



Merit Review Guidelines

Updated October 2016

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide information about the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation (NSHRF) merit review committee structure, roles, processes and procedures.

Merit review is the evaluation of funding applications by a committee of academic experts and other relevant stakeholders with expertise to assess both the merit and potential impact of projects. Reviewers consider the quality, importance and appropriateness of the proposed project, the expertise of the project team, and the likelihood of having a substantive and sustainable impact on related outcomes, practice, programs and/or policy.

The NSHRF's merit review process is completed using an online [Grants Management System](#) (GMS). Applicants submit applications in GMS and committee members access GMS to assess their expertise and conflict of interest, read applications, submit reviews, and enter scores.

Committee Membership

Roles and Responsibilities

Membership of the merit review committee aims to ensure there are reviewers with appropriate expertise for all applications.

Merit review committee membership must strive to:

- Provide expertise in content, program delivery and project methodology relevant to the funding opportunity
- Include representation from sectors relevant to the funding opportunity, such as community organizations, academia, health care delivery etc.
- Achieve gender balance
- Achieve regional representation

Merit review committee members:

- Have both a breadth of knowledge and a specific area of expertise relevant to the funding opportunity
- Are objective, fair minded, and have maturity of judgment
- Appreciate the development and delivery of innovative programs
- Are willing to commit the necessary time to participate in the review process
- Agree to adhere to NSHRF's [Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Policies](#)

The names of reviewers assigned to specific applications will not be revealed to applicants. However, following the completion of the review process, the committee membership may be made available to the public and to applicants on the NSHRF website and other appropriate communication mechanisms.

Specific merit review committee roles are outlined below.

Chair

- When necessary, helps to identify and assign reviewers to specific applications based on fit with content and expertise between the reviewers and the applications

- Is responsible for ensuring that the committee functions smoothly, effectively and objectively, according to the NSHRF's guidelines outlined in this document.
- Establishes a positive, constructive, fair-minded environment for applications to be evaluated
- Ensures that each application receives equal attention by the committee and that all committee members are involved in the discussion
- Reviews applications in advance of the meeting
- Ensures that all evaluation criteria, eligibility requirements and other concerns are addressed
- Ensures that opinions expressed by external reviewers (if utilized) are fully integrated into the discussion of each application
- Assists the Review Officer(s) to provide a verbal summary of the discussion of each application before the final rating is determined
- When necessary, asks a delegate to act as the Chair or Review Officer when the Chair or Review Officer has a conflict with a specific application or is unable to attend committee meetings

Review Officer(s)

- Take notes of the committee discussion, ensuring all feedback is summarized and recorded appropriately (see below). Submits these notes in GMS in a timely fashion after the meeting concludes.

What to Include in Review Officer Notes¹

The purpose of Review Officer (RO) Notes is to explain how the final score was reached, from the point of view of the committee. These notes are sent to applicants, along with a letter of decision and reviewer feedback.

The Review Officer Notes should include:

- Major strengths and weaknesses of the application
- Most important aspects of the committee's discussion and significant points the committee considered to determine the rating (i.e., comments about the application relative to the evaluation criteria).
- Resolution of reviewer disagreement (how the committee resolved conflicting views in reviewer reports)
- Explanation of significant reductions in budget and/or funding term
- Recommendations for resubmission, if applicable, including an explanation of how the applicant could improve the proposal if resubmission is encouraged
- Only the points of discussion which had the greatest impact on the evaluation, or where the committee has important feedback for the applicant

The Review Officer Notes should not include:

- A summary of the proposal
- Every detail of the committee's discussion
- Repetition of internal or external reviewer comments
- A recommendation for funding
- The rating of the grant (number or descriptor)

Internal Reviewers

- Internal Reviewers are assigned as either a Primary Reviewer or Secondary Reviewer

¹ Adapted from CIHR Instructions for Scientific Officers – <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/40216.html>

- Read assigned applications, complete reviewer reports and provide an initial score in GMS prior to the committee meeting
- For each assigned application, Primary Reviewers are expected to present a summary of the proposed project
- For each assigned application, Primary and Secondary Reviewers will be required to present their reviewer reports at the committee meeting. Primary Reviewers should present points raised by the external reviewers (if utilized)
- Participate in the discussion and scoring of all other (non-assigned) applications at the committee meeting

Reader(s)

- May be utilized to read an application in advance of the meeting in order to participate more fully in the review discussion and aid the committee in reaching a final score
- Not required to provide an initial score or submit a written review in GMS

External Reviewers

- Not committee members, but may be engaged as content and/or methodological experts related to specific applications
- Responsible for providing a review of assigned application(s) in GMS in advance of the committee meeting
- The identity of external reviewers is not made available to the merit review committee

NSHRF Staff

- Ensures the merit review process is transparent and runs effectively, efficiently
- Ensures review materials are sent to reviewers in advance of the committee meeting
- Provides advice to the committee on program requirements, evaluation criteria and merit review policies
- Oversees use of GMS during meeting
- Keeps notes on procedural aspects of the committee's function
- Records concerns raised by the committee on issues requiring later attention by staff (e.g., eligibility, requirements, merit review process)

Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest

All internal and external reviewers and observers (if applicable) are required to adhere to the [NSHRF Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Policies](#). All information contained in applications, reviews by internal/external merit reviewers and committee discussions are strictly confidential. Merit review committee members (and observers, if present) must not offer opinions on the chances of success or failure or discuss with applicants, or any individual outside the merit review process, any information relating to the review of a specific application. All requests to a committee member for information on an application should be referred to the NSHRF.

How the Merit Review Process Works

Eligibility

The NSHRF screens applications to determine an applicant's eligibility according to the grant's eligibility criteria. This may be completed during an initial Letter of Intent stage or at the application stage. NSHRF staff also ensure the completeness of the application.

On occasion, reviewers identify eligibility concerns during their review of an application, including applications that do not meet program objectives, are missing elements, or may in some other way appear irregular. Reviewers should contact the Program Manager to discuss any eligibility concerns in advance of the committee meeting so that issues may be screened prior to discussion.

Self-Assessments and Review Assignments

- Committee members complete a self-assessment in GMS to determine any [conflicts of interest](#) and indicate levels of expertise for each grant application received.
- Findings from this self-assessment are used to assign applications to committee members for review.
- A Primary and Secondary Reviewer (and reader, if applicable) are assigned by NSHRF, with support from the committee chair, to each application.

Submitting Initial Scores and Reviews

- All grant applications are submitted and reviewed electronically in NSHRF's online [Grants Management System \(GMS\)](#)
- Prior to the meeting, primary and secondary reviewers submit a review and score in GMS for each assigned application.
- Once logged in to GMS, reviewers are prompted in the GMS Reviewer Portal to provide feedback in the following broad areas:
 - Strengths
 - Areas needing improvement
 - Budget concerns
- Reviewers are expected to comment on strengths and weaknesses in relation to the specific evaluation criteria developed for each funding opportunity. These reviews are provided to applicants after the review process is complete.
- Reviewers must use [NSHRF's Merit Review Scoring Rubric](#) to score applications in relation to the evaluation criteria established for each funding opportunity. This is an initial score only and can be altered after discussion with committee members and prior to being finalized by the committee.
- When completing the review, primary reviewers should keep in mind that they will be asked to provide a brief summary of the proposed project at the meeting and relay the comments of external reviewers, if necessary.
- Readers must read the applications in GMS but do not submit an initial score or review.

What to Expect at the Committee Meeting

- Each committee member uses a computer to access details of the application in GMS, as well as the reviews and scores submitted by the internal reviewers prior to the meeting.

- Each application is scheduled equal time for discussion by the committee. Any committee members who have a conflict of interest with an application will not be present when that application is discussed.
- Primary and secondary reviewers state their initial score (to one decimal place) to the committee.
- The NSHRF is committed to funding excellence and only funds proposals that achieve an overall committee rating of 3.0 or higher (subject to budget availability). If both reviewers score the application below 3.0, the committee may decide to “triage” the application, meaning it would not be reviewed by the committee. Applicants would then only be provided with the review comments submitted by the primary and secondary reviewers.
- The primary reviewer:
 - Provides a very brief summary of the project to the rest of the committee
 - Presents his/her assessment of the application, describing the strengths and weaknesses in relation to the evaluation criteria and eligible expenses, using the scoring rubric as a guide
 - Presents any additional points raised by the external reviewers (if utilized)
 - This initial review sets the stage for the discussion of the project, flagging what should be discussed in greater detail
- The secondary reviewer presents his/her assessment, concentrating on points of agreement or disagreement with the primary reviewer and elaborating on points that may not have been addressed.
- The reader offers any additional comments not already addressed by the reviewers.
- The Review Officer notes areas of agreement and disagreement with the internal reviewers.
- The Chair leads discussion among all committee members, to ensure areas of disagreement are address, and all relevant strengths and weaknesses of the proposal are addressed in relation to the evaluation criteria and eligible criteria.
- The Chair briefly summarizes the discussion. As the Chair and Review Officer are not voting members, they can challenge the committee if they disagree with the discussion. However, if the committee maintains its position on an application, the summary of the discussion must reflect the position of the committee in a neutral way.
- The Review Officer then reads the RO Notes aloud to the committee to verify the content. The committee can request adjustments to the notes, if necessary.
- After the discussion, the Chair seeks a "consensus score" from the primary and secondary reviewers. If a consensus cannot be reached, the average of the initial scores provided by the two internal reviewers' is used (rounded up, if necessary, to one decimal point).
- All committee members, including the two internal reviewers but excluding the Chair and Review Officer(s), then enter scores within +/- 0.5 of the consensus score. The average of these committee member scores is the final score assigned to the application.
- When all applications are reviewed and scored by the committee, applications are rank-ordered according to the final scores, creating the committee's funding recommendation.
- After the meeting, NSHRF staff facilitates a discussion with committee members to seek feedback on the merit review process and any issues that may have arisen in the course of deliberations.

What Happens After the Committee Meeting

- The merit review committee's funding recommendation is anonymized and submitted to the funder.
- The funder approves funding decisions based on final merit review ratings, funding availability and relevant organizational policies.
- Applicants are notified through the GMS of the funding decisions and are provided with anonymized versions of the following:

- Final score
- Primary and Secondary reviewers' reports (comments only)
- External reviews (if applicable)
- Review Officer notes
- Merit reviewers are provided with an online survey to provide NSHRF with additional, anonymized feedback on the merit review process.