERC will only accept requests for:

- tools and instruments that form a comprehensive system intended to support NSERC-funded research in the NSE. A comprehensive system is one in which each tool or instrument forms part of an integrated system of operation to support the research program(s). Requests that bundle unrelated tools and instruments together will not be accepted;
- the purchase of new, used or refurbished equipment; the repair, upgrade or rental of equipment; or the fabrication of equipment that is not readily available off the shelf; and
- equipment that is purchased or rented after the application deadline.

Note that equipment and items that are part of laboratory infrastructure or intended to render other equipment compliant with health and safety standards are not eligible for RTI support.

1.3 Nature of research supported

Research in the NSE encompasses a broad spectrum of activities. These activities range from curiosity-driven investigations with no immediate or even mid-term application, as their importance stems from the intellectual structure of the discipline, right up to applied

research or solutions to problems suggested by social and industrial needs. The Research Tools and Instruments Grants Program is open to activities across the entire spectrum. The program aims to foster activities that position Canada as a participant and leader in global NSE. In this sense, it can be a flexible resource for Canada and also create a favourable environment for the development of research personnel.

Increasingly, research on the most significant problems in the NSE requires the combined knowledge, expertise and contributions of many researchers, often from various disciplines. Creativity and innovation are at the heart of all research advancements. NSERC strives to fully value, through the peer-review system, the role of collaborative endeavours and interdisciplinary work in furthering achievement in research.

1.4 Eligible and ineligible costs

Eligible and ineligible costs specifically for the RTI program are listed below. All project expenditures are subject to the principles and directives governing the appropriate use of grant funds as outlined in the [Tri-agency guide on financial administration](#).

Type of Expenditure	Eligible Costs	Ineligible Costs (ineligible costs must not be included in the application)
Equipment	Purchase or rental of equipment, including taxes, shipping and handling	
Other	Transportation/shipping costs for purchased equipment Fabrication, assembly and installation of equipment Extended warranty or service contract Brokerage and customs charges for the importation of equipment and supplies Testing/calibrations costs On-site costs of training staff to use equipment Software licensing or upgrades	Salaries and benefits Travel* Insurance costs for equipment and research vehicles Laboratory infrastructure (including but not limited to ventilation systems, wiring, power units or electrical outlets, floors, ceilings, walls, plumbing, lighting and storage) Costs of the construction, renovation or rental of laboratories or supporting facilities Equipment or items intended to render other equipment compliant with health and safety standards Consumables

*Travel required for the supplier to install, repair and/or refurbish equipment is an eligible cost.

Applications for computing equipment are considered on the same basis as all other equipment applications. RTI grant funds may be used to purchase hardware and/or to pay for the acquisition of software.

Expenses covered by the [Research Support Fund](#) (RSF) are **ineligible** for funding through the RTI program.

In the Budget justification section, applicants are asked to provide a detailed explanation and justification for each budget item identified in the Proposed expenditures page. They should provide sufficient information to allow you to assess whether the items requested are appropriate, including details on models and manufacturers.

Using a table format like the one below, applicants are asked to provide a clear cost breakdown of the items requested indicating the subtotal(s), the institutional tax rate, the total tax and, if applicable, the currency exchange rate(s) and the converted currency total(s).

Table template:

Item	Quantity	Cost per unit in original currency	Exchange rate	Total cost in Canadian dollars
Subtotal:				
Institutional tax rate (%):				
Total tax:				
Total cost:				
Total confirmed from other source(s):				
Total requested from NSERC:				

All proposed expenditures, including those taken from quotations, must be in Canadian dollars. To convert to Canadian currency, applicants are to use an exchange rate consistent with the [Bank of Canada](#) rate at the time of application. Applicants should also be using tax rates in their application that are consistent with the rates used by their institution. Applicants who fail to use the above described exchange rate and/or tax rate(s), or include any other line item in the budget intended to cover fluctuations in cost, may have their award amount adjusted.

1.5 Eligibility to apply for and hold funds

To be eligible to apply for and to hold RTI funds, applicants and co-applicants must each:

- meet [NSERC’s Eligibility requirements for faculty to apply for or hold grant funds](#); and
- hold at least one of the following NSERC research grants (either as an applicant or co-applicant)*
 - Alliance grant
 - Canada Excellence Research Chairs (NSERC)

- Canada 150 Research Chairs (NSERC)
- Canada Research Chairs (NSERC)
- Collaborative Research and Development grant
- Discovery Development grant
- Discovery Grant
- Discovery Horizons grant
- Industrial Research Chairs grant
- Strategic Partnerships grant

*Applicants and co-applicants may apply for any of the above grants while concurrently applying to the RTI Program. However, if any applicant or co-applicant does not hold one of the above grants by the RTI award start date or is not successful in obtaining one of these grants while concurrently applying to the RTI program, the applicant and/or co-applicant will be deemed ineligible and removed from the application.

1.6 Equity, diversity and inclusion considerations

NSERC is acting on the evidence that achieving a more equitable, diverse and inclusive Canadian research enterprise is essential to creating the excellent, innovative and impactful research necessary to advance knowledge and understanding, and to respond to local, national and global challenges. This principle informs the commitments described in the [Tri-agency statement on equity, diversity and inclusion](#) (EDI).

Considering equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the research process promotes research excellence by making research outcomes more ethically sound, rigorous, reproducible, and useful. It is important to consider EDI through each stage of the research process including, but not limited to, the **research questions, design, methodology, analysis, interpretation and dissemination of results**, and integrate these considerations where relevant. Consult [Equity, diversity and inclusion considerations at each stage of the research process](#) for more information.

2. Membership

2.1 Membership selection process

RTI Selection Committee members are appointed every year, for a one-year term. Potential members include established researchers and early-stage scientists and engineers from universities, government or industry. Potential members are approached by Program Officers regarding their willingness to serve on the Committees; they need not be NSERC grantees.

Past members may be approached by Program Officers to provide recommendations and references for potential new members. These recommendations can include comments on the background, stature and experience of nominees. Factors such as the nominee's involvement in collaborative and interdisciplinary research may also be considered. To learn more about the selection of members, consult the [Guidelines Governing Membership of NSERC's Peer Review Committees](#).

The following documents must be read and agreed to by all members of NSERC's Evaluation Groups, Selection Committees or Panels upon appointment and annually thereafter:

- **Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers**
- **Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Policy of the Federal Research Funding Organizations**

Acceptance of a term as a member brings with it a commitment to participate in the evaluation of applications assigned to a committee within guidelines established by NSERC. Members and chairs must adhere to NSERC policies and guidelines, including those on conflict of interest, diversity and gender equality, communication with applicants, and confidentiality.

The size of the RTI Committee depends on the number of applications received. Before receiving the applications, a pool of reviewers will be assembled, covering a wide range of expertise. The selection of members will be finalized once all applications are received and will be based on the expertise required and the number of applications submitted to the Committee.

2.2 Roles and responsibilities

2.2.1 Members

Members participate in the evaluation of applications and make recommendations to NSERC based on their assessment. Specific responsibilities of members include:

- participating in an orientation session before submitting their scores;
- submitting expertise “comfort ratings” for the applications;
- providing input on assignments (e.g., possible transfer of the RTI application to another Selection Committee);
- flagging applications where there are concerns related to subject matter eligibility (SME), eligibility of equipment requested and/or budget items;
- reviewing all assigned applications;
- submitting scores for all assigned applications;
- flagging and recommending applications for partial funding, if applicable;
- provide justification for partial funding recommendations; and
- participating in further discussion of certain applications, if required.

2.2.2 Chairs

Chairs provide leadership to ensure a high-quality, peer-review process. Over the course of the review process, Chairs may provide their input and recommendations to NSERC on:

- the final membership slate;
- the final assignment of applications;
- possible transfers of applications to other Selection Committees;
- concerns about SME raised by NSERC or committee members;
- possible rejection of applications (e.g., incomplete applications, ineligibility of equipment, requests not intended to support NSERC-funded research in the NSE); and

- policy issues.

2.2.3 NSERC staff

NSERC staff are not committee members and do not evaluate applications. Staff oversee the membership and review process, as well as provide advice on NSERC policies, guidelines and procedures.

2.3 Orientation session

By December, a virtual orientation session is usually held for Selection Committee members with the Chair(s) and NSERC Program Officers. The purpose of the session is to provide members with information on important NSERC policies and committee practices, and an opportunity to ask any questions. The Program Officer and Chair will present information on the following topics:

- **Competition cycle** – An overview of the timetable of the RTI Grants competition, the responsibilities of Committee members, and the role of the Program Officers and Chair.
- **Conflict of interest** – NSERC’s guidelines on conflict of interest, with tips on how to avoid potential conflict-of-interest situations.
- **Confidentiality** – Members’ evaluations should be made in isolation and not discussed with other Committee members or with individuals outside of the Committee.
- **RTI grant review process** – An overview of the criteria and review procedures, including what to look for in various sections of the RTI application and the Canadian Common CV (CCV).

2.4 Time commitment

A Selection Committee member’s preparation for the RTI competition involves:

- attending the virtual orientation session;
- providing expertise comfort ratings;
- reviewing their assigned applications;
- identifying applications in which there are concerns related to SME, eligibility of equipment and/or budget items, and those they recommend for partial funding, if applicable. These applications may need further discussion with the NSERC Program Officer, Chair and other reviewers; and
- arriving at a score for all assigned applications.

Each Selection Committee member normally reviews, on average, between 20 and 40 applications. The time required for this review will vary according to the Committee workload and the workload of the individual member.

3. Review procedures

3.1 Assignment of applications

3.1.1 Selection Committee assignment

Applications are initially assigned to a Selection Committee according to the information submitted by the applicant. Applicants suggest an **Evaluation Group** they feel best fits their research discipline. Their suggestion is used for the preliminary assignment of the application to the appropriate RTI Selection Committee. Committee members can flag applications for which a transfer to another committee may be more suitable. These cases may be discussed with the Selection Committee Chairs before final decisions are made; however, NSERC makes the final decision on assignments.

3.1.2 Assignment of committee reviewers

Each application is assessed by up to five Selection Committee members. In order to assist in the assignment of applications, members are asked to provide their expertise comfort or knowledge levels for the applications received for a given year (e.g., H = high, M = medium, L = low, VL = very low, X = cannot review due to language proficiency, or C = conflict of interest).

NSERC staff, in collaboration with the Chair(s), assigns reviewers to each application according to the identified comfort levels, conflicts of interest, linguistic abilities, and workload balance. Members may be asked to review applications that are not in their primary research field.

In December, each member is provided with the final list of applications they are responsible for reviewing. Any issues with the assignment of applications should be flagged and brought to the Program Officer's attention as soon as possible.

3.1.3 External reviewers

There are no external reviewers for the RTI program.

3.2 Applications and review material

3.2.1 Incomplete or non-adherent applications

The onus is on the applicant to provide complete and sufficient information that adheres to **Research Portal Presentation and Attachment Standards and Instructions for Completing an Application**. Problems related to the application content should be brought to the attention of the Program Officer. In order to maintain the principle of fairness in the competition, applicants must adhere to the guidelines in the preparation of application materials. If NSERC staff determine that the information provided is incomplete or does not adhere to NSERC

guidelines or instructions, the application may be rejected.

Justification is required if an applicant does not submit two (2) recent quotations for any individual item(s) over \$25,000 net* or for any system(s) to be purchased from a single supplier and costing more than \$25,000 net*. If justification is not included in their Budget justification section, the application will be rejected.

*Net cost is defined as the purchase cost of the equipment after any discount from the vendor and before taxes, customs and importation fees, transportation and shipping charges, and assembly and installation costs.

3.2.2 Review materials

Selection Committee members will have access to the following application material in a secure electronic environment by mid-December:

- RTI applications;
- scoring spreadsheet with assigned applications; and
- **assessment notes template.**

Members are required to review their assignments and determine whether they have a conflict of interest and have the linguistic capacity to review the proposals. Members should notify the NSERC Program Officer of any issues related to the applications.

4. Evaluation of applications

4.1 Selection criteria

Applications are assessed on the basis of the selection criteria listed below. Selection Committee members provide scores for each of the three criteria. Each criterion is weighted (weighting indicated below).

1) Need, urgency and suitability (40%):

- Demonstration that the equipment is essential for the research, and that there are no other more cost-effective ways of obtaining the results;
- Availability of similar equipment/facilities/services in the vicinity;
- Impact of a delay in acquisition of equipment on the research and the pace of research progress;
- Need to upgrade or replace obsolete or failed equipment; and
- Degree of utilization of the equipment by the applicant(s) and other users.

When the justification for the equipment is based to some extent on the anticipated use by, or benefit to, other NSE sectors, the applicant should describe the support secured from these sources or the demonstrated efforts that have been made to secure it. The RTI Selection Committee should consider this information when assessing this criterion.

2) Feasibility and impact (40%):

- Quality and significance of the research program(s), including potential for major advances and impact in the discipline as a result of the equipment;
- Feasibility of the plan to use the equipment;
- Extent to which the applicant has relevant experience or has presented a training plan to demonstrate how they will gain the ability to fully use the equipment; and
- Consideration of equity, diversity and inclusion in the rationale of the team composition.

Applicants are encouraged to strive for a diverse research team. Equity, diversity and inclusion considerations should be reflected in the rationale of the team composition and where applicable, in the designated roles within the team. Equitable access, time sharing and accessibility of the equipment for co-applicants and other users should also be discussed. For more information on the “Definition of a research team”, refer to the [EDI considerations for research teams](#).

3) Training of highly qualified personnel (HQP) (20%):

- Quality and extent of training;
- Opportunity for hands-on training;
- Potential to provide marketable skills for students trained on the equipment; and
- Consideration of equity, diversity and inclusion in the training of HQP.

Training must not be assessed solely in terms of the number and level of individuals supervised; it should be assessed by the quality and impact of training demonstrated.

The necessity of the requested item(s) for the completion of student projects and theses should be addressed under the first criterion, as it is related to need and urgency.

Demographic data is neither requested nor required to assess any impacts resulting from the consideration of EDI in the research team and training environment.

Refer to the [Guidelines on the assessment of contributions to research, training and mentoring](#) for examples and indicators of quality and impact of the research program and training of HQP.

4.2 Review process

Up to five members will be assigned to assess each RTI application. Members should not expect to receive external reviewer reports, since there are no external reviews requested for RTI applications. Committee members’ evaluations should be made in isolation and should not be discussed with other members of the Committee, except during a teleconference scheduled specifically for flagged applications. Members should not discuss applications with individuals outside of the Committee at any time. Members should contact their Program Officer for assistance in any regard and at any time.

Applications are assessed on the basis of the three weighted evaluation criteria (above). Members will provide scores for each criterion from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). Members are strongly encouraged to use the full scoring range and are provided tools and training to assist them with this task.

Once NSERC receives the scores from all members, NSERC staff will enter scores into a spreadsheet and rank applications based on the average weighted totals.

At any point during the review, applications may be flagged by NSERC staff, the Chair, or members of the committee for additional discussion.

4.2.1 Eligibility of subject matter, equipment, and costs

While reviewing applications, Selection Committee members are asked to bring any anomalies to the attention of the Program Officer, including the eligibility of the subject matter, equipment, and/or costs. These cases may require further input from the Chair and members, and will be resolved before the results are finalized.

With respect to SME, members should specifically note how equipment purchased with RTI grants will be used, as **grants are intended to foster and enhance the discovery, innovation and training capability of university researchers in the NSE**. Equipment funded by the RTI grant can be used for research that falls outside the NSE, but applicants must clearly document that the primary and majority of the use will be directed toward NSERC-funded research in the NSE. Applications are assessed based on the NSERC-funded research that will be supported.

4.2.2 Partial funding recommendations

RTI grants are normally for the full cost of the recommended items (including tax, transportation and eligible installation costs). In rare cases, RTI Selection Committees may recommend partial funding, but the amount recommended must be sufficient to allow for the purchase of a functional unit. The Committees must provide NSERC staff with details of the partial award, including a listing of all components recommended for funding. In these cases, NSERC will deduct the costs of the ineligible items and prepare written comments to the applicant to specify the funded items.

4.2.3 Relationship to other research support

In the Budget Justification section, applicants are asked to provide an explanation for:

- Any conceptual overlap between the research grants (either applied for or awarded) to be supported by the proposed equipment and the current application.
- Any relationship and/or overlap (conceptual or financial) between the equipment requested in the RTI application and similar equipment applied for or supported by other funding sources.

The applicant must provide sufficient information to allow reviewers to assess the relationship between this application and other relevant sources of support. These sources of support can include grants and contributions from funding agencies, organizations, the private sector, institution start-up funds, research chairs, the primary place of employment (for adjunct professors), and other institutional research support.

In its review, the Selection Committee must focus specifically on other equipment support and how it relates to the current proposal. For funding applied for, applicants must demonstrate that there will be no duplication of funding for the same expense(s) by explaining how funds will be used if all applications are successful. If the applicant fails to meet these requirements, this failure should be reflected in the assessment of the *need, urgency and suitability of equipment for the research programs* criterion. Selection Committee members must notify NSERC staff of any application requesting funds for costs already funded or applied for through other sources.

4.2.4 Implicit or unconscious biases

NSERC asks Selection Committee members to consistently guard against the possibility of unconscious bias influencing the decision-making process, whether this bias is based on a school of thought, fundamental versus applied research, certain sub-disciplines, areas of research or approaches (including emerging ones), number of co-applicants, size or reputation of an institution, or applicants' personal identity such as age, sex, gender, Indigenous identity, person with a disability, visible minorities. NSERC cautions members against any judgment of an application based on such factors. To assist members in recognizing potential bias, all members are asked to complete the [Bias in Peer Review online learning module](#).

4.2.5 Deliverables

Selection Committee members will submit scores for all of their assigned applications to the Program Officer.

4.2.6 Use of the assessment notes template

Selection Committee members may find it helpful to use the [assessment notes template](#) at the end of this document to ensure that all criteria are taken into account when formulating recommendations for RTI applications; however, its use is not mandatory. NSERC does not collect these notes.

5. Confidentiality

Details of the scoring, deliberations and recommendation for a specific application are confidential and must never be divulged. Any release of information must be carried out by NSERC. Under no circumstances should members divulge to anyone the recommendations emanating from the peer-review process.

In accordance with the [Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers](#) (Federal Research Funding Organizations) and the [Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Agreement for Review Committee Members, External Reviewers, and Observers](#) (NSERC), members are not permitted to discuss specific results or the deliberations. Requests from applicants or enquiries on competition results, individual cases or discussions must be redirected to NSERC staff. Members must ensure that review documentation is stored in a secure manner to prevent unauthorized access. When no longer required, review documentation must also be destroyed in a secure manner.

6. Competition results

6.1 Communication of the results to applicants

Program Officers will prepare a document for each applicant indicating the average of the weighted scores for each criterion, the final average weighted score, and the rank of the application. In the case of partial funding, as recommended by the Selection Committee, NSERC will communicate the items approved for funding in the Notification of Decision letter.

6.2 Annual reporting

NSERC releases competition statistics on the [NSERC website](#) after the competition cycle.

7. Legal and ethical information

Legal and ethical information can be found in Section 8 of the [Discovery Grants peer review manual](#).

8. Useful resources

1. [Bias in peer review online learning module](#)
2. [Conflict of interest and confidentiality agreement for review committee members, external reviewers, and observers](#)
3. [Conflict of interest and confidentiality for review committee members, external reviewers, and observers](#)
4. [NSERC guide on integrating equity, diversity and inclusion considerations in research](#)
5. [Guidelines for the preparation and review of applications in interdisciplinary research](#)
6. [Guidelines governing membership of NSERC's peer review committees](#)
7. [Guidelines on the assessment of contributions to research, training and mentoring](#)

Appendix A – Assessment notes template

Research Tools and Instruments grant application

Applicant	Department/University
Title of Proposal	Amount Requested: \$
EVALUATION CRITERIA	
1. Need, urgency and suitability (40%)	/10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demonstration that the equipment is essential for the research, and that there are no other most cost-effective ways of obtaining the results; ▪ Availability of similar equipment/facilities/services in the vicinity; ▪ The impact of a delay in acquisition of equipment on the research and the pace of research progress; ▪ Need to upgrade or replace obsolete or failed equipment; and ▪ Degree of utilization of the equipment by the applicant(s) and other users. 	
2. Feasibility and Impact (40%)	/10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quality and significance of the research program(s), including potential for major advances and impact in the discipline as a result of the equipment; ▪ Feasibility of the plan to use the equipment; and ▪ Extent to which the applicant(s) has relevant experience or has presented a training plan to demonstrate how they will gain the ability to fully use the equipment. ▪ Consideration of equity, diversity and inclusion in the rationale of the team composition. 	
3. Training of highly qualified personnel (HQP) (20%)	/10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quality and extent of training; ▪ Opportunity for hands-on training; and ▪ Potential to provide marketable skills for students trained on the equipment. ▪ Consideration of equity, diversity and inclusion in the training of HQP. 	
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS	
Eligibility of the subject matter	
Eligibility of the equipment and expenses	
Partial funding recommendation (rare)	
OTHER NOTES	