SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL
ACCESSIBILITY PROGRESS REPORT 2023

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Message from the Vice-President, Common Administrative Services Directorate

I am delighted to present the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's (SSHRC) first Accessibility Progress Report. This report describes the progress our agency has made in identifying and removing barriers for staff and members of our research community who have disabilities. When we released our inaugural Accessibility Plan in December 2022, we committed to becoming an organization that builds accessibility into the way we do business. We also recognized that SSHRC has much to learn, and that there are still many changes required to meet this objective. As such, it will take time to implement accessibility fully.

As we developed our internal implementation plan to support the actions listed in our Accessibility Plan, and started on the various activities planned for this year, it soon became evident that agency staff, at all levels, are committed to removing barriers persons with disabilities face. I am particularly proud of the high level of engagement within and between SSHRC and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and sincerely appreciate the responsiveness of members of our research community. I wish to highlight the dedication of our staff, and especially members of our Persons with Disabilities Network (PwDN), who continually provide generous and expert advice, enabling us to make significant progress. As well, I wish to acknowledge the hard work, leadership and commitment of SSHRC's external Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Systemic Ableism (ACASA), which helped identify barriers to full participation in SSHRC's programs, and provided recommendations to eliminate those barriers. The committee's report is available on SSHRC's website. I would also like to thank those who participated in focus groups last fall to validate ACASA's findings. We could not move forward as an organization without the commitment of staff, and of the members of our research community. Thank you.

As you read through this report, you will come across numerous activities completed over the past 18 months. While each individual activity increases accessibility across SSHRC, I want to mention a few that are already making concrete impacts: the work toward updating and developing supporting documentation for the agency's Accommodation Policy, which brings transparency and clarity to the process; the addition of the [Addressing Disability Inclusion and Barriers to Accessibility](#) course as mandatory training for all staff, and uptake for additional accessibility training among staff; and the consolidation of accessibility information for applicants, award holders and research assessors, as well as other efforts NSERC and SSHRC are deploying to harmonize and collaborate on accessibility activities, which send a stronger message to our research communities. I look forward to continued progress, and [welcome your feedback](#) on our accessibility efforts.

Sincerely,

Dominique Osterrath
Chief Financial Officer and Vice-President, Common Administrative Services Directorate
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

General

The purpose of this progress report is to share our advancements in implementing our Accessibility Plan. As we published our inaugural Accessibility Plan in December 2022, we highlighted our commitment to becoming an organization that builds accessibility into the way we do business. As we look back over the past 18 months, measuring the progress we have achieved and noting where we did not progress as much as we had hoped, we reaffirm this commitment. We have been able to deepen our understanding of barriers persons with disabilities face, and can better appreciate the obstacles inherent in having to navigate worlds not designed inclusively. This has been made possible through the various activities on which we embarked, such as developing our internal accessibility implementation plan; further engaging with staff and members of our research community who have a disability; re-entering our new headquarters; and advancing some of the initiatives listed in our Accessibility Plan.

Mindful that each accessibility priority area is part of a system that, ultimately, supports our mandate to promote and support postsecondary-based research and training in the social sciences and humanities, and in research areas related to the administration of tri-agency programs, we adopted a comprehensive approach to accessibility where internal and external efforts build on one another. This interconnectedness means that removing barriers in one priority area improves accessibility across our agency, to everyone's benefit.

Executive summary

SSHRC's Accessibility Progress Report describes achievements the agency has made in the first year of implementing its Accessibility Plan. More specifically, it presents activities completed in the following priority areas: organizational culture; employment; built environment; information and communication technologies (ICT); communication; procurement of goods, services and facilities; design and delivery of programs and services; and transportation. It also highlights how persons with disabilities were consulted in preparing this progress report, and presents feedback received since publishing the agency's Accessibility Plan.

A note on language

According to the [Accessible Canada Act](#) (the Act), "disability":

> "means any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society."

This progress report, like the agency's Accessibility Plan, uses terms like "disability" and "barrier" to align with the Act. SSHRC recognizes that individuals who self-identify as having a disability or as disabled may use different terminology, and that individuals who identify with certain communities—such as some people who are Deaf or neurodivergent—may not identify as having a disability. Further, through their work with SSHRC and in their report, ACASA provided considerable advice on language, namely various terms used by the agency, including: "barriers", "capability", "merit", "talent", "productivity" and "potential". Their recommendations are currently being investigated. In preparing this report, more specifically, the agency's PwDN was consulted on terminology and their recommendations (described under "[Consultations](#)" below) were adopted in writing this report. One recommendation from the PwDN, which the agency recognizes as a best practice, is to respect and reflect the language a person

with disabilities uses to speak about themselves, when addressing them or speaking about them to another person.

Feedback process

Members of SSHRC's research community and staff, as well as the public, can provide feedback at any time on barriers encountered when interacting with SSHRC, on the agency's inaugural Accessibility Plan and its implementation, on this progress report, and on other accessibility-related matters, through several different channels. These include email, mail and telephone, as well as an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was recently updated to include a section on the progress report. Feedback can be submitted anonymously.

Once the agency receives feedback, it provides a receipt using the same communication method, except for anonymous submissions. For example, emails are answered by email, mail correspondence is answered via mail (when a return address is included), and questionnaire submissions receive a message after submission, confirming their input has been received. All survey results are collected in an Excel spreadsheet for review. All feedback, including scanned versions of any mail received, is stored in a repository with limited access. Feedback is integrated into yearly reports and will be considered in developing subsequent versions of the accessibility plan.

Contact information

Contact information for asking questions and providing feedback through various means is below. You can also request a different format version of the Accessibility Plan or this progress report through these channels:

- o   Title of position responsible for receiving feedback: SSHRC Accessibility Coordinator
- o   Mailing address: 125 Zaida Eddy Private, 2nd floor, Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 0E3
- o   Telephone: 1-855-275-1123
- o   Email address: accessibility-plan-accessibilite@sshrc-crsh.gc.ca
- o   Feedback questionnaire

Progress on SSHRC's Accessibility Plan

Due to the production timelines required for creating this report, and initiatives the agency undertook as it was developing its Accessibility Plan, the progress described in this section covers activities completed between June 2022 and August 2023. Activities planned up until December 31, 2023, are also captured in this report, and the agency will confirm in its 2024 accessibility progress report which activities were completed between September and December 2023.

Organizational culture

The Act requires organizations to address seven priority areas: employment; the built environment; ICT; communication (that is not ICT); procurement of goods, facilities, and services; the design and delivery of programs and services; and transportation. SSHRC focused on these mandatory priority areas in developing its inaugural Accessibility Plan. Following further analysis of accessibility barriers within the organization, and review of other accessibility plans, the agency decided to add "organizational culture" as an additional priority area. This better accounts for new, emerging and existing barriers not otherwise addressed, as well as others, and related actions originally included under the employment and communication priority areas. This additional priority area is captured in the agency's internal

accessibility implementation plan, and will be considered as the agency updates and publishes its 2025 accessibility plan.

Two new barriers are included under the organizational culture priority area: 1) shared services and distributed governance; and 2) measuring progress. Three barriers originally presented under other priority areas have also been renamed and moved to "organizational culture", as they will support integrating accessibility into SSHRC's everyday operations: 1) sustaining a welcoming and mentally healthy workplace; 2) supporting the achievement of a fully accessible organization; and 3) accessibility awareness (formerly "disability awareness"). As this new priority area was not included in the inaugural Accessibility Plan, information on the related barriers and progress is below.

Shared services and distributed governance
For its Accessibility Plan, SSHRC is working with its sister agency NSERC, with which it shares common administrative services, to address the barriers listed in most priority areas. This harmonized approach will also clarify accountability over achieving actions, and bring common messaging to agency staff. However, NSERC and SSHRC are two separate funding agencies, with respective governance bodies, programs and priorities, as well as distinct research communities. Barriers and actions under the "design and delivery of programs and services" priority area are, consequently, specific to each agency. From a program delivery and stakeholder perspective, accountability for achieving these actions rests within each agency, but implementation of numerous actions is contingent on jointly managed, shared resources.

Since publishing their respective accessibility plans, NSERC and SSHRC have worked collaboratively to revise the mandate of the joint Accessibility Steering Committee (ASC) and ensure that offices of primary interest across the two organizations are adequately represented. They have also determined and agreed on approval channels for key legislative requirements (accessibility plans and progress reports) and their supporting tools. In 2023-25, NSERC and SSHRC will review their governance, and clarify governance of their accessibility-related initiatives, as part of broader equity, diversity and inclusion [EDI] discussions.

In the spirit of ensuring sound stewardship of public funds (allowing the agencies to leverage their accessibility efforts), and, where possible, that the agencies send harmonized messages to their research communities, NSERC and SSHRC have established a joint, working-level accessibility team. The agencies will need to identify resources to support this work beyond March 31, 2024.

Measuring progress
As soon as NSERC and SSHRC published their respective accessibility plans, the agencies' efforts moved to identifying specific activities to support them in achieving the actions committed to. This led to the agencies agreeing on the activities, timelines and teams for advancing accessibility efforts. The agencies are currently identifying progress indicators to support quantitative, accurate measuring of progress; these should be finalized by December 2023, and will be used as each agency produces its next progress report.

Sustaining a welcoming and mentally healthy workplace
The inaugural Accessibility Plan included activities that spoke to the agency's desire to sustain a welcoming and mentally healthy workplace, increase awareness of the Office of the Ombuds and Workplace Well-being programs and services, encourage employees to seek support, and contribute to

organizational health and effectiveness. These actions were originally listed under the "employment" priority area, but following further analysis, were moved under "organizational culture".

Activities completed in 2023 supporting these actions include: promoting Mental Health Awareness Week to all staff; calling for and training mental health first aiders; offering training on mental health (the Mental Health Leadership Certificate) to various leaders, including chairs of various employment equity groups; and offering training to managers and supervisors on fostering a mentally healthy workplace.

Supporting the achievement of a fully accessible organization

Establishing an anonymous feedback mechanism for accessibility-related issues, and developing an easy-to-access intranet page covering accessibility and persons with disabilities, were two activities moved from the employment priority area to the new organizational culture priority area. The agencies have identified specific activities to support these actions, in their internal accessibility implementation plan. The activities are set to begin in 2024.

Accessibility awareness

SSHRC identified and promoted several accessibility- and disability-related events or days dedicated to recognition (for example, National AccessAbility Week), to contribute to visibility of persons with disabilities, and to support general awareness and education among staff. The agency will continue to promote these activities annually through various means, including news items on the intranet page.

The agencies developed an accessibility learning resources repository, which the agency shares periodically with staff (for example, in its monthly human resources learning calendar). It provides a list of resources for staff to better understand accessibility; raises awareness about the multiple barriers people with disabilities experience; and guides staff on how to support an inclusive, accessible workplace and deliver services that are, likewise, barrier-free.

Employment

As SSHRC developed its accessibility plan and consulted with its newly formed PwDN on agency barriers to accessibility, it identified and captured three main barriers in its plan: 1) hiring, retention and promotion; 2) accommodation policies and practices for SSHRC staff; and 3) creating inclusive policies and practices. The agency works diligently with members of various employment equity groups, namely through its Employment Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee (EEDAC), to achieve equity in the workplace. More specifically, since June 2022, and as SSHRC was developing its accessibility plan, the agency was able to make progress on identifying, addressing and removing some barriers, through the activities listed below. This was thanks to the dedication of its staff, and rigorous input from the PwDN.

Hiring, retention and promotion

SSHRC not only continues to monitor employment tenure data for persons with disabilities; it also began discussions around data capabilities and reporting frequency, and on understanding target-setting and reviewing labour market availability (LMA) data considerations. According to the data collected, the number of persons with disabilities employed and hired at SSHRC is below the LMA, so persons with disabilities are underrepresented in most employment categories. As a result, the agency acted. To support leadership development and career progression for persons with disabilities and other colleagues from underrepresented, employment-equity groups, SSHRC developed and consulted on its pilot Mentorship Plus program, including by working with EEDAC and PwDN members to review tools

and resources for the program. The first year of this pilot should be launched by December 31, 2023. SSHRC also called for participation in the Executive Leadership Development Program, for which 50% of nominees are required to be part of an underrepresented group. Finally, the agency also launched a two-year pilot to offer language training with priority given to individuals from underrepresented, designated employment-equity groups who do not meet the language requirements of their positions on appointment. The training plans are developed based on individual distinct needs, and accommodations are provided, as needed.

SSHRC also developed new tools specifically to support hiring of persons with disabilities. For example, the current, development phase for a new outreach inventory includes persons with disabilities as a focus group. The agency has also identified accountability and measurement mechanisms, and is developing a tool (to be completed by December 31, 2023) for human resources and managers that provides guidance on how to identify biases and barriers in the staffing process.

Accommodation policies and practices for SSHRC staff

The agency reviewed and updated its Accommodation Policy and supporting processes in collaboration with two high-impact groups: the PwDN and EEDAC. While the legislative framework for accommodation remained unchanged, the age of the policy presented an opportunity to renew the accommodation policy in keeping with modernized principles for policy suite structures and clarification that accommodation measures can be sought for barriers based on any of the prohibited grounds of discrimination, as defined in the Canadian Human Rights Act, and not only for a disability. Agency staff reviewed and adapted the policy's language to, wherever possible, be gender-neutral and remove ableist undertones, and add a clause requiring accommodation measures be reviewed at least once annually to ensure they still support each individual's needs. SSHRC communicated these updates to staff through the Human Resources Bulletin and management forums, and is currently developing training for managers on new policy and process implementation (to be completed in early 2024).

Creating inclusive policies and practices

The barrier SSHRC identified regarding the need to create inclusive policies and practices touched on many areas for improvement, including administering better and more sustained training for staff, revisiting policies and practices to ensure a more inclusive definition of "disabilities", and considering hesitation around self-identification among agency staff.

In response to the need for improved staff training; and in hope of destigmatizing, and sensitizing staff to, the realities of disabilities, SSHRC implemented the Canada School of Public Service (CSPS) Addressing Disability Inclusion and Barriers to Accessibility course as mandatory training for all staff in 2023-2024. This training is also showcased in the agency's newly created Accessibility Learning Resources repository, and will be integrated into the onboarding training for new staff following the mandatory year. Creating the new Accessibility Learning Resources repository itself, with input from the PwDN chairs, is another activity SSHRC completed in the past year to help sustain a more inclusive workplace. The repository focuses on accessibility, barriers people with disabilities experience, and how to make workplaces and services inclusive, accessible and barrier-free. It will be reviewed and updated as new learning and best practice guidance becomes available.

Beyond providing learning opportunities, SSHRC also focused on addressing limitations around definitions of "disability" previously in place, by starting to update terminology and definitions as

internal policies, programs, processes, resources and tools are renewed. This effort is ongoing. In response to hesitation and/or misunderstanding around self-identification among agency staff, SSHRC identified gaps in its current system, particularly where self-identification data becomes lost or is not completed (for example, resulting from changes in agency, confusion over how to complete the questionnaire, etc.). The agency is also integrating reminders, through early 2024, on self-identification (specifically, about benefits of self-identification) through various internal communication channels. It is, further, monitoring the launch of a new self-identification questionnaire by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, and will consider opportunities and timing for onboarding it, as needed.

Built environment

In 2023, NSERC and SSHRC staff living in the National Capital Region only just began their re-entry to the workplace, into their new headquarters. While new government buildings are designed in compliance with Government of Canada accessibility standards, one barrier was readily identified in SSHRC's Accessibility Plan: possible issues with building access, navigation and individual workstations. An onsite tour with the PwDN of the new office spaces, and increasing staff occupancy, confirmed that some retrofits would be required, and that other barriers existed, particularly related to emergency procedures and associated documentation.

Issues with building access, navigation and individual workstations

The PwDN toured the new SSHRC headquarters as the space became available to agency staff, to identify potential building and workstation barriers. The barriers identified were shared with the Workplace Renewal and Facilities team. Where possible, some retrofits have already been implemented (such as accessible buttons on doors leading to the parking lot elevator on parking level 1). Other retrofits have been listed among potential built environment investments over the next three years, and require coordination with building owners. The agency has implemented an updated accommodation policy and accompanying process flowchart as of December, to better support managers and employees in identifying solutions and removing remaining barriers for which building-wide retrofits may not be feasible.

For the time being, and up until the end of the lease scheduled for late 2025, SSHRC's Data Centre is in a physical space that does not fully comply with Government of Canada accessibility standards. The agency is actively working to vacate this space, by migrating the Data Centre to the cloud. Many of the tasks involved can be completed remotely. However, some need to be performed onsite, and staff who have disabilities may face additional barriers if required to work on these premises. The agencies are closely monitoring the situation for potential emerging barriers, and would, as required, provide impacted staff with work activities that do no require working onsite.

Emergency procedures

As the agencies moved to their new office spaces in the National Capital Region, emergency-related procedures, plans and registration forms all needed to be updated. As this move to a new location also happened soon after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, some staff members expressed concern about accessibility-related measures in place to ease the return to the office.

SSHRC worked with the PwDN to apply a critical lens to the updated emergency procedures and the associated form for persons requiring assistance. The network's input, and that of other accessibility leads across the agency, led to changes that clarified procedures, including the timeframes for persons

requiring assistance hearing back from the Security and Emergency Management team, and removed ableist terminology.

The Security and Emergency Management team emailed all staff about the new, revised building emergency procedures, and held a kiosk in the new building's ground-floor lobby during the first week in which staff were required to re-enter the physical offices. Kiosk representatives discussed the emergency procedures with staff and answered any questions they had.

Information and communication technologies

Three main barriers associated with ICT were identified in SSHRC's Accessibility Plan: 1) digital tools, platforms and software; 2) external websites and intranet; and 3) direct communications—email, telephone and videoconference. Consultation with the bi-agency PwDN while preparing this progress report identified additional barriers related to the intranet. These are detailed below.

Digital tools, platforms and software

The tri-agencies (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], NSERC and SSHRC) are working collaboratively toward developing and implementing the new Tri-agency Grants Management Solution (TGMS). The solution is rooted in codesign and has adopted a client-centric view, leading to early and regular engagement with the research community. This new solution will replace the agencies' current application platforms, many of which are aging and carry technical debt. It will enhance accessibility for staff and members of the research community. In support of this work, the agencies initiated consultations and have put together the External Change Agent Network, as well as the TGMS External Advisory Board. These include individuals with expertise in accessibility and accommodations for persons with disabilities in the research community. Through these bodies, as a well as agency-specific accessibility and accommodation working groups, the agencies will seek further validation for the development and implementation of TGMS. Finally, members of the TGMS team attend meetings of the Interdepartmental Accessibility Community of Practice and have reviewed the accessibility hub hosted by the Office of Public Service Accessibility for ways to embed accessibility into their procurement practices. This engagement will continue as work on TGMS progresses.

While awaiting the implementation of TGMS, SSHRC moved the Convergence Portal (used for all funding opportunities administered through TIPS, as well as by the most recent Joint initiative funding opportunities at SSHRC) to the cloud, which was deployed with 98% Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 accessibility compliance.

External websites and intranet / direct communications—email, telephone and videoconference

The agency is actively working toward hiring a product manager in fall 2023. This role will be responsible for supporting SSHRC's compliance with the Standard on Web Accessibility (2011) and Accessible Canada Act (2019). The product manager will produce a series of options analyses (on online platforms, meeting supports and videoconference platforms, telephone platforms, survey tools, website supports, and post-award forms) to lead the agency toward compliance and support learning about available accessibility features. These analyses will help SSHRC address some of the barriers identified by ACASA, and to further consider how ACASA recommendations might be implemented (for example, around portable document format [PDF] forms and options for navigating the SSHRC website).

As the agency consulted with its PwDN in preparing this progress report, the network raised difficulties in navigating the intranet. The intranet is one of the main sources of information for staff, including on

agency divisions and committees; terms of employment and other related policies, procedures and forms; general agency policies, directives and communication templates, etc. The intranet search function has been non-operational for some time now, preventing staff from using keywords to access information they are looking for. Information in some sections of the intranet is outdated or missing, or may not be intuitively located. The agency has also yet to develop a dedicated accessibility page with all relevant information (this activity has been captured in the agency's internal accessibility implementation plan, but is not scheduled for the current financial year). The PwDN recommended that the agency adopt a user-centric approach when developing accessibility content for the intranet. Specifically, they recommended the agency should engage with staff to identify where they are most likely to click to access information on accessibility, and what information would be most useful to them.

Communication

In its inaugural Accessibility Plan, SSHRC identified "disability awareness" as the main barrier under the "communication" priority area, acknowledging that not all disabilities had been considered in engagement and awareness initiatives within the agency. Upon analysis of accessibility plans developed by other government agencies and departments, as detailed above, SSHRC decided to include an additional priority area, "organizational culture", and has renamed and moved this barrier (now named "accessibility awareness") under this new and more fitting priority area.

As the agency revises and updates its Accessibility Plan in 2025, it will re-examine communication barriers, with the goal of providing accessible, inclusive and respectful information and services. As part of its internal accessibility implementation plan, however, SSHRC has already identified and implemented some activities that will help overcome communication barriers, such as providing staff with training on accessibility features and best practices of the Microsoft Office suite (Word, Excel and PowerPoint) and on creating accessible PDF files; and developing an evergreen learning resource on accessible communication. As well, SSHRC has hired additional resources to advance its web renewal, to make the SSHRC website more accessible, and is putting in place contracts for accessibility services for public events.

The agency also engaged with the PwDN, as part of producing this progress report, to discuss and gather their recommendations on inclusive language use and terminology regarding persons with disabilities (as described below, under Consultations); the recommendations found in ACASA's report, highlighted under the Note on language above, are also being considered among potential further updates.

Procurement of goods, services and facilities

In analyzing its own processes and practices, SSHRC also monitors policies, guidelines, tools and directives released by Public Services and Procurement Canada, to support its accessibility efforts in procurement. The agency's Accessibility Plan includes two main barriers related to procurement of goods, services and facilities: 1) accessibility to be considered in policies and processes; and 2) what tools or services are available for those who face accessibility barriers is unclear.

Accessibility to be considered in policies and processes

SSHRC is currently updating its statement of work template (to be completed by December 2023), and developed a presentation on accessibility in procurement for its clients. The presentation covers legal requirements, responsibilities and tips around considering accessibility in procurement, and provides

concrete examples and further resources to support agency staff involved in any procurement processes.

What tools or services are available for those who face accessibility barriers is unclear

From a client perspective, the absence of a centralized information point to better support procurement of accessibility tools is a barrier to procuring such tools. The agency's Procurement, Contracting and Material Management division is working on providing technical authorities, by December 2023, with access to view available products and their accessibility features.

Underemployment of persons with disabilities

The underemployment of persons with disabilities is a barrier that was not captured in SSHRC's inaugural Accessibility Plan. The agency recognizes that the number of persons with disabilities hired and employed within the organization is below the LMA, and is taking steps to remedy this situation. It could, in addition, take a step further in supporting employment of persons with disabilities outside the organization, using approaches inspired by social procurement. Such approaches recognize that the procurement of goods and services can have social, economic, environmental, cultural and political impacts. Organizations adopting a social procurement approach apply specific considerations for suppliers owned by, or providing employment for, persons with disabilities. SSHRC will examine the desirability and feasibility of implementing more equitable contracting to, where possible, procure goods, services and facilities from businesses that are owned, led by or make genuine efforts to hire persons with disabilities.

Design and delivery of programs and services

In its Accessibility Plan, SSHRC identified six main barriers related to program and service delivery: 1) eligibility and application-stage requirements; 2) lack of transparency on adaptive measures, including extensions to deadlines; 3) evaluation criteria; 4) "special circumstances" / "career interruptions" / "allowable inclusions"; 5) committee member workload and committee meetings; and 6) direct costs of research. Working closely with its ACASA, the agency was able to translate ACASA advice into progress toward addressing barriers for persons with disabilities within SSHRC's research community. Below, see details on collaboration undertaken with NSERC.

Eligibility and application-stage requirements

Through its consultations, it became apparent to SSHRC that some research fields related to disability were not available in the Canadian Research and Development Classification (CRDC). Since the federal research funding agencies use the CRDC to identify disciplinary categories, the absence of certain fields could impact the application review process. SSHRC and the other agencies are working with Statistics Canada to revise the CRDC to reflect these and other concerns. A public consultation process was launched in August 2023. The CRDC review is expected to be completed by the end of December 2023.

One desired outcome of the [Tri-Agency EDI Action Plan](#) is to have comprehensive data available to help identify EDI-related barriers and inform decision-making for granting agency funding programs. SSHRC acknowledges its current self-identification questionnaire uses outdated language that is not inclusive of all lived experiences. Over the past 12 months, the agency has drafted a project charter to form a working group to review and revise this questionnaire. Areas of focus will include encouraging participation by reducing burden, and ensuring any changes to the questionnaire are validated with members of the community who have lived experience in the areas addressed.

Lack of transparency on adaptive measures, including extensions to deadlines
ACASA identified a need for a "one-stop-shop" Accessibility landing page on the SSHRC website, providing access to all accessibility resources to better support members of the research community seeking adaptive measures. SSHRC developed a new landing page that describes specific services and provides contact information for all aspects of its programs and services, in one easy-to-find location. This new page is scheduled to go live at the end of September 2023. In response to community feedback, and in moving away from using "accommodations" terminology, SSHRC also renamed its "accommodation inbox" (the email address SSHRC applicants and peer reviewers can use to confidentially contact SSHRC to seek individual support) the "accessibility inbox".

Other related steps include improving virtual signage throughout the website to lead users to the new landing page, and making the instructions to apply for Insight Development Grants more accessible, by including them directly on SSHRC's website.

Evaluation criteria
In its report to SSHRC, and via multiple meetings, ACASA has advised SSHRC that using terminology such as "merit review", "capability" and "productivity" reinforces an ableist perspective. SSHRC continues to build capacity for inclusive language, and is analyzing the implications of these recommendations for its terminology. Building on its status as a signatory of DORA, SSHRC is also exploring approaches used by other funding agencies around the globe to implement more equitable processes for assessing research and researchers' contributions as part of grant application review. The Guidelines for Assessing the Productivity of Nominees, in the Canada Research Chairs Program, is an example of concrete steps already taken in TIPS programs. Further, the New Frontiers in Research Fund, launched in 2018, epitomizes the DORA principles, with evaluation focusing on the proposed research rather than individuals. The Fund's competition results to date demonstrate equal success rates across underrepresented groups. In 2023, SSHRC has been expanding on this work for all of its programs.

"Special circumstances" / "career interruptions" / "allowable inclusions"
When applying for a SSHRC funding opportunity, applicants can opt to include a description of life circumstances (often referred to as "special" or "personal" circumstances) that have distinctively impacted their academic career progression. This information has generally been included as part of the "research contributions and relevant experience" section of an application, although the Canada Research Chairs Program has asked for any such information in the CV details section. The "research contributions and relevant experience" section has a maximum number of pages, so including special circumstances reduced available space for other information the applicant may have wished to include. To address this barrier, SSHRC developed a separate life circumstances module, with accompanying text, outside of the research proposal module. The new module was launched across all SSHRC-specific funding opportunities over the course of 2023. It represents a first step in addressing barriers that exist around sharing lived experience as part of review processes. In addition to TIPS's work on the Canada Research Chairs Program, SSHRC continues to explore how to expand and improve guidance provided to applicants and for research assessment, to make assessment more equitable, including through a planned update in fall 2023 to the SSHRC Manual for Merit Review Committee Members.

Committee member workload and committee meetings
In 2023, through the SSHRC and NSERC annual Hackathon, staff worked on a grassroots initiative titled Sharing Accessibility Needs in a Safe Way. This project aimed to further identify expertise from across

the agencies, to offer a safe, secure approach mindful of privacy laws, for any committee member who experiences accessibility barriers and wants to share them ahead of deliberation week. The project emerged as staff realized some reviewers faced barriers during committee deliberations. Its intended outcome is to help establish a process to address barriers to accessibility for reviewers.

Through its work with ACASA, and through community consultations, SSHRC gained valuable experience and knowledge on how to develop and manage accessible meetings, both internally and externally. Lessons learned and best practices that will inform agency work moving forward include: coordinating simultaneous English and French translation and communication access realtime translation (CART) live transcription during hybrid meetings; shortening meetings, dividing longer meetings into two, or implementing additional breaks; creating more written material and providing this well in advance; and learning to blend bilingualism and accessibility in document preparation and meeting formats.

Direct costs of research

In 2023, SSHRC consulted ACASA on common accessibility expenses, and on whether and how to best develop separate accessibility-related budget claims from the application process, including, as a first step, by adding a separate budget line in applications. As part of developing its internal accessibility implementation plan, SSHRC also launched internal consultations and started engaging with accessibility leads at NSERC to identify specific activities to be initiated over the coming years. These activities will enable the agencies to explore how to provide additional support to award recipients to cover accessibility expenses, for both them and research participants.

Collaboration with the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council

In addition to the initiatives listed above, SSHRC and NSERC have started on a crosswalk of actions listed under the "design and delivery of programs and services" section of their respective plans, as well as associated activities, to identify opportunities to further collaborate and share lessons and resources. Through this exercise, the agencies hope to send a harmonized message around accessibility in the Canadian research ecosystem.

Portions of SSHRC and NSERC staff have already demonstrated an ability and readiness to advance accessibility-related initiatives across the agencies. The grassroots Hackathon project mentioned above, Sharing Accessibility Needs in a Safe Way, illustrated this. The project has, as an immediate outcome, led to an informal, bi-agency accessibility community of practice used by members to share resources on increasing accessibility within the agencies. This community of practice will also help increase staff awareness and knowledge around persons with disabilities, and ensure accessibility becomes part of everyday conversations within the agencies.

Transportation

Transportation, as identified in the Accessible Canada Act, does not apply to SSHRC as a priority area at this time. However, recognizing that, as part of service delivery, agency staff and members of its research community are at times transported to various locations, the agency identified one main barrier that could impact persons with disabilities: the general understanding that lower cost of transportation should be prioritized.

Prioritizing the lower cost of transportation

In its Accessibility Plan, SSHRC committed to exploring opportunities to integrate accessibility considerations and options when booking travel. As the agency developed its internal accessibility

implementation plan and further engaged with internal stakeholders, it became apparent that some exceptions, namely for persons with disabilities, are possible and already accounted for. However, they may not be apparent to everyone booking travel or administering research grants within institutions.

The Tri-agency Guide on Financial Administration (TAGFA) is a comprehensive resource for grant recipients and administering institutions to ensure understanding of the principles and directives that govern post-award administration of grants funded by CIHR, NSERC and SSHRC. The TAGFA requires all administering institutions that accept agency funding to make concerted efforts to develop and implement policies and procedures that advance the goals of EDI in the use of grant funds, to support equitable participation in the research system. It also highlights and defines what is meant by "effective and economical" grant expenditures:

> **Effective and economical**: achieving the intended outcome with due regard for minimizing cost by avoiding unnecessary expense. This means the expenditure is considered an optimal use of the funds, which may not necessarily mean the "lowest cost". For example, an unnecessary expense may occur when an item or service, no matter the cost, is ineffective in achieving the intended outcome (i.e., creates undue burden on the funded activities such as research delays, additional expenses, lost time and/or effort due to overly burdensome administration).

To ensure administering institutions understand and apply these guiding principles in a way that complies with agency policies, and does not create additional barriers to persons with disabilities, SSHRC is developing a document for institutions that provides case examples for appropriate use of grant funds for expenditures. NSERC aims to publish the EDI guidance document on their website, on behalf of the three federal research funding agencies, by end of 2023.

To increase awareness and understanding of requirements under the Financial Administration Act and National Joint Council (NJC) Travel directive across the agency, SSHRC, using accessibility best practices, will develop guiding principles within the context of these documents, to enable removal of barriers impacting persons with disabilities. This work is scheduled to start in the coming years.

Consultations

As mandated by the Accessible Canada Act, SSHRC consulted with the PwDN in preparing this progress report. These consultations focused mostly on internal-facing activities, and touched on the organizational culture; employment; built environment; ICT; communication; procurement of goods, facilities and services; and transportation priority areas of the Accessibility Plan. Consultations with members of the agency's research community focused on activities listed under the "design and delivery of programs and services" priority area, as well as some included under "ICT" and "communication".

Persons with Disabilities Network

Since SSHRC published its Accessibility Plan in December 2022, six meetings were organized with the PwDN. As of August 2023, this bi-agency (NSERC and SSHRC) network had, at most, 15 active members. Meetings with the PwDN enabled its members to discuss and provide their input on general impressions following the plan's publication, development of the internal accessibility implementation plan, specific activities the agency is pursuing (the Accommodation Policy and accompanying procedures, the Mentorship Plus program, emergency procedures) and this progress report.

These meetings were held online, using the MS Teams platform due to its accessibility features, and led by the network co-chairs. Members received material in advance of the meetings, in both official languages, and were always welcomed to contribute using the official language of their choice. They were asked to indicate when they would be switching from one language to another, so that participants using closed captioning could make the required change on their respective device.

Consultations on the 2023 accessibility progress report, more specifically, were an opportunity to engage with the PwDN on accessibility and disability language and terminology; additional barriers not captured in the current Accessibility Plan; progress made since publication of the plan; and other elements around accessibility within the agency that members thought should be highlighted in the report or raised with management.

The PwDN formulated recommendations on language and terminology, such as avoiding language referring to impairment or relying on a "deficit model", and moving away from using the term "accommodations" (unless required by specific context, such as language about the Accommodation Policy). Members suggested including a note in the progress report, acknowledging that persons with disabilities generally have individual preferences for how they and their disability are referred to, and that the best practice is always to ask for and use the terminology they have chosen for themselves. Network members also recognized the challenges involved in addressing these elements in French, highlighting that there seem to be even more differing opinions for French regarding terminology acceptability. The PwDN recommendations informed the "Note on language" included in this report, and were, subsequently, shared with the agency's Creative Services team when discussing editing and translation of the report.

PwDN members who participated in the meeting leading to the production of this report expressed appreciation for the steps SSHRC had taken in addressing accessibility barriers within the agency. The creation of and sustained engagement with the Network are seen as indications that accessibility is taken seriously, and that mindset within the organization is changing. Some activities were identified as having immediate and significant impact (for example, the training on accessibility features available in the Microsoft Office suite, which was also identified as a learning activity that should be better promoted internally). The PwDN also identified additional barriers, such as the agency's intranet not being easy to navigate and not providing a lot of information specifically on accessibility. Some members worried about lack of progress in addressing certain barriers, particularly in the "built environment" priority area. Others raised concerns about culture change, which was labeled as "slow", with members sharing how colleagues, at times, have made "shocking" comments about disability, and how training presented as focusing on mental health mostly speaks to stress-coping mechanisms and shies away from mental illness. These examples illustrate that more work is required to raise awareness and reduce stigma around all types of disabilities.

SSHRC's Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Systemic Ableism

SSHRC's ACASA was created as part of the agency's efforts to identify barriers in the delivery of programs and services while developing its Accessibility Plan. Through ongoing engagement (14 virtual meetings and five focus groups held over the course of a year) with the committee's 13 members, SSHRC was able to gain valuable insights and recommendations for making its programs and services as accessible as possible. Committee meetings were led by the ACASA chair and co-chair, and agency staff provided secretarial and logistical support. SSHRC selected the Zoom platform for these ACASA

meetings, with French and English interpreters. This enabled SSHRC to use CART services in English and French. The agency retained the services of American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes du Québec (Quebec Sign Language, LSQ) interpreters as needed.

During the consultation process, ACASA touched on every barrier identified in SSHRC's Accessibility Plan. Some of the committee's key contributions include stressing the importance of reciprocal learning and embracing intersectionality; highlighting the negative implications of certain terminology used in SSHRC programming (such as "merit review", "capability" and "productivity"); identifying the need for an accessibility landing page that consolidates all accessibility information in a single location; and providing feedback that contributed to Statistics Canada launching a consultation on the CRDC. Furthermore, Andréa Peters, Advisory Committee chair and the main author of the ACASA report, presented her lexicon for inclusive language in French to SSHRC.

SSHRC also engaged with ACASA on progress made, via three main vehicles. First, SSHRC provided the committee with detailed updates on progress and future plans, seeking their input and comments during a March 2023 meeting. The advisory committee also provided SSHRC with a report in July 2023. This report, which the committee used to go beyond the parameters of the formal Accessibility Plan, was published on SSHRC's website in fall 2023. The report also builds on SSHRC's efforts to identify barriers faced by individuals engaging with SSHRC's external programs and services, and provides actionable recommendations on how these can be addressed. SSHRC is working toward an agency response to the report, and has scheduled a meeting with ACASA to discuss the progress report in October 2023.

During discussions with ACASA, it came to light that terminology and definitions used in the Accessible Canada Act contain language that some community members find harmful. The advisory committee recommends SSHRC use a social model of disability, whereby a disability results when a person's physical, sensory, neurocognitive and/or psychological aspects interact with barriers present in a person's environment. SSHRC intends to consider this recommendation and look at the most up-to-date terminology when reviewing references to and definitions of disability in its programs and services.

Feedback

SSHRC welcomes feedback from its research community and staff and the public, through several channels: via email, post, telephone and an online form, which lets users provide feedback anonymously. At times, agency staff have contacted the accessibility coordinator directly, using MS Teams, to share experiences or disclose accessibility barriers. Meetings with the PwDN are additional opportunities to gather feedback on the Accessibility Plan and accessibility barriers. All accessibility-related feedback received is saved in the agency's corporate systems for seven years. Due to production timelines required for creating this report, feedback presented in this section covers that received between January 1, 2023, and August 14, 2023. Any feedback received after this period will be included in the 2024 accessibility progress report.

The online feedback form first asks if the individuals providing their input identify as a person with disabilities or as a disabled person. It then invites feedback on the feedback process itself, the seven priority areas listed in the inaugural Accessibility Plan, the agency's approach to accessibility consultation, and monitoring and governance, then asks for any general comments. The form also

provides people an opportunity to share their contact information and indicate if they work for NSERC or SSHRC. Finally, it includes the following questions:

- How could we make this feedback process more accessible to you in future?
- How could we make the Accessibility Plan more accessible to you in the future?
- Do you have any additional thoughts or concerns about the Accessibility Plan?

Feedback received

Three individuals, all of whom identify as working for the agency, provided feedback on SSHRC's Accessibility Plan or accessibility barriers. One used the online questionnaire, another emailed both SSHRC and NSERC, and the last contacted the accessibility coordinator directly, using MS Teams. While some people contacted the agency by phone, none of these calls were about accessibility. Individuals within the agency also contacted the accessibility coordinator for advice or guidance on language, and about increasing accessibility in the production of various documents.

Feedback touched on the built environment (at the agency's new headquarters); communication; and design and delivery of programs and services priority areas. Some general comments were also provided.

Barriers mentioned included difficulties in learning and maintaining proficiency in a second language, and how this could impact career progression for individuals with learning and other disabilities; templates the agencies use that are not fully accessible to people using screen readers or other assistive technologies; the location of and lack of amenities provided in the agency's "privacy rooms" (which can be used for a variety of purposes, including for nursing and by individuals needing to pump while at work, and by staff needing a quiet space for any of various reasons, such as reducing sensory overload); and policies applied by the agency around early career researchers and "special circumstances".

Recommendations and suggestions for improvement made by people who provided feedback include that increased signage be posted throughout the new agency headquarters; efforts be made toward ensuring retention of staff with disabilities, including by creating a safe and welcoming environment; a mechanism be implemented to track staff's accommodation requests, identifying types, responses and delays in solving requests; training for peer reviewers allow them to actively discuss accessibility during review meetings; the agency develop a plan to ensure it is coordinating efforts and making progress in its various efforts, including on EDI and in relation to DORA; and development of the TGMS include establishing, as part of the researcher's personal profile, a section on "leaves" or "special circumstances", which applicants would only be required to fill out once, and which would subsequently be included in all their applications.

SSHRC did not receive any feedback on its Accessibility Plan, or on barriers encountered, from members of its research community through this specific process. However, SSHRC received a great deal of feedback via the creation of ACASA, focus groups leading to the Accessibility Plan, and meetings with individuals who reached out to SSHRC informally and through the accessibility inbox. The agency will consider developing a slide inviting feedback on the Accessibility Plan and barriers encountered, for use in presentations during engagement sessions, orientations and events with scholarly associations (such as during the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences).

How this feedback is helping SSHRC become a barrier-free organization
The agency's accessibility coordinator is responsible for receiving, acknowledging, tracking and following up on feedback received through the various channels. Upon receipt, feedback is shared with relevant offices of primary interest, for their awareness and response or action, as required. The agency's ASC is also kept informed of feedback received during meetings, and its members are invited to follow up with their respective teams, as relevant.

Barriers and recommendations provided to the agency are captured in an Excel spreadsheet, and the agency is developing a mechanism for tracking responses. This tool will be applied as the agency advances its work on activities included in its internal accessibility implementation plan. Any barrier or recommendation the agency is not in a position, currently, to act upon will be included as part of updates to the Accessibility Plan in 2025.

Conclusion

Over the past year, SSHRC has made considerable progress in identifying accessibility barriers that may lead to the exclusion of persons with disabilities within the agency by limiting their career progression or opportunities to fully participate in projects and activities. Accessibility barriers also impact SSHRC's research community, as they may place barriers in the way in application processes; not allow for full recognition and participation of members of the agency's advisory, governance or peer review committees; or prevent applicants from obtaining equitable evaluation during peer review processes.

Overall, this progress report has been an opportunity for SSHRC to measure accessibility progress to date, including the small and larger victories; to identify areas where progress has not advanced as much as hoped and additional efforts and/or resources are required; and to further engage with staff and members of the research community on setting priorities and thinking critically and creatively about accessibility.

As the agency moves toward the second year of implementing its Accessibility Plan, SSHRC is thankful for the sustained efforts of its staff, and for the expertise, experiences and insights that persons with disabilities are generously contributing. This collective work is helping our organization achieve its objective of being barrier-free by 2040.

Appendix A: Acronyms and definitions

Acronyms

ACASA: Advisory Committee on Accessibility and Systemic Ableism

ASC: Accessibility Steering Committee

ASL: American Sign Language

CART: Communication access realtime translation

CIHR: Canadian Institutes of Health Research

CRDC: Canadian Research and Development Classification

CSPS: Canada School of Public Service

DORA: San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment

EDI: Equity, diversity and inclusion

EEDAC: Employment Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee

ICT: Information and communication technologies

LMA: Labour market availability

LSQ: Langue des signes du Québec, Quebec Sign Language

NJC: National Joint Council

NSERC: Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council

PDF: Portable document format

PwDN: Persons with Disabilities Network

SSHRC: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

TAGFA: Tri-agency Guide on Financial Administration

TGMS: Tri-agency Grants Management Solution

TIPS: Tri-agency Institutional Programs Secretariat

Definitions

Accessibility: The quality that enables full participation, without barriers, of all.

Accommodation: The removal of barriers on an individual basis.

Applicant: For the purpose of this document, includes all persons contributing to the development and submission of an application, including principal investigators / project directors, co-applicants/investigators/directors, collaborators, referees, team members or partners.

Barrier: Anything—including anything physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal, anything that is based on information or communications or anything that is the result of a policy or a practice—that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with an impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment or a functional limitation.

Disability: Any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society.

Tri-agencies (or tri-agency): All three federal research funding agencies, including CIHR, NSERC and SSHRC.