

2020 CAP VIRTUAL CONGRESS - NSERC Update – JUNE 8

Summary of Q&A

The session started at 10:50 a.m. EDT with a welcome from Program Chair, Manu Paranjape and the CAP President, Shohini Ghose. Dr. Ghose introduced Dr. Elizabeth Boston, Director, Mathematical, Environmental, and Physical Sciences, and Dr. Sara Ellison, Physics Evaluation Group Chair, who presented the information in the updated slides available at

https://indico.cern.ch/event/914602/sessions/349128/attachments/2051449/3449101/Revised-NSERC_update_CAP_Plenary_Session_June_8_2020.pdf

The Q&A session was moderated by Dr. Ghose and lasted until 11:40 a.m. EDT.

Before the Q&A session began, Dr. Ghose offered a big thank you to the McMaster Local Organizing Committee (LOC). They were the committee at McMaster University where the 2020 in-person CAP Congress was supposed to be held and had done an excellent job in preparing for the Conference which, unfortunately, had to be cancelled in the 11th hour of preparation. This dedicated group were still able to play a huge role in making all of this happen. Dr. Ghose then showed the participants at this meeting the bell that she rings in thanks to all of the extraordinary support groups during these challenging times and noted that she will ring her bell louder for the McMaster LOC.

With that the Q&A was started. Questions were invited for either Dr. Boston or Dr. Ellison.

Question: The NSERC AITI program for Colleges' deadline is not updated on the NSERC site. Is there any update on the site?

[Elizabeth Boston]: I am sorry; I don't know about the colleges AITI deadline. I'll get back to you.

Question: If a grant was in the "one year extension" period (as of April 1), but was using the remaining \$ for student support, will that grant be eligible to apply for the "indirect student support" supplement?

[Elizabeth Boston]: I don't believe so. The funding is just for the active grants; ones that actually received an installment in that year. That's my understanding.

Comments about challenges we are facing in the community: "Difficulties in recruiting HQP, especially international"; "Difficulties associated with users of national and international facilities given travel restrictions"; "Difficulties doing any experimental work during the shutdown of course and in the longer term work involving human participants will be delayed even longer". I am wondering if you heard that from other communities.

[Elizabeth Boston]: Yeah, for sure. One of the things we are hoping to do is gather as many examples and impacts as possible, because coming to the next competition, the longer term future competitions, we are going to have to figure out a way of allowing people to describe the impacts of COVID-19 on their research activities and then also figure out how to deal with that in peer review and account for that in peer review. This is over and above the regular delays we have been dealing with over the last number of years. So that is going to involve some education on our parts as well.

Question: Please clarify the one-year extension. If someone was receiving a grant that ended March 31, 2020, and got a new five-year discovery grant April 1st 2020, will the old one extend for a year and then the new five-year one for five years after that or will the new one last only four more years?

[Elizabeth Boston]: All the announcements that have been made with respect to active grants will apply to the new grant. So, if your grant starts on April 1st 2020, then towards the end of that grant, you will be allowed to say whether you want the one-year funding extension; i.e. you will have an option to extend to 6 years if you wish. But obviously, an invitation will only come toward the end of the grant, in five-years time. That grant will also be eligible to receive a supplement for COVID-related delays for students; that funding should roll out by September 30th.

Comment regarding challenges: “People who have a greater care-taking role such as children, elder care, etc. and people with disabilities who are not able to access health care services are facing greater challenges to research progress, particularly women”. I heard this from several other sources as well, so I’d like to emphasize this point.

[Elizabeth Boston]: Yes. One of the things that we are definitely looking at is the EDI impacts; the differentiated impacts among the different groups of people. You know there may be some people who are being especially productive during this time. But there are definitely other groups – those who are having to look after other people, or in the types of circumstances you just described, who will see some significant delays.

The other thing we are noting is different regions are reopening at different times; so some people might be able to get to the lab much more quickly than other people who are still in shut-down. Accounting for all the differences across the country -- the regional and institutional differences -- is something that we are going to have to be quite sensitive to in the future.

Question: So just to follow-up on that, when you say “being sensitive”, one aspect of course is providing the extensions as well as all of these new

programs and funding possibilities. The bigger question is how are you going to deal with evaluating grant applications given that we are going to see this difference. Is there any sense of what can be done at NSERC?

[Elizabeth Boston]: Well, we are just starting to think about that. The first thing we are doing is gathering information about all of the possible things that are going on. We have received some great input here. We have also been trying to think about all of the potential areas where institutions and researchers might need to spend additional money as they return back to the lab; for example, replacing equipment and supplies, re-recruiting human subjects, rescheduling travel, all these various things.

Once we've gathered all those potential impacts and delays, then the next step is to figure out how we are going to account for them in peer review. We have a working group set up at NSERC right now to start working on that and hopefully by the time of the full application deadline, there will be some advice to applicants on how to account for that in their applications. As well, we'll be working with peer review committee members on how to take that into account as we go into the 2020 competition.

Also, you will understand from the announcement that we made about the extensions to current awards, we are expecting a large number of potential applicants for the 2021 competition to take up that extension. In light of this, the 2021 competition is probably going to be quite a bit smaller than our regular competition and so will probably focus on early career researchers, those who don't currently hold a grant and then probably a relatively small number of people who have declined the funding extension and choose to apply for a grant renewal instead. So, I anticipate that we will, hopefully, have a little bit more space and time to accommodate that extra information. We are figuring that out. It's going to be a big change for us.

Question: So as you do figure that out, researchers are also going to have to figure out also whether we should get that extension or wait another year, whatever is optimal for us. It would be useful for us to be given some information to help us make that decision; for example, how much smaller will it be ...

[Elizabeth Boston]: That is actually a slight misunderstanding. If it is a smaller competition it does not necessarily mean there is going to be more money available, because we have to fund everybody who is taking the extension.

Our main goal is to make sure that [applications will be peer reviewed based on policies and guidelines that are in line with previous years](#) and final outcomes will be based on the quality of the applications received.

So that's our goal and we will have to figure out how to do that within the budget that we have available.

Question: Concerning the 4-month extension for NSERC scholarship holders: what constitutes their eligibility (apart from not getting CERB etc)? Will they have to write a justification for why they need the extension?

[Elizabeth Boston]: I understand that there is some form of attestation required and that it will apply to a particular time frame of grants. I believe that this applies to students whose scholarship is finishing between March and August and that they will have to attest that they need the funds and aren't receiving funding from other government sources. I think the plan is to contact all those students to tell them how they should be asking for the funds. In the meantime, if you go to the announcement of that particular initiative on the NSERC website, there is a link to an FAQ there.

Question: Will additional money on PPE and the disinfection of equipment be allowed?

[Elizabeth Boston]: I believe that those costs currently ought to be eligible under an individual's discovery grant; they have been deemed to be an eligible cost. Whether additional funding can be made available – I haven't seen anything about that for individual grants. I think the purpose of the \$450M that was announced by the Prime Minister is to provide funding for the maintenance and ramp-up of research activities, I believe that those kinds of costs could be addressed through that institutional fund. We're still waiting to hear more details about that.

Question: This has nothing to do with COVID-19. Will NSERC start taking account of publication charges for journals in their funding (many journals, especially online ones now charge).

[Elizabeth Boston]: So it's an eligible cost under the grant, as you probably know, and while many of the online journals have publication fees, our open access policy doesn't require publication in an open access journal. I think there are many ways of adhering to the open access policy by making the publication openly accessible that doesn't require publishing in an online journal that requires you to pay. So right now, I don't think we have the funding to increase the grants to account for those costs, but I would just urge you to seek out other venues that maybe allowing you to make your article openly accessible without paying the fees.

I think there is more work to be done in that area, in terms of talking to publishers and trying to reduce those costs. I suspect that work has been put on hold for now, at least while we are dealing with the current crisis.

Question: In the 2021 competition, if many people ask for extensions that also means the available funds could be small. How is that fair to applicants?

[Elizabeth Boston]: We can't tell how many applications we will receive, as there is no way for us to tell how many grantees will accept the extensions

offered. However, the same standard of quality assessment will remain the same as previous years. That's going to be our top priority for the next competition.

Question: Will an updated version of the slides presented today be made available?

[Shohini]: Yes. There are couple of extra slides compared to the version posted in Indico prior to the meeting, so those will be updated with this presentation.

Question: Will further updates be forthcoming if a Fall shutdown happens and, if so, via what mechanism?

[Catherine Harrison]: I expect that the information will be posted to the NSERC website as it becomes available.

Question: Are the results of the 2020 NSERC Discovery Grant competition still under embargo or can we announce our award publicly? I noticed that the 2020 DG awards recipients are not yet listed on the NSERC website.

[Elizabeth Boston]: The announcement hasn't been made yet, but I can give an update. In the slide deck I presented, you have the high level results and the results of physics as well.

I believe that there is some flexibility to institutions to publicize their own award; I understand that the restrictions were somewhat lighter than in previous years. The NSERC's stats package, which is our regular summary of the results, along with the Discovery Grants announcement should be posted on the website within the next couple of weeks. Once that is done then, for sure, people can definitely publicize their awards.

But if you go on Twitter and look for NSERC, you will see that a lot of people have already been doing that. Some institutions have already made some announcements on their own websites. So, it's been quite variable this year.

Question: In the 2020 competition, is there information as to what the funding per bin is? And can this be compared to previous years?

[Elizabeth Boston]: I don't think there is any reason why we shouldn't be sharing that to the physics community. It's not something that we normally publish on our main website, but I think we have often shared it in the past at the CAP plenary. I'll follow-up on that and will put that information in an updated version of today's presentation slides for distribution after the meeting.

Question: What impact did the new aspects of EDI have on grants?

[Elizabeth Boston]: The EDI requirements were mainly in the highly qualified personnel criterion. People did have to comment on what they've done in the past, but mainly it was to have a plan going forward to address the EDI challenges that they were facing for their team of highly qualified personnel. It was an interesting

experience for both the applicants and for the peer reviewer. I saw some cases where well-considered responses did have a positive impact on somebody's application to the extent maybe of raising up their score on the highly qualified personnel. There may have been some cases where it maybe pushed them down a little bit.

It was definitely a learning experience for everybody. We are doing a bit of an analysis on how that went and building it into more/better advice for both applicants and peer reviewers in the next competition.

[Sara Ellison]: I think the panel/group evaluation recognized that this is very much a learning experience for our community and so were very understanding of the efforts that people were making. I think that there will be improved material going out to the community next time around, once we have done this kind of analysis. I would really encourage you, when you are writing your grants, to look at all the materials that NSERC provides because there is quite a lot available on their website on this.

Question: When you say that you were very understanding about what was being presented in the applications, does that mean that, for example, if an EDI statement was not satisfactory, that this was not grounds for rejecting the application and not getting funded?

[Sara Ellison]: That's right. In no circumstance would we have nixed a grant for the absence of the EDI statement. It was sort of a small regulating factor. For example, in some cases a very good EDI statement could potentially elevate a borderline case up into the next funding bin. It was not considered a fatal flaw if it was absent.

Question: Doesn't that signal that EDI is an optional extra, which is exactly the opposite of NSERC's claim that EDI is a pillar of everything that we are supposed to be focusing on?

[Sara Ellison]: It's one component of the HQP assessment. There are many components that are judged in concert.

[Elizabeth Boston]: Our Committee on Discovery Research discussed whether or not it should be a go or no-go kind of gating mechanism. It was concluded that it is one of several elements of the highly qualified personnel criterion. So, if somebody rated as very strong was on the borderline with strong, an insufficient statement could have moved them down or equally, if somebody rated strong was on the borderline of very strong, a particularly good statement could have moved them up. So, it did have a moderating impact on those criteria. Many of the evaluation groups, in those cases where they felt that those statements were unsatisfactory, provided some direct feedback to the applicants. A learning process is underway for everybody here.

Question: Will a recording of this meeting be made available?

[Francine Ford]: We had not made any provision for this. A recording was made of the Q&A so that the CAP Office can prepare a summary of the questions and answers for distribution with the updated slides that NSERC will provide to us.

Question: Do I understand correctly that NSERC grad student scholarships will generally not be extended (except those ending this year)?

[Elizabeth Boston]: I think that the interruption or deferment applies to everybody who has an active scholarship. I don't see why it would only apply for people that are ending this year.

The additional funding has the restricted eligibility, but the extension in time applies to them all. I don't see why that would be limited to people whose scholarships just end now.

If anybody has any more questions, please do bring them up, or if you have comments to make.

[Elizabeth Boston]: I am noticing 100 participants¹. That's amazing.

[Shohini Ghose]: It is very exciting. This is actually our first time coming together virtually as a physics community from across Canada. It is lovely to see all of these people on my screen. Thanks to everybody for joining us for the start of the virtual Congress activities. I think it's a good start and I hope we keep seeing hundreds of people joining.

[Elizabeth Boston]: We have a tradition that we have started at our NSERC meetings. For our big meetings, we keep our cameras off during the meeting but right at the end, we open up our cameras so we can see each other and wave.

[Shohini Ghose]: I like that idea. We invite everyone to turn on their cameras now if you wish to do so and wave a greeting. It is great to see everyone! Thank you for coming.

[Elizabeth Boston]: What a great turnout! Thank you to you Francine and the Organizing Committee. It is really hard to put that together on a short notice and I appreciate the opportunity to interact with everybody.

[Shohini Ghose]: With that, we officially close the session and extend our thanks, once again, to Liz and Sara and Catherine. Bye everyone.

¹ A note of apology from CAP Executive Director to registrants for the NSERC Update session who did not make it into the meeting. While we had purchased the large meeting extension for this event, it wasn't properly added to our account and so this session ended up being created with a 100 limit in participation instead of the larger capacity of 500.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION OR TO SUBMIT QUESTIONS TO NSERC:

The best page for additional information is the Discovery Grants program description at: https://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/Professors-Professeurs/Grants-Subs/DGIGP-PSIGP_eng.asp .

Click here for [more information related to COVID-19](#) and here for [associated FAQ](#).

Questions about the Discovery Grant program can be addressed to: resgrant@nserc-crsng.gc.ca . Click here for the [NSERC contact list](#) for questions about their other programs.