

Management's Response to the 2009 Evaluation of the Networks of Centres of Excellence - New Initiatives

Context:

The NCE Steering Committee launched the NCE New Initiatives (NCE-NI) as a pilot initiative in 2005. It was created to support networking among well-established researchers or research teams, as well as to encourage them to develop new partnerships with receptor communities and facilitate the creation of networks.

NCE-NI funding is not intended to support research, as it is expected that the teams already have existing research funds. It supports networking activities among researchers whose work seeks ultimately to improve the well-being of Canadians, be it social, health-related and/or economic.

As the funding period of the pilot will end in September 2010, it is important to decide if the initiative should be maintained or discontinued. In October 2008, the NCE Steering Committee mandated the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to lead an evaluation of the NCE-NI pilot to provide information that could be used to make decisions on its future. A competitive process led to the appointment of Science-Metrix as the external evaluator; the process of designing and implementing the evaluation began in February 2009.

The objective of the evaluation was to articulate the extent to which the NCE-NI pilot met its objectives and to make recommendations for its future. Specifically, the evaluation was designed to address three main issues: results, delivery, and relevance. The final report and recommendations were provided to the NCE Steering in September 2009.

Management Response:

NCE management finds that, overall, the evaluation is sound, provides useful information and agrees with the evaluation's findings and conclusions, and with the majority of its recommendations. Detailed responses to the evaluation's recommendations are provided below. The action plan recommended by the NCE management is contained within the accompanying table.

Results:

Recommendation 1. *Provide transitional funding to ongoing networks for at least one year to allow more time for the development and implementation of a sustainable funding model, particularly with regard to their operating costs. The NCE should also consider providing the opportunity to apply for a second year of transitional funding (for a total of six years of NCE–NI funding) to allow networks to adjust their strategy based on the results obtained during the first year.*

NCE management is pleased that the evaluation has provided evidence of the added value of the NCE-NIs and of the fact that the objectives of the pilot have been attained. A decision on the future of the NCE-NI has not yet been made. NCE management agrees that another year of funding would be useful to allow the NCE-NI networks to complete their activities and consolidate the progress accomplished to date. The additional year would also allow sufficient time to develop and launch a new program and competition beyond the pilot, if these actions were deemed appropriate.

Delivery:

Recommendation 2. *Adjust the management practice for the NCE–NI pilot to better acknowledge that NCE–NIs have a much different scope, size and funding regime than the full NCEs.*

NCE management agrees that future design elements of the initiative should be adapted to the size and scope of the NCE-NIs. NCE management has tasked the NCE Secretariat with assembling a tri-agency working group to consider whether the NCE-NI should be continued and, if so, in what form (as discussed in Recommendation 3).

Recommendation 3. *Clarify the future rationale of the NCE-NI pilot in the context of the NCE program portfolio and the current S&T strategy.*

NCE management agrees that the NCE program should review and clarify the rationale of the NCE-NI program in the context of the new S&T Strategy and the NCE portfolio, and will task the tri-agency working group with examining the following elements:

- The need for a permanent program of this kind.
- Whether the initial concept of the NIs should be expanded, and the possible need to strengthen some of the current elements (e.g., the project management and knowledge transfer (KT) requirements).
- Discussing the alignment of a new program with the S&T priorities versus an open concept, as well as the duration of the new networks (up to five-years cycles).

Relevance:

Recommendation 4. *Maintain the NCE-NI pilot for one additional competition round, during which time the initiative should be reviewed as per Recommendation 3.*

NCE management noted strong evidence that: (1) ongoing NCE-NI networks have reached a level of credibility and momentum that will clearly lead to important benefits, and that the initiative adds value for multidisciplinary and collaborative research in Canada involving academics and community receptors, (2) the level of excellence that is required in the NCE program is maintained, and (3) that the initiative continues to fit the objectives of the NCE program and complement the array of programs delivered by the NCE Secretariat.

There are currently no plans to extend the NCE-NI past September 2010. The tri-agency working group will make recommendations on the future implementation of the New Initiative concept past September 2010. NCE management agrees that there is a need to inform all stakeholders, better manage expectations, and communicate the details of the new entity.

Contact: For further information on the management response, please contact Enikő Megyeri-Lawless, Deputy-Director, NCE, and on the evaluation, Hélène Gauthier, Manager, Performance and Evaluation, SSHRC.

Management Action Plan

Recommendation*	Agree/ Disagree	Action plan	Responsibility	Timeline
Results and added-value				
1. <i>Provide transitional funding to ongoing networks for at least one year to allow more time for the development and implementation of a sustainable funding model, particularly with regard to their operating costs.</i>	Agree	NCE management agrees to provide a one-year extension, from September 2009 to September 2010, to NCE-NIs that demonstrate the need for additional funding. This extension will be implemented immediately to allow the NCE-NIs to consolidate the progress accomplished to date and avoid losing their momentum and interrupting their activities.	NCE Secretariat	September 2009 - September 2010
<i>The NCE should also consider providing the opportunity to apply for a second year of transitional funding (for a total of six years of NCE-NI funding) to allow networks to adjust their strategy based on the results obtained during the first year.</i>	Disagree	Management will provide only one year of funding. This will align the funding period of the NCE-NIs with the five-year funding cycle adopted for the full NCE networks.		
Delivery				
2. <i>Adjust the management practice for</i>	Agree	Management has tasked the NCE Secretariat with appointing a tri-	NCE Secretariat	September 2009 -

Recommendation*	Agree/ Disagree	Action plan	Responsibility	Timeline
<i>the NCE-NI pilot program to better acknowledge that NCE-NIs have a much different scope, size and funding regime than the full NCEs.</i>		Agency working group composed of representatives from the three federal granting agencies, as well as external members, to make recommendations regarding the future NCE-NI.		January 2010
3. Clarify the future rationale of the NCE-NI pilot in the context of the NCE program portfolio and the current S&T strategy.	Agree	Management will task the tri-agency working group with : (1) examining the need for a permanent program of this kind and the alignment of a new program with the S&T priorities versus an open concept. (2) recommending whether the initial concept of the NIs should be expanded. (3) defining the elements of the future entity (e.g., duration, project management and KT requirements, performance reporting).	NCE Secretariat and Tri-Agency Working Group	September 2009 - January 2010
Relevance				
4. Maintain the NCE-NI pilot for one additional competition round, during which time the initiative should be reviewed as per Recommendation 3.	Under consideration	Management will not extend the NCE-NI pilot in its current form. However, the possibility to request an additional year of funding has been provided to the ongoing NCE-NIs. During the coming year (2009-2010) the working group will provide its recommendations. When the working group's recommendations are to hand, NCE Secretariat will communicate them to stakeholders.	NCE Secretariat	September 2009 – January 2010

* Source: Summative Evaluation of the Networks of Centres of Excellence-New Initiatives Final Evaluation Report, September 2009, Science-Matrix.