



Ottawa, May 23, 2013

Dr. Laura Ferrarese
President, CASCA
Herzberg Institute of Astrophysics
National Research Council Canada
5071 W. Saanich Road
Victoria BC V9E 2E7

Subject: Your letter dated May 16, 2013

Dear Dr. Ferrarese:

This is in response to your letter dated May 16, 2013 in which you expressed concerns on behalf of CASCA regarding the absence of astronomers from Canadian institutions in the membership of the 2012-2013 Physics Evaluation Group.

First, let me assure you that NSERC strives at ensuring the active participation of members of the communities it serves in its peer review processes, as external reviewers and members of selection committees. In every Discovery Grants competition of the Physics Evaluation Group, several hundred requests for external reviewer reports are submitted to researchers in Canadian institutions.

As you may know, there are numerous guidelines that govern the recruitment of our committee members, the principal aim being to ensure fair and expert assessments and recommendations. Various parameters need to be taken into account when recruiting new members and balancing the membership of each committee, including but not limited to expertise breadth, continuous institutional representation, simultaneous institutional representation, capacity to review applications in the two official languages, gender representation, etc. Furthermore, NSERC endeavours at ensuring that researchers who are recruited for specific expertise do not end up being in conflict of interest with most of those applications that require their expert input.

The size of the Canadian physics community is small; that of the Canadian astronomy community is even smaller. This fact is coupled with a highly collaborative field and a finite number of expertise centres throughout Canada for each sub-discipline.

The above constraints explain the higher proportion of foreign representation in some disciplines, especially physics and astronomy. Circumstances that are out of NSERC's control can further lead to fluctuations in the membership representation, and result in a temporary higher proportion of

foreign members. Examples of such circumstances include situations where Canadian researchers with appropriate expertise and stature face personal circumstances that preclude them from accepting to serve as members, or from continuing their service. Taking into account that the duration of appointments is typically of three years, one may appreciate the time it takes to re-adjust fluctuations due to such situations, which we have frequently faced in recent years.

Nowadays, where most research endeavours are global in nature, the participation of highly regarded international researchers in our peer review processes is an asset, as they provide invaluable contributions, further strengthening NSERC's peer review processes and asserting the excellence of Canadian research on the international stage. NSERC's committee members and external reviewers are formally bound by stringent requirements that are intended to ensure the highest ethical and integrity standards in peer review; these requirements and the accompanying guidelines on conflicts of interest strictly apply to all members, from Canadian and foreign institutions.

Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that Evaluation Group members participate in several in-depth orientation and mock review sessions prior to carrying out their assessments. In these sessions, the objective and specificities of the Discovery Grants Program are presented and explained, as is the importance of the Program in the Canadian research landscape. The peer review process is also thoroughly discussed, with the goal of ensuring consistent assessments for all applications. The sessions are led by the Group Chair and Section Chairs, and they complement the extensive literature our members receive. The members from Canadian institutions actively participate in these sessions alongside their peers from foreign institutions, ensuring that the latter have a sound understanding of the Canadian context.

As a final note, I would like to stress again the fact that NSERC values the contributions that members of the Canadian research communities generously make to its peer review processes. We will continue to make every possible effort to ensure their active participation, and further expand it, while guaranteeing the quality and fairness of our processes.

Sincerely,



Samir Boughaba
Team Leader, Research Grants

c.c.: Isabelle Blain
Janet Walden
Ainsley McFarlane
Canadian Association of Physicists