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Chair: Ms. Valerie Bradford



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• (1545)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting 110 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research.

Before we begin, I ask all in-person participants to read the guidelines written on the updated cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents, and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters. You will also notice a QR code on the card that links to a short awareness video, which, obviously, I don't want you to watch at the present time, because I don't know where it came from.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

I would like to remind all members of the following points. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed through the chair. Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether participating in person or via Zoom. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can. For those participating by video conference, and I think we might have some in the next panel, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For interpretation, for those on Zoom, you have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either floor, English or French audio. Thank you all for your co-operation.

Before we move into the formal portion of the meeting I want to give you an update on our witness requests. We now have confirmation from both of our ministers that they will be appearing shortly after the winter break. Minister Champagne is confirmed for the second week—just a moment, please let me finish—and Minister Holland said, “In the new year.” As we know, our dates for our meetings will probably change, so we don't know the exact date, but that's the commitment.

Mr. Tochor, you had your hand raised.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Yes. I don't think that's acceptable for the committee. We gave them how many weeks already? It's holding up this committee's ability to do its work. The Liberals are hiding ministers from this committee and from answering questions that we need answers to. It's not acceptable that they're going to take the winter off and come back in the spring to present those answers. We need answers today for Canadians. I believe this is a stalling tactic being deployed here, and I'm very interested to hear the rest of the members' views on this tactic.

The Chair: Mr. Longfield, I believe you have your hand up.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): I think that, given the season we're in, with supplementary estimates, it's.... Thank you to the clerk and chair for finding some time in the ministers' schedules once we're through estimates and the other things that are drawing them into other committees. It's unfortunate that we can't see them sooner, but at least we know what we're dealing with now. Thanks for the update.

The Chair: Are there any other comments?

That seems to be the first available date. I do know that the minister is anxious to come, but he's called, as you indicated, before other committees as well. As we all know, we're running out of actual dates.

Go ahead, Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate that.

I have a question. What we're dealing with here is that we asked the ministers to come and are continually asking them to show, such that we can hear about what's going on. The excuse has always been that, “Well, capstone hasn't been determined yet.” We need to find out...input from the minister so that the minister can actually respond to capstone. That's the purpose of the discussions. It's so that the minister can hear from witnesses and from us on issues about capstone, yet the minister's going to wait until the new year to come back and speak to us. That's not acceptable.

The minister shouldn't be speaking to us: We should be speaking to the minister, and the fact that the ministers are saying they're not coming until such a date.... We don't even know when that date is, because (a) we don't have a time frame as to when our meetings will be, whether they'll be Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. Who knows? However, the reality is that we have ministers who should be here, because we...and they're delaying the aspect such that we can't deal with this, which then says that they already pre-arranged what capstone is about, which is not acceptable to this committee. It's very upsetting to hear that. We're supposed to be having input into this, and we're not getting any whatsoever, Madam Chair.

• (1550)

The Chair: Mr. Kitchen, Minister Champagne has confirmed for the week of February 3. As you know, the dates for committees change after a break, so we don't know on which days of the week we'll be meeting, but he has confirmed that he will attend that week. That's his first availability. He is attending other committees in the meantime.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Madam Chair, February 3 is the date.

The Chair: It's the week of.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: He has nothing else during that week? All of a sudden a minister of that level can say I've got a whole week off after we come back to the House. How is that acceptable?

The Chair: He's slotted that he'll make himself available during our committee meetings that week. We will have two committee meetings, presumably.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: What if the minister gets called away and is sent off somewhere else? How are we to deal with it then? We'll get another excuse for, oh, I can't make it, will we?

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: On a point of order, we have witnesses in the room. Could we move to witnesses, please?

The Chair: Yes. Can I have agreement around the table that we'll proceed with our witnesses?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will proceed with our meeting, then, as scheduled.

I'm sorry. I have one comment quickly.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Madam Chair, I just want to confirm one thing with the clerk.

Have the other meeting dates before the holiday break been proposed to the two ministers? These dates would be November 28 and December 3, 5, 10 and 12 and even December 17 and possibly December 19.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry, I missed the first part of what you said, because I didn't have the translation. I can say we offered all of those dates, and this is the answer we got back. Now I'm going to proceed with our witnesses, who have been patiently waiting. Thank you.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(i) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, September 17, 2024, the committee resumes its study on the mission, mandate, role, structure and financing of the new capstone research funding organization announced in budget 2024.

It is now my pleasure to welcome, from the Department of Health, Michelle Boudreau, associate assistant deputy minister, health policy branch. From the Department of Industry we have Nipun Vats, assistant deputy minister, science and research sector.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we'll proceed with rounds of questions.

Mr. Vats, I invite you to make an opening statement of up to five minutes, please.

Dr. Nipun Vats (Assistant Deputy Minister, Science and Research Sector, Department of Industry): Thank you, Madam Chair and members, for the invitation. I'm here on the traditional unceded and surrendered territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people today to discuss the capstone research funding organization as a central element of the government's plan to modernize the research support system.

[Translation]

As assistant deputy minister for the science and research sector at Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, or ISED, I'm responsible for managing the policies and programs related to the federal funding of post-secondary research.

[English]

The ISED portfolio supports researchers through two of the three federal granting councils, as you know, NSERC and SSHRC. The third granting council, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, falls within the health portfolio, and my colleague will be speaking to that today as well. Together, these councils form the backbone of the federal research support system we know today, alongside the Canada Foundation for Innovation, which funds research infrastructure.

[Translation]

The granting councils have been highly successful at delivering on their mandates and supporting social, technological and public health advancements. However, the challenges that we face today are far more complex and interconnected than the challenges encountered when these structures were first established.

[English]

Researchers are increasingly working across disciplines, sectors, and borders to address multi-faceted issues such as public health crises and environmental sustainability, but the fragmentation of the system limits support for cross-cutting solutions and hinders the coordination necessary to fully address these challenges.

This was recognized by the advisory panel on the federal research support system, which was convened to gather independent expert advice on the structure and governance of the federal system supporting research and talent, and how to position research investments for greatest impact.

Among the panel's recommendations was the creation of a new structure to improve coordination, collaboration and agility, enhance strategic direction and modernize research support. The capstone is a direct reflection of these objectives and a commitment to strengthen and build a more resilient research ecosystem.

The capstone would integrate the three federal granting councils within a single federal research funding organization, establishing CIHR, NSERC and SSHRC as constituent research councils. The capstone would be more than just an umbrella organization over three separate councils. It would also provide a unified governance structure to foster coordination and collaboration across disciplines.

It would be led by a single board of directors with diverse representation, who would provide strategic governance and a CEO responsible for day-to-day operations. This governance would drive coordination across the organization, enhancing support for cross-cutting disciplinary and multi-sectoral research and partnerships within and outside of Canada while preserving the discipline-specific leadership that the granting councils currently provide.

It would also maintain vital linkages with the Canada Foundation for Innovation, given the links between research and research infrastructure, and ensure the organization plays an active role within the broader science ecosystem.

• (1555)

[Translation]

A key objective of this new structure is to support all types of research and researchers. This includes investigator-driven research, which is essential for generating foundational knowledge through new ideas, theories and insights; research that can provide practical solutions to specific societal challenges; and more strategic or applied research, where findings can be turned into applications.

The capstone would aim to help bridge the gaps among these types of research and among disciplines and sectors in order to effectively tackle domestic and global challenges, drive innovation and improve the quality of life of the people of Canada.

[English]

Academic freedom would remain a foundational principle of the capstone, ensuring that research is funded based on internationally accepted standards of scientific excellence and ethics and peer and merit review.

The capstone would also continue to advance equity, diversity and inclusion research, ensuring that researchers for equity-seeking groups have equal opportunities to access funding. This includes strengthening research capacity for indigenous researchers and communities and fostering a more inclusive understanding of the world through indigenous ways of knowing.

It would also include continuing to support French language research to ensure that francophone communities can contribute equally to and benefit from scientific advancements.

[Translation]

The capstone would enhance Canada's global scientific reputation through improved coordination and collaboration and by fur-

ther incorporating diverse perspectives that play a crucial role in effectively addressing complex societal challenges.

[English]

In closing, I would like to thank the research community, including the advisory panel, for their valuable contributions so far, as well as the committee for its deliberations. Ongoing dialogue will ensure that the capstone meets the community's needs and serves the broader interests of the country.

I thank you for your time and your important work, and I look forward to answering your questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now turn to Ms. Boudreau.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Thank you.

Ms. Michelle Boudreau (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Health Policy Branch, Department of Health): Thank you very much, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for the invitation to be here today.

I want to begin by acknowledging that I'm speaking to you today from the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin and Anishinabe people.

My name is Michelle Boudreau. As you already know, I'm the associate assistant deputy minister of the health policy branch at Health Canada, and I work very closely with my colleague at ISED, Nipun Vats, whom you just heard from.

I will not revisit the topics that my colleague has covered in his statement. Instead, I'll take a few minutes to speak about health research and its importance to the health of Canadians.

Health research creates the scientific evidence and knowledge needed to support the health and wellness of people in Canada. It is vital for decision-makers at all levels of government. Health research also helps health professionals, policy-makers, health system administrators and others make informed decisions.

Canada has a strong health research community, with research in universities, colleges and polytechnics, in hospitals, in affiliated research institutes and in government and private sector research facilities as well.

The Canadian Institute of Health Research, CIHR, has also been central to the development of Canada's vibrant health research community.

Health research and innovations are constantly changing to address the complex and emerging issues impacting people's health. Research has needed to become increasingly collaborative in response. This is where the capstone organization will play a vital role.

Moving forward, we anticipate that the capstone's objective of maximizing the impact of research by increasing collaboration and by better supporting research that crosses disciplines and sectors will have great benefits for health for all Canadians.

• (1600)

[*Translation*]

Bringing together health, social sciences and natural sciences will create opportunities to address the disparities that affect the health and well-being of Black and racialized people, people with disabilities, 2LGBTQIA+ people and other communities.

We also see an opportunity to advance reconciliation by promoting collaboration and co-development with indigenous communities, with organizations and with academics in order to address the disparities that affect the health and well-being of members of first nations, Inuit and Métis communities.

According to the research community, making sure that the capstone organization, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research or CIHR, the Minister of Health and other health partners maintain strong ties will play a vital role in the capstone organization's success. We remain committed to maintaining these ties.

These ties will also play a key role in ensuring that emerging health issues are given prominence; that research evidence informs health policies, programs and regulations; and that health research gets integrated into strategic initiatives.

At Health Canada, in particular, our deep and lasting ties with CIHR, and in turn with the health research community, ensure that we can apply research evidence to our work.

Through our collaboration with CIHR, we can also help the Canadian health research community to better understand the critical questions and issues that we face, resulting in more targeted advice and more effective health research.

I'll end my remarks here. My colleague, Dr. Clifford, CIHR's acting president, will also be appearing later today. She can elaborate on the feedback from the health research community regarding the capstone organization.

Thank you for giving me the floor today. I look forward to answering your questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Boudreau.

We'll now start our members' questions and open the floor.

Be sure to indicate to whom your questions are directed.

We'll start with MP Viersen for six minutes, please.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I, too, want to just voice my concerns around the minister's not appearing this fall yet. I think we made ourselves fairly clear about that. It is incredibly frustrating.

However, I would note that Mr. Vats has answered a bunch of the questions that we were wondering about. I had a number of questions prepared here just around whether we would be melding the tri-councils into the new capstone association. I think you referred to the fact that you will be. There will be a pulling together of that.

We've also noted a number of studies that are having money sent abroad to the United States and to other countries. We heard from witnesses who talked about how the Americans are putting crazy amounts of money into research.

How do you think the capstone will manage the more targeted funding for research? Looking around the world and seeing what is in Canada's interests, how do we focus Canadians to get these research dollars...to maximize Canada's place in the world, I suppose?

Dr. Nipun Vats: First, maybe I'll just clarify your first comment, which is about the melting together or the melding of the councils.

What we're trying to do is drive integration but still draw on the expertise of those domain-specific councils, which have the natural science and engineering expertise or the health expertise. Sometimes you need to bring those together to address an issue like the pandemic, for example, where you need to bring disciplines together. That's going to be the role of the capstone. It will have an overall kind of governance responsibility for the organization as a whole. That's not to minimize the importance of the domain-specific research areas that feed into that.

With respect to the international positioning, I think one thing that the Bouchard report highlighted and was also true in the consultations that came forward is that Canada does really well in terms of researcher-initiated international collaboration, but it's not necessarily thought of from the standpoint of the strategic interests of the country as a whole. That's natural for a researcher. A researcher is going to find the best people to work with anywhere in the world to advance knowledge, so long as it adheres to some important principles around, in our case, research security or the research integrity elements.

However, individual researchers alone are not going to necessarily be able to say, collectively, that they have certain capabilities to bring to the table and that they want to work with their trusted partners to advance collaboration and research that can lead to economic benefits, greater security benefits or societal benefits for the country.

There could be big challenges internationally that we want to work on together. That's a bit of the role of the capstone as well. It's to bring that kind of coherent, coordinated voice to those international collaborations that may be there but are a bit more diffuse in the way that the system is now.

• (1605)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: What we've been hearing from the witnesses is, I think, that's this is what the dream of the capstone is.

How do we make sure that this isn't just a renaming exercise? We just smush it together and, instead of three councils, we have one, and it's essentially a renaming exercise.

What specifically do you think is going to be different from what we currently have?

Dr. Nipun Vats: Well, I think there are a few layers to that.

The first one is that it will have a governance board that will bring the perspectives of the research community, of industry and of civil society around providing strategic direction to the organization. It'll be informed by government directions, but there's a degree of independence in terms of how it funds research to make sure that—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Presumably most of that is already happening. The councils are governance boards.

Dr. Nipun Vats: It varies by council, but the way that the councils are structured now, the councils per se, in the case of NSERC and SSHRC—and my colleagues here can speak to this a bit more—play an important advisory function but don't have a true governance function for the organization. There's a bit of a shift in terms of the way an organization is governed with that strategic oversight.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Who is providing governance at this point?

Dr. Nipun Vats: The presidents are accountable to the minister for that. They draw on the expertise in the research community, but it's not formalized in the same way, except for the councils, which, again, are valuable. However, they serve more of a governance function with respect to CIHR. It's a little different.

The other thing I will say is this: The idea is that the CEO of the new organization would carry the voice of the Canadian research community. The way it works right now is very effective in certain kinds of—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Is that a dedicated...rather than the health minister? Is that what you're—

Dr. Nipun Vats: It wouldn't replace the political dialogue that can help pave the way for important collaborations. When you get down another level, what often happens, because we have such a rich research ecosystem, is this: If you go to an international meeting, you'll have 12 Canadians on one side and maybe two or three people on the other side. Again, we've organically developed this great research ecosystem. However, when you want to speak as a collective, it's a little harder to do. Part of what this would do is enable a single-window, coherent voice on those larger-scale research initiatives.

There would still be a role at the political level for paving the way for some of that. However, the idea is to bring more focus to those initiatives at the research level.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

We'll now turn to MP Diab for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon to the two witnesses.

I believe you're both of Nova Scotian descent. MP Mike Kelloway and I are also from Nova Scotia.

Welcome to the committee.

I am very proud that you're bilingual as well. Well done.

My first question is for Ms. Boudreau.

• (1610)

[*English*]

I understand that your background is in health, and your work relates predominantly to pharmacare, mental health and substance abuse policies, or a combination thereof.

Can you speak about the importance of maintaining or even enhancing the linkages between health research and Health Canada under the capstone, as it relates to those important issues?

Ms. Michelle Boudreau: Certainly, and thank you for the kind invitation.

[*Translation*]

I'm Acadian, and I'm very proud of Acadia. I come from an area in the Acadian riding of Richmond.

[*English*]

Absolutely. Maintaining that link with CIHR is critical for Health Canada. As you mentioned, I can tell you, from the areas I work in, that one of the first things we do, as policy-makers looking at initiatives, is think about what the research component is. Are there specific research elements we would want as part of the initiative? For example, in the national strategy for drugs for rare diseases, there's a strong component that has to do with research. We have CIHR leading that. In mental health and substance use, one of the things we have been putting forward is IYS, or integrated youth services, and its hubs. Again, there is a very strong link with CIHR and the work it has done through its network of networks.

It's almost instinctive for us at Health Canada. When we start to develop these strategic initiatives, we think about what the research component is and where CIHR can help us with that.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: Thanks for providing those examples. Sometimes I find using specific examples makes it easier for us to understand the linkages between all of that.

What would you say are the top considerations to make the capstone successful?

Ms. Michelle Boudreau: I would answer that question by playing back to you some of what's in the "What We Heard" report and what researchers themselves have told us. My colleague Nipun mentioned a few of them in his opening remarks. Certainly, independent research should be merit-based; there should still be room for investigator-led research; there should continue to be a focus on equity-deserving groups and health equity, and there should be the continued importance of indigenous health and indigenous issues. Look at addressing the disparities that exist.

Finally, here are a couple of things to close on that: Make sure the link between CIHR, the health portfolio, health partners and the Minister of Health remains critical, and ensure that some of what's currently in the CIHR Act remains in some of the governance. In other words, the successes CIHR has brought will continue to be critical as we move forward with the capstone.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: Dr. Vats, you work with investments in post-secondary research, among other things. What impact do you see capstone having on that process? What would be the top considerations, in your opinion?

Dr. Nipun Vats: Well, I think the starting point is to say that you want to ensure that the basic research enterprise isn't compromised through the creation of capstone, because there's still a need for the ideas and talent that are developed through that kind of core research funding enterprise.

With respect to some of the activities of capstone, some of them may just be about better coordinating activities that are already under way within the councils and, I should say, beyond the councils. It's important to connect. We have a very broad research ecosystem. Can we pull that community together more effectively when we're talking about international or mission-oriented work?

I think there would also need to be—and this is something that would follow, so it wouldn't be a day one thing—more thinking about how you can better engage the consumers of research in how you define things like mission-oriented research: talking more actively with industry, for example, about how you can meet their needs in the research enterprise and talking more with community groups when it comes to issues that are research-related and are going to impact communities directly, and having that be the way that you shape the larger-scale initiatives that would come forward through the capstone. I think that's a really important part of constructing something that's going to have real impact.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: Where are we now with developing the governance structure? Or is this part of what we're doing with some of these studies? I'm not clear on that.

• (1615)

Dr. Nipun Vats: The two ministers asked the presidents of the three councils to consult this summer. As part of that consultation, as you know, there was a kind of framework document that laid out

the kinds of high-level parameters of what the organization would look like.

It talked about many of the things that I spoke to in my opening remarks, but it also is asking for that input. We talked about having a board. What should that board look like? We talked about having a CEO. What kinds of characteristics should that CEO have? This—

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: It's a work in progress.

Dr. Nipun Vats: It's a work in progress, and—

The Chair: That's all the time we have.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: Thank you.

That's very helpful. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will turn to MP Blanchette-Joncas for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses with us today.

Dr. Vats, in October 2022, the federal government formed the advisory panel on the federal research support system. A few months later, in March 2023, a report was tabled. Among other things, it suggested that an umbrella research funding organization be established. A year and three months later, in June 2024, the government asked for public consultations.

Can you explain to us what happened between the tabling of the report in March 2023 and the public call to consult those in Canada's science ecosystem in June 2024?

Dr. Nipun Vats: Thank you for the question.

I'm not perfectly bilingual, so if I may, I will answer in English.

[*English*]

What I would say is that the Bouchard report identified the issues and also laid out a proposed structure for responding to that. There's a fair bit of work internally to determine how we could move forward with that.

There was informal consultation with a range of organizations and groups to better understand the implications. You'll note that the proposed structure that came out in the consultation document from ministers in 2023 was not exactly the same as what was put out by Monsieur Bouchard and his colleagues.

There's a bit of work to identify how to realize the objectives that were laid out by the Bouchard panel in a way that we felt would be more effective. The purpose of that next consultation is to provide more specificity on how the government would intend to respond, and then seek the feedback of the community. There are two elements of input. One is broad community input to an expert panel, and the next is the government proposing a model, then seeking their feedback and explaining why they didn't do exactly the same as what was recommended by the panel.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Dr. Vats.

On June 17, 2024, you formally asked people in the science ecosystem to comment on the establishment of the new umbrella organization. You set a staggering deadline of 30 days for conducting these consultations.

On the one hand, your department took a year and three months to decide to request public consultations, and on the other, you gave people in the science ecosystem 30 days to comment on the matter.

Would you agree that establishing this umbrella research funding organization is one of the biggest changes in the organizational structure that you've seen in the five years you've been in this position?

[*English*]

Dr. Nipun Vats: Yes, it is a pretty significant change, and I agree it would have benefited from having a longer period of engagement. I don't think there's any question that we want to hear as many voices as possible. In the interim period between the Bouchard report and the request to the councils, there was a fair bit of dialogue at the ministerial level, with officials to try to understand the community's responses to Bouchard. Then, having put out a proposed model, it was a validation to say whether this model actually makes sense.

The time constraint.... I think we got almost 120 responses in that period of time, so it wasn't a small consultation.

I may also add that—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Dr. Vats. That's enough for me.

You received 118 responses in 30 days. What strikes me is that you spent more time on four other consultations, including the one planned for establishing the umbrella organization, than you did on the one to gather comments from people in the science ecosystem.

I'd like you to explain to me how the Government of Canada spent three months on consultations to expand wireless satellite services, and even extended it for one month, and yet a consultation on one of the department's biggest structural changes lasted 30 days. Do you think that time frame is really sufficient?

Why do some public consultations last 30 days, while others take 60 or 90 days?

Consultation with people in the science ecosystem began in the middle of summer. As you must know, universities, CEGEPs and

colleges are closed during the summer. Therefore, some people were unable to express their opinion.

Do you think it's responsible behaviour on the part of a government that's about to make such a massive change to not care if the people who are supposed to take part in consultations are able to do so?

Do you believe that a 30-day consultation process is really enough to provide an accurate picture of the science ecosystem?

• (1620)

[*English*]

Dr. Nipun Vats: The period of consultation, as I said, could have been longer, but you have to distinguish the nature of the feedback you're going to get for different types of consultation. When you talk about wireless, you're talking about something where there's a direct, immediate impact on citizens. You want to make sure you're getting the voices of individual citizens on what that's going to mean for them and their pocketbooks.

When you're talking about a structural change to these organizations, what you're really looking for.... Of course, individual researchers may have views, but those views are usually input through organizations and through institutions that have a greater capacity to provide feedback on a shorter time frame, so I think you're getting feedback from a community that's much better organized to be able to provide that input in a shorter period of time.

I don't think that we lost.... I'm sure we lost some voices—it'll always happen—but I don't think it's comparable. Given the importance of the issue, the fact that we launched it in June didn't seem to cause an issue in terms of getting feedback. I mean, if it's important enough, academics will respond.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: That's your opinion, Dr. Vats, and I respect it. However, I can confirm to you that I received hundreds of emails from people who were unhappy that they were unable to participate in the consultations. They were not happy with the process.

Again, 30 days is not a lot of time to hold consultations on such a significant change. Why did the other consultations take longer?

Nevertheless, I'm grateful to you for being open and for recognizing that you may have missed the opportunity to hear from some people during these consultations.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now turn to MP Cannings for six minutes, please.

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Thank you.

Thank you both for being with us today.

I also want to welcome the Liber Ero fellows. They're in the middle of the back over there. These are Canada's finest conservation scientists, post-doctoral fellows who are here in Ottawa to see how policy is made and things like that, so I wanted to welcome them. I also see other student groups here as well. This is what we're here for: to talk about the future of science in Canada, so we are hopefully doing a good job for them.

I have so many questions. I'm going to start off with Mr. Vats.

Some of the concerns I've read about in the "what we heard" documents and other briefs are concerns about, in this period of change, what that will look like. They don't want things to go sideways. There's always the consideration of existing budgets.

First of all, let's talk about that. Will the existing budgets for the tri-councils remain intact, and will anything new that capstone might want to fund be on top of that? How is that going to work?

Dr. Nipun Vats: I think a starting principle is that we're not looking to take from the councils in any significant way to support the implementation of the capstone. It's still to be determined, because we're still in the process of working it through. I can't say that it will be dollar for dollar preserved, but it's not as though the intention is to take large amounts of money out of the councils or to reallocate money across the councils as part of this exercise.

It's acknowledged that if you want to do this well, you have to do it carefully. There may be some investments needed, but we want to do that in a way that doesn't compromise either the operations of the programs of the councils or their funding envelopes.

Mr. Richard Cannings: I guess this is another major high-elevation question. This capstone idea came about because we wanted more collaboration across disciplines. How will that actually work? We have three now. For instance, from the viewpoint of an individual researcher, how will that change their opportunities?

Just walk me through how this will make things better. What do we see elsewhere in the world in terms of other things that we're trying to emulate? How will this improve all that?

• (1625)

Dr. Nipun Vats: There's been a range of these kinds of initiatives going on internationally. In some cases, they've actually collapsed structures down. In other cases, they've created a structure similar to ours. Fonds de recherche du Québec has something similar, as does UK Research and Innovation. They have moved in this way.

There will be a number of changes over time. I would just want to start by saying that. I don't expect programs to shift overnight. I think what we need to do is actually talk to the researchers and talk to the consumers of that research and our international partners to help define how programs need to evolve to meet these needs.

I can give you some examples of things that even from the recent past you could have addressed more effectively with this approach. Take the example of research during the pandemic and how it could have.... It did support, obviously. It was all science- and research-based in terms of the kinds of interventions that were made. But if you're thinking about the kinds of problems we're trying to deal with in developing new vaccines and therapeutics in terms of public health actions, you're trying to bring together expertise primarily

from the health science community. If you want to talk about how you can actually get community engagement to protect the public, you need social sciences and humanities. If you want to actually develop the capacities that you need to generate vaccines and therapeutics, you need engineers. You need people who are actually more in the natural sciences to bring that together.

There was no natural vehicle for doing that. In fact, we created a layer of new programs with new governance to be able to bring the councils together and CFI to have an integrated approach to that. That program is called the Canadian biomanufacturing research fund and the associated infrastructure fund. That's under way, but it took quite a while to actually spin it up. It's a very heavy kind of structure for responding to these kinds of issues.

Now, that's an extreme example, but you could see other ways where there are issues that you want to deal with as a country, where there's a societal question or there's a science question—

Mr. Richard Cannings: Can I just jump in here and ask who picks those issues? We talk about mission-driven. Who chooses the missions? Who sets those priorities? Is it the government? Is it the researchers? If we're in the pandemic, would a bunch of researchers get together and create a mission?

Dr. Nipun Vats: I think there will be different types of missions. Some will be more akin to moon shots, for example. You can see a technological objective that you're trying to achieve. These are the kinds of initiatives that DARPA does in the U.S., for example, where you achieve a certain milestone. Those may be defined through government strategies and through this new council of science and innovation, which we're also standing up to provide expert advice on this.

There may be others where you're bringing communities together to identify how to move forward. In broad issues like poverty or housing, there could actually be some technological solutions that you'd want to engage the community on and the experts on to be able to define how we're going to incentivize the right kinds of research directions.

The Chair: That's our time. Thank you.

We'll now start our second round of questions. This will be our five-minute round.

We'll start with MP Lobb.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you very much for coming here today, Mr. Vats.

With regard to the people who are doing the research, is it all the same ones who get the same amount of money, or roughly this money, every year? I've looked at some of the results, and it looks like several researchers get money every year. Is that the case, roughly speaking?

Dr. Nipun Vats: I think the agency presidents may be able to speak to this better, but I think it does vary by agency. If you take a natural science or engineering researcher, you'll see that their core funding is through a program called the discovery grants program. The discovery grants program is typically on a five-year cycle. The amounts don't change; they're set for the five-year period. Someone reapplies. Typically, their money might go up somewhat or go down, depending on their research performance, and that provides core funding that they can rely on to enable their students to pursue their research.

The other things are layered on top. There are more targeted programs, of varying scales and different objectives, that can change how much a researcher gets from year to year.

• (1630)

Mr. Ben Lobb: The other thing we heard a lot in the opening up of this study and throughout this study is that we need everybody to work together. Is that the position of the department, that nobody's working together? I go through all the results of the studies, and everybody's working together from all over the world. However, every time we have somebody coming in here, they're saying that we have to get these guys working together. What is the case? Are we in the Stone Age here, or do we actually have researchers...? Are we to believe that the researchers are working together or not working together?

Dr. Nipun Vats: I think researchers are very.... They have a lot of ingenuity, and they do collaborate if they can. That is core to advancing knowledge. It's a question of whether it's knowledge in the purpose of a larger goal or not. There may be some initiatives that you want to move forward on that require a greater collective action than individual researchers can achieve on their own.

If I may, one other thing that you can also have is this: There are some researchers who don't fit nicely into a discipline. They're actually people who will ask, "Am I a health researcher, a natural science researcher or a social science researcher?" Those distinctions don't necessarily matter as much as the quality of the research.

Mr. Ben Lobb: We are setting up the capstone for the one researcher who doesn't know what slot he fits in.

I look at it, and I see that, okay, a lot of these people have been getting money for 20 years. It's different, but basically they've been getting it. Then, they're also working around the world with different researchers, and they're going to the same conferences, so they're already doing it. Is this a failure of bureaucracy, or is this some make-believe thing? I think the problems are right in front of your face, and you don't need to create another layer of bureaucracy by chance. We just have to do this in a better system, possibly.

I have one last question before my time's over. I want to get your thoughts because you see on the American news and on the Canadian news some of these studies that are getting approved. They're studies in other parts of the world. There's one here called "Population Diversity and Economic Development in...Mexico". It's in some little place in Mexico. Why is a Canadian taxpayer paying for that? Of what value...? I'm sure there's value to the person in Mexico, but of what value is that? There's a list, a long list. I think people in parts of our communities are asking why we are funding these.

The health ones are a different story. I think there are great arguments to be made for the chances on those, but with regard to one like that, what is it? Where's the value you're asking people to make on those?

Dr. Nipun Vats: The starting point is that the system is geared towards funding the best research projects. From my perspective, I think it's a bit dangerous to try to narrow the scope of these things, because you don't necessarily know what the outcomes and the benefits to society would be.

In the case of a study on communities in other countries—

Mr. Ben Lobb: Here's another one, just while we're talking. It's studying Ukraine's Maidan Museum. I'm sure there's value somewhere, but why does a Canadian taxpayer have to pay for that? Why can't the Ukrainian government pay for it, or why can't some wealthy Ukrainian person living in France pay for it? Why does some hard-working guy who is working overtime and can't see his kids have to pay for that?

Dr. Nipun Vats: I can't speak to specific projects, but the examples you've given are about a better understanding of the situation in other countries.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Can I ask a question though, in all sincerity? Who do we have to get here who can answer that question? We've asked this question, and they say, "Well, we have to trust this; we have to trust that. I wouldn't question this councillor or that one."

Who has to come here to say that this is great value? A Ukrainian museum and Mexican migration patterns and porcupines.... Who do we have to get in here to tell us that it's good value?

Dr. Nipun Vats: I mean—

Mr. Ben Lobb: Just give me a name. I'd take one.

Dr. Nipun Vats: This is just a suggestion, but maybe you talk to the researchers. They would be the ones who are best positioned to explain the impacts of their research.

The Chair: Thank you, I appreciate that.

We'll now turn to MP Chen for five minutes, please.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

I also want to acknowledge the folks in the room, the post-docs and the researchers who are here in the committee room. I'm thankful for their commitment to research and knowledge production, especially in this age of information and the increasing amount of misinformation and disinformation in the world. To have peer-reviewed studies and research in the spirit of knowledge production is truly important.

I want to start off with a question for Mr. Vats.

Last month we had Chad Gaffield here. He's the CEO of the U15 group of Canadian research universities. He testified to this committee that, "The new capstone organization must continue to maintain the political independence of funding decisions. This core commitment to academic freedom and the free pursuit of knowledge are foundational principles of Canada's research system and are central components of its success."

In your opinion, how can the structure of a capstone organization balance the support for investigator-driven research and mission-driven research?

• (1635)

Dr. Nipun Vats: As we were just discussing, it's important that investigators, if they have ideas thought to meet a bar of excellence, have the freedom to pursue those ideas. The knowledge is generated. The training of young researchers, not just for the research community but for society as a whole, is a really big benefit of that. That's always done through a peer-review process to ensure that you have the highest standard of research quality.

When it comes to mission-oriented research, it may be that, as we were discussing, there are different ways to identify the priorities and what you're trying to focus on as a target. If you want to get the best quality of research in support of those targets, you still need an assessment of the excellence of that research. In the case of something that's more mission-oriented, you could see it being in two parts: What we are shooting at—what our target is in terms of what we're trying to achieve—and then how we ensure that we get the best quality of research that will support that goal.

That latter part is something where you want to have an independent review of excellence to make sure that the research can deliver. That's how you can do both with the same model.

Mr. Shaun Chen: The current system of the granting agencies allows them to really home in and focus on the unique needs of their respective research communities. How should this new organization balance central oversight and maintain the autonomy of those respective communities?

Dr. Nipun Vats: The model that's being proposed is one where you wouldn't lose the individual domain-specific councils for that very reason, because there is an expertise, a knowledge and a community that can foster knowledge in those domain areas. That would be preserved in the structure, but that structure would also be tied to the goals of the organization as a whole.

The question that you would then get is how we can better leverage, for example, the health research community to address this broader objective, as in the case of the pandemic, or how you can engage social scientists to do so. It draws on that expertise with an accountability and a mandate to bring them together around these larger challenges that we're trying to address.

Mr. Shaun Chen: I'll turn over to Ms. Boudreau and ask about health research, because your focus has been, for over 20 years in government, on pharmacare and in the areas of mental health and substance abuse.

You mentioned earlier in your testimony focusing on equity-seeking groups, Black and racialized people, the disability community, and LGBTQ and gender-diverse as well as indigenous people.

I believe that there's an understanding that health research requires us to look at the different health outcomes of diverse groups to ensure health equity. In terms of the need to focus and the lens you bring within health research, how can that be maintained or perhaps even strengthened with the creation of the new capstone organization?

Ms. Michelle Boudreau: I would reply to that with the two words that you used, "maintained" and "strengthened". The importance there is maintaining that link of CIHR to the health portfolio and the Minister of Health, and then also ensuring that the links of CIHR with other important health partners across the ecosystem are also strengthened. It's that opportunity, those links with health partners, universities and other academics and, also, even just going in to the communities as well and ensuring that those are maintained.

• (1640)

The Chair: That's well over our time. Thank you.

Now we turn to MP Blanchette-Joncas for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Vats, how do you think the new research funding framework organization will make it possible to promote French and scientific research in French, specifically?

[*English*]

Dr. Nipun Vats: I don't have specific mechanisms in mind. I mean, the councils, as you know, are making an effort in this regard now. They'll be here for the second hour.

I think what is really important is that we highlight this as an objective of the organization explicitly, because once you have a clear mandate to promote the use of French in research, then it becomes the accountability of the organization as a whole to achieve that. In terms of the specific modalities, I don't have specific recommendations on that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Mr. Vats, you talk about a clear mandate. However, in October 2024, just over a month ago, the federal government announced the creation of the external advisory group on the creation and dissemination of scientific information in French. That group is managed solely by Canadian Heritage. Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada was excluded from management.

Can you explain to me why the department wasn't included in the management of this new initiative?

[English]

Dr. Nipun Vats: My group is actually engaged in that effort. It's being led out of Heritage, but it is something that we are actually drawing on as well and are participating in. I know our ministers' offices have discussed this as well. It is being led by Canadian Heritage, but it's not uniquely a Canadian Heritage initiative.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Let me get this straight. In public communications, there's only mention of Canadian Heritage and the recently tabled action plan on official languages. There's no mention of your department anywhere.

When we talk about disseminating, promoting and creating science in French, how can we forget to mention your department's participation?

What is your role on this new advisory group?

[English]

Dr. Nipun Vats: My team's participating in the working group that's supporting that consultative process, and we intend to draw on the insights from that.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Will this new science advisory group also be part of the new umbrella organization?

[English]

Dr. Nipun Vats: It's not a standing committee. It's a consultative committee that may not have a life beyond it. I could see mechanisms like that being drawn upon to make sure that is integrated in the new organization, but that's still to be established.

The Chair: Thank you. You were right on the button there.

MP Cannings, you have the floor for the last two and a half minutes for this panel.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you again.

I'm just going to try to pick up where I left off, I think, about getting an idea of the roles, for instance, of the governing board of this new capstone body. You mentioned the advisory council on science and innovation, another new body. I'm wondering whether you could explain for us what the difference is there and what the advisory council will be doing. Will it have some role in saying, "Hey, we should be putting more focus on AI, quantum or climate adaptation," and will those then become some of the missions in this mission-driven structure? I'm curious and, maybe, a bit concerned about how those missions might be drawn up and put forward.

Dr. Nipun Vats: The council on science and innovation is meant to provide that higher level of strategic direction for the science enterprise as a whole. It's important to remember, as this committee knows, that there are a large number of organizations, beyond the councils and even this more integrated structure, that are involved in science and supporting that in terms of knowledge generation as well as the downstream impacts of science. The idea with a council like that is it would draw on the insights of leaders in industry, academia and society to set some of those broad directions. Those would then cascade down not only to the council, to the new capstone, but also to other organizations that receive government fund-

ing, or even that don't, to give a bit more of a sense of direction in terms of where the country, as informed by these experts, seizes the opportunities and challenges that we need to be addressing.

This is still to be established as the council is stood up, but yes, it could be priorities on the basis of some really strong input from knowledgeable people across Canadian society and maybe internationally as well. It could also be more directionally around things like how we collaborate better internationally or how we better support talent in this country. There could be other kinds of thematics beyond just research priorities that come off that.

• (1645)

Mr. Richard Cannings: If we had a new pandemic, say, and we wanted scientists to gather together and come up with direction and ideas and research, how would that flow through capstone into the research community?

Dr. Nipun Vats: If you had a health emergency, I think you need to ensure there's still a connection between the Minister of Health and the research community. For those kinds of special purposes, I think you'd want to make sure that you have the agility and the connection that you need to be able to mobilize research in a way that wouldn't take as long as a deliberative process.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Do you mean there would be other sources of funding flowing in?

Dr. Nipun Vats: There could be. I think the important thing is that some of these urgent priorities for the country may be defined by governments as the needs arise, and you need to have a mechanism for doing that as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you to both of our witnesses, Nipun Vats and Michelle Boudreau, for their testimony today and participating in the committee's study.

If you have any questions or anything further to add, you may submit that through the clerk.

We're now going to suspend briefly to allow the witnesses to leave, and we'll prepare for our second panel.

• (1645)

(Pause)

• (1650)

The Chair: We're back.

It is now my pleasure to welcome, from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Dr. Tammy Clifford, acting president. From National Research Council Canada, we have Ms. Maria Aubrey, vice-president, business and professional services, by video conference. From the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, we have Dr. Alejandro Adem, president. From the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, we have Dr. Ted Hewitt, president, and Normand Labrie, vice-president and chair of the SSHRC board.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions.

Dr. Adem, I invite you to make an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Dr. Alejandro Adem (President, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council): Good afternoon, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

As president of the largest government funder of natural sciences and engineering research in Canada, and as the current chair of the Canada research coordinating committee, I am pleased to provide remarks concerning the capstone.

The CRCC is pleased to have the opportunity to engage the research community on the government's vision for this new organization.

[Translation]

Over one month, we held numerous engagement sessions and received 118 written submissions. Respondents voiced clear and consistent themes. These are captured in our report to the ministers, published and shared with you on October 16.

[English]

First and foremost, the community called for a continued commitment to investigator-led, fundamental research, which is where the vast majority of major breakthroughs and discoveries occur. They also articulated core values and essential strengths in the current system on which to build the new organization: academic freedom and peer review; equity, diversity and inclusion in research; a commitment to research training and indigenous research priorities; and strong agency leadership with dedicated funding and reliable program delivery. Lastly, they called for sustained community engagement in the design of the new organization and as part of its culture going forward.

During the engagement process, we met with members of the NSERC council and its standing committees, as well as NSERC leaders, a network of over 70 institutional representatives from universities across Canada.

• (1655)

[Translation]

Consistent with the information I just highlighted, there was a focus on, again, the importance of fundamental research; how mission-driven research will be framed; the alignment of research and research infrastructure; the importance of guiding values and principles; and preserving disciplinary funding envelopes.

[English]

They also voiced a particular interest in the new organization's relationships with industry. Through our grants, scholarships and fellowship programs, NSERC is committed to developing talent, generating discoveries and supporting innovation in pursuit of economic and social outcomes for Canadians.

Let me leave you with a few facts about NSERC.

Each year, NSERC funds over 11,000 researchers and provides direct support to more than 6,000 students and post-docs. These investments have impact. Since 2015, three researchers based in Canada have won Nobel Prizes in physics, one of the main disciplines supported by NSERC. More importantly, NSERC invested in all three, including Dr. Geoffrey Hinton, the most recent Nobel winner.

When NSERC began supporting his work in the early 1990s through its discovery program, which is investigator-led, the concept of artificial neural networks was purely theoretical. In fact, it can take decades to build the foundations of new, high-impact research areas such as AI. NSERC's early investments in AI research supported not only Geoff Hinton but also other leaders in the field, such as Yoshua Bengio. In addition to decades of research, they have trained whole generations of AI experts. Consequently, Canada's AI research ecosystem has grown by leaps and bounds.

[Translation]

NSERC funding at universities and colleges has supported the development of key world-class technologies in partnership with the private sector in areas such as AI, but also quantum science, biomedical engineering, clean energy, semi-conductors, electric vehicles and agriculture, to name a few.

NSERC's investments have real-life, real-time impacts on Canadian society.

[English]

As another example, this year, NSERC awarded Mehdi Sheikhzadeh, a chemical engineer and research administrator at Lambton College, with a prize recognizing partnerships. Origin Materials partnered with Sheikhzadeh and his team to optimize a pilot plant where they extract carbon from non-food biomass. The partnership was a success, and Origin opened a \$140-million facility in Sarnia that employs 50 people to produce recyclable, carbon-negative, plant-based plastic bottles.

We can also talk about the remarkable achievements of Professor Jeff Dahn, a lithium-ion battery pioneer at Dalhousie University.

[Translation]

This type of partnership with industry exemplifies our commitment to local innovation and supporting research that moves quickly to meet the needs of our partners.

[English]

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have, and I would be happy to share with you more examples of the research NSERC is funding, which is producing direct and tangible results for Canada and Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Adem.

Now, Dr. Hewitt, the floor is yours for an opening statement of up to five minutes.

[Translation]

Dr. Ted Hewitt (President, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the committee members for inviting me to appear before the committee.

I'm pleased to be here as president of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, or SSHRC for short, accompanied by the chair of our governing council and rector of the Université de l'Ontario français, Dr. Normand Labrie.

As you are no doubt aware, SSHRC is the federal research funding agency that for the past half-century has supported research and research training in the social sciences and humanities at Canadian post-secondary institutions and other eligible research organizations.

[English]

This research expands knowledge and builds understanding of people and societies. Our community, made up of 70,000 post-secondary-based researchers, graduate students and post-doctoral researchers, examines the social, cultural, technological, environmental, economic and ethical dimensions of our past, present and future. Their insights help explore our own humanity, better inform policy and decision-making, and drive innovation in Canada and beyond.

In 2023 alone, we invested some \$44 million in research addressing environmental and climate change issues, more than \$34 million to research business and economic issues, \$18 million to examine AI and cybersecurity, and over \$14 million to help address the housing and homelessness crisis. Approximately 10% of our funding supports research undertaken by and with Canada's indigenous peoples.

All of these investments are guided by decision-making led by expert review that is conducted at international standards and respected worldwide.

• (1700)

[Translation]

At SSHRC, we also take great pride in our solid track record administering tri-agency programs, including the well-known Canada

research chairs program, the new frontiers in research fund, and the Canada biomedical research fund, among several others. Our leading role in designing and implementing these programs has ensured all disciplines—including health, natural sciences and engineering, and the social sciences and humanities—are supported and contributing to Canada's research enterprise.

As the committee is aware, the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry and the Minister of Health mandated the three federal research granting agencies to engage with members of Canada's broad research community to gather perspectives on the proposed capstone research funding organization and to report back their findings within a month. The agencies published a "What We Heard" report in mid-October.

[English]

Overall, stakeholders welcomed the opportunity to provide input on the proposed capstone organization and expressed an expectation in continuing to engage in the development process as it moves forward.

What we heard from our community was that in shaping a new vision and structure, it is of critical importance that the value of social sciences and humanities research be recognized as a fundamental ingredient and leveraged to drive true interdisciplinary and mission-driven research.

Just some of the unique elements SSHRC and our community bring in this respect include a focus on human thought and behaviour that drive innovation and help society understand change and adapt to change; unique methodologies and approaches for conducting interdisciplinary research; expertise in engaging communities in research, including first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, as well as industry and civil society; and experience in supporting a robust research enterprise in French.

[Translation]

As an organization, SSHRC welcomes the opportunities presented by the proposed capstone with respect to increasing harmonization of key programs and initiatives, breaking down silos, and facilitating a more coordinated approach to tackling the challenges that Canadians face.

At the same time, we very much want to ensure that the contributions that SSHRC has made in the past to innovative programming in support of partnerships within and beyond government, interdisciplinarity, knowledge mobilization, equity and inclusion, support for smaller institutions, indigenous research, French language research and international collaboration are firmly recognized and embedded within a much larger, consolidated corporate and financial entity of which SSHRC would form only a very limited part.

[English]

In the latter regard, we also strongly urge due consideration of the concerns brought forward to the committee by the tri-council indigenous leadership circle.

As we look to the future of Canada's federal research ecosystem, the committee's engagement in matters related to the government's research modernization efforts is most welcome. As an organization serving Canada's largest community of academics and researchers, SSHRC is committed to this process, and specifically to helping ensure that the social sciences and humanities research is well positioned to contribute to the renewed federal research support system and the outcomes we are all looking for it to produce in terms of enhanced economic and social well-being for Canadians.

Both Dr. Labrie and I thank you for your attention and look forward to your questions and comments.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Hewitt.

Now I will give the floor to Dr. Clifford.

I invite you to make an opening statement of five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Tammy Clifford (Acting President, Canadian Institutes of Health Research): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for inviting me to participate in the committee's important work on the capstone.

[*English*]

I would like to open my remarks by informing your committee that on January 2, 2025, CIHR will welcome its new permanent president, Dr. Paul Hébert, a clinician scientist and health leader with extensive experience within Canada's health research ecosystem. Dr. Hébert is eager to start his new role and work with our partners to make the new capstone organization a success for all Canadians.

Madam Chair, over the last few months, CIHR has had the privilege of engaging closely with its federal partners, including our tri-council colleagues, Health Canada and ISED, to articulate the foundational elements of the new capstone organization, including those that will create opportunities for researchers to work on international, mission-driven and interdisciplinary research. In addition, CIHR has also consulted with partners spanning Canada's health research community. They have contributed invaluable feedback and insight to inform the creation of this new capstone organization.

Overall, the community expressed optimism that a capstone organization will enhance coordination of initiatives among the granting councils, invest in critical areas of importance to the country and provide a unified approach to international opportunities for Canadian researchers. The community also offered key considerations, values and guiding principles upon which the modernization should take place, for example, ensuring academic freedom, research excellence, peer review and domain-specific research.

Another opportunity identified through our recent engagements has been to leverage the extensive experience and expertise of CIHR and of Canada's diverse health research community. In particular, the health community was pleased to learn that CIHR's institute model would be preserved within the new capstone organization. For almost 25 years, CIHR's 13 scientific institutes, which are based at universities and health institutions across the country,

have been leaders in their domain. They have excelled in delivering strategic research in response to the vast and ever-changing needs of Canadians.

Our institutes also collaborate among themselves and with domestic and international partners in complex health areas that require an interdisciplinary approach, such as indigenous health and non-communicable diseases.

Within capstone, the CIHR institutes will be poised to contribute their expertise and leverage their networks in exciting new ways. The health research community, and our health partners at large, have also spoken about the importance of maintaining CIHR's strong and direct linkages to the health portfolio, as was noted in the budget 2024 announcement. This ongoing interaction, as you heard from my colleague, Ms. Boudreau, earlier on, will no doubt ensure that health research continues to improve the health of Canadians into the future. This is a key consideration, particularly in light of the complex challenges facing Canadians, the need to be prepared to address health emergencies, and the need for the translation of research into actionable health solutions.

CIHR's continued collaboration with health portfolio partners enables it to rapidly mobilize strategic research across many priorities in support of federal initiatives, as well as to generate evidence to inform policy and decision-making. This includes, for example, close collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada on the pan-Canadian action plan on antimicrobial resistance and also in support of the research goals of Canada's national dementia research strategy.

We are pleased that the new capstone organization will preserve these vital linkages so that research continues to drive health system innovation and efficiency, and, of course, better health for all Canadians.

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

In closing, I would add that the Canadian Institutes of Health Research remain committed to working with our federal partners and the research community to set up a new organization that builds on our strengths and provides the necessary guidance so that we can continue to meet the complex challenges that are arising.

I look forward to your questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Clifford.

Now, for the final opening statement, we're going to turn to Ms. Aubrey.

The floor is yours for five minutes.

Ms. Maria Aubrey (Vice-President of Business and Professional Services, National Research Council of Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today on behalf of the National Research Council of Canada as part of this committee's study of the new capstone research funding organization announced in budget 2024.

• (1710)

[Translation]

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that NRC's Canada-wide activities take place on unceded, shared, current and traditional territories of first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

We recognize the privilege we have been given to undertake research and fuel innovation on these lands, and we honour the peoples who came before us.

[English]

As Canada's largest federal research organization, the NRC advances scientific knowledge, supports business innovation and provides science-based policy solutions. With facilities and collaborations nationwide, the NRC unites scientists, industry, academia and global partners around Canada's challenges and opportunities.

The NRC's current strategic priorities, reflected in our recently released strategic plan, are to advance research and innovation with the greatest impact to Canada and Canadians, focused on climate change and sustainability, health and biomanufacturing, digital and quantum technologies and supporting foundational research.

In addition to conducting research, for more than 75 years the NRC has provided key support to innovative Canadians' small and medium-sized businesses through the NRC industrial research assistance program, or IRAP, to develop innovations that drive the growth of these businesses and Canada's economy.

As announced in budget 2024, a new capstone research funding organization will bring greater coordination and stronger connections among the tri-councils and the researchers they support. While it is not planned for the NRC to be formally part of this new organization, we have long-standing collaborations with the tri-councils through institutions like the Canada research coordinating committee, and we will work with the new organization to maximize the impact of research funding.

As Minister Champagne and Minister Holland indicated in their letter to my tri-agency colleagues on June 17, 2024, the new capstone organization will include key objectives such as supporting internally collaborative, interdisciplinary and mission-driven research.

[Translation]

At the NRC, our mission-driven Défi programs will dovetail with that objective. The programs bring NRC research centres together with industry, universities and international partners to focus efforts in key priority areas.

We are committed, along with our partners and contributors, to advancing high-risk, high-reward research on Canadian priorities.

[English]

We look forward to continuing our long-standing partnership with our tri-council partners, NSERC, SSHRC and CIHR, through the new capstone agency, to advance scientific knowledge, innovation and research excellence across disciplines in Canada.

Madam Chair, thank you once again for the invitation to appear today. I look forward to answering your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Aubrey.

I'd like to welcome MP Genuis to our committee today. I understand you will be taking the first round for six minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

I am very concerned about the rising problem of anti-Semitism on university campuses. I do want to focus in this round on some of the potential linkages between that and questions on research funding.

Just to put the problem in perspective, first of all, it's been reported that there were over 5,700 anti-Semitic incidents in Canada in 2023, and it is deeply troubling to see a substantial number of those incidents happening on university campuses, with very anti-Semitic statements made by certain groups, for example, as well as various incidents.

I wanted to ask, just in terms of research proposals, is it fair to say that you have a process whereby you would seek to screen out research proposals that promote racist or other discriminatory ideas or narratives? Would that apply to anti-Semitism as well?

Maybe Dr. Hewitt is a logical place to go to with this.

• (1715)

Dr. Ted Hewitt: The short answer is yes. I mean, we stand firmly against research that would be considered anti-Semitic or discriminatory in any way. All of our research is reviewed through panels that involve experts who read materials, provide input and ultimately decide which projects will be recommended or not recommended.

Beyond that, once these projects are funded, we rely on institutions to monitor the process of projects and how they're implemented locally through ethics committees, through their own guidelines and through the laws of Canada and other rules and regulations as they exist there.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. Thank you.

Would you say you're confident that this process is screening out proposals that would promote anti-Semitic ideas or narratives?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: I would say at the point where we're reviewing projects, yes, as much as we're able to do that, that does occur, but as individuals undertake projects, or work in certain domains, or move towards certain areas of research or collaboration, then, of course, issues can occur. There are mechanisms for dealing with that, which I'm happy to tell you about as you move to your next question.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. We can come back to that.

I wanted to ask, in terms of what anti-Semitism is, do you use the IHRA's definition of anti-Semitism, or would you use a different definition?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: We do not screen at the level of the councils for particular types of discrimination or otherwise. We're looking to see whether, in the view of peer review, those exist. I would say that for other screening or other activities that would be taken at the level of institutions, you'd have to ask them exactly what constitutes that in their view, or how they apply the rules within their local institutions.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. I am struggling a bit to understand your answer, then, because on the one hand you're saying that you do try to screen out anti-Semitic or other racist content, but on the other hand, you don't have a specific definition of anti-Semitism. How do you screen out anti-Semitic content without having a definition that you're using for anti-Semitism?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: As I explained earlier, the screen that we use is peer review, expert review—people who work in the same area, people who have the expertise to provide their views, their oversight and their considered opinion on the worth of the research and whether or not it crosses those boundaries. Should it cross those boundaries and somehow find its way into the institution, then there is a whole other level of scrutiny that occurs at that institution and measures that can be taken, subject to the laws of Canada and local rules and regulations or otherwise, to deal with that.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. Essentially, then—I'm trying to be fair to you and not put words in your mouth—there is a screening based on discrimination, but that screen is based on what other people already working in the field say it is, not based on some particular identifiable definition.

That seems like a problem, because if you have existing building concerns of certain narratives being broadly accepted in certain environments, then you might see more tolerance for certain kinds of discrimination than you would see for other kinds of discrimination. In other words, it's not based on objective, definable criteria. It's just based on what other people happen to think.

Dr. Ted Hewitt: As an agency and as agencies, we follow the rules and guidelines of the Government of Canada—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: The Government of Canada has adopted the IHRA's definition. I have concerns about their implementation, but they have said they adopted it.

Dr. Ted Hewitt: We would follow the rules and the guidelines of the Government of Canada and apply those to the best of our ability,

but you're right: In the case of peer review, that review is undertaken by experts in the field, and they will have views and they will apply those views. That's how peer review works.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: You did say that you're applying Government of Canada policies. The Government of Canada says that it has adopted the IHRA's definition of anti-Semitism. Have they said to you that they want to see you use the IHRA's definition of anti-Semitism, or have they not?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: Not specifically, but generally speaking we are looking, in peer review, to make sure these things are caught. I'm saying also—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: It's important to know what that definition is, because B'nai Brith has sent a submission in which they identify specific examples, and they are concerned that there are aspects of the narratives promoted by these examples that are violating anti-Semitism...and they're using IHRA's definition. Someone else might say they're not, but the one we use, and that the government says it has adopted, is the IHRA's definition.

Dr. Ted Hewitt: There are mechanisms to review those projects to see if that is indeed the case, and they can be applied at the level of institutions that they should be applied—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Well, one mechanism might be for the government to be clear with you on what it means that it has adopted this definition, because it says it has adopted it, but it is just pretty evident in its funding and, again, evident today that it is not actually insisting on that definition being the one that's used.

• (1720)

The Chair: That's the time.

We're now going to turn to MP Jaczek for six minutes.

Hon. Helena Jaczek (Markham—Stouffville, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our witnesses today.

Dr. Hewitt, I'd like to start with you. As I understand it, you're the chair of the Canada research coordinating committee.

Dr. Ted Hewitt: I'm sorry, but that's incorrect. That's my colleague, Professor Adem.

Hon. Helena Jaczek: Okay, then we'll go to Dr. Adem.

Dr. Adem, you are the chair of the Canada research coordinating committee. It sounds very much like that committee was attempting to coordinate research. We are now looking at capstone, which is to provide the same coordination, we understand. Will capstone replace the Canada research coordinating committee? If so, is it going to add some value? If there has been some attempt at coordination, why do we now need this new agency? Could you just clarify that for me?

Dr. Alejandro Adem: Sure. I think we should see this as an evolution of the ecosystem. The Canada research coordinating committee was created to start this coordination more organically among the agencies. CFI is also a member, as is NRC, and the chief science adviser also sits on it.

It had some very specific goals to deliver on—early career researchers, EDI, indigenous research and talent, etc. Over the years, we have developed a suite of activities, which I think have really helped pull together activities among the different councils. Research security is an example of a theme that comes up a lot to the CRCC. We're working very hard all together to make sure this is moved forward.

There's also a program delivered under the supervision of the CRCC. It's called the new frontiers in research program, and it delivers multidisciplinary projects across the three councils on areas of compelling interest. It's like a pilot for what we want to move to, so then as we evolve to these larger-scale interdisciplinary activities, the big-scale international ones that our colleague, Dr. Vats, talked about—mission-driven, etc.—then I think what the government is proposing is to move to a next level of integration where we're not doing it informally under a committee but really as part of our job, and where there's a structure, where above it is the strategic committee informing on the strategies for Canada. Then we get very clear and crisp instructions to deliver in this interdisciplinary mode without, of course, debilitating the disciplinary verticals, which will continue to exist.

Hon. Helena Jaczek: You think there is a definite benefit to the capstone organization as has been proposed.

Dr. Alejandro Adem: I see great value. I'm a big enthusiast of it.

I'm a mathematician, so I like to work with examples. Look at the case of UKRI, UK Research and Innovation. That is a consolidation of multiple councils that continue to exist. There's also a nice study about what didn't go so well when they created that structure. You might want to look at that review. I've been to the U.K. and have spoken to their CEO, as well as the heads of their different councils, and right now I think it's working quite well.

Hon. Helena Jaczek: Now, we've also heard from Dr. Vats about the council on science and innovation. Again, not being really familiar with what is already on the ground, is this an organization that exists already, or is it to be created as well?

Dr. Alejandro Adem: We used to have something called STIC. It wasn't replaced, so I think this would be the new version of that. It would be people from all different walks of life—universities, colleges, community and industry, very importantly—and they would develop strategies for Canada. I think the chief science adviser would be the co-chair. I think they would be told to create a strategic plan.

We should not be developing strategy. We are deliverers, and we do this in the most efficient way possible.

I think that piece has been missing. In some sense, it might be the most important piece to inform the whole process.

Hon. Helena Jaczek: It struck me, as we were hearing about the National Research Council of Canada, that it performs, to a certain

extent, a function that sounds on the surface to be a little similar to this new council on science and innovation.

Ms. Aubrey, perhaps you could clarify for me some key differences, as you see them, between this new council or replacement council and the work of the National Research Council.

• (1725)

Ms. Maria Aubrey: The National Research Council, in its mandate, is to do research and develop technologies that can be put in the hands of those who can actually execute on them for the benefit of Canada and Canadians. Our mandate goes beyond research.

To do that, we need to make sure that we engage all of the capabilities of the ecosystem and provide a way of convening the best players, the best minds and so on to provide that research and that technology.

One of the things we did, starting in 2017, was create what's called the collaborative science, technology and innovation program, which basically facilitates not NRC trying to do everything and trying to bring more money into the NRC, but rather engaging others and funding them so that we can get the best possible, both in Canada and internationally, to provide solutions for Canada. That could be done at the early stage of research or at the later stage, where the technology research levels need to be closer to commercialization.

We are not really doing the same thing as the council. Rather, we're complementary. We engage with them and leverage—

The Chair: That's our time, Ms. Aubrey. Perhaps you can elaborate in another question.

We're now going to turn to MP Blanchette-Joncas for six minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses who are with us for the second hour of our study.

Mr. Labrie, you have had an impressive career, particularly as an expert on bilingualism, language policy and the humanities. You have highlighted issues that are crucial for the future of French in Canada. You have closely observed the dynamic between language and research throughout your career, both as part of your work on linguistic pluralism and as head of the Fonds de recherche du Québec.

Given your many years of experience and your commitment to the francophone community, how do you perceive the vitality of French in the scientific field today, and what specific measures do you suggest to strengthen its vitality, particularly through the new capstone organization?

Mr. Normand Labrie (Vice-President, Chair of the SSHRC Board, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council): Thank you very much for asking me this question and giving me the opportunity to address a subject that I find very important.

Indeed, Canada operates in two official languages, French and English, which are two international languages, and we have the opportunity to produce knowledge in both languages. Unfortunately, the proportion of knowledge produced in French is lower, due to the demographic ratio between French and English speakers, as well as the tendency of researchers in certain scientific fields to produce and publish in English. Examples include health and engineering.

This has an important impact, insofar as generative artificial intelligence today produces new knowledge on the basis of an existing corpus. If the existing corpus in French is smaller, we have less capacity to develop knowledge, even though we have a global role to play in these two international languages. We really need to think about this.

In the social sciences and humanities, more knowledge is produced in French, because researchers are connected to communities. For their research to have an impact, it needs to be disseminated in French. This is generally the case for French-speaking communities. In other areas, efforts must be made.

If broad priorities are to be established, on a global level, for the new framework organization for research funding, French should be an important part of them. This will have to be reflected in the appointment of members to the board, in the establishment of a standing committee, and in the development of concrete policies and measures within the organization to ensure the place of French, not only in the social sciences and humanities, but in the sciences as a whole in Canada.

• (1730)

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you.

Mr. Labrie, what we've heard, and what's in the report published on October 16, 2024 by the federal government following the public consultation on, among other things, the research funding framework organization, is that the predominance of English in scientific publications is detrimental to the visibility of French-language research. In parallel, in October 2024, Canadian Heritage launched an external advisory group on the creation and dissemination of scientific information in French, but it seems that this group is not permanent.

Do you think it would be relevant to integrate this group into the research funding umbrella organization in the future? Also, in your opinion, how can we facilitate scientific communication in French in the future research ecosystem?

Mr. Normand Labrie: Several players are involved in the research. There are the three current councils and the umbrella organization that is currently being developed. There are other organizations, as we've just seen. I'm thinking of the National Research Council and the Canada Foundation for Innovation, which supports research infrastructure projects. There are also a number of other governmental and paragonmental organizations involved in research.

In the umbrella organization, there has to be some kind of permanence, to monitor the presence of French in the sciences. As it's more global than just these three or four funding organizations, it could also be the federal government, through Canadian Heritage or

other departments. The government should also keep an eye on the priorities established for the production and dissemination of knowledge in French.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you very much.

Concretely, how do you see the fact of grouping, with the umbrella organization, the three granting councils under the same umbrella to try to improve the situation and encourage an increase in the number of scientific publications in French?

Mr. Normand Labrie: At SSHRC, there are programs on scientific journals, knowledge mobilization and ways of disseminating knowledge. I think programs like these should be maintained, and perhaps extended to all scientific fields as well.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you.

My next question is for Ted Hewitt.

Thank you for being here today, Mr. Hewitt.

Do you think the strategic science fund, which is currently administered by ISED, should be administered by the new capstone research funding organization?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: Which organization are you referring to?

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I'm talking about the strategic science fund.

Dr. Ted Hewitt: Oh, the strategic science fund. I'm not sure. I don't work with that, sir. I have no idea. That's not within our purview.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: All right. I see.

Dr. Ted Hewitt: I have no opinion on that.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Very well.

Do any of the granting council presidents want to answer that?

[*English*]

Dr. Alejandro Adem: It's above our pay grade. I'm sorry.

Voices: Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I'll continue with you, Mr. Hewitt.

We know that a lot more French research is happening in the social sciences and humanities.

How do you think the new capstone research funding organization could benefit and promote the development and spread of science in French?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: That is a very significant challenge. We will be actively participating in the new research funding organization's efforts to promote French research, using the same methods currently being used.

We are waiting for the organization to be created and established. After that, we will contribute to that effort.

[English]

The Chair: We will now turn to Mr. Cannings for six minutes, please.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you.

Thank you, again, for being here today.

I think I'll start with Dr. Adem.

It's well known that Canada invests less in research and development than almost any G7 country, I think, except Italy, in terms of a percentage of GDP. However, we produce, I would say, great science out of that. You could say that our scientists are very efficient, if you want to put it that way.

I'm just wondering how the capstone is going to help this. Will there be an uplift of funding for the sort of coordinating projects that the capstone does, or will it simply allow us to do better science?

I mean, you seem to be a fan of this. I'm still unclear in my mind as to exactly how the capstone will help the coordination role and the collaboration among scientists that we really need in many cases. I could give examples, but you know them all.

Help me out here. How will this increase our impact in the scientific world?

• (1735)

Dr. Alejandro Adem: Thank you for that question.

Indeed, Canada really punches above its weight. I like to say that it's not about the money you have, but what you do with it.

The point here is that science is a very dynamic enterprise. We have to modernize and keep up with the most modern trends, because there's a lot of competition out there. There are a lot of models and ways of doing science that we have to keep up with and that will benefit our researchers. I'll give you an example. "One health" is quoted a lot. To deal with health threats, you don't only look at humans. You have to look at animals, too. That is something that goes between CIHR and NSERC, yet, in the NSERC Act, researchers are not allowed to work on medical issues. There are legacies of things that fall between the cracks.

The idea is to take the deep expertise from these disciplines and assemble them on teams to work on missions. That does not necessarily mean there have to be huge new investments. We can take funds that exist, like the new frontiers in research fund, which is, I think, a prototype of this interdisciplinary tri-council work. We also have some very interesting tri-council programs that are already quite interdisciplinary. Repurpose them for a modern view of science for the 21st century. This would be in consultation with the community—I want to stress that. We don't want the know-it-all in Ottawa, as I call them, telling the community what programs they should be running. We have to consult with industry. What does industry want to see in our ecosystem? Where are the deliverables? What kinds of international partnerships do we want to have? Increasingly, research security is a very important, key factor in everything we do, so we want to be working with like-minded partners.

I see great potential to really burst out on these interdisciplinary, mission-driven projects that are being contemplated.

Mr. Richard Cannings: I heard you say a few minutes ago—maybe you were talking about NSERC specifically, but it may have been the capstone as well—that you don't want to be the policy. You don't want to shape policy. You are the deliverers of policy. You have the basic research that should be and, hopefully, will be done by researchers, who are doing it from a purely curiosity-based approach.

I keep coming back to missions, because people talk about the mission-driven approach.

Who is deciding what missions they are? Is it the researchers themselves who band together to undertake a mission, or is it the government telling them what to do? Is it the new advisory council that is doing this?

Dr. Alejandro Adem: I think the logical model is this: The new advisory council would set a strategic plan, then flesh it out in particular missions relevant to the strengths Canada has and the different deliverables. Of course, you have these things along the way that you want to do, and those other things that you want to do.

You also have talent streams that feed into that. I want to mention the big investment in talent that was done with budget 2024—increasing stipends and grants to support students. This is very important.

Put all of that picture together. Then, I think, you can unleash the real potential of all these researchers across areas. Now, if you have a mission, you'll have universities, colleges, CEGEPs and industry working on it, so it has a way of levelling the playing field. We're getting the best from all the constituent parts of the ecosystem to face the challenges Canada has.

Mr. Richard Cannings: If the advisory council says, "This is one of our missions," do you envision funding streams coming from the government so you can deliver it? How do you deliver that mission? Do you just get extra points when you're applying for a grant, if you check off the mission box?

Dr. Alejandro Adem: There are different missions. There are some, for example, into which two councils could try to put some money to address them. If it's a very large mission, such as a very important international mission, I think we would make use of some of the tri-council funds after they've been appropriately deployed.

Of course, we do not decide on funding. That is decided by you. We're here to deliver. I think we understand that concept. It's part of what modern science has to do. Modern science has to be accountable, and it needs to have an impact. That goes all the way from blue-sky research to commercialization.

• (1740)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For our second round, we have MP Kitchen for five minutes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank all of you for being here. It's greatly appreciated. With four groups, it will be very hard to get all the questions in, so I'll try to do something fairly quickly here. Hopefully, the first couple of questions will need yes-or-no answers.

Correct me if I'm wrong on the role that each of your organizations has to allocate funding. The selection of funding should be based on individual merits of scholars applying for the research, and also greatly on, basically, the quality of the proposed research.

Is that correct, Dr. Hewitt?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: Yes. That is correct.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Dr. Adem.

Dr. Alejandro Adem: In addition, the training piece, which you call HQP, is the third factor that comes into the evaluation.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

Dr. Clifford.

Dr. Tammy Clifford: Yes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Ms. Aubrey.

Ms. Maria Aubrey: No. The National Research Council does not fund the students. We fund research. We engage and hire students to work with us or work with collaborations. Ours is slightly different.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

Next, each of your organizations is to promote collaborative, urgent, international and interdisciplinary research—yes or no?

Dr. Hewitt.

Dr. Ted Hewitt: I would say in part, or for the most part, we're funding research that is primarily discovery-based or what we would call fundamental research. It follows where the researchers are moving in terms of issues that they find to be of importance—to them, certainly, but also to society generally. That's how we get projects. Then we evaluate them in accordance with the mechanism you were alluding to in your first question.

We do participate and we do lead in the development of more mission-driven international and other themed research competitions and calls, often in collaboration with the other two agencies as well. We offer not just one program but a series of programs and competitions that try to meet these needs.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Dr. Adem.

Dr. Alejandro Adem: I would say that all our programs have to have natural sciences and engineering as a focus, because that's our mandate.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Dr. Clifford.

Dr. Tammy Clifford: For CIHR it would be similar to Dr. Adem's response, but in the domain of health.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Great. Thank you.

Ms. Aubrey.

Ms. Maria Aubrey: Yes, as long as it addresses priorities and benefits for Canada.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Great. Thank you.

That's what your organizations are doing. From your presentations, which I greatly appreciated, I will just quickly paraphrase what I heard.

For example, Dr. Adem, you talked about 11,000 researchers.

Dr. Hewitt, you talked about 70,000 researchers.

Dr. Clifford and Ms. Aubrey, I suspect that you could give me similar numbers.

That's a huge number of researchers that we're looking at for research and to come up with their funding.

Now, the reality is that what I've heard from you today, Dr. Adem, is that you're the chair of a council that's overseeing all of these bodies. From what I'm hearing—I wish that we had more time with you, or that you'd been here at the very beginning of this study—you're doing that role in collaborations and in discussions. Why would you want to have another organization that creates another bureaucracy to tell you to do what you are already doing?

Dr. Alejandro Adem: We are a committee. We don't have the kind of authority that you're talking about, or the budget. We have a tiny secretariat that runs it. I think the idea is to do this in such a way that it's your job to work together. It's your job to deliver on these missions. It's not because this committee is putting you together to work together. It's a natural evolution. It's inspired, as I said, by the UKRI model.

There is confusion, as Dr. Vats talked about, when there's an international event and they come to Ottawa and want to meet with all of us. They'll say that in UKRI, there's a single person—the CEO. I know her. She's the symbol of the organization. She deals with the higher government. She deals with all those issues. Then the verticals go deep into the science. When they're needed, they're brought up to work on these bigger issues.

The trick is to do this without creating an extra-huge bureaucracy. I completely agree with you on the light touch and having this be like a conductor for these councils, with that interface with the government. That is very important. That board of directors will be critical, because it has to have true representativity.

● (1745)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

To your point, the reality is that the money that will be put out there to create this bureaucracy would be much better spent for the research, such that you could determine, based on those facts that we talked about earlier, where that funding should be going.

I think I have only a very little time left.

The Chair: You're actually over your time. Thank you.

Now we'll turn to MP Longfield for five minutes.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all of you for being here. I feel like we have a mini capstone discussion going on, because of your agencies.

Dr. Adem, you mentioned mathematics, and that got my interest. I'm doing a master's program right now, and we're using linear regression analysis in different ways. I was looking at it from a manufacturing point of view, which was my background. What products are making the most profits? How do you determine that? What data do you need to capture?

Another person in our class was looking at nursing. Dr. Clifford, with what you've worked on in biostatistics and epidemiology, there's some tie-in there.

We're also looking at management and how you inspire people to perform. Dr. Hewitt, how do you create a culture of innovation and trust using data?

Is data the connecting link in this organization? Is it one of the main connecting links? Maybe you could speak to how you would work on the problem of trying to get people working on a complex problem that involves health, engineering and social sciences.

Dr. Adem can start.

Dr. Alejandro Adem: Yes, absolutely, data is at the bottom of everything. How can you have improvement if you don't know where you are?

Of course, there are issues of privacy, etc., and the quality of the data is key. Of course, AI plays a big role in moving that data forward to get results. Ethically, it's very important that the social sciences come in and inform that. In the health sciences.... I was explaining to someone why AI is interdisciplinary, because the applications of AI in health are just monumental.

You can simplify the data. Your statement is true, but it has all of these contexts and contours that have to be fleshed out.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: That's something we will deal with in terms of policy, if we can ever get our bills through the House of Commons, which is being stalled right now.

Just as a side comment, Dr. Hewitt, as we look at the social sciences, we've had the Conservatives, who are chirping right now, looking at different research projects and saying they shouldn't be funded, as if politicians would know whether they should or shouldn't be funded.

Could you talk about the importance of having the peer approach, but also how social innovation applies to other innovation?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: I said before in response to other questions that it's really hard to go by lists. You look at lists; you see titles, and you think, "What is that?"

In the first instance, we have to understand that applications come in from researchers; they're reviewed carefully to make sure they meet international standards, and they're funded on the basis of their quality. A critical element of that is the benefit or the impact of that research. That is always taken into consideration.

One piece of advice that Mr. Vats gave previously is that it's important to talk to the researchers themselves and ask why this is important to them. It will be important to them, and it will be important within a community of 70,000 researchers—at least to some of them—and it will be important to some Canadians.

I was telling you a story earlier in reference to the earlier comment about Mexico. I'm a student of Brazil. Nobody really wanted to know anything about Brazil at the time when I was working, but all of a sudden we were in a trade war with Brazil, and Global Affairs was calling me as a resident expert. I was subsequently appointed to a committee to help manage the relationship with Brazil. When nobody cared.... You just never know.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: All of a sudden, an epidemic hit.

Maybe I could go over to Dr. Clifford. From a one health perspective, and looking at antimicrobial resistance, which I hope our committee will pick up a study on at some point, the one health approach and antimicrobial resistance are a key part of what humanity is facing right now as a risk.

How do you keep on top of the epidemics we are facing? Could you talk about the importance of that in a big, mission-driven discussion, please?

• (1750)

Dr. Tammy Clifford: Thank you so much for the question. As the idea of the capstone first came about, people were wondering what might be a mission. Many people would have pointed back to the COVID-19 pandemic, when, as you heard, there were a number of mechanisms created at the time because we didn't have them. You've mentioned AMR. We've also heard about AI and its various uses.

In terms of your specific question around one health and AMR, certainly for the CIHR, continuing to work strongly with our colleagues in the health portfolio, with the Public Health Agency of Canada again being the lead for the plan on antimicrobial resistance....

I also want to mention that the CIHR is the home of a centre for research on pandemic preparedness and health emergencies. Again, that group has a steering committee. You spoke about governance. That is linked not only to federal partners, such as the Public Health Agency and the CFIA, but also to provincial and territorial individuals.

It's not an easy thing to do these days, but there are those mechanisms.

Thank you.

The Chair: We now turn to MP Blanchette-Joncas for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Labrie, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, or SSHRC, uses effective strategies to promote scientific publication in French. How could the new capstone organization tailor those strategies to disciplines such as the natural sciences, health and engineering? How could the new organization be equally as effective?

Mr. Normand Labrie: SSHRC has funding programs for scientific publications and journals, including a number in French. Through the research partnerships program, collaboration is also possible with the scientific community, civil society, industry and various other stakeholders. Those are ways of promoting the development and dissemination of knowledge in French. That is happening in social sciences and humanities research.

An umbrella organization overseeing the three research areas could use similar approaches to foster more scientific publication and research in French in the natural sciences, health and other fields.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Mr. Labrie.

Mr. Hewitt, how do you plan to support an efficient and swift transition to the new funding structure that will take the form of the capstone research funding organization? Do you have a specific plan? What measures do you plan to deploy to support the transition?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: The plan is to consult and work closely with ISED to help set up the new research funding organization. We will follow its lead in terms of how to proceed and what the next steps are. It will also depend on the government, which has to pass the legislation before the new organization can be established.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Would you say you're ready to set up the new organization at this point?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: Yes, I would say so. We are ready to work closely with ISED and the government to set up the new organization.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Your team is ready, then.

Is that right?

Dr. Ted Hewitt: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: What about your team, Mr. Adem?

Dr. Alejandro Adem: We are ready.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: How about you, Ms. Clifford?

Dr. Tammy Clifford: We are ready.

[English]

The Chair: That's a nice way to end that round.

MP Cannings, you have the final two and a half minutes.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you.

I'm going to continue with Dr. Adem. We talked about how it's a given that basic curiosity-driven research is important. When I talk to researchers and mention this capstone idea, they say, "Well, I hope that is protected." They want to make sure the funding levels they have now are protected.

It comes back to this idea, then, of mission-driven projects. Will they, in the future, gradually eat away at the research funding envelope that the federal government provides, or will they be an additive thing? If I'm a researcher who decides to jump on some mission, will I be applying to the usual envelope, or is this something that has to be worked out?

● (1755)

Dr. Alejandro Adem: I, myself, as a scientist... Of course, the first thing I looked into was the assurance that the discovery research will remain where it is and continue to thrive and to have successful examples, such as that of Professor Hinton, who publicly thanked NSERC for the support when his work was very theoretical.

We give fairly small grants. If people really want to mobilize their knowledge, then they're encouraged to go into partnerships—for example, with industry—through the alliance program that we have to apply to CIHR, to SSHRC, and to these interdisciplinary programs. I think it's a real opportunity for our researchers in natural sciences and engineering, indeed across the three disciplines, to unleash their talents in this new, modern, mission-driven...so I don't think we should be afraid of that term. It's not like a military mission. It's a mission to do something for society, to help Canadians.

Mr. Richard Cannings: I'm not so much afraid of the mission idea—

Dr. Alejandro Adem: The name can be intimidating.

Mr. Richard Cannings: It's the funding. If the advisory council says—

Dr. Alejandro Adem: We have to demonstrate the impact, and we see it in all the councils around the world. They have to demonstrate impact to continue to be able to support the blue skies research. It's a circulation.

The Chair: Thank you, that's our time.

I want to thank all of our witnesses, and I want to thank all of the spectators we had in the gallery today. It was so refreshing to see all our student researchers and the interest that you have in this very important capstone study and the testimony of our witnesses today. Thank you for joining us.

To our witnesses, if you have anything further to add, you may submit something further to the clerk.

Thank you very much. Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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