

## Canadian Astronomical Society Société Canadienne d'Astronomie Office of the President Bureau du Président

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To: Ainsley McFarlane
Program Officer
Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada
Mathematical, Environmentale and Physique Sciences Division

Samir Boughaba Team Leader Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada Mathematical, Environmentale and Physique Sciences Division

CC: Isabelle Blain,
NSERC, Vice-President of Research Grants and Scholarships

Janet Walden NSERC, Acting President

Victoria, May 16, 2013

Dear Dr. McFarlane, Dear Dr. Boughaba,

I am writing on behalf of the Canadian Astronomical Society/Société Canadienne d'Astronomie (CASCA), to express concern about the absence of Canadian astronomers in the 2012-13 Physics 1505 evaluation panel.

According to data publicly available on the NSERC website, in the last competition, 29% of the 1505 reviewers worked at Canadian institutions. This is a significantly lower percentage than for any other discipline: with the exception of Computer Science (1507, 55% Canadian representation), all other panel are composed of 80% or more Canadian reviewers. In the past few years, the level of Canadian representation in the 1505 conference has been consistently falling: from 48% in 2010-11, to 42% in 2011-12, to 29% in 2012-13. This trend has been the cause of significant concern to the reviewers, and indeed has prompted strong and repeated recommendations from former panel Chairs to NSERC stressing that Canadian representation needed to be increased.

Of particular concern to CASCA is the fact that, in 2012-13, none of the Canadians on the 1505 panel were astronomers: of the six reviewers listed as having astronomy expertise, five were from the US, one from France.

While some foreign representation is beneficial, a significant Canadian component is vital. As detailed below, we believe that the exclusion of Canadian representatives undermines the peer review process

and, unless corrected, will inevitably decouple NSERC from the needs and priorities of the Canadian Astronomical community.

Foreign astronomers provide a useful prospective, but have little appreciation for the strategic direction of the Canadian community. Their research priorities will in general be different from ours, and align with their own National plans. The US Decadal Plan and the Long Range Plan for Canadian Astronomy differ in many significant aspects; the all too real danger is that the predominance of US reviewers in the 1505 conference will lead to US priorities being enforced on Canadian astronomers.

Furthermore, a pre-requisite for a fair peer-review process is that the reviewers must be familiar with the Canadian university system and the Canadian standards for research productivity, teaching loads, and HQP training. The US system is significantly different from ours: funding opportunities are more numerous and come from a variety of sources. Teaching loads are different. Generally speaking, it is easier to support students and postdoctoral fellows within the US system, and many US universities can rely on a steady number of independently funded postdoctoral fellows which is far higher than available in Canada. As a consequence, an excellent HQP training record for a researcher in a Canadian university might not appear overly impressive to our US colleagues. This could easily translate in a downgrade unless the reviewers are familiar with Canadian standards.

Finally, but equally important, within the current review system Canadian proposal intellectual property is effectively being handed out primarily to foreign countries. This is widely recognized as undesirable: for instance, Canadian telescope proposals are preferentially reviewed by Canadian astronomers precisely to avoid leakage of concepts and ideas.

CASCA fully realizes that the relatively small size of the Canadian astronomical community, combined with the need to avoid conflict of interests, presents challenges to the selection of panel members. However, these challenges can and must be overcome. Identifying high calibre Canadian representation has always been possible for all other Canadian astronomical committees, including CASCA's committees, Canadian Time Allocation Committees, Science Advisory Committees and Board of Directors of astronomical facilities with Canadian interest. We see no reason why NSERC should be an exception.

CASCA would appreciate a response from NSERC detailing the reasons that allowed this situation to arise, and a reassurance that it will be corrected in future competitions.

Yours sincerely,

Laura Ferrarese

**CASCA President**