

# Mixed reaction to new research grant proposal

by John Gushue

Canadian University Press

**OTTAWA (CUP)** — Canada's research community has greeted the federal government's proposed guidelines for a matching grants program for its research councils with reactions ranging from gentle praise to doubt and hesitancy.

The Conservative government announced with the federal budget in February that the three councils that sponsor university research — the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and the Medical Research Council — would have to raise money from business and industry to earn a major portion of their budgets.

Finance Minister Michael Wilson proposed a scheme where government would contribute a dollar for every private sector dollar raised by the councils. The scheme replaced part of the sustaining grants the councils were hoping to be

awarded.

Early reaction from the research councils was negative enough to prompt the federal government to redesign the matching grant funding formula. Councils said their staff were barely able to manage daily operations, and could not spare time to solicit private sector funds.

A revised plan announced in July met with more praise. The government has now put the onus on universities to attract funds, and the councils to determine which donations are eligible to be matched by the federal government.

NSERC president Art May said the revisions are more to the councils' liking. "Our position is that we support them fully. What's come back is very much as we had hoped they would be," he said.

Louise Dandurand, SSHRC director of policy and planning, said her council's staff is "not pessimistic. We certainly believe we can raise money for some areas of research."

However, she said researchers in the humanities and social sciences are at a disadvantage because their work will not qualify for some tax breaks applicable to other researchers. "The other councils appear to be in a better position than ourselves... the government's fiscal treatment puts us at a disadvantage," she said.

Ross McCormick, vice-president of the University of Winnipeg — which specializes in the social sciences — agrees with Dandurand. "The private sector will likely be more inclined to look favourably upon, and hence fund, applied research and not basic research," he said. "The disadvantage will be in the social sciences."

He said the university may still be able to attract sponsors for some arts-related projects, including ones "that study the implications of technology on society."

Reaction at universities already housing heavy research activity is mixed. Ernie Holmes, dean of research at the University of Waterloo, said the government's intentions are good, but more direct funding would be better.

"I'm not enthusiastic about the scheme at all," he said. "I don't see that there's going to be much benefit."

The University of Toronto is "cautiously optimistic" about the guidelines, according to Geraldine Kenney-Wallace, chair of U of T's research board. The university wants a greater emphasis placed on incentives, as the current system does not require a research council to give to a school funds matched by the federal government based on private donations the school may have attracted.

In other words, U of T could win a corporate donation, but would

not necessarily receive an equal amount of government money if the donation falls within the proposed guidelines.

NSERC president May said the councils will likely continue to use the current system to ensure both regional distribution and excellence in research. He said universities close to industrial centres — such as Waterloo and Toronto — would be more likely to win industrial funding than smaller institutions.

"Lethbridge, Laurentian, and Cape Breton deserve funding as well," he said. "There has to be a balance though — some sort of incentive is desirable to encourage researchers."

May agreed that the matching grants system is not a cure to underfunding. "Right now, we're just in a holding pattern," he said.

"In relative terms, it's a good deal. But of and by themselves, these guidelines do not solve the problems of underfunding in the universities," May said.

Federal officials are studying written briefs on the proposed guidelines, and will introduce a final draft later this fall. Alan Cobb, an official of the Ministry of State for Science and Technology, said many briefs "came in quite a bit late." He expects a government response by the end of October.

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