

CIHR Reviewers' Guide for Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT) Mentoring Awards

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Introduction

On behalf of CIHR, we would like to thank the reviewers for agreeing to serve as a peer review committee member. The success of the peer review process is made possible by dedicated people like you who generously give their time and expertise. Your efforts are greatly appreciated by CIHR and the scientific community.

The purpose of this document is to provide instructions on the peer review process specific to the CIHR Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT) Mentoring Award program.

Peer Review at CIHR

Information on CIHR's objectives, governance and policies; an outline of the roles and responsibilities of peer review committee members; and the policies, principles and procedures for peer review of applications can be found in the [CIHR Peer Review Guide for Training and Salary Awards](#). **It is important that reviewers become familiar with this document, as well as the present document, before starting the reviews.**

Summary of the Peer Review Process

The RCT Mentoring awards program uses an unstructured review process, using the online ResearchNet platform. The review process is completed in two (2) stages: an individual preliminary evaluation of an assigned set of applications, followed by a teleconference committee meeting. The committee will be composed of one Chair, one Scientific Officer (SO) and internal reviewers. The number of internal reviewers will be determined based on the number of applications received.

Reviewers are asked to follow the step-by-step instructions below to successfully complete all peer review tasks:

Stage 1: Individual Review

- Step 1: Read the pertinent documentation
- Step 2: Determine ability to review and identify conflicts
- Step 3: Conduct preliminary review
- Step 4: Submit initial reviews and ratings on ResearchNet

Stage 2: The Committee Review

- Step 1: Become familiar with all applications
- Step 2: Attend the committee meeting

Stage 1: Individual Review

☑ Step 1: Read the pertinent documentation

The peer review process for this program is described in details in this document. It is essential to read the document and be familiar with it. It is also important to read the following:

- the [CIHR Peer Review Guide for Training and Salary Awards](#);
- the [Funding Opportunity](#).

☑ Step 2: Determine ability to review and identify conflicts

To determine the ability to review and identify conflicts of interests, reviewers are to follow these steps:

- Log into ResearchNet;
- On the home page, click on the link of their assigned committee to open the main task list;
- Complete the task “Review Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Guidelines” (once completed, it will “open” the other tasks);
- Open the “Manage Conflicts/Ability to Review” task;
- For each of the assigned application, use the information provided to indicate their ability to review (high-medium-low) or if they have a conflict of interest including conflict of language. If there is a conflict, CIHR will assign the application to another reviewer.

It is important to note that many candidates will likely be conducting research outside of the reviewer’s research specialty. Therefore, they should review the application with a generalist’s perspective and assess the overall quality of the research proposed by the candidate, using the appropriate adjudication criteria. However, if a reviewer feels that their level of comfort reviewing an application is unacceptably low, they should choose the expertise option “Not Enough Expertise”.

Assignment of Applications

Based on the ability to review/conflict information, CIHR, in collaboration with the committee’s Chair and Scientific Officer, will proceed with assigning the applications to reviewers. Efforts will be made to ensure a balanced workload, taking into consideration potential conflicts, language capabilities and areas of expertise. The final authority for the assignment of applications rests with CIHR.

Each application will be assigned to three (3) reviewers to ensure the reliability of the rankings.

☑ Step 3: Conduct preliminary review

Once the individual assignments are released, reviewers will have access to the full content of their assigned applications under the task “Conduct Reviews”. They should then follow the steps below.

3.1 Review the adjudication criteria

Reviewers should first become familiar with the adjudication criteria for this funding opportunity. They can be found at the end of this document in [Appendix A](#). This appendix identifies which elements of the application to review for each criterion.

3.2 Read the assigned applications

Reviewers should read all of their assigned applications in details before rating any of them; and jot down notes to capture their impressions. The *CIHR RCT Mentoring Awards Reviewer Worksheet* in [Appendix B](#) provides a template that they may wish to use. Note that this worksheet is strictly for the reviewers' own personal use and will not be filed with CIHR.

To ensure that all applications are treated equally, reviewers are asked to base their evaluation only on the content of the application and not to complete any additional research (e.g. publications via PubMed, etc.). They are however free to consult published lists of journal impact factors when assessing the candidate's research accomplishments. It is important to note however that journal impact factors vary from one discipline to another and that they do not necessarily indicate the quality of individual articles.

Reviewers should also be alert to unconscious bias related to gender, discipline or geographic location as detailed in the [CIHR Peer Review Guide for Training and Salary Awards](#).

3.3 Rate the assigned applications

Reviewers are then asked to rate their assigned applications against each of the adjudication criteria described in [Appendix A](#), using CIHR's traditional rating scale (below). **It is particularly important that the full scale be used.**

Reviewers are not bound by this initial rating and can change it at the peer review committee meeting.

Descriptor	Range	Outcome
Outstanding	4.5 – 4.9	May be Funded
Excellent	4.0 – 4.4	
Very Good	3.5 – 3.9	
Good	3.0 – 3.4	Not Fundable
Average	2.0 – 2.9	
Below Average	1.0 – 1.9	
Not Acceptable	0.0 – 0.9	

For further details on CIHR's rating scale, please consult the web page entitled [Ranking and Rating Scale Meaning and Use](#): <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/44001.html>.

Please note that only applications rated 3.5 or higher are eligible for CIHR funding. Therefore, applications rated below 3.5 are not eligible for CIHR funds, including those from partnerships/priority announcement programs.

3.4 Provide a written assessment for each assigned application

Reviewers are asked to provide a short written assessment for each assigned application that supports their ratings. The written reviews will serve to initiate the discussion of applications with other reviewers. They also provide constructive advice to applicants to assist them in improving the quality and efficiency of the proposed training.

Comments should focus on the **strengths and weaknesses** of **each** adjudication criterion:

- Keep it simple;
- Use familiar descriptors that align with your rating;
- Include justification, context and an explanation of your comments, if applicable, for each topic introduced;
- Be clear and concise;
- While brevity is acceptable (e.g. using bullets), express complete thoughts and ensure the length is sufficient enough to inform the reader;
- Use objective and non-inflammatory language;
- Carefully avoid language that might be construed as sarcastic, flippant, arrogant or inappropriate in any way.

The applicant will receive the review as it is submitted by the reviewer. For this reason, **reviewers are to refrain from inserting scores in the comments and should not identify themselves** in order to ensure the confidentiality of the review process.

3.5 Flag issues for CIHR's attention

Any concerns regarding eligibility, ethics, human stem cells, etc. should be reported to CIHR staff immediately for follow-up and **should not be noted in the written comments**. For the full list of potential issues, please refer to the [CIHR Peer Review Guide for Training and Salary Awards](#). Concerns may be expressed by email to the committee coordinator or by using the *Issues for CIHR Attention Form* at the following link: http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/documents/re_issuesforcihrattentionform_e.pdf.

These issues should not be considered as criteria for evaluation, except as they may impact on the scientific quality of the application. For detailed regulations concerning these issues, reviewers should refer to the [Grants & Awards Guide](#).

☒ Step 4: Submit initial reviews and ratings on ResearchNet

As the reviewers perform their evaluation, the reviews can be saved as drafts by selecting "Save draft copy" on ResearchNet. This allows them to make changes at a later time. However, in order to submit the reviews and ratings to CIHR, they must select "Submit Final Review". Afterwards, they will no longer be able to modify them prior to the meeting. After the committee meeting, they will have one week to revise their **written comments only**.

It is important for reviewers to respect the deadline provided by submitting the reviews and scores in ResearchNet by the date specified via correspondence with CIHR staff responsible for this program. Delays in the peer review process will jeopardize CIHR's ability to release decisions to applicants by the published date. If, at any point in the process, a reviewer determines that he/she may not be able to submit his/her reviews on or before the deadline, he/she must contact CIHR staff as soon as possible.

Stage 2: Committee Review

Stage 2 consists of a teleconference meeting of peer review members. The objective of this meeting is to discuss and rate the applications so that they may be ranked in order of excellence so that CIHR can generate a rank-order priority list to make funding decisions.

☒ Step 1: Become familiar with all applications

It is the responsibility of all reviewers to familiarize themselves in advance of the meeting with **all** applications to be assessed at the meeting in order to facilitate the committee discussion.

☒ Step 2: Attend the committee meeting

During the teleconference, any committee member who has a conflict of interest with an application cannot take part in the discussion of that application and will be asked to leave the teleconference for the duration of the discussion. The Chair and CIHR staff will be responsible for monitoring conflicts and for resolving areas of uncertainty.

The discussion of each application will proceed as follows:

1. The two reviewers assigned to the application announce their initial ratings to one decimal place.
2. The application is streamlined (not discussed) if it meets the following conditions:
 - The average of the internal reviewer's initial rating is below 3.5;
 - There is no objection from the other reviewers that the application not be discussed¹.

If the application is not streamlined, the discussion proceeds as follows:

3. The primary reviewer assigned to the application summarizes his/her assessment, describing strengths and weaknesses of the application;
4. The second reviewer follows, concentrating on points of agreement or disagreement, and elaborate on points not addressed by the first reviewer;
5. The third reviewer will then concentrate on points of agreement or disagreement, and elaborate on points not addressed by the first and second reviewers;
6. The Chair leads the discussion of the application by all committee members;
7. The Scientific Officer reads the SO notes, capturing the key elements of the discussion to be considered when rating the application;
8. The Chair seeks a consensus rating from the three reviewers assigned to the application. The internal reviewers may revise their initial ratings as they see fit. If a consensus cannot be reached, the mean value of the ratings of the two internal reviewers is used (round up, if necessary, to obtain a single decimal point);
9. All committee members, including the three reviewers and the reader but excluding the Chair and Scientific Officer, cast individual confidential votes within +/- 0.5 of the consensus rating (they are

¹ If an application is not discussed, the applicant will receive a copy of all internal reviewers' reports and the SO notes will only carry notification of the decision to streamline. Committee members do not vote on the rating; it is calculated as the mean of the initial ratings of the two internal reviewers.

not bound by the consensus rating). The final rating to be assigned to the application will be the average of these confidential votes. A vote will be taken even if the consensus rating is below 3.5 (i.e. not in the fundable range).

At the end of the meeting, *if* the peer review committee feels that any application(s) has been treated inconsistently, re-review of one or a small number of applications is permitted. Any committee member with a conflict of interest must again leave the teleconference. Following the discussion, a consensus rating is determined by the two reviewers and voting proceeds as before. The committee does not review the overall ranking of all applications at the end of the meeting as individuals with conflicts of interests would inevitably be present.

After the committee meeting, the reviewers will have one week to revise their **written comments only** should they wish to do so.

Feedback

An important component of the peer review process is the review of the committee's effectiveness and functioning, and feedback on policy issues that may have arisen in the course of the process. This feedback provides an opportunity for CIHR staff to address any concerns of the committee members and for staff to record comments on the peer review process as part of CIHR's ongoing efforts to maintain an effective and high quality peer review system.

This discussion will occur at the end of meeting. Feedback can also be provided by email to the committee coordinator.

Appendix A – CIHR RCT Mentoring Adjudication Criteria

The following adjudication criteria will be used for evaluating the applications.

More specifically, reviewers will consider the track record of the mentor/supervisor as a principal investigator in RCTs, the mentor's supervisory experience of training postgraduate students, the mentor's demonstrated ability to provide the mentee/trainee with a fertile environment that is conducive to training in RCTs. In addition, acquired graduate academic training in epidemiology, or more specifically in RCT methodology or equivalent by the mentee will be considered as an asset.

Criterion	Notes and advice for reviewers on how to review
1. Excellence and suitability of the training environment	<p>When evaluating this criterion, you should consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research environment • Resources (space, operating funds and/or infrastructure) available to the mentee • Current and anticipated future activity of the Trials unit/centre • Research funding • Institutional commitment and support
2. Quality and suitability of the proposed mentoring plan	<p>When evaluating this criterion, you should consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed research and research related activities • Potential to foster the development of a future leader in RCTs • Suitability of 'match' between the mentor and mentee
3. Suitability of the mentor	<p>When evaluating this criterion, you should consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track record in trials research • Research funding • Track record as a mentor • Commitment to the candidate • Commitment to the mentoring plan • Time availability/commitment • Letters of support
4. Suitability of the mentor and appropriateness of the mentee for the award and mentoring plan	<p>When evaluating this criterion, you should consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background & previous training • Commitment to research • Commitment to the mentoring plan • Research time protection – at least 75% • Potential to become a leader in trials research • Letters of support (sponsor assessment forms)

Appendix B – CIHR RCT Mentoring Awards Reviewer Worksheet

The following table is meant to guide reviewers in the evaluation of the application. It is strictly for their working notes and will not be filed with CIHR.

Applicant Name: _____ Application #: _____

Criterion	Reviewer's Comments
1. Excellence and suitability of the training environment	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •
2. Quality and suitability of the proposed mentoring plan	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •
3. Suitability of the mentor	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •
4. Suitability of the mentee and appropriateness of the mentee for the award and mentoring plan	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •
Score:	