CIHR STAGE 3nd Program Advisory Committee Meeting Report
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Executive Summary

Strategic Training for Advanced Genetic Epidemiology (STAGE) is Canada's foremost training program in genetic epidemiology and statistical genetics, and has joined Oxford and Cambridge/Sanger in the UK, and the University of Michigan, University of Washington, and Harvard University/Broad Institute in the USA, as one of the leading programs of its kind in the world. STAGE training addresses a high demand area now and for the foreseeable future, owing to the rapid advances in genome technology and the corresponding need for the development and creative application of new methods in quantitative biology capable of integrating multiple levels of large-scale genomic and other omics data with clinical and epidemiologic data. Such approaches provide novel opportunities to understand better the role of genetics in human health and disease and to more effectively target interventions aimed at reducing the burden of disease. Such cross-disciplinary training will be key to ensure the future competitiveness of Canadian science related to personalized medicine and public health.

STAGE has attracted trainees and faculty in multiple disciplines from Toronto, across Canada, and internationally. STAGE is successful in conventional terms of faculty and trainee quality and productivity, and at the same time is highly innovative, adding foci and expertise as they become relevant and as faculty are available. The current plan to link STAGE training in genetic epidemiology and statistical genetics with other topics in big data and health represents a real opportunity to build on STAGE success in an exciting new direction.

STAGE leverages limited CIHR support in creative and productive ways. STAGE trainees hone their grant-writing skills and are successful in obtaining external funding, allowing involvement of more trainees than would be possible based on STAGE funding alone. STAGE engages multi-disciplinary mentor faculty from all over Toronto, with non-core DLSPH faculty surmounting departmental barriers and contributing far beyond their expected levels or the level they might otherwise commit. The professional benefits for these mentors include interactions with outstanding trainees, opportunities for intellectual broadening and scientific synergy through collaborations that may otherwise not have occurred. STAGE is a prime example of the value of moving outside of traditional disciplinary silos, benefitting both mentors and trainees. STAGE is contributing to our understanding of human biology, health, and disease, and is generating knowledge that will impact public health practice and facilitate better-targeted clinical care, both in Canada and worldwide.

Given STAGE success to date, and the recent elevation of the DLSPH to faculty status at the University of Toronto, it is time for the DLSPH to provide basic administrative support for STAGE, acknowledging its strategic importance and integral role within the School. Further, given the key role STAGE is poised to play in the exciting DLSPH big data strategic initiative, and the increased demand on STAGE faculty with expertise in complex data investigations and analyses, the PAC recommends recruitment of additional faculty in this area.

With CIHR STAGE funding set to end in 2.5 years, the time is now for STAGE faculty to identify new grant sources for training and for STAGE faculty and DLSPH leadership to work together to continue to find ways to finance this outstanding program.