

When excellence meets equity: re-imagining research chairs

As the very nature and conduct of research evolves, the policy experiments will no doubt continue for supporting talent, knowledge and discovery. The research chairs remain important, but they are merely one element of the country's expanding ecosystem for knowledge creation and dissemination.



Paul Dufour

Opinion

OTTAWA—"Our government recognizes that when our institutions better reflect the diversity of Canada, science and research are stronger and their impacts on the lives of Canadians are more profound," said Minister of Science and Sports Kirsty Duncan on June 14.

When the minister of science and sport made the announcements of 364 new Canada Research Chair (CRC) recipients in Victoria, B.C., earlier this year, she also issued a strong statement about the changing nature of the chairs program. The principles of EDI (equity, diversity and inclusion) are now applied to the program and institutions supporting the chairs are encouraged to sign off on a new Dimensions Charter adapted from the U.K. committing them to embed the principles of equity, diversity and inclusiveness in their policies, practices, action plans and culture.

We've come a long way from the original concept and rationale behind the CRCs.

Back in 2000, a major issue facing Canada's research support centred on addressing a brain-drain from Canada to the U.S. along with strengthening the country's knowledge eco-system overall (with the Networks of Centres of Excellence, a newly-formed Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Genome Canada, the Canada Foundation for Innovation, and Millennium Scholarships). In support of the brain-drain argument, evidence showed a disconcerting flow of Canadian talent to the south with a concern that these flows

could increase substantially. Action was needed to stem this and make Canadian universities more competitive globally.

When then-prime minister Jean Chrétien made the announcement in December 2000 of the first 195 recipients of 2000 Canada Research Chairs (originally called the 21st Century Canada Chairs for Research Excellence), 15 holders were from outside of Canada. Changes to immigration regulations were made to allow both the chair scholars and their spouses to enter Canada under-facilitated entry procedures. The historic \$900-million set aside in the 2000 federal budget was eventually to support 2000 chairs by 2005.

The original program was designed by a working group that included the granting council presidents, the president of the AUCC (now Universities Canada), the presidents of St. Francis Xavier University, Waterloo and UBC along with the University of Montreal rector and the DM of the then Industry Canada. They spent some time fine-tuning the program design elements including how best to brand the government's investments in university-level R&D and discussing whether to brand simply the institutional arrangements or the person holding the appointment (e.g.; Canada Research Scholars or Canada Research Laureates).

Allocation by discipline and by tier garnered another debate along with the need for a strategic research plan with universities submitting applications for individual chairs. As the chairs were to be

allocated on the basis of the past success of a university attracting eligible funds from the granting councils, an important consideration was to ensure a constant updating of the notional allocation of chairs and a competitive allocation of five per cent of all chairs so as to allow for smaller and mid-sized universities to benefit.

The CRC program has been periodically evaluated, mostly with positive results. More metrics have been added along with the concomitant paperwork. Meanwhile, the lexicon has expanded with Canada Excellence Research Chairs launched in 2008; and another element with Canada 150 Research Chairs to celebrate the country's 2017 anniversary.

The brain-drain arguments may have slipped from view since the origins of the CRCs. Today, the focus should be on providing enhanced opportunities for scholars and young researchers to work abroad as well as bringing more bright minds to Canada from diverse contexts, countries, and cultures.

Canada's research system has been built around the constant tensions of excellence versus equity. It should come as no surprise that there is a healthy debate today as to what academic research chairs represent in their contributions and impacts to knowledge discovery and to the advancement of society. Excellence has met up with equity and diversity as key criteria in this changing context.

As the very nature and conduct of research evolves, the policy experiments will no doubt continue for supporting talent, knowledge and discovery. The research chairs remain important, but they are merely one element of the country's expanding ecosystem for knowledge creation and dissemination.

Paul Dufour is a senior fellow at the Institute for Science, Society and Policy at the University of Ottawa.