

# "FROM GRANTING COUNCIL TO KNOWLEDGE COUNCIL": RESPONSE FROM Vancouver Island University TO SSHRC'S PROPOSED TRANSFORMATION

## Introduction: A Time of Change

"From Granting Council to Knowledge Council," SSHRC's discussion paper, outlines a welcome transformation in the Council's approach to the funding of humanities and social science research in Canada. While maintaining its commitment to its longstanding core principles and the continued funding of research, SSHRC proposes to respond to changing circumstances and new challenges by expanding its focus. This shift is viewed positively by faculty and staff at Vancouver Island University.

We see the transformation to a "knowledge council" as creating the conditions that support the emergence of new knowledge and the kind of research activities that many of our faculty wish to pursue. When the current consultation is complete, SSHRC will need to take a more active role in establishing those conditions. We suggest that a statement of SSHRC's new philosophy, intended outcomes, and action plans will help the Council and those it serves to make the proposed transformation a reality.

At small, teaching-focussed postsecondary institutions like VIU, the landscape is changing both internally and externally. Having grown from a community college in 1969 to a comprehensive University which now offers a range of undergraduate degrees, we believe, as our Strategic Research Plan states, that "early involvement in research helps students cope with complexity in a changing world." Our faculty are frequently involved in innovative research projects with their undergraduate students and with community partners. These projects are built upon a synergistic research agenda which includes interpretative, qualitative approaches such as locally grounded theory, feminist inquiry, arts-based research, field work, participatory action or case study research.

Forming the connections between "producers," "users," and "mediators" of knowledge highlights the importance of the diversity of research approaches in the social sciences and the broadening scope of cultural critical practice in the humanities. In the past, SSHRC has had a narrow definition of what constitutes research and therefore of what was fundable, and many innovative projects seemed to fall between the cracks of the various funding envelopes. As an example, Walsh-Bowers (2002, p.164) noted that external funding for qualitative research has been limited "because the SSHRC Psychology Committee has tended to evaluate qualitative research proposals according to quantitative criteria." If SSHRC and those institutions it funds are to respond to the "new worlds, new needs" reality that the discussion paper references, then they must recognize and support emerging areas of study, new research approaches, and alternative means of knowing the world. As Babbie (1992, p.456-7) states with

respect to methodology, "Anything goes, if it leads ultimately to the understanding of data and of the social world under study."

If one accepts the need for diversity in research, then it makes sense to support a diversity of institutions conducting research in a diversity of regions. In general, we believe that small institutions are a good research investment. Their research infrastructure costs are low, and their community links are strong. The university-colleges are young, vital and flexible institutions that have the ability to respond quickly to new needs. Faculty at such institutions are enthusiastic about challenging the status quo in research and are keen to find and share "other ways of knowing" that will have direct meaning and value for their communities and their professions.

## Opening up the Grant Assessment and Evaluation Processes

It is vital that assessment processes recognize the workload assignment issues peculiar to small institutions. If SSHRC is to support research initiatives at institutions such as VIU, it must increase funding of research time support. In the presence of different workload arrangements in Canadian institutions, a 'one size fits all' funding scheme is not the most inclusive way for SSHRC to operate. Our faculty require the Research Time Stipend (RTS) funding in order to demonstrate the significant research achievements that they can contribute to this country and to their disciplines.

The transformative nature of the SSHRC proposal suggests changes in the scope, topics, methodology and assessment of applications. Different kinds of research will require different review processes. A different kind of review lens is required to encourage the sort of research that has meaning outside the walls of the university. The opening up of criteria to include a wider range of research and researchers need not imply a lowering of standards, but rather will signal an openness to innovation.

Peer review committees must be open not just to new research approaches but also to the need to adopt new approaches in assessing applications, such as including new people, perhaps less formally educated, and inviting community participation in the review process. At the same time, these processes must also recognize that research in literature and the arts requires different approaches in assessment and evaluation.

At present, many important results, such as the real value to people and communities and the actual impact on policy development are often not measured or considered in funding applications. The fact that they are not, and often cannot be, measured should not mean that they are not taken into account in making funding decisions. Walsh-Bowers (2002) points out that quantitative researchers tend to have more publications, which disadvantages those with a participatory/qualitative orientation. In evaluating the track records in dissemination of results, new measures will be needed to recognize web-facilitated collaborations, e-communities, and a variety of publications and participatory activities such as relevant community presentations.

As one VIU Faculty member observed, "Faculty at small institutions such as ours do, in a sense, actually play on a different field, which gives us something quite unique to bring to the table. Our size means that we interact closely with undergraduate students, with faculty in a variety of disciplines, and with the community. This shapes our world view and the kind of research questions that we formulate." It also promotes precisely the kind of interdisciplinary approach that SSHRC seeks to develop.

Recommendations:

1. Increase the RTS Stipend and dedicate it to small universities.
2. Involve representatives from smaller institutions on review committees.
3. Encourage review committees to consider a variety of non-traditional research approaches and research credentials, as well as research in emerging disciplines.
4. Adopt new approaches to accommodate community participation and assess impact of research on participating communities.
5. Establish structures that allow shared control between researchers and communities, and ensure that dependent linkages are avoided.

## **Building Capacity for Research at Smaller Institutions**

All small institutions face some challenges because of their size, and evolving institutions such as the university-colleges face more unusual barriers. Institutions like ours, lacking a well-established research culture, are in the process of developing systems, policies and procedures to support faculty and students in their research. Our faculty, with heavy teaching assignments, need extra support for their research activity, including support in the research application process. We are eager to participate more fully in the development of knowledge, and we need support and resources to build our research capacity.

The SSHRC Aid to Small Universities (ASU) and Small Institutions Grant (SIG) funding is critical to institutions like VIU. We need this funding in order to develop and strengthen focused research capacity in the social sciences and humanities. Some opportunities may be lost if there aren't ways of encouraging those faculty members who lack recent research experience. "Renewal point" funding to develop the capacity-building model will encourage broader involvement in formal research activities. Currently RTS funding is given to the top research proposals, and smaller universities are disadvantaged (given more 4a designations) in the peer-review process.

In small institutions, transdisciplinary initiatives are encouraged and faculty frequently teach in more than one department. However, crucial to the success of multidisciplinary programs of research are leadership skills as well as research skills. An institutional grant that encouraged leadership, mentorship and research development by bringing together groups of researchers to work on projects involving collaborative teaching and research projects would support our capacity to engage in multidisciplinary research.

Because of our close connections with our communities, the CURA model of research is seen as a good fit for VIU, and one that can have a significant and valuable impact on community wellbeing. This model, by enhancing linkages with the community and with larger institutions, encourages effective collaboration.

Recommendations:

1. Develop an RTS formula that is equitable for the small universities.
2. Increase ASU and SIG grants to reflect the greater need for capacity building at small universities.
3. Offer grants that recognize and fund research leadership skills.

## Supporting Emerging Scholars

At smaller institutions, there are many types of scholars: young scholars (undergraduate students), new scholars (those who have only recently graduated and begun teaching), emerging scholars (faculty with a teaching history but an insufficiently established research record) and experienced scholars (faculty with established research record)[D.1] . Teaching loads are high for new faculty and as these newcomers focus on providing excellence in the teaching and learning process, they disadvantage themselves for the research peer-review process. At mid-career, when faculty are comfortable with their teaching and have devised ways of managing their workloads, they turn towards funded research activities. We believe that students and emerging scholars, as well as experienced scholars, require various types of support.

Faculty at VIU responded positively to the proposal of making special support available to undergraduate students. Many students are currently working in research projects with community partners that focus on important local issues, and VIU Faculty are frequently approached by municipalities, non-profits, First Nations bands and organizations, and other community groups who require research assistance. These activities provide useful research exposure for students and may offer links with coursework and with potential future employment. It is important that small seed money funds be available to provide compensation for students undertaking such projects. At present,

many students are using their own limited funds to pay for research stations, travel and equipment costs.

Emerging researchers, those who, because of heavy teaching assignments, have been unable to pursue research activities may require a review of the weighting formula with regard to the assessment of the project versus the applicant's research track record. In some cases it may be desirable to assess applications solely on the basis of the proposed project. Different expectations regarding research records might be required. In the words of one faculty member, "We cannot be expected to accomplish as much as someone with half our teaching load accomplishes during the same period. I think that SSHRC may need to interrogate its 'core value' of competitiveness to see if bias may be systemic."

A balance between various pockets of money is recommended, as are different processes for supporting student research. Internships, exchanges and funding for institutions in collaborative projects are supported. There needs to be awareness of the changing demographics and, in particular, of the increasing number of part-time students who may require support for longer periods.

Smaller grants for more people would be desirable, but faculty cautioned against making the grants so small that the faculty workload issue could not be addressed. Ideally grants should allow for both student support and stipends for faculty release.

Recommendations:

1. Fund students in the beginning of their careers, that is, at the undergraduate level. Specifically, funding that supports internships, exchanges, collaborative and/or community based research projects for undergraduate students is recommended.
2. Set up a special envelope of funds to be assigned to institutions, which then distribute the monies to students.
3. In order to respond to the needs of part-time students, develop funding envelopes that provide support for longer periods.
4. Develop a new definition of an "Emerging Scholar." There should be a definition that recognizes "emerging" researchers.
5. Base assessment for emerging scholars entirely on the project and not on the research track record.
6. In order to ensure a diversity of research, provide smaller grants for more people.
7. Ensure that the online and agency processes are supportive and transparent for those who seek SSHRC funding.

## Linking Teaching and Research

Moving from an industrial to a "knowledge society" perspective enables us to view research not as a product that is the outcome of a research project, but rather as a process. Viewed in this way, research

becomes an important part of the teaching and learning process. Although institution and funding structures separate teaching from research, writers such as Clark (1997, 242) argue that "research activity can and does serve as an important mode of teaching and a valuable means of learning." Research topics pertinent to the scholarship of teaching and learning include the development of scholars in the post secondary system, inter-disciplinary dialogues and reflective practice, integration of discipline research in student learning experiences, approaches to deep learning, processes of knowledge construction, as well as critical reading, thinking, and writing.

An expanded approach to funding that supports interactive engagement and a closer link between teaching, research and action will allow students to benefit from inquiry-based learning and to participate directly in research activities. It is important that undergraduate students have a solid exposure to research methodology. By participating in research, students learn to analyze, critique and, 'think outside of the box.' The majority of our students will develop careers outside of academia, and they will need to use research methods in their future workplaces. As one faculty member observed, it is important for them to "look at research as a part of every day practice in their chosen field, not something that is the forte of academics in research labs."

VIU's strategic research plan states that the institution's strategic mission is "to engage faculty and students in inquiry, enhance teaching and learning, advance disciplinary knowledge, and encourage interdisciplinary interaction among faculty and students." Teaching and learning are at the heart of VIU's academic culture. The institution regards research "as a foundation of undergraduate education" and is committed to providing research opportunities that involve the participation of students.

If research is seen as a process as well as a product, then research as inquiry is critical as a way of thinking and therefore critical to connect with teaching and learning for the student as well as the instructor.

The scholarship of teaching and learning is in itself an important response to the changing university landscape. Many authors (Palmer, 1997; Middleton, 1997, and Bass, 1999) express concerns about the state of university teaching. Problems of teaching must become part of regular discourse, and clearly promotion of research into the scholarship of teaching is one way of addressing this issue. As Bender and Gray (1999) observe, "The scholarship of teaching means that we invest in our teaching the intellectual powers we practice in our research."

#### Recommendations:

1. Target grants to institutions that support undergraduate student researchers and that support the link between teaching and learning and research.
2. Target research into the scholarship of teaching and the art of inquiry in the classroom.
3. Provide funding for projects that support teams of researchers integrating community practice, research and instruction.
4. Involve students and communities in defining their own research topics and methods.
5. Support "cultural literacy" so that those outside academe are prepared to deal with issues and ideas that they encounter.

## Encouraging and Supporting Broader Dissemination of Information

Broader dissemination of research information is long overdue. Some faculty point to the problem of "grey literature" in their field and urge the importance of getting the information and knowledge "out there," while others caution that dissemination in disciplines such as literature and arts may require different methods and measures. Accessibility and use of information among researchers and also between researchers and citizens is needed, and thus a variety of dissemination approaches should be encouraged and recognized.

Researchers have much to do making their work more accessible and relevant. A member of our faculty noted that the mainstream media is not doing this well, and media and communications scholars have not been greatly successful in taking their insights about culture and politics to an audience that most needs to benefit from those insights. It was suggested that researchers, collectively, need to renew their commitment to sharing knowledge. An interdisciplinary scholarly-based journal for lay audiences on cross-cultural communications, for example, would be of potentially great service to Canadians. The sharing of insights between networks of researchers is critically important, and a common language is needed.

Knowledge dissemination begins in the development stage of a research project rather than at the end. We need to think of dissemination as a process of research rather than only a product of research. This will require a broadening understanding of research that includes approaches, such as action research, that are based on a theory of change.

In its work in the area of cultural communication and expression, VIU has strongly emphasized the importance of research dissemination, and has developed numerous electronic research resources. Arts-based research dissemination has been supported through conferences, seminars and computing collaboration. These activities are valued both for their capacity to disseminate knowledge and for the contribution they make to the knowledge base.

Cross-cultural fluency is supported by VIU's research plan, and faculty here endorse goals to "help young people acquire the digital literacy and cross-cultural fluency that the global knowledge economy demands." Exchange/mobility programs and internships that allow scholars to work in other settings and in other cultures are encouraged. Working in joint ventures with a variety of partners, SSHRC can play a greater role in bringing the world to Canada.

With regard to the new linkages being proposed by SSHRC, a question was raised about how any such arrangements would connect with the 30,000 researchers in the 69 learned societies that are represented by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. While the annual Congress is valuable in highlighting distinguished speakers and book displays that draw public attention to current research, there may be other ways for SSHRC to maximize the contributions of the existing scholarly vehicles so as to more effectively influence public policy and broaden the dissemination of research findings.

## Recommendations:

1. Encourage and support various publications and presentations, e.g. lay journals and town hall meetings, community workshops, and view such dissemination activity on the part of researchers as legitimate scholarly activity.
2. Develop national and international exchange/mobility programs among researchers and between researchers and citizens.
3. Support dissemination activities that build a knowledge base in various disciplines.

## Encouraging Real Collaboration as Researchers

The importance of collaboration for researchers within the institution and with a variety of partners was noted. There was support for potential collaborative projects proposed at a departmental or institutional level, as well as joint initiatives between institutions or with various community groups. Theme-based collaborations were seen as valuable. A caution was expressed, however. Some faculty expressed concern about the value of collaborations between large groups of disconnected researchers. It was emphasized that collaboration needs to be real, credible and substantial and to involve meaningful connections, not merely a matter of adding names and partnerships to grant applications.

Not all disciplines or projects lend themselves easily to collaborative work. It was suggested that the kind of collaboration proposed in the discussion paper is much more difficult in the humanities, because of the nature of the disciplines. In addition, in small universities, many faculty members may have no colleagues within their field of interest, and in this regard particular appreciation was expressed for the proposed confederations of learning as a complement to the connections that the Learned Societies offer. Collaboration requires a variety of skills such as leadership, facilitation and management skills, not just research skills. SSHRC needs to acknowledge, value and fund faculty who bring these skills to collaborative projects.

Recommendations:

1. In response to SSHRC's proposed new structures, support confederations of learning, web-facilitated communities of practice, the clearinghouse for advanced expertise, and knowledge mobilization units.
2. Develop a clearinghouse for advanced expertise as a means of establishing and nurturing relationships between French and English research activities.
3. Create e-communities to support the exchange of ideas and outcomes and enhance mobility of ideas.

## Fulfilling our Social Responsibility

In raising questions about the university's "contract" with society, the SSHRC discussion paper notes that the 2003 "Most Newsworthy" lists highlight social innovations, and it points to the social responsibility of academics: the need for us to undertake real activism related to people, the communities in which they live, and the quality of their lives. In this regard, faculty noted that "the humanities have much to offer to a society that needs to reflect on its values and goals, to redefine itself, and to include all its members in the process."

Academics have a social responsibility to interpret and analyze events and movements to the broader community. Max Wyman, proclaiming the central importance of the arts and culture for 21st Century Canadian society, proposes "an ongoing campaign to develop thoughtful cultural journalism," one which would support critical writing and other learning tools (Abley, 2004). This kind of "knowledge mobilization" is currently being carried out by many academics through a range of activities at multiple community sites and in popular publications, rather than taking place in large institutes or appearing in scholarly journals. It was suggested that SSHRC consider finding ways to support these smaller and less formal activities and recognize them in application processes.

The SSHRC Discussion Paper, however, suggests that scholars should be taking a more active role than that of interpretation. It also proposes to "help Canadians understand and move to action." We believe that our failure to solve pressing problems in the world today has less to do with a lack of knowledge than with a lack of will to take action -- or perhaps an inability to establish a social foundation or sufficient social consensus to warrant and legitimate action. If this is the case, then SSHRC needs to find ways to support such action and to recognize ongoing social responsibility activism. For example, a researcher with a strong human rights focus might receive 2-3 years of research time support in order to organize and facilitate a program of speakers, events, radio talk shows, workshops for the local community, as well as writing on the issues being covered in local and/or scholarly publications.

Recommendations:

1. Recognize direct interaction between scholars and their local non-academic communities.
2. Recognize that social activism may stem from sound research and constitute legitimate warranted extension of that research into action. In such cases, funding decisions might recognize the value of publications in magazines and newspapers; presentations at community events and rallies; radio interviews; works of art; workshops, etc. in addition to scholarly publications in peer-reviewed journals.
3. Support research that fosters critical reading, thinking and writing and other learning tools.
4. Create a "Social Responsibility" envelope to which scholars can apply when their work bridges academic and activist concerns.

## Attending to Language

While generally supporting the proposed new approaches, many faculty objected to the language used in the document. As one respondent said, "'Knowledge mobilization' that 'commercializes' and 'brokers' knowledge is not the way I envision my research contributing to society." The term "human sciences" was not viewed positively by those in the humanities, as it, along with the push for collaboration and utilitarian research, suggested a social sciences bias in the conception of this transformation.

Concern was also expressed about the strong emphasis the document placed on research that supported "prosperity" and "wealth accumulation," and the implication that economic growth and wealth necessarily led to a better standard of living quality of life. One respondent suggested that "there is an abundance of evidence suggesting that many people are questioning the value of wealth accumulation and of consumerism" and questioned whether the funding "is caught up in government and corporate interests which may be inconsistent with real issues or questions in community."

Dr. Ursula Franklin (1997) reminds us that people under occupation have refused to speak the language of the occupier, and advises that we too should avoid "the language of the market," which speaks of "service providers" and "clients," of "stakeholders" and of "the bottom line." Franklin suggests that we use instead words like "teachers" and "students." She points out that these are "friends, families and communities," and not targets for commerce.

When SSHRC considers how to provide "the missing link between a technologically advanced society and a successful one," the need for a common language, and careful language that reflects our shared values, must also be considered.

Recommendation:

1. Develop an appropriate, common language that is acceptable and understandable to a variety of disciplines and to members of the non-academic community.

## New Directions

SSHRC's proposed transformation opens the door for a diversity of researchers to make a stronger contribution to our collective communities. The new directions are seen as positive ones that will support new kinds of research of interest to VIU Faculty, and the proposed transformation will alleviate some of the negative perceptions that some faculty have held about SSHRC's accessibility to those in smaller institutions. Many faculty, particularly those in areas such as the fine and performing arts, leisure studies, developmental and literacy education, and First Nations studies, have not previously seen opportunities to apply for SSHRC funding to support the kind of research projects they are pursuing. One respondent stated, "SSHRC has been about big bucks for big folks," and many others

echoed that view, noting that it was frustrating to invest substantial time preparing applications for projects which, though frequently approved, were seldom funded.

Thank you for inviting us to participate in this dialogue. We are pleased to see that SSHRC is working towards an expansion in the scope, methodology, use and dissemination of research projects being funded, and is attempting to increase the percentage of applications that will be approved. We look forward to receiving your reports on the consultation and to transformation developments.

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