

September 5, 2023

Dear Melanie:

We, a group of SFU faculty members who are interested in promoting open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement at SFU, understand that you are seeking feedback on the terms of reference of the new SFU Research Excellence Awards. We commend the administration for promoting research excellence via the creation of these awards. However, we have several concerns about the adjudication policies described in the draft documents.

First, the definition of research excellence in Appendix A, Section 2.5 currently includes the following statement:

The Advisory Committee, responsible for evaluating excellence, will be guided by established frameworks such as the Canada's Dimensions Charter and Scarborough Charter (of which SFU is a signatory), University Canada's Inclusive Excellence Principles, SFU's Equity Compass, and emerging principles and practices to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion and Truth and Reconciliation.

This statement, which deals with the committee's responsibilities with respect to certain frameworks, should be deleted; Appendix B, Section 5.0 seems like the appropriate place for discussion of responsibilities. Appendix A, Section 2.5 should be restricted to the definition of research excellence alone. Otherwise, the inclusion of these frameworks in the definition could be interpreted as introducing new requirements for academic research related to the social and political views expressed therein. Such requirements would be inconsistent with the [BC University Act](#), which states that "A university must be non-sectarian and non-political in principle", and the [SFUFA/SFU Collective Agreement](#), which states that faculty members have the right "to investigate, speculate, and comment without reference to prescribed doctrine". Imposition of particular political ideology within the definition of research excellence may lead to discrimination against candidates whose research challenges or critiques popular beliefs – including those concerning equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI).

Second, the committee's EDI-related responsibilities (currently described in Appendix A, Section 2.5, as stated above), though presumably designed to foster a fair and inclusive environment at SFU (which we support), could be clarified and improved. Insisting that the committee adhere to multiple frameworks – especially external frameworks that could change over time, use varying definitions of equity, diversity, and inclusion, or be mutually inconsistent – seems ill-advised. Rather, we suggest that the committee be guided by a single, SFU-specific framework with clear definitions of key terms mirroring those in other SFU documents (such as the Equity Compass – or, preferably, in the glossary that the SFU Equity Office plans on publishing – in the case of terms related to equity, diversity, and inclusion). This framework should be described in specific terms. **Which principles and practices, exactly, should the committee follow?** The vagueness of the current language could lead to interpretations that violate the principles of academic freedom.

Third, the committee's responsibilities should explicitly include adherence to the principles of academic freedom. Academic freedom, [recognized](#) as a fundamental value that guides SFU, serves as the cornerstone of innovative and rigorous research, enabling scholars to explore new frontiers of knowledge without constraints or undue influence from their employers. The policy should therefore emphasize this freedom as a central tenet when evaluating candidates for the awards. The committee members should have a thorough understanding of the theory and practice of academic freedom and be counselled to judge a candidate's work on the basis of its academic merit alone, regardless of whether their own opinions mirror those of the candidate.

Finally, Appendix B, Section 5.3.1.4 currently states that

The Committee Members are responsible for... creating a shared definition of equity, diversity, and inclusion in the context of its work.

Requiring every committee to create its own definitions of "equity", "diversity", and "inclusion" will almost certainly result in different committees' adjudicating awards according to different criteria, causing unfairness in the procedure. Moreover, this requirement imposes extra, unnecessary work on the committees. We recommend instead that every committee use the definitions outlined in the SFU Equity Compass (or, preferably, the forthcoming glossary).

We respectfully request a response to the points we have raised. We would also appreciate the opportunity to review the policy again before it is finalized.

Sincerely,