



Canadian Brain Research Strategy: Capstone Consultation Submission

INTRODUCTION

Brain conditions, encompassing neurological disorders, brain injuries, mental illnesses, and addictions, affect over 7.5 million Canadians, constituting 1 in 5 of our population. These conditions not only reduce quality of life but also strain families, diminish workforce productivity, and burden our healthcare system.

The [Canadian Brain Research Strategy \(CBRS\)](#) welcomes the government's initiatives in Budget 2024 to modernize and strengthen Canada's research and innovation system. These investments and measures, responding to the report of the [Advisory Panel on the Federal Research Support System](#), will enhance our ability to address the most complex and urgent challenges facing Canadians today, particularly in optimizing brain and mental health for an aging population.

The CBRS is a pan-Canadian effort to develop a national research strategy driven by the conviction that we must foster better neurological and mental well-being for all Canadians. With appropriate structure and governance, the proposed capstone organization stands to significantly advance brain research by coordinating across the federal support system to support multidisciplinary approaches inherent to brain and mental health research. By focusing on our considerable strength in brain and mental health research across the country, the capstone has the potential to solidify Canada's global leadership in brain and mental health research and care. Furthermore, this new framework could empower the Canadian brain research ecosystem to engage more fully in international initiatives and in the global race to translate brain research into new technologies and much-needed healthcare innovations.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

To ensure the effectiveness of the capstone organization, we believe it is crucial to uphold several key principles and guidelines in shaping its design and operation.

1. **The vital role of fundamental research.** While the capstone will administer and oversee the capacity of the research enterprise to address missions, a strong focus on supporting investigator-initiated fundamental research must remain because it forms the bedrock of scientific discovery and innovation. The importance and maintenance of peer-reviewed,



investigator-initiated research supported by the granting agencies must be enshrined in the new structure.

2. **Autonomy of the granting councils.** The unique mandates, independent decision-making processes, and funding priorities aligned with specific research domains of each granting council, including CIHR's institute model, must be preserved. Each council should retain autonomy to cultivate a diverse and adaptable research portfolio. Additionally, independent, empowered and discipline-specific advisory bodies should be maintained for each of the granting agencies in the context of capstone's governance model.
3. **Health research and the health of Canadians.** Both the capstone organization and CIHR must maintain steadfast connections to the Minister of Health and their mandate, as well as connections to the policy imperatives of Health Canada, PHAC, and CFIA. This alignment should be upheld and integrated in all constructs – including the capstone's legislative framework, governance, and leadership decisions – to ensure a cohesive approach to advancing health research and promoting the health and well-being of Canadians.
4. **Facilitating interdisciplinary research.** As scientific fields evolve and challenges grow more complex – such as in brain and mental health research – projects often fall outside or across traditional disciplinary boundaries, making it difficult to fit neatly within the criteria of single granting councils. The capstone organization can play a crucial role in supporting research initiatives that bridge disciplinary gaps, fostering innovative solutions across diverse fields.
5. **Indigenous Knowledges and a holistic approach to health.** Facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration across granting councils within the capstone framework can amplify the impact of Indigenous-led research, particularly in promoting a holistic approach to health and well-being. Honoring and braiding Indigenous Knowledge systems within Canada's research strategies fosters mutual respect and advances shared goals toward health equity and community resilience.
6. **Research integration and application.** The capstone organization should be positioned to strengthen the linkages between basic research, clinical research, and research commercialization for stronger health and economic outcomes. This includes facilitating the transfer of research outcomes into impactful applications by establishing robust frameworks for scaling proven initiatives and ensuring stable funding mechanisms. In doing so, the capstone organization can significantly advance public health and health outcomes nationwide and deliver greater value and results from Canada's investments in R&D.



7. **Coordination and coherence across the system.** The implementation of the capstone organization offers an opportunity to enhance collaboration between the granting councils and other federally funded entities, including third-party organizations.
 - a. **The role of long-term, stable, flexible funding.** Programs like the Canada First Research Excellence Fund (CFREF) exemplify how long-term and flexible funding can amplify the impact of investigator-initiated grants. Canada can achieve transformative advancements in scientific knowledge and innovation by providing stable, non-grant-specific support in coordination with other funding programs. This approach ensures continuity for significant research projects, enabling the pursuit of ambitious goals.
 - b. **Developing research talent through training.** The capstone can facilitate linkages to create robust multidisciplinary training programs that span multiple granting councils. These programs are vital for nurturing the next generation of researchers equipped with transdisciplinary skills essential for tackling complex challenges. Additionally, this approach fosters innovative thinking and problem-solving, enabling transformative research outcomes that address pressing societal needs.
 - c. **Enhancing research infrastructure.** Research infrastructure, including major initiatives funded by the Canadian Foundation for Innovation (CFI), are pivotal for fostering multidisciplinary collaboration and support both mission-driven and investigator-initiated research. Strategic investments in infrastructure maximize the effectiveness of research efforts nationwide by enabling smaller institutions to participate more actively in multidisciplinary and international collaborations through shared resources and expertise.
8. **Sustained investment for federal granting agencies.** The multi-year and ongoing investments earmarked in Budget 2024 for the granting agencies and research talent must flow, even as the new capstone structure, harmonization and governance changes are considered and pursued. Any reallocation of funds within the capstone structure should not detract from these essential investments.
9. **Securing additional budget for capstone projects.** To effectively support mission-driven, multidisciplinary, and international research under the capstone, additional dedicated funding must be allocated. This should exist over and above funds earmarked for investigator-initiated research under the purview of individual councils, ensuring that both types of research receive adequate support.
10. **Independent governance with robust scientific representation** from diverse stakeholders within the research ecosystem, including academia, industry, and not-for-profits, to inform



decision-making processes will be crucial for fostering innovation and advancing national research priorities.

- a. **Scientific leadership of the capstone.** The President of the capstone, responsible for leading strategic goals and daily operations, should possess a strong scientific background to ensure alignment of capstone programming with the scientific capabilities across the ecosystem. The President should not hold concurrent roles as a granting council president or government official in order to maintain independent leadership and unbiased decision-making, which is crucial for the capstone's integrity and effectiveness.
- b. **An independent Board of Directors** should lead governance of the capstone, set priorities, establish strategic directions, evaluate performance, and advise the government on funding allocation for multidisciplinary, mission-driven and international research. Strategic oversight of capstone programs would also be under the board's purview, complementing the roles of ISED and Health Canada.
- c. **An independent external scientific advisory body**, such as the Council on Science and Innovation (CSI), should be appointed with national and international members that enables the research and innovation communities to advise the government on research and innovation priorities and to assess coordination across the support system. The CSI would provide strategic advice on funding to Ministers and complement the policy functions of ISED and Health Canada to support the development of a coordinating national strategy on science, research and innovation.

RISK AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

1. **Secure research funding.** Canada must continue to invest in the federal research support system, including fulfilling the much-needed funding commitments for the granting councils and talent outlined in Budget 2024. Support to the granting councils must grow proportionally to ensure that research funding allocated through the granting councils keeps pace with inflation and enhanced funding for fellowships. This adjustment is crucial, given that the majority of trainees are supported by investigator-initiated grants rather than fellowships, necessitating an increase in grant sizes to maintain equitable support and Canada's global competitiveness in attracting and retaining research talent.
 - a. **Balance of mission-driven and investigator-initiated research.** We must ensure the sustainability and continuity of funding for investigator-initiated research even as the capstone organization comes into place to support mission-driven research. Clear demarcation between the budgets and roles of the capstone and disciplinary councils is essential to maintain support for both areas.



- b. **Mitigating administrative costs.** There is a need to carefully manage administrative costs within the capstone organization to optimize resource allocation and operational efficiency. Streamlining administrative processes and leveraging existing infrastructure will be key to maximizing the impact of research funding without unnecessary overhead.

2. Integrity, autonomy, and effectiveness of Canada's research funding ecosystem

- a. **Scientific excellence and peer review** must continue to be foundational principles that guide research funding, strategic decisions and governance within the new framework, whether it is for investigator-initiated, multidisciplinary, mission-driven, or international research, to ensure the integrity and effectiveness of Canada's research funding ecosystem. Any reforms to this system must be informed by the research community.
- b. **Independent external scientific advisory** from national and international peers, providing non-partisan, independent advice and strategic guidance for the federal research support system, including the capstone organization, is crucial. The advisory CSI indicated in Budget 2024 must be established concurrently with implementation of the capstone organization to ensure integrity, effectiveness, and alignment of the new framework with global best practices.
- c. **Reducing fragmentation of the federal support system** will require the proposed capstone organization to work in tandem with diverse research funding programs, including federal, not-for-profit, and private sector organizations with varying governance structures. Independent oversight and clear strategic guidance from the CSI within a coordinating national strategy on science, research, and innovation could facilitate this integration, providing cohesive direction and fostering collaboration across stakeholders.
- d. **Maintaining health research focus** is crucial for leveraging research and innovation to enhance our healthcare system and improve health outcomes for Canadians. Within the G7, Canada and the US uniquely fund research through health departments, ensuring close alignment with health priorities. Protecting CIHR's distinctive mandate, Institute model, and its close ties to the Minister of Health and Health Canada is crucial. Thoughtful change management will preserve Canada's leadership in health research and enable a seamless transition to broader research and innovation initiatives under ISED that can promote a more integrated approach to health challenges.

3. Accountability and inclusivity in Canada's research support framework

- a. **Ongoing stakeholder engagement** across sectors is vital to identify gaps, mitigate risks, and optimize outcomes during the new organization's establishment. Regular engagement will ensure alignment with diverse stakeholder needs and expectations, crucial given the rapid consultation process and tight implementation timelines.
- b. **Evaluation and public reporting.** It is essential to establish clear key performance indicators (KPIs) that prioritize coordination and collaboration outcomes, and to evaluate and publicly report on the impact of the capstone organization and overall support for and performance of science, research, and innovation in Canada. This should include international benchmarking in addition to the key metrics, and be reported annually or biennially.
- c. **Indigenous research partnership.** Meaningful consultation and collaboration with Indigenous researchers and leaders are paramount in shaping the proposed research framework, given the capstone's multidisciplinary mandate and the importance of braiding a holistic approach into Canada's health research strategies. Beyond appointing Indigenous representation on advisory bodies, it is crucial to establish formal mechanisms for ongoing, meaningful engagement with Indigenous researchers, Knowledge Keepers, and community leaders throughout the framework's development and implementation phases.

CONCLUSION

The Canadian Brain Research Strategy welcomes the development of a capstone organization designed to strengthen and modernize Canada's scientific ecosystem and, in doing so, better address the most urgent challenges facing Canadians today.

CBRS appreciates being consulted on behalf of its leadership which represents 40 neuroscience and mental health institutes and major programs across the country, Indigenous Knowledges Holders, and patient representatives and advocates. Additionally, more than 50 organizations across sectors of the brain research ecosystem have contributed to building our national strategy, including organizations that fund brain research (federal and provincial granting agencies, non-profits, health charities, and private foundations); knowledge mobilization, health, and community service organizations; industry partners; and professional societies of neuroscientists and clinicians.

Having brought together these diverse entities, we recognize the transformative potential of the capstone to create a cohesive research framework that can harmonize efforts across various sectors. In a modernized federal support system with robust linkages between basic and clinical



research, alongside enhanced research commercialization, the advancement of brain and mental health research promises to catalyze breakthroughs that elevate the health, resilience, and prosperity of all Canadians.

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