

SSHRC achieving greater recognition with emphasis on its contribution to economy

Half way into a five-year term and on the eve of a federal Budget, Dr Chad Gaffield remains a man on a mission to achieve greater recognition — and resources — for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). With a strong emphasis on accountability and value-for-money, the SSHRC president says that emphasizing the economic impact of the social sciences and humanities (SSH) is perhaps the most persuasive way to make the case that SSHRC now comes to the table as an equal among its peers.

That hasn't always been the case, as a succession of presidents have failed in varying degrees to make the case for greater support for Canadian SSH. Yet a re-positioning of the granting agency and the findings of a recent report on the economic role and influence of SSH appears to have captured the attention of politicians and policy makers.

In the past two Budgets SSHRC — along with its health and natural sciences and engineering counterparts — has received targeted increases in areas that conform to the current government's S&T priorities.

The 2007 Budget added \$11 million to the council's A-base and directed it towards research into management, business and finance. The 2008 Budget provided another \$12 million, requiring that it be spent on research on the social and economic needs of northern Canadian communities and the impact of the environment on Canadians. Gaffield says he has no problem with the government directing his agency in how new funding is to be spent.

"In terms of national priorities, it's seen that there is a need for us to really ratchet up in certain areas. We certainly have potential across the board and we're in a position given our envelope where we can significantly contribute more, based on increases like that and we're ready," he says. Additional funding to increase our contribution is my priority."

A March/08 report on the economic impact of SSH in Canada shows that the industries dominated by "SSH inputs" contribute to a greater amount of GDP (\$696 billion) than those in which science, technology, engineering and medicine are dominant (\$431 billion). While the research is preliminary and requires follow-up, Gaffield says its impact has been considerable.

"A lot of it is just getting the evidence on the table. (The report) is important to us and got a lot of attention because it's saying 'let's look at the numbers here'. We have not put our best foot forward on this and now

we're starting to do that to a much greater extent. And the recognition of the value of the contributions we can make is enhanced."

Unlike the other two granting councils, SSHRC has no programs for direct interaction between industry and the researchers it supports. Gaffield says that will change this year. How ambitious the new program will be and whether SSHRC can extend its influence

depends upon the contents of the Budget.

"We'll stay tuned in terms of the Budget coming up and how much flexibility we have. We are certainly going to collaborate with the private sector," he says. "Our basic approach has been to ... demonstrate our readiness to contribute. This is especially true given that we are now able to support the top slice in terms of who we can fund. If we expand the top slice just a little bit, then the cross-benefit can be really interesting. Our interest is to get beyond that top 20% (funding success rate). Every little bit more, the potential is really significant."

Gaffield says SSHRC should be a key part of the Budget's proposed stimulus package. Many of the issues that have come to the fore in the economic crisis — global legal frameworks, intellectual property, management and global engagement — all fall into SSHRC's purview.

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One strong national voice as hydrogen and fuel cells associations negotiate merger

Faced with an unprecedented economic downturn and lack of support at the federal level, Canada's hydrogen and fuel cells associations have opted to have merge and provide their industries with a stronger unified voice. The Vancouver based Hydrogen and Fuel Cells Canada (H2FCC) — formerly Fuel Cells Canada — and the Canadian Hydrogen Association (CHA) will now be known as the Canadian Hydrogen and Fuel Cells Association (CHFCA).

"It seemed preferable to have one national organization to stimulate the development of the sector and commercialization," says John Tak, president and CEO of CHFCA and formerly president and CEO of H2FCC. "This will allow us to use our resources more carefully and use one voice to advocate to government."

The CHFCA will have its first opportunity to convince government that increased support is both necessary and justified when members meet with government officials and others in Ottawa next month.

There's a lot to talk about. The federal fuel cells strategy which sat on the shelf for more than two years has been officially abandoned, leaving Canada without a guiding framework for the industry and supporting research enterprise. The \$213 million, five-year commitment to fuel cells R&D expired and has not been replaced. The sector must now compete with seven other energy sectors for funding from the \$215-million Eco Energy Technology Initiative.

"A Canadian strategy would help to

focus the government's policies and help with branding of those policies," says Tak. "We would like to see an increase in funding support that matches the size of the sector and our place globally."

While industry derives some funding from Sustainable Development Technologies Canada and programs like Hydrogen Highway and Hydrogen Village have been renewed, the lack of policy attention and financial support is allowing other nations to pull ahead. Tak says the fuel cell and hydrogen industries are excellent examples of industries that spend heavily on R&D, enable a whole range of other industries and employ in excess of 30,000 people.

"We are the poster child of the government's new Science and Technology Strategy. We conduct far more industry R&D. We have a ratio of 80:20 private to public, while the Canadian average is 53:47," he says. "We're also an enabling technology. We can work with the oil and gas sector and work with solar and wind."

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