Changes to the DCI's Consultative Body and Steering Committee: Recommendations

Spring 2023

Summary

In response to the Digital Citizen Initiative's (DCI) Evaluation, the Cultural Affairs Sector committed to review and update the governance structure of the DCI, which is made up of a Consultative Body and Steering Committee.

This note proposes to engage the Consultative Body in a more targeted manner with regard to reviewing applications and sharing knowledge and expertise, and to review the mandate and membership of the Steering Committee to mitigate potential conflicts of interest, accommodate the DCI's expanded scope since 2019, and bring new perspectives to bear.

In doing so, the DCI recommends the following action be taken:

1. Continue to consult the whole Consultative Body regarding new priorities for calls for proposals but engage only certain members of the Consultative Body when reviewing applications.
2. Present the results of at least two projects from each future call for proposal to the whole Consultative Body.
3. Organize a monthly meeting with representatives from a specific Department or agency for the purpose of knowledge exchange with inter-governmental partners.
4. Narrow the role of the Steering Committee to focus on the priorities for each call for proposals, not reviewing applications.
5. Update the membership and composition of the Steering Committee.

Context

The DCI's governance structure was developed and implemented in 2019 when the program was launched. There are two main components to this structure.

The Consultative Body is made up of representatives from PCH and other federal government departments (OGDs). Its purpose is to: 1) review applications submitted to the DCI's Contribution Program, the Digital Citizen Contribution Program (DCCP), for suitability and relevance to the Government's objectives on countering online disinformation, bringing to bear any existing subject matter expertise or experience in working with applicants; 2) view project proposals that may align with their own programs more so than the DCCP with an eye towards coordinating funding activities; and 3) review the funding priorities for each new call for proposals.

The Consultative Body includes 43 members representing 23 OGDs. A full list of membership is attached as Annex A. The Consultative Body meets once per call for proposal, including both regular calls and special calls. For each meeting, the DCCP provides each application accompanied by an initial assessment and analysis.

The Steering Committee is made up of representatives from academia, civil society, and not-for-profit funding organizations. Per the Terms of Reference for the Steering Committee (attached as Annex B), its primary objective is to "frame the agenda of the research component of the Department of the DCI,

which includes DCCP and the PCH-SSHRC Initiative for Digital Citizen Research (IDCR)". In doing so, it shall:

i.   consider pressing research needs relating to online disinformation in the Canadian context in order to provide strategic guidance for the development of the DCCP program guidelines and calls for proposals, and the program description of the IDRC;

ii. evaluate and recommend project proposals received through the DCCP and the IDRC to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, and;

iii. provide strategic input into matters pertaining to the operation of the DCCP and IDRC as needed.

The Steering Committee is chaired the Director of the DCI. Aside from Departmental representatives, the Steering Committee currently include six representatives from academia, civil society, and not-for-profit funding organizations. The full membership of the Steering Committee is attached as Annex C. Under the Steering Committee's Terms of Reference shall be made up of at least 3, but not more than 7 individuals.

The Terms of Reference also state that each member is entitled to an annual honorarium of $9000. In practice, however, the DCI has been awarding members with $500 per meeting attended to incentivize participation.

DCI Evaluation and the Management Response Action Plan

PCH's Evaluation Services Directorate conducted an Evaluation of the DCI in 2022. The evaluation contained two recommendations pertaining to the DCI's Governance Structure.

First, it recommends that "the Assistant Deputy Minister, Cultural Affairs, should clarify existing roles and responsibilities for DCI within PCH and with the growing number of partners to promote strong collaboration and communication while preventing any duplication or overlap of efforts or resources."

Second, it recommends that "the Assistant Deputy Minister, Cultural Affairs, should review, update and communicate funding priorities for DCI to ensure achievement of key results with the limited funding available".

The Sector responded to these recommendations through a Management Response Action Plan (MRAP) that commits to the following activities:

- Establish the frequency of Consultative Body and Steering Committee meetings
- Review the membership process, purpose and structure of the Consultative Body and Steering Committee and update as necessary
- Organize monthly meetings for the purpose of knowledge exchange with inter-governmental partners

Issues

Consultative Body

The Consultative Body's size makes it difficult to facilitate effective coordination and consultation. Made up of 43 representatives from 23 ODGs, Consultative Body meetings provide little opportunity for

each represented department to voice their opinions and concerns. Many members share their input on a one-to-one basis after meetings – in some cases this input arrives too late to make relevant changes to the DCCP's recommendations strategy.

The Consultative Body's diverse membership results in some members having little to no input depending on the nature of the call for proposals being discussed. The DCI has added membership to the Consultative Body depending on the priorities of each call for proposals. For example, representatives from Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada were added to the Consultative Body a result of the DCCP funding projects to build citizen resilience to pandemic-related disinformation. However, as the Program has completed these calls for proposals, the relevance and added benefit for representatives from these Departments has waned.

There are opportunities to leverage the Consultative Body for knowledge mobilization that have not been fully realized. While the stated purpose of the Consultative Body is to consider priorities for calls for proposals and reviewing applications, the use of this body can go beyond these roles by being used as a venue for sharing the results of projects and insights into new activities and research. The DCI has conducted several 'knowledge mobilization' sessions with the Consultative Body, but these sessions have been planned and executed in an ad-hoc nature.

Steering Committee

The Steering Committee's composition has not been substantially updated since 2019. While the Terms of Reference states that members of the Steering Committee shall be appointed on a twelve-month basis, some members have been participating since 2019. The DCI has introduced two new members to the Steering Committee since 2019 to account for the resignation of some members. However, there is a group of members that have participated since its inception.

The Terms of Reference for the Steering Committee does not account for the expansion of the DCCP's focus to include not only research, but citizen-focussed activities and online harms beyond disinformation. The Terms of Reference were created at a time when the DCCP was solely focussed on funding research projects to better understand the creation, spread, and impact of disinformation and to evaluate digital media and civic literacy programming. Since 2020, the DCCP has also been active in funding activities beyond research, especially in the context of COVID-19. At the onset of the pandemic, the DCCP began funding public awareness campaigns and learning tools as a way to build resilience to pandemic-related disinformation. Since then, the DCCP has also launched two other calls for proposals whose scope goes beyond research and into digital media and civic literacy activities. More recently, the DCCP has also begun funding projects to address online harms and online safety at a larger scale, not just focusing on online disinformation. The expansion of the DCCP's scope has not been factored into the purpose or composition of the Steering Committee.

The composition of the Steering Committee presents risks pertaining to conflicts of interest. Several members of the Steering Committee have either received funding via the DCCP or are in close collaboration with individuals or organizations that have applied for funding. Each member has disclosed their conflicts of interests and when conflicts of interest do arise, members abstain from discussion and participation. Nonetheless, some members of the Steering Committee have expressed concern with the potential for perceived conflicts of interest. The continued inclusion of individuals and organizations so closely involved in the funding process presents risk to the DCI and to the Department.

Some members of the Steering Committee have resigned or seem to have lost interest in the process. Active participation in the Steering Committee is led by one or two members, with many members either not attending meetings or not contributing meaningfully to discussions. The lack of participation among some members leads to less fruitful discussion and difficulties in maintaining the integrity of the process and the Steering Committee as a whole.

<u>Recommendations</u>

Recommendation 1: Continue to consult the whole Consultative Body regarding new priorities for calls for proposals but engage only certain members of the Consultative Body when reviewing applications.

The Consultative Body contains diverse and critical perspectives on various subject matter areas aligned with the DCI's objectives – it is therefore crucial that it be leveraged to develop the priorities for each new call for proposals.

However, many members have little to no input when it comes to reviewing applications that do not involve their areas of expertise. For each batch of applicants, the DCI recommends identifying a core group of Consultative Body members plus additional representatives with relevant subject matter expertise that would add useful considerations to its recommendation strategy, and only engage those members through the process. This change would ensure that meetings of the Consultative Body are more focused, direct, and relevant to the participating members when reviewing applications. It would also alleviate the administrative burden of developing application packages for the Consultative Body each time a batch of applications is to be reviewed.

Recommendation 2: Present the results of one project from the DCCP's calls for proposals once per quarter.

The DCI presents research projects to members of the Consultative Body, Steering Committee, and other interested parties on an ad-hoc basis. The DCI proposes to formalize the frequency of these presentations by choosing at least one project from each call for proposals to present to these audiences at a frequency of once per quarter. These presentations will serve to leverage the full value of the Consultative Body and the wider community focused on disinformation to showcase new and ongoing activities and research being supported by the DCI.

Recommendation 3: Organize a monthly meeting with representatives from a specific Department or agency for the purpose of knowledge exchange with inter-governmental partners.

Holding monthly meetings with representatives from specific Departments will ensure that the DCI is staying up to date with current issues and activities happening in the disinformation space across Government. Each month, the DCI will identify a government partner to engage with depending on the current strategic and policy environment. These meetings would add valuable context and knowledge to inform the DCI's activities moving forward and would also serve to keep OGDs engaged between meetings of the Consultative Body.

Recommendation 4: Narrow the role of the Steering Committee to focus on the priorities for each call for proposals, not reviewing applications.

Allowing the Steering Committee to focus on setting the priorities for calls for proposal in lieu of also reviewing applications would mitigate the conflicts of interest wherein members must abstain from

discussion when reviewing applications from their own organizations or those they have partnerships with.

Recommendation 5: *Update the membership and composition of the Steering Committee:*

- *remove the limit on number of members*
- *add a quorum of 4 members per meeting*
- *provide an honorarium of $500 per person per meeting attended, instead of $9000 per member per year*
- *allow some long-standing appointments to expire,*
- *fill vacant positions with new members with broader expertise*

The Steering Committee's Terms of Reference allow for a maximum of 7 members at any given time. To allow for a broader range of perspectives to be brought to bear, the DCI recommends that this limit be removed. To avoid meetings with little to no participation, the DCI recommends that a quorum of 4 be established per meeting. The DCI also recommends that member's honoraria be provided on a per meeting basis and reduced to $500 in the Terms of Reference, instead of an annual honorarium of $9000 per member.

Allowing long-standing appointments to expire and filling vacant positions with new members, along with the flexibility to bring in more members, would allow the DCI to add members to the Steering Committee that have expertise in not only research, but citizen-focused activities to account for the DCCP's expanded scope since it was created in 2019.

Next Steps

With ADM approval, the DCI would:

- identify a core group of Consultative Body members to review applications
- reflect the changes made to the structure, composition, and purpose of the Consultative Body and Steering Committee in the Terms of Reference and Participant Guides for each body.
- identify members of the Steering Committee for either renewal or expiration based on individual meetings and prior experiences at Steering Committee meetings, then allow identified appointments to either expire or be renewed.
- seek out new members for the Steering Committee with research expertise in disinformation and online harms, digital media and civic literacy, and community interventions focused on online harms.