

Evaluation of the SSHRC Prizes and Special Fellowships

Executive Summary

April 18, 2012



PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SSHRC'S PRIZES AND SPECIAL FELLOWSHIPS

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is the federal agency that promotes and supports university-based research, training and knowledge mobilization in the humanities and social sciences. Prizes provide SSHRC with an opportunity to raise its profile among the public, private and not-for-profit sectors, and the public at large. Together, these prizes celebrate and recognize the value of research in the social sciences and humanities, and reward excellence at the various stages of a student's or researcher's career. Special fellowships allow SSHRC to fund research by individual graduate students, postdoctoral researchers and researchers in specialized areas.

Prizes and special fellowships have a long history at SSHRC. Some components predate SSHRC's creation in 1977. For example, the Queen's Fellowship was established in 1974, and the Parliamentary Internship Programme was launched in 1969. Typically, SSHRC created and delivered awards and fellowships in support of scholarly training or research, frequently in partnership with other organizations. By 2004, with the creation of three new prizes (the SSHRC Gold Medal for Achievement in Research, the SSHRC Aurora Prize and the SSHRC Postdoctoral Prize), the total number of prizes and special fellowships increased to sixteen. Over the years, the responsibility for delivery of the prizes and special fellowships was delegated to the Research Training Portfolio.

SSHRC is pleased to present the evaluation of its prizes and special fellowships. Conducted in 2011, the evaluation meets the Treasury Board's evaluation requirements to assess the relevance and performance of activities. In addition, the evaluation report offers suggestions and recommendations to inform the planning of future program strategies and priorities, as well as SSHRC's program architecture renewal. While the heterogeneous nature of the suite of activities and the data availability limitations did pose occasional challenges for the evaluators, enough evidence was collected to reliably demonstrate that not only were the activities' elements well-delivered, they also continue to have a positive impact to beneficiaries. The evaluation findings suggest that a review of the suite of the activities' objectives and structure is both warranted and timely. The report also provides program management with evidence that will help support decisions regarding the future direction of the prizes and special fellowships.

In terms of acknowledgements, it is important to note that the evaluation was conducted by independent consultants contracted by SSHRC's Corporate Performance and Evaluation Division (CPE). The views expressed in the evaluation report are those of the external team and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of SSHRC. The evaluation was a collaborative effort involving the expertise of Public Works and Government Service Canada, E. Beals and Associates, and SSHRC's Corporate Performance and Evaluation Division.

We wish to extend our thanks to Ellie Beals and Betty Turpin for taking on the evaluation in mid-stream, after the closing of Public Works' evaluation division. Their work, along with the CPE team—represented by H el ene Gauthier, Nicole Michaud and Jacques Critchley—was instrumental in assuring the timely delivery of this report.

The success of this evaluation would not have been possible without the cooperation of Brent Herbert-Copley, vice-president, Research Capacity; Gordana Krcevinac, director, Research Training Portfolio; and the staff of the Research Training Portfolio. Similarly, special thanks are extended to members of the Evaluation Advisory Committee, including Dr. Les Monkman, Joanne Larocque-Poirier, Brent Herbert-Copley, Gordana Krcevinac, Boris Stipernitz and Holly Peel. Their commitment, knowledge and insights were instrumental to the completion of this study. Finally, the study respondents and key informants should be recognized for their time and for their thoughtful reflections on SSHRC's prizes and special fellowships.

Altogether, everyone's conscientious and respectful collaboration made this a timely and effective contribution to SSHRC's overall understanding, program management and continuous improvement.

Wayne MacDonald
Director, Corporate Performance and Evaluation
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

**EVALUATION OF THE SSHRC
PRIZES AND SPECIAL FELLOWSHIPS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared for:
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

Prepared by:

BEALS, LALONDE & Associates

April 18, 2012

Executive Summary

This evaluation report was produced for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) by Beals, Lalonde & Associates. The evaluation draws on preliminary findings collected by Government Consulting Services, prior to its disbanding in summer 2011. It is important to note that this is the first evaluation of the Prizes and Special Fellowships.

Background

Prizes and Special Fellowships is composed of a heterogeneous set of 16 discrete awards: five prizes and 11 special research fellowships. The Prizes provide SSHRC with an opportunity to raise its profile among the public, private and not-for-profit sectors, and the public at large, by celebrating and recognizing the value of research in the social sciences and humanities and rewarding excellence at the various stages of a student's or researcher's career. The Special Fellowships allow SSHRC to fund research by individual graduate students, postdoctoral researchers and researchers in specialized research areas.

The responsibility for delivery of these prizes and special fellowships has accrued over time to the Research Training Portfolio, and this was reflected in SSHRC's program activity architecture (PAA) with the creation of a distinct subactivity group entitled "Prizes and Special Fellowships." SSHRC has recently revised its PAA and, beginning in 2012-13, the prizes and special fellowships fall under the sub-subactivity group of "Research-Based Knowledge Culture," which means the suite of activities are now under the purview of SSHRC's Knowledge Integration Division. Given the redesign of SSHRC's PAA structure, a partial moratorium on the delivery of some elements of the prizes and special fellowships was instituted in 2010, in part so that the alignment of these activities could be reviewed in relation to SSHRC's current strategic or thematic priorities.

Evaluation Issues

The evaluation of the prizes and special fellowships was planned and conducted in 2010-11, to meet Treasury Board's program evaluation requirements. It was expected that the evaluation findings would inform senior management's planning regarding future programming and renewal decisions. In addition, it was anticipated that results would also inform SSHRC's revision of its program architecture, and provide program management and staff information related to program performance and relevance. Fundamentally, the evaluation was intended to help assess the extent to which the prizes and special fellowships address SSHRC's strategic priorities.

The evaluation was designed to address three key issues:

- Relevance and continued need: To what extent do the prizes and special fellowships address demonstrable needs? Are they appropriate to the federal government and to SSHRC, and are they responsive to the needs of Canadians?
- Design and delivery: To what extent has the design and delivery of the prizes and special fellowships been effective?

- Performance: How successful have the prizes and special fellowships been at achieving their outcomes and objectives? How efficient and effective have they been?

Methodology

The following lines of inquiry were used to collect evaluation data:

- a document review;
- a comparative analysis that built upon a 2011 environment scan;
- 25 key informant interviews with representatives from among SSHRC senior managers and program officers, members of selection committees, funding partners, and representatives of some non-governmental organizations or associations;
- a survey of 185 past award holders, 79 (43 per cent) of whom responded to the survey; and
- an analysis of program data.

Constraints/Limitations

As with most program evaluations, there were some limitations associated with the study design that require consideration when interpreting the study's findings. Specific constraints and limitations include the following:

- There was an over-representation of input from past award recipients. The survey was directed only to those who benefited from the prizes and special fellowships and, as a result, their input may not be impartial.
- There was a lack of reliable performance measurement data, given that performance information had not been systematically collected for the programs. This resulted in data-gathering tools that may have lacked clarity and precision.

Evaluating Relevance and Continued Need

Evaluation findings indicated that the social sciences and humanities research context has changed considerably since the prizes and special fellowships were assembled. The most notable contextual changes that key informants cited were:

- the emergence of multidisciplinary/cross-sectoral teams working collaboratively and forming research partnerships;
- the use of new technologies and social networking; and
- an increased focus on international collaboration.

These changes were also evident in the responses of key informants, who said they felt that changes in the social sciences and humanities context—such as the lack of focus on multidisciplinary research, new technologies, social media and increased international research—have undermined the relevance of the prizes and special fellowships. In contrast, however, award recipients responded that they felt the programs, particularly prizes, still reflect the needs of the community.

These findings have obvious implications in terms of the types of funding partners involved in a number of the awards. It seems likely that changes in some, or even most, of the existing funding partners may be deemed necessary in order to better reflect the current social sciences and humanities context.

On a very broad level, the prizes and special fellowships are reasonably well aligned with both SSHRC's and the federal government's strategic directions. The degree of alignment with more specific or precise priorities that better reflect the evolving collaborative and multidisciplinary social sciences and humanities context and the topics of pressing concern for Canadians is much less evident.

Following the assessment of relevance and continued need, it was suggested that SSHRC conduct a design study, the results of which will allow for informed decisions regarding the future of the prizes and special fellowships. This would permit a reconsideration of how the activities should fit into SSHRC's three programs. This design study would yield a coherent set of prizes and special fellowships in which all components and funding partners correspond to a revised and updated set of specified needs and criteria that are meaningful in the current social sciences and humanities context.

Evaluating Delivery and Design

Award recipients appeared to be well-informed about, and complied with, the application process. Delivery of the prizes and special fellowships appears to have been relatively effective. The input from key informants also suggests that program delivery has been reasonably efficient and economical. Furthermore, award recipients are well-informed about reporting requirements; however, there has been little adherence to these requirements and little or no monitoring or enforcement efforts by SSHRC.

Evaluation evidence indicates that the design elements below warrant focused attention:

- identifying the responsibilities of all parties to the prizes and special fellowships;
- specifying the most viable delivery model or models (e.g., co-delivery by SSHRC and funding partners, sole delivery by either SSHRC or funding partners, or a mixture of delivery models) for the components within the prizes and special fellowships;
- measuring and reporting on the value attached to co-delivery of prizes and special fellowships, where appropriate;
- enhancing the visibility of all involved parties through promotion/celebration;
- achieving the best balance between monetary and other benefits (which most key informants and survey respondents felt were as or more important than the dollar value of the award);
- ensuring that there are effective tools for capturing and monitoring performance information; and
- specifying performance information that should be collected in the future.

Evaluating Performance

Performance is typically evaluated by assessing the degree to which program objectives have been achieved. This approach was not viable for the prizes and special fellowships, because there are no specified program outcomes other than those established when Prizes and Special Fellowships were included as a subactivity in SSHRC's PAA. Despite this, evaluation evidence gathered about the perceived impact and benefits of the prizes and special fellowships do serve as a reasonable proxy, allowing for some assessment of program performance. For example, survey respondents indicated that the prizes and special fellowships programs have had a positive impact on career development/opportunities for recipients. In addition, according to survey respondents, the prizes and

special fellowships have increased the visibility of recipients. They have also increased the visibility of SSHRC; however, it was noted that, in the future, more could be done in this area. It does not appear that the prizes and special fellowships have increased the visibility of funding partners. Again, this is an area of program improvement that should be considered in the redesign of the suite of activities.

The evaluation report suggests that, in the future, as part of the proposed redesign study, a performance measurement strategy should be developed, including a plan for monitoring and evaluating compliance.

Evaluating Results and Success

Given that validated outcomes and indicators for the prizes and special fellowships have not been clearly established, assessing results and outcomes was difficult. Regardless of this obstacle, the following insights related to potential outcomes did emerge:

- Most informants felt that the most important way to benefit the programs would be through better/more celebrations and therefore greater visibility.
- Survey participants identified the perception that special fellowships have contributed to the successful development of partnerships and/or communities of practice in the targeted research field.
- Both key informants and survey respondents indicated that the prizes and special fellowships contributed positively to career development, opportunities and recognition.

The evaluation report suggests that the future performance measurement strategy should include explicit indicators of visibility, partnership development and career development opportunities.

Recommendations

The evaluation report includes numerous suggestions, designed to serve as an action plan for moving forward with the constituent elements of the prizes and special fellowships. The suggestions have been compiled into three main recommendations related to the three key issues of relevance and need, design and delivery, and performance.

1. SSHRC should undertake a redesign study of the prizes and special fellowships that would include, but not be limited to:
 - a. identifying the current and near-future strategic needs for social sciences and humanities research from SSHRC's perspective;
 - b. establishing criteria for redesign and/or inclusion of new prizes or special fellowships in line with identified needs, assessing the existing 16 awards against those criteria, and identifying any irrelevant elements or gaps in the current suite; and
 - c. documenting its policy direction and priorities for prizes and special fellowships for its own benefit and the benefit of the communities of interest and stakeholders, including funding partners; further guidance should be provided by developing memoranda of understanding for all awards within the prizes and special fellowships suite for which there are funding partners, as well as developing terms of reference or other documents that provide additional administrative guidance.

2. With the results of the redesign study in hand, SSHRC should establish guidelines, policies and procedures to permit a more flexible treatment of prizes and special fellowships across its program architecture to ensure an appropriate and strategically oriented inclusion of prizes and special fellowships and to enhance synergies among the individual prizes/fellowships.
3. Following the redesign, SSHRC should also develop a performance measurement and evaluation strategy with clear objectives and performance targets, and ensure that reporting requirements for the prizes and special fellowships are specified, implemented and monitored.