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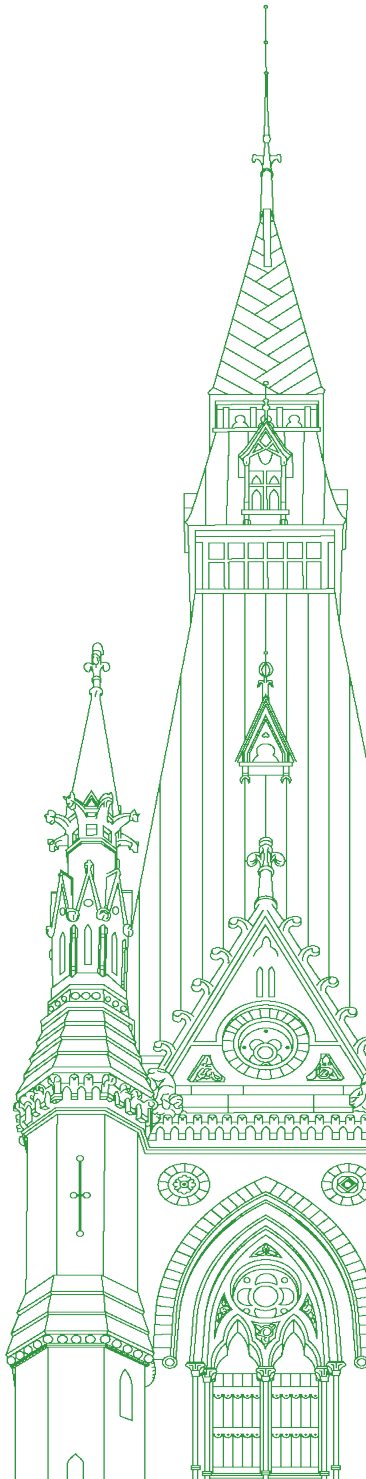

Chair: Ms. Valerie Bradford

Standing Committee on Science and Research

Thursday, November 28, 2024

● (1555)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 111 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research.

Before we begin, I would 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, particularly our interpreters.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. I'd 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, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and 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 floor, English or French. Thank you, all, for your co-operation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(i) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, October 31, 2024, the committee commences its study of the impact of the criteria for awarding federal funding on research excellence in Canada.

It's now my pleasure to welcome, as an individual, Dr. Eric Kaufmann, professor at the University of Buckingham, by video conference; Dr. Jeremy Kerr, professor of biology at the University of Ottawa and chair of NSERC's committee on discovery research; and Dr. Yuan Yi Zhu, assistant professor of international relations and international law, Leiden University, also by video conference.

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

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

Mr. Eric Kaufmann (Professor, University of Buckingham, As an Individual): Thank you, Chair.

I wish to raise concern over several aspects of research funding in Canada that fall under the rubric of diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, sometimes known as EDI.

The main point I wish to make is that DEI, as practised by the tri-council research councils, reflects a particular world view. It's a left-wing world view that I term “cultural socialism”. That's a valid world view, but it's a particular world view.

Cultural socialism, as I define it, consists of two tenets. The first is DE, or diversity and equity. This means that rather than, say, equalizing outcomes by class—as in traditional Marxist socialism—outcomes should, instead, be equalized by race and sex, through a form of discrimination. The second component of cultural socialism is inclusion, or I. It is that minority groups must be protected from emotional harm, or what's known as “emotional safety” or “protection from emotional trauma”. It means that this requires a censoring of free speech and the pursuit of truth because this might offend. This aspect of DEI is what underpins what is commonly known as “cancel culture”.

My point here is that DEI is political; it's not neutral. Just to prove that, when I asked a representative sample, in a Maru survey of 1,500 Canadians in September 2023, whether they approve of flying the pride flag on government buildings, those who identified as “left of centre” approved 63-24, while those who identified as “right of centre” disapproved 74-15. Moderates also disapproved by a more modest 42-35. The point here is that [*Technical difficulty-Editor*].

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab (Halifax West, Lib.): He is frozen on my screen. I don't know if anybody can hear him.

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] evident in both diversity statements on application forms and race and sex discrimination in hiring and funding calls.

I'll make three points about DEI. First, most Canadians do not support it. I found that 59% of Canadians favoured a colour-blind approach of “combating racism by treating people as individuals and trying not to see race”, as against just 29% in favour of the colour-conscious approach of “combating racism by being aware of race, in order to better notice inequality”. It's also worth saying that in the U.S., a majority of people, including a majority of Black and Hispanic respondents, support the Supreme Court decision banning racial preferences in university admissions.

The second point is that DEI is in tension with research excellence. Richard Sander, in 2004, famously showed that admitting Black students to law school with lower entrance scores correlated with them achieving lower grades in law school. That's not surprising if you're admitting at a lower score. More recently, I looked at data on academics from an article in Nature in 2024. It showed that female academics had significantly lower numbers of citations in their work than men, even when controlling for field of study and years in the profession. Likewise, Black and Hispanic scholars had substantially fewer citations than whites or Asians, although the gap was not as large as for gender. Whatever the cause of this is—arguably, there may be inequalities in society, and that's absolutely right, or inequalities earlier in the pipeline—artificially narrowing the talent pipeline by rigging the result at the end of the pipeline does not rectify the problem. All it does is prioritize equity or cultural socialism over excellence.

The third point is that DEI creates the conditions for delegitimizing research funding. Confidence in higher education in the United States has fallen from nearly 60% in 2015 to 36% in 2024, nearly half. The sharpest decline is amongst Republican voters, from 56% to 20%, dropping to nearly a third of its former value.

In Canada, the trust in higher education is greater, but it's also at risk. For instance, in my survey, I found that just 49% of Conservative-voting Canadians trust social science and humanities professors, as compared with 69% of those supporting left or Liberal parties. Now, that 49% is higher than the 34% amongst Republicans for the same question in the U.S., but it shows that when a sector starts to be seen as partisan, it will lose the confidence of those on the other side of the political divide. Consider that a quarter of conservatives now trust the media. That's approaching U.S. levels. Support for such established institutions as the CBC is in decline—

● (1600)

The Chair: That's our time. You'll have a chance to elaborate through the questions.

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: Okay.

The Chair: We'll now turn to Dr. Kerr.

You have the floor for up to five minutes.

Dr. Jeremy Kerr (Professor, Department of Biology, University of Ottawa, and Chair, Committee on Discovery Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer my views and experiences on these topics.

I'm a member of NSERC's executive council, advising the last three presidents on policy directions and implementation, and I'm chair of its committee on discovery research. Basically, I am part of the bridge between Canada's research community and NSERC, but I am a professor first.

Research-granting programs are superb at supporting excellence. Canada does not lack for talent worthy of that support, even while we must also recognize the need for continuous and rapid evolution to maintain our international reputation as a nation of discovery.

Let me quickly get into some details about an exemplar program that I know well, that of discovery grants or DGs. They drive Canada's scientific research productivity. Sixty-two per cent of all Canadian publications in natural sciences and engineering involved researchers who received a discovery grant. More importantly, the portfolio effect of such programs creates two additional and critical outcomes. DGs maximize the economic efficiency of discovery in terms of discoveries per dollar expended, and they expand Canada's ability to compete internationally in science. At a Canada-wide scale, programs like the discovery grants lay the foundations for both specialized advances and transformative change. We need both kinds of discovery.

Transformation is built on the shoulders of generations of specialized and even incremental work. The ways we evaluate grant applications, whether they are in SSHRC, CIHR, NSERC or other granting councils or agencies, continue to evolve rapidly, partly because of the enhanced research coordination through the Canada research coordinating committee, CRCC. There is an emerging role for the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, or DORA, a modern approach to research evaluation that assesses thoughtfully what researchers have achieved, rather than looking at journal impact factors or other reductive, and potentially lazy, metrics. The community has embraced this approach, and agencies in Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere have also.

What are some of the key awarding criteria, and how do they relate to excellence? Every grant program I know of includes fierce academic skepticism. Has the applicant accomplished impressive things that made a difference in their field or more broadly in society? Are there flaws in the proposal? Can applicants do the work they are suggesting? Importantly, are they training the next generation effectively?

I'll dwell on the training aspects of research grants. More than 60% of core research grants go directly to launching the careers of the next generation of Canadian talent. A great training program imparts skills that enable those people to find relevant positions in any sectors that use those skills, or to create their own positions through innovation. When researchers help create wonderful training experiences, it “echoes in eternity”, to borrow a phrase from Marcus Aurelius. That student's career launch becomes memorable in the best way and might affect the people they help train in the future.

Let's be clear: Training students is really difficult. They are as diverse as Canada itself. Their abilities to hit the ground running in their programs of work are all over the place, and their lived experiences can define how they fit into some kinds of research groups. Evaluations of grant proposals now require applicants to consider best practices for how to deal with that diversity. The training program, in other words, is about achieving excellence, not cloning the supervisor.

Canada faces outward in a competitive global environment. We engage with and learn from agencies and researchers everywhere. Our granting agencies have evolved in response, and Canada can boast of a superb portfolio of researchers at all levels and in all fields. The ways in which we evaluate grants here are a reflection both of the evolutionary changes the agencies have recognized and embraced, and of philosophical and political decisions about the best ways to ensure that research generates answers that matter for Canadians.

Thank you.

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you very much. It was right on time.

Dr. Zhu, thank you for joining us. You have the floor for up to five minutes.

Dr. Yuan Yi Zhu (Assistant Professor of International Relations and International Law, Leiden University, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to members of the committee. It's a pleasure to appear before you today.

Every year, the federal Government of Canada spends billions of dollars on research funding. Canadians expect, and rightly so, that this money will be allocated to the most deserving researchers based on excellence—and excellence alone—in order for them to pursue high-quality research that will benefit Canadians.

Sadly, this is no longer the case. Today, federal research funding is often allocated on the basis of race, sex, ideological conformity and other criteria that have nothing to do with the pursuit of truth and excellence.

For example, we have federally funded Canada research chairs that are available only to people of a certain race or of a certain sex or a combination of both, even though none of these characteristics have anything to do with the quality of someone's research. Indeed, under plans announced by the Government of Canada, universities will lose their funding under the Canada research chairs program unless they meet diversity requirements in recruitment, which means that people are no longer being hired solely because of their research.

We also have federally funded research programs that expect applicants to “clearly demonstrate their strong commitment to EDI in their applications”—EDI being, of course, equity, diversity and inclusion—as well as to integrate EDI into their “research practice and design”. With respect, the purpose of research design is to enable good research to be done. It is not to promote specific ideological objectives such as EDI.

In addition, there are many informal obstacles to the pursuit of excellence within the federal funding system for research. For example, in the humanities and social sciences, where I come from, it is well known that research proposals that contain buzzwords and fashionable progressive political language have a much better chance of being successful than do proposals on more traditional subjects, which use more traditional approaches and which do not contain buzzwords. This means that, from the beginning of their careers, young scholars and researchers are being taught that the way to get ahead in academia is to be a conformist and to chase grant money using buzzwords, regardless of what they actually think is intellectually valuable.

Now, I speak to this committee as a former recipient of federal research funding through SSHRC. Without this funding, I would not have been able to pursue my academic career, which has taken me to different countries, and for this I am very grateful.

Naturally, I am a strong believer in the value of investing public money into research. However, in these difficult economic times, many Canadians already question the value of funding academic research, which can seem sometimes irrelevant to their daily lives, and the heavy-handed imposition of EDI and other ideological requirements in research funding undermines public support for public research funding. That is something that needs to be urgently addressed.

Thank you very much.

● (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for their opening remarks.

I'll now open the floor to members for questions. Be sure to indicate to whom your questions are directed.

We'll start the first six-minute round with MP Viersen.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Zhu, if I can, I'll start by questioning you.

We've just finished up a study on our new capstone organization that's being proposed, and we've had a chance to hear from professionals across the research field. The study we're starting today will help define Canada's criteria for the pursuit of excellence.

I'm curious. Is there anything else you wanted to share that you may not have had time for in your opening remarks?

Dr. Yuan Yi Zhu: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Viersen.

First, as I mentioned, EDI, I think, is a major problem. Also a big problem is the lack of ideological diversity within Canadian academia, which is not a problem that is unique to Canada, of course. Academics all across the world tend to be more progressive, and there are many reasons for this, some of them perhaps perfectly understandable. However, I think it is fair to say that within Canadian academia, there is a monoculture where, if you deviate even very slightly from what is fashionable and what is commonly accepted by your peers, not only will you be ostracized, but often you will not be able to have an academic career in the first place.

Unfortunately, when I advise my students, I have to tell them, “You know, if you are in any way not progressive, you have to hide your views until you actually have at least a dissertation accepted, because otherwise you will never get ahead.”

The Chair: Dr. Zhu, we're going to have to ask you to hold for a minute, because the interpreters are having trouble. They can't hear you.

Since there's trouble with Dr. Zhu, would you be able to ask a question of another witness?

I'll just stop your time here.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes, please do.

Can we sort out his mic situation?

The Chair: We had trouble with him coming in. We were hoping it was fixed.

I'm sorry. It seems they've lost it. It was a bit shaky coming in.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: All right.

The Chair: I'm sorry about that.

I've stopped your time. If you want to collect your thoughts and think about a question for someone else for a minute—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay. I'll move to Mr. Kaufmann.

When your time ran out, you were just starting to address a topic that's interesting to me: the CBC. If you want to continue your remarks from there, I may collect my thoughts and it may provide me with a question.

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: I was drawing the analogy between what's happened to trust in the media in.... Now, in the U.S., trust in media is very low on the right. Republicans have very low trust in media. They have very low trust in academia now. In Canada, the trust in media, on the right, is very low. I think the trust in academia, which is coming down, has a potential to go where it is in the United States.

I want to pick up on some of what Yuan Yi Zhu was just talking about. When we think about the way the councils work, the allocation of funds comes from academic experts. Because they're drawn from academia, they're going to reflect the perspectives of academia, which is a good thing in terms of quality. However, in terms of ideology....

I will echo a couple of studies we have. There was a study on Canada by Chris Dummitt and Zach Patterson, I believe, which came out last year. It showed that 88% of Canadian academics identify on the left. Work and surveys that I've done show this number to be 75% or thereabouts, with only about 5% conservative. That slant....

Now, the other thing is that people who take an active role in setting policy tend to be even further left if they're in the humanities and social sciences. If they're active in anything to do with policy, I think they are going to be even further left. What we're getting is the furthest left point, roughly, of public opinion, which is having an outsized role in setting the agenda here.

I'm saying that, if you believe that mirroring the Canadian population by race and sex is the most important thing—more important than excellence—that's fine. That's a perfectly valid world view. However, what I'm trying to stress is that this is not the world view of most Canadians who pay tax to support the research enterprise. The more the tri-councils move in this direction.... They're already in this direction. Also, having things like diversity statements on your application, where you can signal your adherence to cultural socialism or DEI, is going to lead to political discrimination. Political discrimination is a real thing.

Here's another survey fact: In surveys I did, about 45% of Canadian academics would not hire a known Trump supporter for an academic job. In the U.S., it's 40%. In Britain, a third won't hire a known Brexit supporter. Now, there could be noise in that data, but, roughly speaking, there is significant political bias. There have been a lot of studies, mainly American, showing bias against right-leaning grant applications. People openly admit they would mark them down, so we have systemic political bias, I think, in the adjudication and selection processes of these policies. I'm wondering what people think. Are they just going to put their heads in the sand, go forth with business as usual and hope that what's happening in the U.S. will never happen in Canada?

I would like to see the councils get ahead of this problem and move to a colour-blind merit approach. Remove political criteria such as mandatory diversity statements. These are not universal consensus values. They are partisan values, and every survey will show a big partisan gap on these questions.

● (1615)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Do you have any specific suggestions on some kind of mechanism for that, if you were helping to create this new capstone organization?

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: First of all, I don't think you should have Canada research chairs restricted by race and sex. I think that's the first thing.

Second, there should be no diversity statements, where people who essentially affirm cultural socialist ideology get higher points. We've seen Harvard and MIT remove mandatory diversity statements. We've seen The Washington Post editorialize against this. These things should be removed from the application form. That's at a minimum.

I have—

The Chair: That's our time.

We're going to move now to MP Kelloway for six minutes, please.

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses who are here today. This is an interesting topic, and these are interesting viewpoints, and I think it's important that we hear all of them.

I'll start my questions with Dr. Kerr.

One thing that is common in this room right now, and online, is that, whether you're an MP or a witness, everyone has their politics and their viewpoints. Some people believe climate change is real, and some people are studying climate change from a biodiversity, or declining biodiversity, perspective.

I want to drill down with you. How do inherent political views affect the work of academics, and, most importantly, what process can we put in place to ensure that research in the country remains free from political bias?

As a side note, I certainly did not work as a researcher in academia, but I did work at Cape Breton University, and I did work at the Nova Scotia Community College, which did more applied research than the traditional research at Cape Breton University. The one thing I did notice is that there were a plethora of viewpoints from researchers. Some were far right, some were far left, and there were people who were more centred in their approach.

I wonder if you can address those things and, also, if you can explain the importance of diversity and inclusion in research when it comes to producing reliable and accurate data.

● (1620)

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: This is a double burger of questions. Thank you very much. I'll do my best.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: It's a Big Mac of questions, indeed, and I can always come back to them.

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: Indeed. Thank you very much. If I miss something in my response, please do come after me and I will try to follow up.

First of all, in terms of politics being present in the execution of policies at the granting councils, I have never seen this. The agencies respond to community imperatives, and they respond to research that goes into how we represent excellence. Maybe we can measure it differently sometimes, but let's just be very clear: My personal expertise is in NSERC, so I'm coming from the natural sciences and engineering, and the holy book for us when we are applying for research grants is the merit indicators—the things that the panel uses to evaluate whether we are good, bad or indifferent in terms of our level of excellence. Nowhere in that set of merit indicators will you find anything that looks political from where I'm sitting in my perhaps privileged position in the science community.

Moreover, were someone to bring a political litmus test into a discussion at those granting councils in evaluating a grant, the program officer, who is universally present in the room during those deliberations, would terminate that discussion instantly if they were doing their job. Having done that job from the evaluator side of the equation for many years, never once have I witnessed a single occasion where somebody tried to apply a political filter in evaluating research.

Maybe there are implicit considerations. For example, I study conservation biology, and if you don't think it's important to protect biodiversity, well, that's your right. I think, as scientists, we have a counter-argument for that, but it's all about the evidence. It's not about the ideology. I approach my beliefs after evaluating them for supporting evidence, by and large. That defines what I do, so this idea that there's some sort of political conformity test is an utterly alien concept to me that I have simply never, ever seen in any evaluation mechanism at the tri-council level.

I'm sorry. I know there was more to your queries.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: I did give you a Big Mac of questions. Let me unpack them burger by burger within the Big Mac.

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: Thank you.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: How important are diversity and inclusion in research when producing reliable and accurate data?

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: Why would we want to try to...? I want to be really clear here. As I said, our objective is not to implement an affirmative action program; our objective is to achieve excellence, on behalf of Canadians, in terms of our research pursuits. I think the purely rhetorical question that comes up, in terms of this line of inquiry, is a very simple one: How do you compete internationally if you leave half of your team on the sidelines? That is, effectively, what has historically happened in terms of things like the CRC program.

I think there has been an example or two in the past of what looks like an affirmative action hiring program. This is something I think is difficult to support, and I do not personally support it. However, there was a Federal Court case that was applied and resolved to the way that program was being administered, because it was so systematically biased against everybody except people who look like me.

As I said in my remarks—and I mean this to the absolute depths of sincerity—when I am looking for people to include in my research group, the last thing I'm trying to do is make everybody be like me. I want them to disagree with me. I want to have arguments with them about our science and the nature of evidence. Those robust conversations make discovery more powerful and make us evaluate those ideas from more than one perspective. If they're all like me, our views on that issue become more limited, and our capacity to compete internationally downstream, a few steps from that point, is then degraded, and that's antithetical to the objectives of all of what we do.

● (1625)

The Chair: That's very good. Thank you.

We now turn to MP Blanchette-Joncas for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome to the witnesses joining us for the start of this study.

Mr. Kaufmann, is there any scientific evidence or empirical research showing that DEI criteria benefit academic research?

[*English*]

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: DEI in universities...? I'm commenting on the Canadian research council's.... The Canada research chairs program, for example, has restricted hiring to particular racial and sexual groups. I'm commenting on the diversity statements in which, if you affirm your commitment to DEI, your application is rated more favourably. That's what I'm talking about in terms of applying ideology to the allocation of research.

I don't know whether I've answered your question or understood it correctly—maybe I should have kept it in French rather than going to the translation—but what I would say is that, just because people say, “Don't vote for so-and-so”.... The definition of what is political.... What I'm saying is that, when you talk about how you will promote diversity and equity in your research, that is political, even if you don't say, “How will you promote voting for the Liberal Party?” The definition of “political” is not narrowly focused upon party politics.

On political ideologies, I mentioned that survey data shows very clearly that attitudes to DEI divide, very heavily, based on who you vote for and how you identify on a left/right axis. That means they are political, so I think this is a bit of semantics in what we heard, really, the idea that this isn't political. It very much is.

I hope I answered your question.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you. That answers the question, Mr. Kaufmann.

Can you tell us whether there is a link between DEI and scientific merit?

[*English*]

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: I use the example of this study where we looked at the number of publications times the number of times they're cited. That is the standard h-index metric that is used for research assessment—and I'm willing to defend that, by the way.

We saw very clearly, in the Nature paper of 2024, that female and Hispanic or Black academics—controlling for the number of years in the profession and for discipline—had substantially lower output than white and Asian or male academics. I think it is reasonable to surmise and—although I am open to other data; I want to see data on this and scientific proof—I believe that, by pursuing EDI, you are reducing research output. I would bet on that.

Is it the biggest factor? No, but it's a factor. It's going to reduce it by a certain amount, and maybe that's a trade people are willing to make. Maybe they think, “Okay, equity and diversity are a more important factor” or “Let's just say we're going to have 20% or 30% equity and diversity, and we're willing to sacrifice a certain amount of research output.” However, I'm not sure that the Canadian taxpayer is willing to fund that and support those values. Those values are, of course, backed because, if 75% of academia is on the left, they're setting these policies. To them, this is natural and not political. I get it, but they are in a bubble.

How many academics vote for the Conservative Party? It's very small. As I mentioned, it's 10%, so—

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: I don't think this is—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I want to stay on that line of questioning.

Do DEI criteria conflict with the pursuit of scientific truth? Is there an opposition there?

[*English*]

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: Are you saying opposition to DEI?

I'm sorry. Could you repeat that?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Do DEI criteria conflict with the pursuit of scientific truth?

[*English*]

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: Yes, I believe they are in opposition. I think that if they weren't in opposition, a purely colour-blind, merit-based hiring.... You're going to get some diversity through a colour-blind, merit-based program. The fact that you have to rig it means you are going to compromise on excellence and scientific truth in order to achieve cultural socialism or EDI.

I think they are in tension fundamentally. It doesn't mean you're going to get no.... It's probably just going to result in attacks on your scientific research and pursuit of truth. It's not going to kill it.

I think that the values of the general public that supports research are what should prevail, not the values of academics, I'm afraid—or at least the vocal academics who wind up participating in these committees.

● (1630)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Do you have any recommendations to ensure that minorities get more access to funding, while keeping the bar for scientific quality high?

[*English*]

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: First, I would recommend going with a colour-blind approach that does not advertise grants or positions by race or sex. Then, I would recommend removing any statements that require you to affirm cultural socialism or DEI in order to get higher points.

Those are two simple recommendations. I think that would improve research excellence. They would also help to restore public faith. Particularly the half of the country that isn't on the same side as most academics, if they go against the research enterprise, it's going to damage research, the way it's damaged belief in the CBC and mainstream media.

I think that's a bad way for academia to go, if we care about the research base and research funding.

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

Before we go to Mr. Cannings, I want to announce that the clerk has been in touch with Dr. Zhu. Unfortunately, the volume levels are too low for the interpreters, so we've invited Dr. Zhu to submit any further testimony by brief. Again, he's able to listen to whatever's going on, so if he has some opinion that he wants to express through a brief, he can do so.

Mr. Cannings, I'll now turn it over to you for your six minutes.

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

I'm going to start with Dr. Kerr.

Here we are. We're talking about excellence in Canadian research, and it seems that there are two aspects of it in this discussion today. One is how we assess excellence in research when the federal government is giving out funding for that research. Then there's a side question of how we are selecting researchers for federal government positions, like the Canada research chairs, for instance. These seem to be quite different aspects of this question.

From your position in NSERC, I assume you deal more with the former, in terms of how you assess people who are applying for research funding through NSERC, through discovery grants or whatever. You mentioned some of the broad criteria there. You also mentioned DORA.

We've heard before in this committee about concerns over using impact assessments of papers by looking at the number of citations, how many papers a person has written and how many citations those papers get. People have been pushing back on that. Could you expand on what the data behind that is or what the impact is, and why that change seems to be under way?

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: One of the challenges is in terms of which scientific fields get favoured and the nature of publication in the literature that occurs among those scientific fields. Observations that people make in some branches of science may be seen by a small number of specialists. You can be immensely productive, but the citation rates for those papers may be very limited.

I would give the example of systematics, which enables us to describe the biological diversity of planet Earth. If you don't have capacity in this area, you are basically just looking at everything and you don't have names for them or how they evolved or what the future of that evolutionary pathway might look like. Systematists do not tend to be particularly highly cited. In a field that is more familiar to me personally, citation rates can be quite a lot higher.

The simplicity and reductive quality of those kinds of metrics prejudice our directions based on momentary popularity. I'll give you some examples from the 19th century. Charles Darwin was really into barnacles, but he was hardly ever cited for it for a long time afterwards. The discoveries that he made in those areas have changed the world in the most fundamental ways, but at the time, nobody recognized this. They are ultimately the way you get to the jewels in the crown.

The idea that we should follow a simple counting process to estimate and measure, as though it were reliable, the value of science.... It's just a popularity contest. I say this as somebody who has some experience with these kinds of metrics. If I was being perfectly selfish about it, I would be thrilled to see all of us just rely on the h-index, but the fact is that it is a reflection of a whole bunch of things, only some of which actually have to do with the importance of discoveries that I may have made. It may have to do with whether or not I'm social-networking effectively or something. It's reductive.

DORA exists so that we will be thoughtful about this, rather than simplistic.

● (1635)

Mr. Richard Cannings: The other thing that was mentioned, I think by Dr. Kaufmann, struck a chord with me, and that is the idea that buzzwords can affect someone who is assessing a paper. For instance, we're all part of this milieu of what we're getting from various forms of media and things like that. How do we guard against that? To me, it would be an easy thing to be seduced by the use of these buzzwords, whether it's something like climate change or biodiversity or some of the ones over time in our careers. How do you guard against that when you're assessing somebody's excellence in science?

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: I just don't look for buzzwords. Let's be clear. What is a buzzword? Sometimes, I think the way we are hearing it interpreted here is that it's sort of a political secret door into something. In my domain academically, and in terms of where I exist policy-wise, it is meant to be a recognition of what is currently being discussed, debated and attacked in the scientific literature. Basically, if you are not able to use the language of your field in an appropriate way to place yourself within that field, it does not demonstrate that you know what you're talking about. Now, it might be possible to illustrate that you do know what you're talking about while still not using the language that everybody else uses, and that happens, but that's just....

None of this strikes me as challenging or sort of a cult political litmus test.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you.

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

Now we'll start our five-minute round.

We'll start with MP Kitchen.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today. It's greatly appreciated.

Dr. Zhu, I understand that you can hear us but that we can't hear you, unfortunately. I would appreciate any statements or anything from this conversation that you might be able to add from your point of view.

Ultimately, you know.... It's interesting; we're now looking at a study on federal funding of research excellence. The study we just finished was dealing with the capstone issue and research. We had the tri-council as well as the NRC here on Tuesday. I asked them at that time a very simple question about their goal. Was it based on the individual merit of, one, the scholars applying for the funding, and two, the quality of their proposed research? They agreed with that. That's what they did.

Dr. Kerr, you made that statement today when you talked about discovery grants, etc. Those are there. Dr. Zhu talked about similar aspects. We didn't hear all of it, but I think he would agree with that. He also talked about the buzzwords.

When we look at issues such as DEI and this aspect of it, and these buzzwords that people want to hear, the concern we have is about what we're hearing from researchers around the country who believe that when they apply for that research, everything is based on those two points, those two goals. Yet they're finding that there's a third one in there, DEI, which steps in the way of what they're presenting, when it should be based on the quality of their research.

Dr. Kerr, your point is that if that person isn't knowledgeable in that area, then they shouldn't be doing that research, but that's where the funding goes. We get a lot of crossover from basic natural sciences to health care sciences and even to social sciences. There might be some overlap, so there can be some crossover there. How do we ensure that when it's done, the people who are making this decision on federal funding and providing that funding for excellent research...? When we're talking about federal money, which we are responsible for, how do we ensure that it's based on those two principles and not something else?

● (1640)

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: Thank you for that question. I do indeed fully believe in and support the idea that excellence should be the defining criterion here. Let me just say that there is a third category that is practically universally present within granting evaluation, and that is the quality of the training program. That's part of it as well.

There are two points that I will very quickly try to make in response. The first is that sometimes, as was commented on by a colleague witness here, we want to include a recognition of diversity under some circumstances—that is to say, when it is appropriate—in research design. I will give you an example of why this can sometimes be absolutely vital.

Everybody's car has airbags these days. Those airbags are adaptive. That is to say, the weight of the person in the front seat and the proximity of that person to the airbag determine how strongly those airbags will explode onto you if you're in a collision. When those airbags first came out, they tended to kill small women and also children. The reason for this was that the research that was done to back this up was basically done on young men. The initial proposition around airbags was to protect young men 25 years old and under who didn't wear seat belts. The result of not including gender in the consideration here was simply that you killed a lot of people who really didn't need to die. It can be very appropriate for research design to consider aspects of diversity.

The other part is the training program. That's where—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: I apologize for interrupting. We have limited time.

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: I'm sorry. Please go ahead.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: I understand that aspect. That's the research. The person designing that research hopefully is looking at.... Sometimes it gets missed. I get that part. I think the public gets that part.

That is not necessarily what the DEI is about. It's a question of whether that research was given to an individual researcher because they met that DEI quality or standard, as opposed to the quality of their research. When we're dealing with the research, the quality of the research one would like to think is covering all of that aspect.

It's a huge challenge along those lines. I get that. We get that we need to understand that with our researchers and provide that. That is what those committees are looking at, but the committees should be making that decision based on the quality of the research and the presentation of that research, as opposed to it being presented based on buzzwords that might meet certain standards. I appreciate that.

Dr. Kaufmann—

The Chair: I'm sorry, but that's your time.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we will turn to MP Diab for five minutes, please.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Let me start with one question for Mr. Kaufmann, and then I'll ask Professor Kerr a follow-up question.

We've undertaken many studies in this committee. Earlier on in our mandate, there was a study on indigenous traditional knowledge, something I'd never really experienced on my own. I'm not a researcher, although I have family members who have done research and have done Ph.D.s in various categories, so the indigenous traditional knowledge was a new one for me. We learned at that point about different kinds of knowledge that are not in the mainstream and how they can help us cover more areas of research with a better depth of understanding. I certainly felt that way, in any case, after doing that study.

The question to you is based on what you have just testified on. Do you not think these are valuable perspectives to learn from, and that these communities deserve to have a say? They're certainly not the mainstream. I know we talk about buzzwords. English is not my first language, so I'm not sure I agree with a lot of the terminology that I'm hearing in this. It's not something that I'm used to. But we would have never heard about some of these perspectives if we had just gone with, let's be honest, your typical white man doing research.

Go ahead.

● (1645)

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: The first thing to say is that I don't think it would just be white men if you had a merit-based competition. I just think that's a bit of a straw man.

On indigenous knowledge, I think there's plenty to learn, but I think that if it is of value to science, then it will form part of science. If it is folklore, then it will be studied by folklorists. I do not think there should be any special dispensation for indigenous knowledge.

I actually think that those people who would try to elevate indigenous knowledge to the same level as science—falsifiable, measurable, testable, Popperian science—are actually a threat to the pursuit of truth. I have to say that I find this idea—that we can put indigenous knowledge, just because it's indigenous, on the same level as scientific knowledge that has been accrued through the scientific method—to be deeply counter-enlightenment and against what should be the mission of the councils, and against what the public would support.

I don't think this is something that should be in the university, unless it is in accord with science. It may be that there are certain medicines and scientific knowledge about medicines that are informed by indigenous knowledge. In that sense, that's great, but should we have any special dispensation or affirmative action to get those perspectives in? No, I don't think so.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: I appreciate your perspective. I don't agree with it, but that's my perspective. I'll let another MP follow up on that if they so wish.

Let me now go to Professor Kerr.

I know you're a professor of biology, but you also talked about discovery grants, evaluation of grants and so on. Not only do you deal with researchers, but you're also dealing with students. In your experience, what happens if we don't have diversity and inclusion considerations in some of this funding, for example for women, or for people who don't speak English as their first or even second language, or for people of different ethnic backgrounds? I'd just like to hear your perspective.

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: We're less good at discovery. This is what happens when you leave half of your team on the sidelines and you only play the other half. I have had a great privilege over my career of having a very diverse group. I don't apply litmus tests of any sort, beyond interest in stuff that I do and capacity to do that stuff.

My experience has been that accounting for the ways in which people have different lived experiences than I do makes my research program stronger. I'm not here to talk about my research, but I could quite easily point to what are, by the h-index, my most influential publications. Had I not been somebody who thought carefully about how to include people who looked and experienced things very differently than I do, those publications would never have happened. Again, I'm not here to talk about myself, but some of those papers have been influential. With a monolithic team—

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: We appreciate hearing about your experience, which is why you're here today, so I personally would like to hear that.

The Chair: That's our time.

Ms. Lena Metlege Diab: Thank you.

The Chair: Perhaps Dr. Kerr could submit an expanded answer in writing. We always accept those.

Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Kaufmann, in 2023, the U.S. supreme court banned positive discrimination in university admissions. We are talking about a country that has historically been a pioneer in the area of DEI. The decision comes in the wake of 45 bills in 33 states and two bills in the House of Representatives.

What should we take from the developments south of the border? Are they not an admission that DEI policies are flawed?

● (1650)

[*English*]

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: I'm very much in favour of the approach I've outlined, the affirmative action that's been advocated by the U.S. Supreme Court in the Students for Fair Admissions case, which, let's not forget, was brought principally because Asian Americans were being discriminated against. Let's remember that the flip side.... Really, “affirmative action” is a euphemism for discrimination against certain groups: Asians, whites and males, essentially. There's also discrimination against conservatives, but that's not happening through affirmative action. What I would say is to look at that decision, which has been supported not just by a majority of white Americans, but by a majority of Hispanic Americans, Black Americans and Asian Americans. This is a consensus value.

There have been a number of referendums in California to try to reintroduce affirmative action because it's been repealed by popular initiative. However, every time they try it, it's always voted down, because the public does not want racial preferences in the allocation, whether it be university places at Harvard or whether it be research grants. That's against the values.

I mentioned that, in the Canadian survey, 59% want a colour-blind approach, while only 29% want a colour-conscious approach. Yet, what is the approach that's being pursued? It's a colour-conscious approach in the tri-council. I think it is out of step with public opinion. They may be able to get away with it for a little longer, but ultimately I don't think this is going to do the research body any good.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Mr. Kaufmann, some witnesses have pointed to the unintended consequences of DEI criteria, specifically the fact that they fuel misogynistic and racial tensions.

What can be done to ease those tensions while preserving the goal of fostering equity?

[*English*]

The Chair: Give just a short answer, please.

Mr. Eric Kaufmann: Well, I think misogynistic approaches are contrary to the idea of judging individuals as individuals and not by their gender. I just think that the classical liberal, merit-based approach, where we're judging strictly on the basis of the individual, is more than sufficient. Gender discrimination is against the law; it's also against the classical liberal position. I would also add that the research—

The Chair: That's our time. You can always expand on your answer in writing if you care to.

Thank you.

The final two and a half minutes go to MP Cannings.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you.

I just want to give Dr. Kerr a chance to fully answer a question that he got cut off on.

You said your first part, and then I think you started to talk about training. I'll let you finish that. Go right ahead.

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: Thank you, MP Cannings.

Of course, academics are infamous for being long-winded, and I'm no exception.

The area in which equity, diversity and inclusion are accounted for in specific ways is the training plan, and essentially nowhere else. Therefore, it is not part of the quality of the proposal, fundamentally, unless there is a need to include diversity in terms of how it's evaluated. The idea here is this: Is the door open in training to everybody, or is the door open to a selection of people?

An example that is extremely important to me of how this has been done successfully in the past is an anglophone professor working in the common language of science, which is English, who has implemented a number of very specific actions in the context of his research group and in terms of his department and, indeed, his university to attempt to foster and protect the use of French language in the workplace.

I'm not sure why we would want to do anything else than that. These are opportunities for us to take the whole team and enable them to participate in the academic exercise, but that is evaluated in the application process. The goal is simply to say whether this person knows how to train people who are not necessarily other white males.

Mr. Richard Cannings: You mentioned that when you're looking at, I assume, students to take on for research, you just look at their merit, but they've had to rise to that place.

Does DEI in Canada research chairs help with that, when students see people like them at that level?

● (1655)

Dr. Jeremy Kerr: I'm sure it does. I am one of those people who come from the majority group, so I have no shortage of role models and examples of people who look just like me who've also been very successful.

When there are examples of people who are diverse, in the sense of being very different from me, I'm sure that it can create inspiration for others to believe that they, too, can pursue a career in that direction. If that talent proves itself in the academy, that's wonderful. I think those people should therefore always be welcomed, but also welcomed as individuals given their personal backgrounds, rather than in some sort of cookie-cutter way.

There's just no litmus test here. We're looking for excellence, and we're trying to foster the creation of more of it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. That's a great note to end on, for our first panel.

Thank you to our three witnesses, even the one who we unfortunately couldn't hear from verbally. However, if you have any questions, you may check with the clerk and submit additional information.

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

● (1655)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1700)

The Chair: Welcome back.

As a brief reminder for those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you're not speaking. For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French.

It's now my pleasure to welcome, appearing as individuals, Dr. Christopher Dummitt, professor of Canadian studies at Trent University; Dr. Daniel O'Donnell, professor of English at the University of Lethbridge; and Bruce Pardy, professor of law at Queen's University, by video conference.

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

Dr. Dummitt, I invite you to make an opening statement for up to five minutes.

Dr. Christopher Dummitt (Professor, Canadian Studies, Trent University, As an Individual): Thanks so much.

I should say that I'm a historian of Canadian politics, and this is a great honour. I am very pleased to be here, but I'm not here to speak about the history of Canadian politics, sadly. I am here to speak about a survey I did with a data analyst from Concordia University about university professors, their political opinions and their attitudes towards academic freedom and towards diversity.

The news I want to bring to you—and this has been slightly preempted by the other witnesses—is that federal funding agencies, federal research agencies and the Canada research program are at the moment ignoring the single biggest and most egregious diversity problem in higher education, and that is viewpoint diversity. This may seem like a partisan statement, and I would understand if you thought it was so, but it's simply an accurate description of reality.

In our survey—Eric Kaufmann found slightly different things—76% of professors we surveyed voted for either the Liberal Party or the NDP. Only 7.6% voted for the Conservatives. We asked them—because maybe party identification is not the only thing you want to think about—how they would identify politically, on the left or right spectrum, and 88% identified as left-leaning. This is, of course, significantly different from the rest of the population and of a category of magnitude that is unlike any other kind of diversity concerns that higher education is currently concerned about.

It might be tempting to dismiss this as a concern only for conservatives. Again, I would understand if some would think that this would be the case, and certainly there are consequences for conservatives. They reported in our survey high rates of self-censorship, finding the workplace to be a hostile workplace and a whole host of problems. I should say that we also found that centrists, sometimes even left-leaning scholars, particularly feminist scholars who thought about biological sex as a really important category, also reported great concerns about political discrimination, so it's not just a right/left concern.

However, I want to suggest to you that it is not a partisan concern. It's a concern that matters towards the purpose of higher education as a truth-seeking and truth-validating research enterprise. I think the lack of viewpoint diversity significantly damages the purpose of higher education, which I greatly support.

How does it do this in practice? Well, first of all, it just reduces the effectiveness of peer review. John Stuart Mill said, “He who knows only his own side of the case knows [very] little”. Peer review is supposed to give you the best criticisms by the most knowledgeable people who are going to be most critical of your work. You don't have to change your mind just because you face that criticism, but you will know your side and be much more robust by knowing that. The fact is that a university higher education sector that is so devoid of divergent opinions prevents this from happening.

There are other concerns. Self-censorship makes this even worse. The small numbers of conservatives among the academics who are there reported to us that almost half of them were too frightened to have their colleagues even know their politics. Their ability to actually effectively do peer review, especially in the social sciences and humanities, is greatly diminished.

This leads to what some social psychologists call “reputational cascades”. This is a process whereby information that is untrue—or at least partial or inaccurate—can be accepted in certain groups as accurate if those who have alternative viewpoints don't speak up and aren't able to speak up. This is a major concern.

It also brings us to another problem, which is that an institution that lacks viewpoint diversity, in the way that higher education does, also leads to the possibility of group polarization. Group polarization is a well-known phenomenon whereby in groups, small or large, where many people already think alike, the absence of divergent opinions makes everyone's individual opinion—which may be more moderate—after processes of discussion and assessment, even more radical at the end, because they're not facing opinions and corrective discussions. It's a serious concern. Ironically, the current EDI policies in the tri-council agencies and in the Canada research program might actually be making it worse. To the extent to which diversity statements are required, these act as a kind of political statements.

I did hear Professor Kerr talking about the importance of diversity and having different perspectives in the research, and I fundamentally agree with what he was saying, but diversity statements ask for certain kinds of understanding of diversity and certain politicized ways of understanding diversity. It's not about eliminating discrimination. It's about having a very politically partisan idea of what EDI means. If you don't have those particular kinds of terms in your assessment, then it's very possible that you'll be rated lower and weeded out. You either have to lie on your assessment or risk not getting funding.

● (1705)

What's more, the other problem is that often programs that are meant to attract equity-deserving groups or under-represented groups come paired not just with a desire to improve those groups but—and I'm not sure how much this reaches this level—with certain kinds of other qualifications, so things like a position or funding might be advertised for someone who has a commitment to, say, decolonization or anti-racist pedagogy. I've seen these in ads for a whole bunch of things, and these are political statements—

The Chair: I'm sorry. We're over our time, but you can elaborate in the question period.

We will now turn to Professor Pardy.

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

Mr. Bruce Pardy (Professor of Law, Queen's University, As an Individual): Thank you.

Madam Chair and members of the committee, you may be familiar with *The Big Bang Theory*—not the explosion, but the TV sitcom. It's about four scientist nerds who work at a research university. In one episode, they argue with the university president, who says to them, “Let me ask you something. What do you think the business of this [university] is?” “Science?” one of the science nerds replies. “Money,” the president snorts.

In Canada, the business of universities isn't just money; it's government money. The business of Canadian universities, in large part, is to get their hands on as much government money as they can. They have become chronic welfare recipients that, like the CBC, are dependent on government largesse with no prospect of becoming self-sustaining. These are deep black holes into which gobs of money disappear.

If you are a young professor today, your university probably doesn't care so much about your work. It cares more about whether you get federal grants. From every grant, universities skim a cool chunk off the top—like 40%. To get the grant, you must pitch research that the granting councils like, and universities have whole departments of administrators dedicated to getting their academics to pitch the research in a way that will please the people holding the purse strings.

Federal research money corrupts the intellectual enterprise of universities. My academic colleagues and I are among the many Canadians feeding at the public trough. The public sector is 40% of this country's economy. That's not sustainable. It's one of the many reasons this country is becoming poor. He who pays the piper calls the tune. Government money always comes with strings—ideological strings, political strings. The way to have politically neutral research is not to have government granting agencies.

You are studying whether to reform federal research funding. Don't reform it; abolish it. Get rid of it. Universities fall under provincial jurisdiction. Please stop interfering. Please stop taking money from truck drivers and cashiers and giving it to elite institutions. Please stop corrupting the intellectual enterprise. Please stop requiring and funding discrimination against white people, Asian people and men. Please stop dictating how research is done and by whom. Please get federal money out of the business of Canadian universities.

Thank you very much.

● (1710)

The Chair: Thank you for that opening statement.

Now we will turn to Dr. O'Donnell.

The floor is yours for your opening statement of five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Daniel O'Donnell (Professor of English, University of Lethbridge, As an Individual): Good afternoon, members of the committee.

My name is Daniel O'Donnell, and I teach Old and Middle English as well as digital humanities at Iniskim, or the University of Lethbridge.

I'm delighted to be appearing before the Standing Committee on Science and Research to share my views.

[*English*]

I will continue in English, since this is my first time at this committee.

Just over a decade ago, Italian researcher Domenico Fiormonte published an article in the journal Historical Social Research, focusing on what he called an “Anglo-American hegemony”, which he believed controlled access to the most prominent journals, conferences and standards in the then fast-growing discipline of the digital humanities.

The discipline of the digital humanities was and remains today a key driver in applying computation to cultural, social and political problems. It's the field that first modelled Michelangelo's *David* in 3D, contributed to some of the most important mechanisms for processing texts with computers, and helped develop the standard character encodings that allow us to use computers in languages other than English.

Today, researchers in the digital humanities are at the cutting edge of cultural applications in artificial intelligence, big data, and the critical examination of how infrastructure shapes the questions we ask about ourselves. If it's the job of scientists to solve problems and if it's the job of humanists to problematize solutions, then digital humanists end up doing both. They develop cutting-edge tools, and they also offer technologically literate critiques of those same solutions when they fall short or require improvement.

This brings me to the motion before your committee. Fiormonte's claim that there was an “Anglo-American hegemony” in the leadership of the global digital humanities was, in fact, incorrect. To the extent that there was a small group of scholars leading the field's most important organs and projects, those people were neither British nor American. They were Canadian. In fact, there were as many francophone Canadians on Fiormonte's list as there were British people. Just as importantly, these Canadians were not based at the usual suspects, our big U15s such as the University of Toronto, McGill, UBC, or the University of Alberta. Instead, they came from smaller U15s or francophone U15s like McMaster and Université de Montréal, and especially from smaller comprehensive research universities such as Victoria, Guelph and my own university, the University of Lethbridge.

I flag this because, as the Bouchard report suggests, Canadian researchers, especially from smaller comprehensive research universities, have lost a lot of ground since Fiormonte wrote his article. At that time, Canada was second only to the U.S. in its number of digital humanities centres. Today, we're nowhere close to third or fourth place.

Our researchers, too, have moved. The U15s now dominate Canadian digital humanities, largely because they have the resources to attract talent from the smaller ones. Of the eight Canadians on Fiormonte's list in 2012, six have been recruited by U15 institutions, and only two remain at smaller universities as Canada research chairs. I, too, was on the list and was recruited, having been offered a job at the University of Saskatchewan, although I had to turn it down for personal reasons.

I stayed at the University of Lethbridge because it once supported my SSHRC-funded research on scanning early medieval crosses in 3D and my work as the chair of the Text Encoding Initiative, a major international computing standard. However, even as we speak today, I am in discussions about moving a major SSHRC-funded textual project and the associated graduate student to a U15, because we no longer have the resources at the University of Lethbridge to create a position for the adjunct who brought us the project in the first place.

In preparing my remarks, I reviewed testimony from my colleagues Vincent Larivière of the Université de Montréal and Dena McMartin, my own vice-president of research, and both emphasized the importance of understanding excellence in the broadest sense as a question of capacity rather than competition.

In “'Excellence R Us': university research and the fetishisation of excellence”, an article I co-wrote with a number of colleagues from the U.K., Australia and Canada, we argued that national research capacity is far more important to research success than a narrow focus on identifying winners and losers. This is particularly true when it comes to developing the kind of knowledge reservoir the Bouchard report describes as having been critical in the global response to COVID, and I would argue it underpins our societal developing consensus and developing understanding of things like marriage equality 20 years ago, gender equity and systemic bias. Much of the reservoir is filled at global universities, like my daughter's alma mater of Harvard or mine of Toronto and Yale, but universities like Lethbridge, Guelph and Victoria also play a critical role.

● (1715)

Our system is one that has been great, historically, at fostering research across the country, rather than concentrating it in a few elite locations, which is perhaps a uniquely Canadian form of research excellence. As DH over the last 10 years demonstrates, we are now beginning to lose that advantage.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but that's the end of your time.

Dr. Daniel O'Donnell: There's no problem. My main point was made. Thank you.

The Chair: Hopefully you will get to elaborate through our questions.

Thank you all for your opening remarks.

We'll now open the floor to questions. Please be sure to indicate to whom your questions are directed.

We'll ask MP Viersen to start off for the first six minutes, please.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here and online.

I just wanted to start with Mr. Dummitt. You published the report "The Viewpoint Diversity Crisis at Canadian Universities" a little while ago, in 2022. I'm just wondering what your experience was in producing that report. It's an interesting report. I'm just wondering if you could elaborate a little bit, not even necessarily on the results of the report, but just on your experience of producing it.

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: Sure. Ironically, in doing the research, simply asking professors what their political viewpoints were and what their attitudes towards diversity were was difficult in and of itself. In fact, we faced a kind of online campaign from other federally funded scholars to shut down the research. They contacted our universities and our ethics board. We had to pull back the funding. We had to go through a whole other process and we had to go through ethics to double-check it, because our universities were so frightened of the blowback from simply asking pretty simple questions about essentially who people voted for, what their politics were and what they thought about EDI in a general way.

It was an example of why research by political minority scholars is just really hard to do.

● (1720)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I'm not quite sure of the term that you used, but you talked about a waterfall effect or an exponential growth.

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: It was a cascade.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Do you see any way of self-correcting that without perhaps using the exact tools that we're somewhat concerned about here?

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: What I was trying to get at when I was talking about reputational cascades—and you had an esteemed witness before who was talking about the natural sciences—is that I think the research in the social sciences and humanities is just fundamentally different here.

Let's say you're trying to research something like the effectiveness of harm reduction. We know that people on the political spectrum psychologically just have different makeups. When you're going to assess what the costs of harm reduction are, and why it would work or why it wouldn't work, you want people in the room who are doing research on that topic to come from the full diversity of perspectives in order to really fundamentally assess that. When you don't have that, the danger is that you get certain stories told, certain bullet points, that are accepted within academic disciplines as true, as operating assumptions, and they just haven't been tested. It's due to this kind of cascade of untested information.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: You mentioned political loyalty tests and how they either self-select or self-censor.... There are folks who are self-censoring. Could you elaborate on that a bit more and perhaps point out how, if it's from your side, you might be blind to the fact that it's even a political test?

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: Thanks. I didn't get a chance to really say that effectively.

Things like diversity statements, in expecting a certain kind of language, are a classic example of systemic discrimination. They pretend to be neutral; they ostensibly are neutral. They just want diversity. However, they have expectations that an applicant is going to describe it in a way that fits a certain political standard approach to that.

There is a diversity of ways of thinking about how you create a society so that discrimination is not there. When you have expectations to include these things.... As I was saying, when you expect candidates to have a commitment to say something like "decolonization", no one working in the field of decolonization is a conservative, so ostensibly it's a neutral claim, but it's really a political litmus test. It's a systemic discrimination that's built into the way this thing works.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: That's interesting.

Mr. Pardy, would you be interested in commenting on any of this as well?

Mr. Bruce Pardy: I completely agree with Chris. The political strings are as he describes, inevitably so.

Now, you can change the nature of the strings, and that would be an improvement, I suppose, to encourage viewpoint diversity, for sure. We have the problem that he is identifying. There is no question about that, but if you keep it and just reform it, then you're going to just get different kinds of strings.

For my money, the problem is having the overseers with the power to direct the activities of both individual researchers and the universities themselves. These programs require conformity of a type, not just from the applicants but from the institutions. They have requirements for EDI action plans on behalf of the institutions. In order to qualify for Canada research chairs, for example, you have institutions complying with tri-council documents. That means that the whole institution is driven by the political ideological agenda that is embedded in the tri-council programs.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Can you talk about any countries that you know of around the world that are doing...? Can you give us an example that we could have a look at and say, "Hey, these folks are doing it well"?

Mr. Bruce Pardy: What would it be an example of? If you're asking me what my preference is—

● (1725)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes.

Mr. Bruce Pardy: —it's for a country that doesn't do this.

Governments call their handouts "investments". The government is claiming to make "investments" in the CBC. It's not an investment; it's a handout. An actual investment is something that you get an actual return on, a concrete return. It's that you invested this much and that you got this much return for it. That's not the way the government calculates its investments.

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

We're going to the next questioner now. Our next questioner is MP Chen.

You have six minutes.

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

I'll start with my first question for Professor Pardy.

You spoke about universities skimming 40% off the top of the money that is given through federal grants to students—

Mr. Bruce Pardy: It's not students, no.

Mr. Shaun Chen: It's not students. Okay, help me understand. Maybe you could explain a bit further what you meant by that.

Mr. Bruce Pardy: When a researcher gets a tri-council grant for doing some kind of research, there are policies in place so that money comes off that grant to cover overhead costs. That's the rationale: that there are overhead costs, that you're doing the research at this institution and that, therefore, the institution needs a cut in order to cover the overhead costs.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Are these researchers doctoral students, or are you talking about researchers who are not students?

Mr. Bruce Pardy: No, they're not necessarily students. Sometimes they're faculty. Often they're faculty. This is a way—

Mr. Shaun Chen: However, it does include students. Is that right?

Mr. Bruce Pardy: If the students are included in the research grant, it does, sure.

The point—

Mr. Shaun Chen: We heard from folks from SSHRC and NSERC at our last committee meeting, so I'm just trying to understand how it works.

In terms of, for example, a SSHRC doctoral fellowship that goes to a student or an NSERC postgrad scholarship, these are monies that flow through from the granting agencies. You're saying that 40% of that, off the top, would go toward university overhead.

Mr. Bruce Pardy: To be clear, I'm not saying that it's always 40%. I'm not saying that it's the same at every institution. I'm not saying that it's the same for fellowships as opposed to faculty research grants. My point is that these research grants are a way to funnel money to the institutions, as well as to the individual researchers.

In other words, don't believe that this is just a government-to-individual researcher relationship. The universities have an interest in their faculty getting research grants because it affects the universities' bottom lines. They are very anxious to get their hands on this money in some way, and that's why they're so interested in their own faculty getting the grants, as I alluded to.

In some places, it gives the appearance of the universities being more interested in whether or not their faculty get grants than in the work they actually do. It's all about the money.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Got it.

You're a professor of law at Queen's. You mentioned in your testimony that you don't want to see the continuation of research being dictated to scholars in terms of what research and by whom. Could you share, in your experience, how the government or the tri-council agencies have been dictating the type of research that you've encountered in your work as a professor?

Mr. Bruce Pardy: At some of these universities, it is a common thing to have, for example, seminars or meetings for academics to come and hear from people who know how to angle, frame and write research proposals so that they will receive a favourable response from the people at the granting agencies—the councils, the peer reviewers and so on—and so that they will succeed in their attempt to get hold of research funding. In other words, it is not enough.... In an ideal world, you would get a researcher who says that they want to investigate X. They write down what they want to investigate and hand it in. That's not the way it works.

The way it works is, how am I going to get the grant? Who is there? What are their criteria? What's their background? Who's going to be evaluating me? Who can I get for a peer reviewer? I'm then going to craft it so that the thing works successfully. That is all caused by the carrot of the money.

Mr. Shaun Chen: You are speaking of peer review.

Let me turn to Professor Dummitt.

You also mentioned the effectiveness of peer review or lack of it. Given the shortfalls that you've identified in the peer review process, what would you suggest as the alternative?

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: I think the alternative is for federal funding agencies and other institutions to really begin to think about viewpoint diversity and to put it on their radar when they're thinking about diversity.

I'm a big believer in peer review. I think peer review at its best should give us robust, better and more accurate information and scholarship, but I think we have a significant problem in higher education with a lack of viewpoint diversity. It's that lack of diversity that hampers or really diminishes the ability of peer review to work.

● (1730)

Mr. Shaun Chen: You mentioned half of academics being fearful of having their politics known. One of the concepts in qualitative research is reflexivity, where, in proposing a research study, a researcher would situate themselves in terms of their experiences and any assumptions or beliefs. I think everyone would agree that research is biased, so it's important to reflect on one's positioning.

If that is the case, do you believe that even in that respected way of conducting research and positioning oneself as a researcher, people are still afraid of situating their political views?

The Chair: Give a quick answer, because it's a little over time.

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: The quick answer is that those processes of self-reflection don't really work effectively when done by individuals. They work best when done by institutions and groups where other people are best able to call you out on what your biases are.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now turn to MP Blanchette-Joncas for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you to the witnesses joining us for this second hour of our meeting.

Mr. Dummitt, you and 38 of your colleagues submitted a joint brief to the committee on May 24, 2024, as part of its study on the distribution of research funding among post-secondary institutions. In the brief, you raise concerns about DEI criteria, pointing out that DEI policies often punish small institutions and under-represented regions.

Can you explain how these policies hurt researchers at institutions that are far from large centres?

What adjustments would you recommend to make more room for those researchers while preserving academic excellence?

[*English*]

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: In that brief, what we were concerned about was the way in which.... The regulatory burden on universities to meet these criteria is quite significant. It's one thing if you're the University of Toronto. My colleague here was just speaking about Lethbridge. I teach at Trent University. It's a great institution, but it just doesn't have the administrative ability to do that.

I would say, in another sense, that it also makes the questions about meeting DEI criteria really difficult. When your university is very small—this literally just came up at a research policy meeting last week, meeting these criteria—having one position has a huge impact on the overall percentage of these things.

The lack of flexibility around these things—around the criteria—just poses a huge burden at a place like Trent and, I'm assuming, at a place like Lethbridge, which it just wouldn't pose at the University of Toronto.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Some institutions, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, announced that they would no longer ask candidates applying for faculty positions to write diversity statements. Is that a step in the right direction?

Would genuine diversity within universities raise the quality of the research and teaching?

[*English*]

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: I think there's a big distinction to be made between including diversity in research design, making sure your research design is accurate and effective.... Like the previous witness, Professor Kerr, was saying, it's fundamentally important to think about how that affects research design. However, it's an entirely different matter the way diversity statements are included. They expect a certain kind of language, which acts as a political loyalty test. For example, if one were to talk about the importance of a merit-based, blind assessment, like Professor Kaufmann did, that would be a signal to people assessing that research that wouldn't even have to come up in a meeting but could significantly affect their scoring on the application. Nothing would be said about someone's partisan political beliefs, but everyone would know where someone was coming from, and it could significantly reduce their chances of getting funding.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: According to reporter Erin Anderssen, scientists are polarized. They alienate each other on the basis of their respective principles. If they don't think the same way, they don't talk to one another. In other words, they don't communicate with one another. It has been shown, however, that when researchers with opposing views collaborate, it sparks debate, fuels ideas and leads to advances in science that can make a difference. It improves productivity.

With that in mind, how can we create and support a uniform environment that fosters academic freedom if we threaten to withhold research funding when people do not comply with requirements such as DEI statements?

That is counterproductive to science and research in Canada, don't you think?

● (1735)

[*English*]

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: Am I optimistic that something can be done? No.

Is there something that can be done? I think you can factor this into a whole host of things in institutional higher education funding. Make those research funding decisions really based on the research. If there's a political officer in the room assessing the politics of these things, ensure that they're thinking more than about party politics, that they're thinking about the small-p political elements that will enter into research funding decisions, especially in the humanities and social sciences. It's not about someone saying, “I don't like that person, because they're a Liberal or a Conservative.” That's not the issue. It's about the under-guiding cultural assumptions that operate in certain groups. When an institution is, as we found, almost 90% made up of people from certain political perspectives, it is impossible that that organization is not going to be troubled by these concerns and biases.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Mr. Dummitt, some researchers argue that adopting DEI policies could limit academic freedom because it puts restrictions on the selection of research projects. Do those potential restrictions worry you, as well?

What can be done to ease those tensions?

[*English*]

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: In particular, I think there should be a lot of research about DEI. I know just this week there was a research report out of a U.S. institute that talked about the incredibly counterintuitive, negative implications of certain kinds of DEI training. The report was...that this didn't get reported in The New York Times, because it fell offside. I think that kind of thing is happening for researchers in Canada all the time. They would be reluctant to take on this research.

I'm a full professor. It's a lovely job. It's tenured, and it's a great thing. However, if I were recommending to a young graduate student who wanted to come into the field, I would absolutely not recommend that they take a position that is critical of DEI. They would be guaranteeing that they wouldn't get research funding and they wouldn't get a job.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Is there any evidence or science showing that DEI policies lead to less bias and bring about changes in behaviour?

[*English*]

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: Well, you're slightly going beyond my expertise, so I'll just say that right at the outset.

I am a member of a U.S.-based organization called Heterodox Academy, which is really committed to universities as non-partisan, truth-seeking institutions. They've done a lot of research out of that institution that talks about the ineffectiveness of DEI, and a host of different kinds of DEI training, in actually reducing discrimination. There is some evidence, as I understand it, that some kinds of training can actually make things worse and can lead to worse climates. I won't pretend to be an expert on that, but I know of research on it.

The Chair: We're out of time, in any case. Thank you.

Now we turn to MP Cannings for six minutes.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Dr. O'Donnell, you gave the example of digital humanists and the funding they've been getting and how it has shifted over the years. You're from a smaller institution, the University of Lethbridge, but you're saying more of it is going to U15 universities now. Is there any logical explanation for that, other than some bias towards big research universities? The usual thing we hear in this committee is that U15 universities have bigger, better infrastructure. I'm wondering if, maybe, the digital world of digital humanists...the “digital” part has become more complex and expensive. What's your explanation for that?

Dr. Daniel O'Donnell: Well, it's actually very much tied, I think, to the discussion of viewpoint diversity that we're having here. The idea that, 15 years ago, digital humanities were being, essentially, run out of smaller universities.... It was not just a Canadian thing. If you look at the universities in the States, for example, the most dominant universities in digital humanities were in places like Nebraska, not at Yale. One reason for that was the ability and freedom to experiment, which you had in smaller universities at the time.

I think the reason things changed is not that we're losing at tri-agency.... I'm in the humanities. I'm an English professor. I have had over a million dollars in grants during my career—which, for a humanist, is not a bad number—but like I said, I have an untenured adjunct professor who became the lead on a 40-year-old project now in digital humanities. Exactly to the point that my colleague was making, she brought it to us as an adjunct. Hiring her in our department in order to keep the five graduate students she brought—this $300,000 grant would increase my faculty complement, in the department that I chair, by about 12%—that's a huge ask compared to the University of Alberta or the University of Toronto.

I think the issue that's really coming.... The bigger universities in digital humanities were behind the curve in the beginning because these are big departments that are, in many fields, fairly consensus-based, and it was the smaller departments, where you had a bit more intellectual freedom to pursue things quickly and early, that developed the field. However, it's much easier for a big university to play catch-up, and it's absolutely the case that a big university is never going to lose an insight grant because they can't create a position for somebody. I think that's where it's coming.... It's not even the size of the equipment that you have; it's the scale.

Ironically, smaller universities.... The description of how block grants or how grant overhead is paid earlier is not anything that I am aware of. Normally, what happens in Canada is that you get a block grant that's given to your university based on your success in funding. I think that about $7 million is the tipping point. Below that, you get less money, and you also don't get a percentage the same way as you would at a big university, when it really should be the other way around because the cost of maintaining a grant at a small university in relation to the overall size of the pot is massively different.

● (1740)

Mr. Richard Cannings: Mr. Pardy, you basically talked about defunding universities, university research. The business of universities, you said, is getting government money. You said they're “chronic welfare recipients”. This “corrupts” the university enterprise and whoever “pays the piper calls the tune”, with all the strings attached. I guess I'm left wondering where universities should go for this funding, then, and how that will stop the corruption.

Mr. Bruce Pardy: Well, I think we should start with the division of powers in the Canadian Constitution. Education, including higher education, is a provincial matter of jurisdiction. I don't understand why the federal government is involved in this. Surely, it's—

Mr. Richard Cannings: I'm sorry to interrupt, but do you think that provincial governments would have fewer strings? I can see there may be different strings if I were applying for funding in Alberta versus British Columbia, for instance—I'm from British Columbia. They might be different strings, but I can't see how that process of what you label "corruption".... I almost get the impression that you're saying it's corruption because you don't agree with the present government here.

Mr. Bruce Pardy: No.

Mr. Richard Cannings: I'm not necessarily a fan of theirs, either, but I don't—

Mr. Bruce Pardy: Just to be clear, though, when I say "corruption", I don't mean brown envelopes of cash under the door.

Mr. Richard Cannings: I know you don't.

Mr. Bruce Pardy: I'm talking about the corruption of the intellectual enterprise, as in the influence that the promise of funding has on the questions that are pursued, and on how they are pursued.

Mr. Richard Cannings: In other words, you're saying that universities should be funded strictly by the provinces.

Mr. Bruce Pardy: Yes, I am, in the same way that I think health care should be funded by the provinces, because health care is a provincial responsibility.

Mr. Richard Cannings: I just don't see the intellectual thing behind all these other things you complain about with the federal government. I don't see that changing under a provincial government. That's all.

● (1745)

Mr. Bruce Pardy: I think the solution is to allow the provinces to work it out for themselves. I might have the same criticism of a provincial government's approach, if they chose something similar.

The point is that it's a provincial responsibility. Why don't you let them work it out? If they put together a program that resembles what we're talking about, I would have criticisms for them, as well, but at least they're within their jurisdiction now.

Mr. Richard Cannings: How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have a minute.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Oh, my goodness. Time flies. Actually, it doesn't fly when you're having fun.

I'll continue on this, then.

You commented how there's 40% taken off the top. That doesn't come off the top if—

Mr. Bruce Pardy: I want to be very clear. I will—

Mr. Richard Cannings: I'm sorry. That was just the start of my question.

It seems as if the universities are eagerly trying to claw in money wherever they can find it. The fact is that government funding of universities has steadily declined over the last 30 or 40 years, so universities are desperate for cash. They're looking for cash wherever they can find it. They upped tuition fees and brought in lots of foreign students so they can get higher tuition fees. They take bigger and bigger chunks off research grants from researchers—not from students.

Again, the only way I can see that being fixed is if the provincial governments—in your view—fund universities at a much higher rate than they are now.

Mr. Bruce Pardy: There are lots of possibilities. I'm not concluding this, but you're assuming—

The Chair: The time is up.

Mr. Bruce Pardy: —that all the universities that exist should exist and expand. They expanded during one period, and now they're finding that, well, maybe they're too big now, because the international students are not there.

On the 40%, I want to be clear that—

The Chair: I'm sorry. That is the time.

We're going to turn to a five-minute round.

We'll start with MP Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you all for being here. Your presentations are greatly appreciated as we start this new study to look at how we can improve excellence.

As you might have heard, in a previous study we did, we were looking at the capstone and aspects of how to take federal funding and delegate that. What I'm hearing around the table, in various ways, are concerns about political biases that might be made as we move forward. Instead, we should be looking at what a scholar's individual merit is and what the quality of the proposed research is. We now talk about issues like EDI or DEI, depending on how we look at it. These are some of the aspects.

I'll go to you, Dr. Dummitt, to start.

What do we do to stop that? What suggestions would you have? How do we resolve this with professors, whether they're applying for these at big universities—the U15—or smaller universities?

Dr. Christopher Dummitt I'm sorry. Can I clarify what you mean? Is it stopping the political discrimination?

Mr. Robert Kitchen: That's correct.

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: The simple answer is this: You need a more diverse higher education sector, which I think is tricky to do. I think there are some reasons why, traditionally, certain kinds of people might be attracted to universities. They might be on the left, generally. I think the ratio is so skewed that it's hard to think other factors aren't involved. I would think that, at a host of levels, there are things you can't do, like job advertisements. But for things you can control, like research funding, you need to think about the way in which certain disciplines contain political assumptions within them and try to open those out to more diverse perspectives.

If you have a field in a funding agency in something like settler colonial studies, it comes with a whole host of political assessments. I mean, I'm fascinated by the history of settler colonial nations, but my perspectives are not welcome in settler colonial studies. If you're advertising a position in that area, it's not really open to diverse perspectives. Whether you're advertising jobs in these fields or advertising research funds, you have to include that kind of small-p political assessment to make sure you have institutional neutrality—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you. I'm sorry for interrupting. I appreciate that.

One suggestion we've had over time and from the reports that have been presented is that basically from a tri-council EDI aspect of policies, they should just be abolished. What are your thoughts on that?

● (1750)

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: Well, I think that's unlikely to happen, but if they're going to exist, then I think they should include the viewpoints there as well. It shouldn't just be the other categories. If I were to reform them, I would have them be based not on the general population levels but on the funnel of applicants.

I understand it. At my university, when we're thinking about our percentage of Canada research chairs, we have to match the percentage of a certain identity group in the general population, regardless of whether the pipeline to provide us those applicants is open and diverse. It just doesn't make sense. That's just bad statistics. You want to look at how many people are there. If they're not there at the Ph.D. level, the problem isn't at our hiring level but why they aren't attracted to this level. Are there barriers further down the line?

I would reform them by thinking about it and not assuming that discrimination is the problem. Where is the problem? Is it discrimination? It might be, but it might be a whole host of factors that are just assumed under the current system.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

Dr. O'Donnell, I can tell you that I had the opportunity to tour the University of Lethbridge this past summer. I was golfing at the golf course right beside it. It's a great university.

We're talking about smaller universities here. Throughout, we're talking about researchers. Those researchers who are making those applications obviously put in a design of what they're doing. They may be looking at post-graduate students working with them. They may be post-doctoral students working. They're funding that. That's part of the agenda they put forward.

What about from the institution's point of view? Obviously, if they're doing research, they're using facilities at that institution. What are the costs to them to pay for using the labs, etc.? Is that a contract that's worked out individually?

Dr. Daniel O'Donnell: No, in Canada it's not. Worldwide, there's basically no research funding, whether it comes from a private institution or a government institution, that doesn't pay overhead. The reason is that the funders are paying for certain research, but the researchers are not building the labs themselves or paying for the heat. The university needs that. Actually, 40% is a bit low in some cases, such as medical. For instance, I have colleagues at UCLA, and 60% is what they can be charged on medical grants.

The universities do need that money. They're supplying me with a lab. They're supplying graduate students with services. That money in Canada, though, is from a tri-agency paid via a block grant. There are various tipping points, but I believe it's $7 million in funding in any one year. If you're above that, you then fall into essentially the category that Toronto and everybody belongs to, but that's quite a hard number to get, even for a university like the University of Lethbridge, with 600 faculty members. We're below that, which means we get kind of a base amount, plus some share of a percentage of the funding that we receive to go to overhead. It pays for the research administration staff. It pays for financial staff and everything.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

The Chair: That was over the time, but I wanted you to fully explain it. That was important.

Dr. Daniel O'Donnell: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll now turn to MP Jaczek for five minutes, please.

Hon. Helena Jaczek (Markham—Stouffville, Lib.): Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses from both panels. This is a fascinating discussion.

Madam Chair, I'd like to go back to the purpose of our study, which is to look at the criteria used in the evaluation of research proposals and whether we would recommend any modifications. I would say that it would have been very helpful if we had started off our study with a really clear idea of what those criteria currently are.

Dr. O'Donnell, you have considerable experience. You've obviously been very successful in your career in achieving research funding. Could you help us and describe what the criteria specifically are that are looked for in an application?

Dr. Daniel O'Donnell: In my experience on funding panels, I've also done a fair bit of adjudication work. I think at SSHRC, I've done everything except for insight grants.

The criteria vary from grant to grant. Partnership grants, for example, which are about developing networks of researchers, will have an emphasis on buy-in from partners and on evidence of contributions. Conference grants will have an emphasis on evidence that there's other money coming in. It really varies from grant to grant.

On the whole, I think it's fair to say that you are adjudicated on capability, which is the evidence you can provide that you are able to deliver the kind of research you're planning to do. You're judged on the intrinsic, domain-specific merit of the research you're proposing to do, the overall research design and aspects like that.

When you're on a panel at SSHRC—which is, again, most of my experience; I've also done the frontiers fund—the criteria are presented to you on a piece of paper, like a restaurant menu, which you have in front of you as you talk. The committee goes around, essentially using this as a rubric. You have multiple readers. They have a discussion at the end. At the very end, once again, they put up a thing on the screen. They divide the categories into these infamous boxes at SSHRC. They ask, essentially, under "capability" or "training of students", which is one that shows up, if it's excellent, good, satisfactory or poor, and the committee has to come to a consensus about that.

● (1755)

Hon. Helena Jaczek: Is there any category in that box that says there's a need for some sort of acknowledgement of diversity, equity or inclusiveness? Is that a category?

Dr. Daniel O'Donnell: It shows up in the new frontiers in research program. That is where I've seen it. It's a tri-agency.... It's not one of the specific agencies. It's a group that goes beyond that. It's interdisciplinary. As part of that, you're asked to indicate how you are supporting, in essence, a diversity viewpoint in terms of creating a space for people who have non-traditional experiences to participate. The place where it really shows up, however, I would say, is in ensuring that you are not inadvertently shutting diversity down. A very common question that shows up is how you are going to create the space so that the people who feel like they are not being heard can report that.

Hon. Helena Jaczek: Thank you.

Dr. Dummitt, do you find that reassuring, to a certain extent? You seem to be very conscious that some people are being excluded.

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: As far as I understand it, when the assessors think about who is excluded or included in the research, they don't include viewpoint diversity in that. They're not thinking about political diversity, so no, I'm not reassured at all.

I think the assessments about whether the research design is good, whether it's interesting or whether it's solid contain a whole host of implicit assumptions. When 90% of the people on that panel—maybe higher in certain fields—are making assessments about merit, interest and how innovative the research design is, if they share political opinions and aren't asked to think about the way in which their assessments are based on their own political assessments, and they don't have people in the room who call them out on that, I'm not reassured at all.

Hon. Helena Jaczek: Would you see the adjudication panel being expanded so that people could bring that viewpoint to the panel?

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: Yes. I think two things. In fairness, I think the question is about having more diverse viewpoints on the panel. If assessments are going to be part of it, I think political viewpoints and viewpoint diversity should really be part of the assessment.

Hon. Helena Jaczek: Is that—

The Chair: I'm sorry.

We'll now turn to MP Blanchette-Joncas for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Dummitt, like a number of your fellow professors, you recommend in your brief to the committee that funding agencies do away with DEI criteria. You also say that applying the criteria can impact social cohesion within universities and institutions.

Can you elaborate on that?

[*English*]

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: I think that, if it doesn't contain viewpoint diversity, DEI is a serious problem. I think it represents problems of social cohesion at the university for those people who want to represent divergent voices. They want to have different opinions.

With regard to someone who wants to do research on, for example, the possible negative impacts of DEI or whether it works, asking that from a perspective that is just genuinely open-minded and doesn't contain certain assumptions, life is difficult for such a person. I think it makes it very difficult at the university for those kinds of projects to get funded and for people to do research.

● (1800)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: You also say in your brief that DEI policies don't have an ultimate goal and that they lack clarity. I would like to hear more about that.

In addition, you say that DEI criteria do not have a clear definable long-term objective.

[*English*]

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: Yes, I think that's definitely the case. Also, I think that if we're going to have DEI criteria, we ought to be really flexible with what they are and who's equity-deserving at any one point in time. We shouldn't be operating on past assumptions.

I teach at Trent University, which is sort of.... Some people say that it's in the north, but I don't think it's in the north. A lot of the most disadvantaged students in my classrooms are white rural kids from backgrounds where people don't have a university education. Those are people who wouldn't be considered equity-deserving by a whole bunch of categories, but they don't fit in at the university. I think we need to be very flexible about what we mean in terms of who deserves special attention and who deserves assistance in higher education.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Are there any other essential points you would like to make in connection with your work on DEI criteria?

[*English*]

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: With regard to viewpoint diversity in general, I would just call on people from different perspectives. I think this really matters. I think Eric Kaufmann mentioned public trust in higher education. I'm not an anti-university kind of person. I love my job. I love the world in which I live. However, I would warn people that the lack of viewpoint diversity does threaten public trust, and I would hate to see Canada go down the route that the U.S. has followed.

The Chair: That's going to be all. We're soon going to be out of resources.

For the last two and a half minutes, the floor is yours, Mr. Cannings.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you.

I'm going to continue on with Dr. Dummitt about this idea of viewpoint diversity. I'm a biologist and an ecologist, and Dr. Kerr was talking about evolution, selection and all that.

As you've been talking, I've just been thinking about the idea of self-selection. When we're young and looking toward what we want to be in life, we make these choices about what interests us.

I guess I have one little anecdote about viewpoint diversity. In my previous life, I sat on a couple of very high-level boards where they needed a biologist, and everybody else was a billionaire or a CEO of a very large company. That was an environment where I kept my politics to my chest because I was clearly not in the majority. There was some very inflammatory language around that table about the NDP, for instance. I wasn't a member of the NDP at the time, but I supported it, and I kept that silent.

However, in my university world, when I was at UBC, the students who came and took my courses chose to study ecology, the environment or whatever. I can see that if you were going into social work, as well. Would you go into social work if...? Even if you had certain views to start, once you worked in that field with underprivileged and lower-income people and saw their struggles, I think you would be selecting for people who would have those political views. I'm just wondering if you could comment on that.

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: I'll try to be quick. I welcome your question. What I like about your question is that you're asking whether there is something aside from discrimination involved here.

Mr. Richard Cannings: Totally.

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: What I wish is that other policies on EDI asked the same question, because I think it's a fair assessment. I think, to a certain extent, there is a self-selection going on here. As to whether it represents the full problem, I don't know.

Mr. Richard Cannings: I think it's huge.

Dr. Christopher Dummitt: I think those same kinds of assessments for people who maybe think slightly differently than I do.... They aren't being asked other questions of diversity in higher education. They need to be asked by people who are also critical of the kinds of assumptions that are operating.

The Chair: That's our time, right on the button. Thank you so much.

Thank you to the witnesses, Dr. Christopher Dummitt, Dr. Daniel O'Donnell and Professor Bruce Pardy, for their testimony and participation in the committee study.

The meeting is adjourned.