

Ottawa to universities: Improve diversity or lose research chair funds

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The federal granting councils that award the prestigious Canada Research Chairs say universities must offer up more diverse candidates for the honour or they will lose their funds.

Directors of the program, which sends out \$265-million every year across 1,600 researchers, say new measures unveiled on Thursday would help to address the chronic underrepresentation of women, Indigenous people, those with disabilities and visible minorities among the award's ranks. For example, only 28 per cent of chairholders at large universities are women, and they are more likely to be in the bottom of the program's two funding tiers.

Under the new rules, postsecondary institutions have until Dec. 15 to create an action plan on how to achieve more diversity among their candidates, and then they have another 18 to 24 months to ensure the demographics of those given the awards reflect the demographics of those academics eligible to receive them.

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Universities are now being warned that if they don't meet these equity targets in time, they could lose their research chairs.

"We believe that progress has been made, but we think it could be made much faster," said Ted Hewitt, president of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and head of the CRC steering committee.

Academics are nominated for the positions by their universities, which receive an allotted number of chairs from the government based on the institution's size. The program is one of the federal government's most prominent tools to attract and retain top academic talent in Canada.

But for most academics, research chairs represent a milestone far along in their career. Addressing diversity earlier in academic careers will require more work on the part of universities and provinces, Dr. Hewitt said, but he believes the program's new rules will inspire others to make changes.

"We are doing what we can through this federal program," he said. "We believe this might have a broader effect on the ecosystem."

Science Minister Kirsty Duncan, who had a long career in research before entering politics, made changes last year to a more elite version of the program, called the Canada Excellence Research Chairs, and required competing institutions to submit diversity plans along with their applications.

Ms. Duncan hinted last week that new measures were in the works for the larger program when she spoke to a gathering of university presidents in Montreal, admonishing them for not doing more to address the issue.

"When I became Minister of Science, I made it clear that I expected the universities to meet the equity and diversity targets that they had agreed to meet a decade ago," Ms. Duncan said in an interview Thursday.

"For the most part, they've failed to do so. It's been a decade, and there simply hasn't been enough progress."

University of Ottawa law professor Amir Attaran, who has held a Canada Research Chair, filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission last year over what he said was discrimination in the program. He said he'll be watching to see if the government makes good on its threat to pull funding from universities that underperform.

"The intent of this is good, but we've seen good intent and bad performance over a decade," he said.

Prof. Attaran said much of the credit for raising the issue rests with Wendy Robbins, a University of New Brunswick professor who died last month. Prof. Robbins led a successful legal challenge in 2006 that led to the creation of the Canada Research Chairs' equity targets.