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Peer Assessment Process Research

Final Report

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Canada Council for the Arts

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Introduction

1.1 Executive Summary

This summary presents the results of research to better understand the effectiveness of the Canada Council's current peer assessment practices and explore ways to improve the process from the perspectives of peer assessors and staff. This research is intended to assist the Canada Council to better understand their perspectives with particular emphasis on changes made to the assessment process in recent years, and to identify potential areas for improvement.

Peer Assessment at Canada Council

Most of the Canada Council's funding decisions are guided by peer assessment. Peer assessment committees are composed of a diverse range of artists and arts professionals. Approximately 700 peer assessors are engaged by the Canada Council each year. Peer assessment committees evaluate and compare eligible applications, discuss their relative merit, and score each against assessment criteria. All assessments follow a common operational policy, although there are variations in the peer assessment processes across programs.

Methodology

The research project gathered and analyzed data from Canada Council staff and peer assessors who were involved in the peer assessment process between April 2022 and March 2024. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was used, including:

- Surveys of peer assessors who were part of an assessment committee between April 2022 and March 2024. 1,070 peer assessors were invited and 507 completed the survey, for a combined response rate of 47.4%.
- Focus groups and individual interviews with peer assessors who were part of an assessment committee between April 2023 and March 2024 (12 focus groups involving 39 individuals and 8 individual interviews).
- Staff focus groups with program officers and program assistants who are involved in peer assessment. (8 focus groups involving 54 individuals)
- Group interviews involving directors and managers from the Canada Council's Arts Granting Programs division (6 interviews involving 19 individuals)

Summary of Findings

The findings of this research reflect that peer assessment at the Canada Council is highly regarded: 87% of peer assessors surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied with the process. There is respect for the process and the principle of funding applications being reviewed and assessed by peers.

Peer assessors appreciate the professional nature of assessment at the Canada Council and regard the process as well-organized, well-supported and well-informed.

Interactions among peer assessors are respectful and Canada Council staff facilitate meetings effectively.

There is much that works well in peer assessment, including:

- A well-organized, well-supported and well-informed process.
- Interactions among peer assessors that are respectful and constructive.
- Canada Council staff are seen as professional.
- The knowledge, perspective and diversity of committees.
- The integrity, transparency, and inclusiveness of the assessment process.

Peer assessment is seen as an opportunity to contribute to the arts community in Canada. The assessment process also provides a professional development opportunity for artists to understand the Canada Council's granting programs, engage with colleagues, and gain inspiration and education for their own artistic practices and understanding of the arts sector in Canada.

While there is high satisfaction with the peer assessment process, the report surfaced potential improvements, primarily in response to recent changes. Peer assessment is critical to the success of the Canada Council and the process would benefit from refinements and adaptations with particular attention needed in response to the increase in the volume of applications to the Canada Council and the demands that this places on assessors, a shift to multidisciplinary assessment in some programs, and the transition to remote assessment. Greater consistency and clarity on the process will help improve overall efficiency and fairness. Efforts to move towards more consistency and efficiency must also balance the critical relationship building that comes through the assessment process, and the need for flexibility to address the unique needs of each program and committee.

The following are the key areas identified for improving the peer assessment process:

The demands of the process

The process is demanding for both assessors and staff, and the increasing volume of applications poses challenges. Assessors have noted the importance of having sufficient time to read and study each application, and some feel that the time allocated is insufficient. Recommendations for improving the process include:

- Reducing the demands of the process on peers by improving application forms and the pre-screening process.

The selection of files for discussion

Scoring is the primary guide for selecting applicants' files for discussion with additional direction at times from an individual program officer's analysis, interpretation, knowledge, and experience. The number of files that are discussed varies from program to program. Recommendations for improving the process include:

- Improving the consistency and organization of how files are grouped for the peer assessment committees.

Benefits and challenges of virtual assessment

While virtual assessment meetings have improved scheduling flexibility, they have also introduced barriers for some, especially for assessors who are Deaf or have disabilities. Face-to-face engagement is especially valuable to Indigenous peer assessors. Being together creates a space for ceremony and relationship building. This helps to acknowledge the reciprocal commitment, foster a sense of accountability, and support an understanding of shared values. Recommendations for improving the process include:

- Exploring if a return to an in-person process is better for some committees, for example, for Indigenous and Deaf and disability arts committees.

Multidisciplinary assessment

The shift to multidisciplinary assessment has introduced challenges including ensuring access to disciplinary expertise or representation of priority groups when there are conflicts of interest and supporting peer assessors to feel comfortable assessing applications involving an unfamiliar field of practice. Recommendations include:

- Enhancing assessment through cross-calibration across committees, use of advisors and communication on multidisciplinary assessment.

Assessment process

This research has highlighted the need for clearer assessment criteria, and a need to address systemic barriers and bias. There is strong support for providing feedback to applicants after the assessment process. Alternative application formats and methods could empower a broader range of applicants. Recommendations for improving the process include:

- Updating training and resources for assessors on reducing bias and how to apply assessment criteria.
- Improving the application process for applicants by reviewing forms and providing feedback.

Recruitment and support of peer assessors

Recruitment of peer assessors can be challenging and requires significant effort from program officers. In general, peer assessors feel well supported. Support could be further strengthened by providing training and resources on trauma informed practices and improving ways to make peers feel recognized and connected. There are concerns about the fairness of fees for assessors. Recommendations for improving the process include:

- Exploring use of standing committees for peer assessment.
- Reassessing compensation and expectations for peers.

Accessibility and Accommodation

Applications from Deaf and disability arts are often reviewed by committees with individuals who are Deaf or have disabilities, however, it was observed that this could

be done more and be better supported. Recommendations for improving the process include:

- Providing more accommodations and support to assessors who are Deaf or have disabilities, or who have been impacted by trauma.

Facilitating Equitable Access

Assessors emphasized the importance of diversity and inclusion in the assessment process. The challenge of achieving comprehensive representation across various disciplines and regions within a limited committee size was acknowledged.

Recommendations for improving the process include:

- Providing more context for applications from Canada Council's strategic groups and prioritizing recruitment of peer assessors from different regions.

Observations of peer assessors on applications and the arts sector

The insights from assessors on common themes in grant applications are as follows:

- **Diversity and inclusion:** Many applicants emphasize the importance of diversity and inclusion in their projects, focusing on gender and Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQI+ and other marginalized communities.
- **Indigenous representation and cultural identity:** There is a call for increased representation and support for Indigenous artists, as well as a focus on preserving and celebrating Indigenous cultural identity.
- **Climate change and the environment:** Numerous applicants explore themes related to climate change, environmental activism, and the impact of the climate crisis.
- **Mental health and trauma:** Many artists address trauma, mental health struggles, and the healing power of art.
- **Social justice:** Many projects aim to address social justice issues, the needs of equity-deserving communities, and counter systemic oppression and fascism.
- **Identity and self-expression:** Many applicants focus on exploring personal identity, ancestry, and self-expression through their artistic work.
- **Innovation and experimentation:** Artists aim to push boundaries and innovate in their respective fields, incorporating AI, technology, multidisciplinary approaches, and new mediums.
- **Collaboration and networking:** The need for collaboration, networking, and community engagement is highlighted by applicants.
- **Funding and resource challenges:** Artists express financial struggles and the need for more arts funding and resources.

Assessors identified the following as the key challenges currently faced by artists and the arts sector in Canada.

- **Financial challenges:** Artists are facing increasing challenges including funding, increasing competition for grants, and rising costs of living and production.
- **Artists' mental and physical health:** Artists across the country are struggling with mental and physical health issues exacerbated by the economy and the pandemic.
- **Inclusivity and diversity in the arts:** The arts world is striving for inclusivity but still faces challenges in achieving equity and inclusion for Indigenous, racialized, and other marginalized communities.

Assessors highlighted various supports that would be beneficial for the arts sector.

- **Increased Funding:** Assessors emphasized the need for more funding across various areas, including support for artists, organizations, projects, and operational costs.
- **Support for Artists:** Assessors noted the importance of providing support to artists at different stages of their careers, including mid-level artists who may be facing challenges or life changes, emerging artists in need of mentorship, and first-time grant applicants.
- **Accessibility and Inclusion:** There was a strong emphasis on supporting marginalized artists, including artists who are Deaf or have disabilities, 2SLGBTQI+ artists, Indigenous artists, Black artists, and racialized artists.
- **Policy and Government Support:** Assessors called for stronger advocacy to support increased government investment in the arts and policy changes to support the sector.
- **Collaboration and Networking:** Ideas included fostering cross-country and cross-discipline networking opportunities through conferences, symposia, and workshops.

This research signals that the peer assessment process is robust in many ways. Potential changes could strengthen the integrity, transparency, and effectiveness of the assessment process and help peer assessment to evolve.

1.2 Introduction

This report presents findings from a research project on the peer assessment process at the Canada Council for the Arts. The purpose of the research is to better understand the effectiveness of current peer assessment practices and explore ways to improve the process from the perspectives of peer assessors and staff. This research is intended to assist the Canada Council to better understand their perspectives with particular emphasis on changes made to the assessment process in recent years, and to identify potential areas for improvement.

Most of the Canada Council's funding decisions are guided by peer assessment. Peer assessment committees are composed of a diverse range of artists and arts professionals. Approximately 700 peer assessors are engaged by the Canada Council each year. Peer assessment committees evaluate and compare eligible applications, discuss their relative merit, and score each against assessment criteria. All assessments follow a common operational policy, although there are variations in the peer assessment processes across programs.

Several changes and factors have impacted the Canada Council's assessment processes, most notably:

- The transition to remote (virtual) peer assessment processes in 2020-21 for all programs, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- An increase in the volume of applications.
- The shift from a disciplinary to a multi-disciplinary assessment model in 2023 in the Explore and Create, Arts Abroad and Arts Across Canada programs.
- The move away from providing individual feedback to applicants, largely driven by the higher volume of applications.
- The introduction of a peer assessor self-nomination form in 2023 to gather a wider range of information from potential assessors.
- The introduction of a new scoring tool in 2023 to standardize how files are scored and discussed across programs.

The research project gathered and analyzed data from Canada Council staff and peer assessors who were involved in the peer assessment process between April 2022 and March 2024. The following key questions guided this project:

- What is working well within the existing peer assessment process?
- How could the peer assessment process be improved?
- How do changes in assessment processes impact the way peer assessors and Canada Council staff perceive the effectiveness of the process?
- How can the peer assessment process help facilitate equitable access to funding for youth, official language minority communities, and historically underserved

and marginalized communities, including Indigenous, Black, racialized, Deaf and disability, and 2SLGBTQI+ and gender-diverse communities, women, and artists at intersections of these groups?

- How well do the onboarding and training processes for peer assessors work?
- How can the Canada Council best support peer assessors in their participation in the process?
- What trends and challenges are peer assessors noticing in their review of applications?

1.3 Methods

The methods for this research were determined by the Research, Measurement, and Data Analytics Section of the Canada Council and implemented by Imprint Consulting Inc. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was used. See Appendix A for the focus group/interview guides and survey instruments.

1.3.1 Focus Groups and Interviews with Staff

Directors and Managers from the Arts Granting Programs division were interviewed to explore their perspectives on what is working well and what could be improved in the peer assessment process. They were also asked to provide input on what they would like to learn about peers' and staff's perceptions of the assessment process. There were 19 Directors and Managers who participated across six discussions.

All program officers and program assistants who are involved in peer assessment were invited to a focus group. There were 54 staff who participated in nine focus groups. They were invited to attend discussions for the following groups: Francophone program officers, Anglophone program officers, Indigenous or racialized staff, or program assistants. An additional focus group was added inviting a small group of staff to discuss the accessibility of the assessment process.

1.3.2 Survey of Peer Assessors

Peer assessors who were part of an assessment committee between April 2022 and March 2024 were invited to participate in an online survey. Three separate groups of peer assessors received survey invitations. Two invitations were made to peer assessors who served on a committee between April 2023 – November 2023 and November 2023 – March 2024. A simplified version of the survey was sent to assessors who served between April 2022 - March 2023. A simplified version was used because these assessors experience was less recent and some survey questions in the full survey focused on more recent changes to the assessment process. Assessors who served on multiple committees could only complete the survey one time and were asked to use their most recent assessment experience as reference. In total, 1,070 peer assessors were invited and 507 completed the survey, for a combined response rate of

47.4%. Of all respondents, 71% of assessors were Anglophone and 29% were Francophone, and 37% were first time assessors. For the two surveys for peer assessors who served on a committee between April 2023 – November 2023 and November 2023 – March 2024, the majority (66%) of responses were assessors in Explore and Create as this program had significantly more assessors in these assessment periods. Response rates by program are as follows: Explore and Create (50%) Creating, Knowing and Sharing (43%), Arts Abroad/Arts Across Canada (53%), Strategic Funds (62%), Supporting Artistic Practice (59%). Program data was not included in the survey sent to assessors who served between April 2022 - March 2023. The response rate for this survey was 41%.

1.3.3 Focus Groups and Interviews with Peer Assessors

A selection of peer assessors who served on a committee between April 2023 and March 2024 were invited to participate in one of twelve focus groups. Focus groups were organized by program area with an additional two focus groups peer assessors from Deaf and disability communities. Focus groups were conducted in French and in English. Individual interviews were offered to people who were interested in participating but were unavailable for the focus group, and to individuals from regions or strategic priority groups that were underrepresented in the final attendance of focus groups. A total of 39 people participated in focus groups and eight individuals participated in an interview.

Table 1: Methods Summary

Source	Participation	Timeline
Group interviews with Directors and Managers	19 participants, 6 discussions	Dec 2023-Jan 2024
Staff focus groups	54 participants, 8 discussions	Feb-Mar 2024
Peer assessor survey	3 groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • April 2023 – Nov 2023 Assessors • Nov 2023 – March 2024 Assessors • April 2022 - March 2023 Assessors 507 responses (47.4% response rate)	Feb-May 2024
Peer assessor focus groups and interviews	47 participants, 12 focus groups and 8 interviews	April-June 2024

1.3.4 Analysis

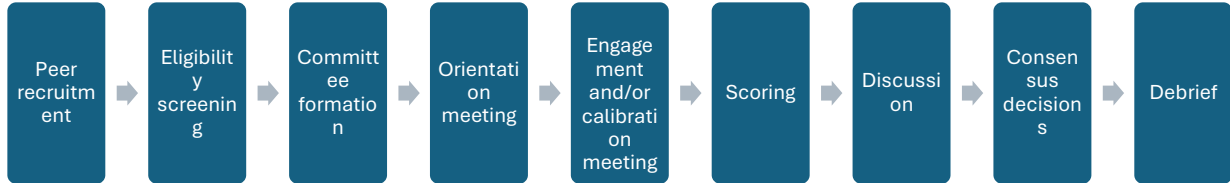
The analysis integrates staff and peer assessor perspectives. The perspective between peer assessors and Canada Council staff is highly aligned and observations and recommendations are generally presented without clarification as there was input from both that supports most points. The report notes when a comment is specific to peer assessors or staff, however, this does not imply that the other disagrees, it is simply that there is not data or that the point is unique to one or the other.

Please note that some assessors in the November 2023 – March 2024 assessment cycle were assessing 2024-25 competitions, and their perspective is included in the survey and focus group data.

Peer assessors whose quotes are included in this report consented to their use. They were presented the option of attributing their name or contributing the quote anonymously. For those assessors where the program they assessed for was known, that information was included.

1.3.5 Steps in the Peer Assessment Process

All peer assessments follow some version of the following activity: peer recruitment, eligibility screening, committee formation, orientation meeting, engagement and/or calibration meeting, scoring, discussion, consensus decisions, and a debrief that includes a reflection on the assessment process and observations of trends that peer assessors are seeing in the arts sector. There are variations across programs, and sometimes within programs.



Findings

2.1 Overall Satisfaction

The findings of this research reflect that peer assessment at the Canada Council is highly regarded. There is respect for the process and the principle of funding applications being reviewed and assessed by peers. Peer assessors appreciate the professional nature of assessment at the Canada Council and regard the process as well-organized, well-supported and transparent. Peer assessment is also seen as an opportunity to contribute to the arts community in Canada.

“I valued the whole experience and hearing about the projects happening in Canada and each assessors’ perspective. It was also helpful to see how people write proposals and you understand what techniques [and] type of language works best or is clearest.” – Peer Assessor, Anonymous, Creating, Knowing and Sharing

Peer assessors who responded to the survey had a favourable view of the peer assessment process. Eighty-seven percent of peer assessors were very satisfied or satisfied with the process as noted in figure 1 below. This favourable view is consistent across program areas as noted in figure 2 below. This favourable view is also consistent across Francophone and Anglophone assessors, first-time assessors, and for assessors from strategic priority groups.

“The plurality of observations, each person’s ability to express what they see and hear, to gauge the work of artists, but also to step back, adjust, try again and backtrack, in order to take other points of view into consideration. For me, it was a true meeting of society and the artistic community. Analyzing artistic offerings and being able to discuss them with our colleagues is a very enriching exercise in anthropology. Regardless of the complexity of the projects, they are representative of our reality today. For me, it is an honour and a joy to be able to take part in the artistic creativity of the country as an assessor.” – Géraldine Célérier Eguiluz, Peer Assessor, Explore and Create

Figure 1: Overall Satisfaction with Peer Assessment

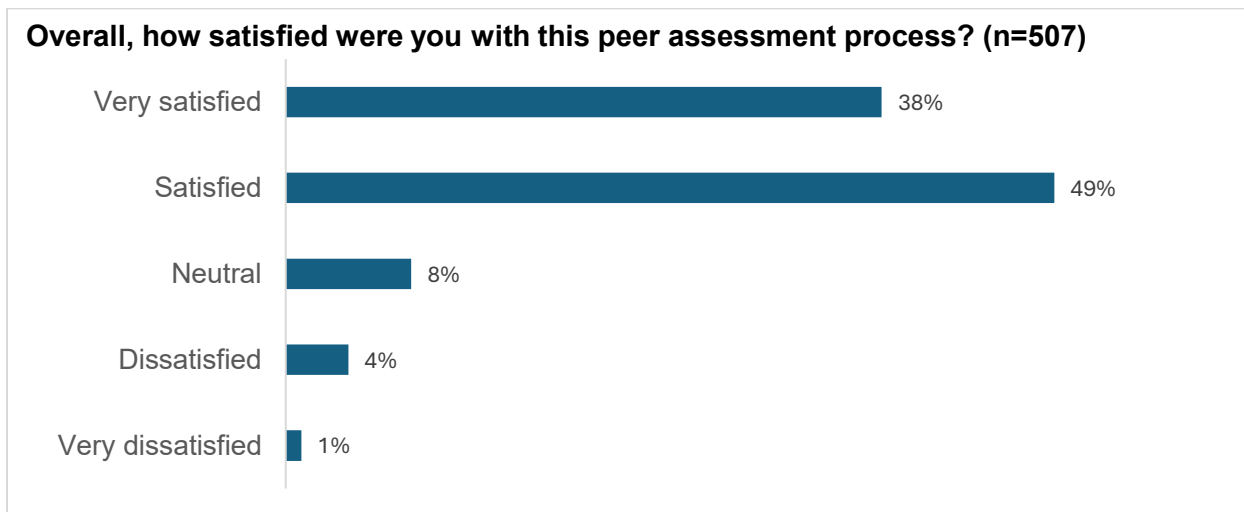
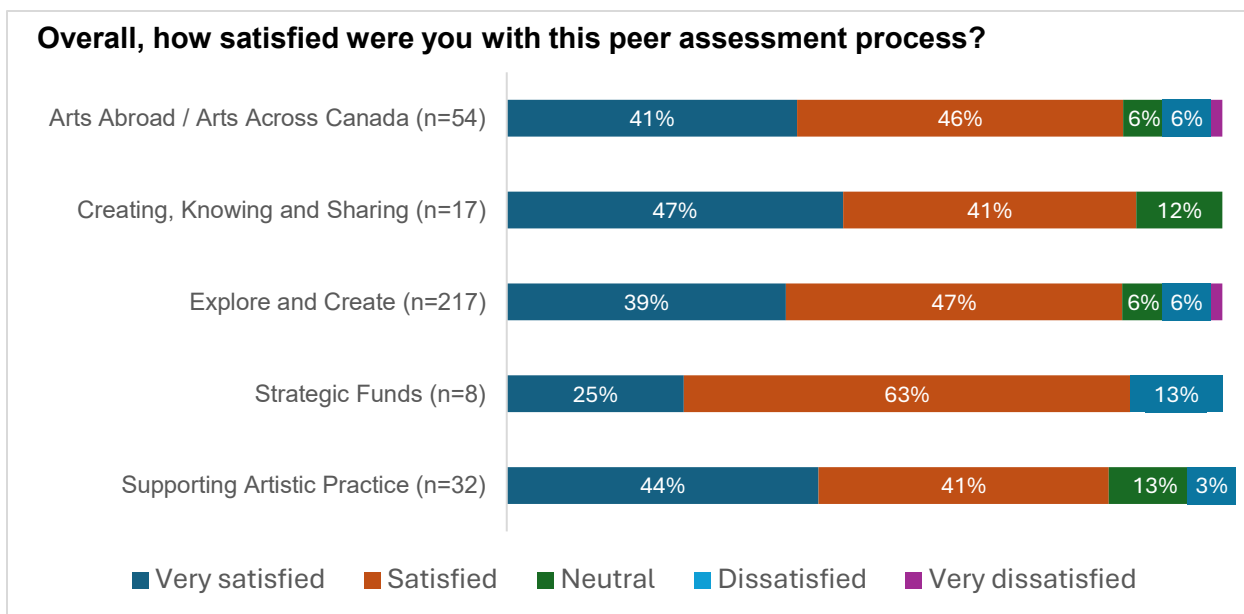


Figure 2: Satisfaction with Peer Assessment by Granting Program

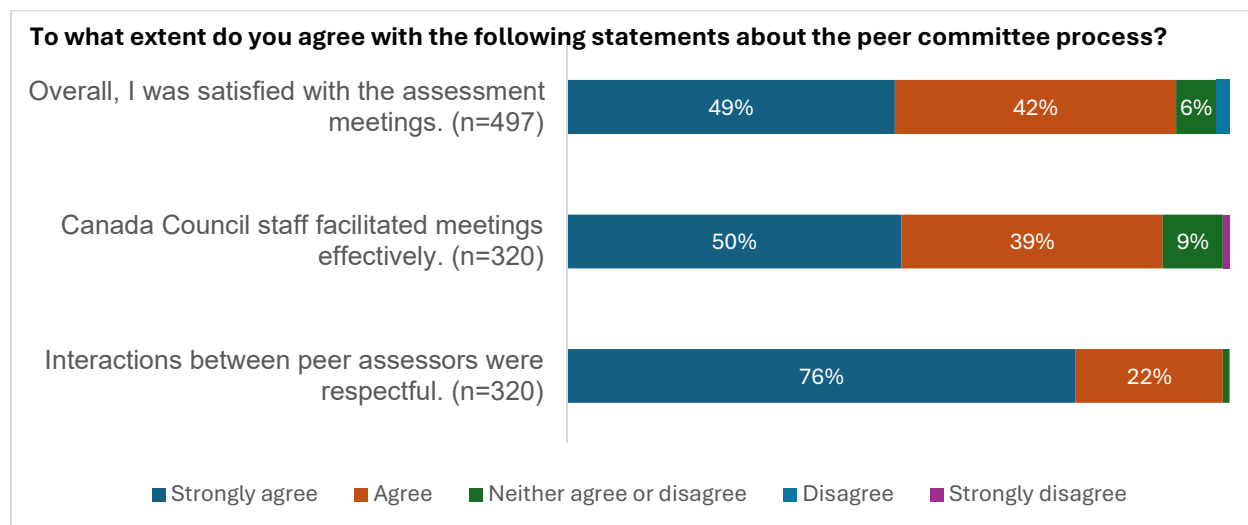


2.2 The Assessment Process

Overall, there is high satisfaction with the assessment process as noted in figure 3 below. Interactions between peer assessors were respectful (98% of assessors strongly agree or agree) and Canada Council staff facilitated meetings effectively (89%).

“The model that [the Canada Council] uses seems fair and straightforward. I appreciate the opportunity to meet with peers for open discussion about the applications.” – Travis Cole, Peer Assessor, Arts Abroad

Figure 3: The Peer Committee Process



A successful assessment process relies on the creativity and flexibility of program officers and assistants to respond to the unique needs of each committee. At the same time, consistent processes, tools and support materials relating to peer assessment are valued and there is a recognition that consistency across peer assessment committees contributes to fairness and efficiency. There is a need for better defined expectations regarding consistency and clarity on when flexibility is appropriate. Program officers appreciate having flexibility to adapt parts of the process, for example, the design of engagement meetings.

“I appreciated the transparency of the process, the valuable insights and experience brought to the conversation by the peer assessors. Values and opinion on certain files were allowed the space and time to be discussed and negotiated and respected for their individual perspectives. The officers were well prepared, patient and paid meticulous attention to consensus in arriving at decisions.” – Lata Pada, Peer Assessor

2.2.1 The Demands of the Assessment Process

As the volume of applications to Canada Council granting programs has increased, this has introduced challenges for assessors, staff, and the assessment process.

Assessors noted the importance of having sufficient time to read and study each application. Peer assessors are divided in their view that the time allotted was adequate to allow peer assessment committee members to make a thorough and fair assessment of the proposals submitted. Some consider the time allocated for reviewing applications as insufficient and identify that they spend additional time to thoroughly review and assess the applications. Reviewing supporting materials such as video or text often extends the time required per file well beyond the 20-minute allotment.

Discussing only some files is a practical solution to address application volume introduced in some programs. For some assessors, they question if this affects the fairness of assessment. It also can make the assessment process more difficult for some peer assessors as they are not able to build on their knowledge through discussion.

“[The] volume of applications was way too heavy (I had 125!) It felt impossible to hold that amount of information in one’s mind and realistically figure out a way to mentally put it all in perspective, that reflected and considered so many nuanced circumstances.” – Calla Lachance, Peer Assessor

Some programs have implemented engagement meetings which provide a space for developing relationships, building respect, and setting the stage for exchange among peers. These are different from orientation meetings which are about sharing information about the assessment process. The benefit is that less time is required to build consensus on final rankings as it is easier to work through consensus building decisions when time comes.

Recommendations for reducing the demands of the process include:

- Improving the pre-screening process to reduce the volume of applications being assessed (in some cases, files were given to assessors to review even though they didn’t meet the eligibility criteria).
- Providing clearer terms for applicants and assessors.
- Improving the budget evaluation process for applications.
- Reviewing the time allotted to assess each file.
- Implementing shorter application forms. Form committees for smaller, low risk grants (under \$15,000 for example) using existing systems and tools.

2.2.2 The Selection of Files for Discussion

Scoring is the primary guide for selecting applicants' files for discussion with additional direction at times from an individual program officer's analysis, interpretation, knowledge, and experience. The number of files that are discussed varies from program to program. For example, Supporting Artistic Practice selects a smaller set of files for discussion as it improves the efficiency of the process and helps peers to focus their attention and reading so they can be more decisional with their scoring. In contrast, Creating, Knowing and Sharing discusses all applications as it is seen as a more equitable approach. Some assessors would prefer to review every application – even if they have a very high score – as they think it would help to build consensus and understanding amongst peers.

Recommendations for file selection include:

- Having more consistency across programs in how files are selected for discussion and the number of files that are discussed.
- Organizing applications based on their similarities in requirements and scope to make the assessment process more manageable.
- Grouping applications from individuals and organizations separately to reduce confusion.
- Letting peers know in advance what applications will be discussed at specific meetings.

“Some of the women artists were not eligible for a given fellowship. Better communication with artists before submission would therefore be beneficial, saving them time and energy, and helping avoid creating false expectations. It would also help prevent peer assessors from assessing ineligible submissions and focus on (the numerous) other submissions.”
– Catherine Bourgeois, Peer Assessor

2.2.3 Virtual Assessment

Virtual assessment meetings have improved scheduling flexibility and removed barriers for peer assessors for whom travel is difficult or impossible. Assessors appreciate that there is less of a time commitment in comparison to in-person and value the reduced climate impact.

However, virtual meetings have also introduced barriers that limit or eliminate the participation of some assessors because of their level of comfort using technology, internet connectivity,

“[I valued the] discussion with peers, [that we] can still evaluate applications according to what I assess is fair, [and] no need to travel to participate.” – Anonymous, Peer Assessor, Explore and Create

or accessibility barriers for peer assessors who are Deaf or have disabilities. Virtual meetings have also introduced new privacy issues as some assessors sometimes join meetings from a public space or when others are present in the background. A small number of assessors perceive that the shift to virtual meetings has reduced the amount of time available to prepare, review, and discuss applications.

Many assessors miss the community and networking created by meeting in-person. A return to some in-person assessment was desired, particularly for committees that are for Indigenous or Deaf and disability communities. As communicated by the Canada Council when assessments were changed to virtual, many peer agreed with the undeniable time and cost advantages of online meetings and appreciate that the savings generated by online meetings increase the proportion of the budget devoted to grants.

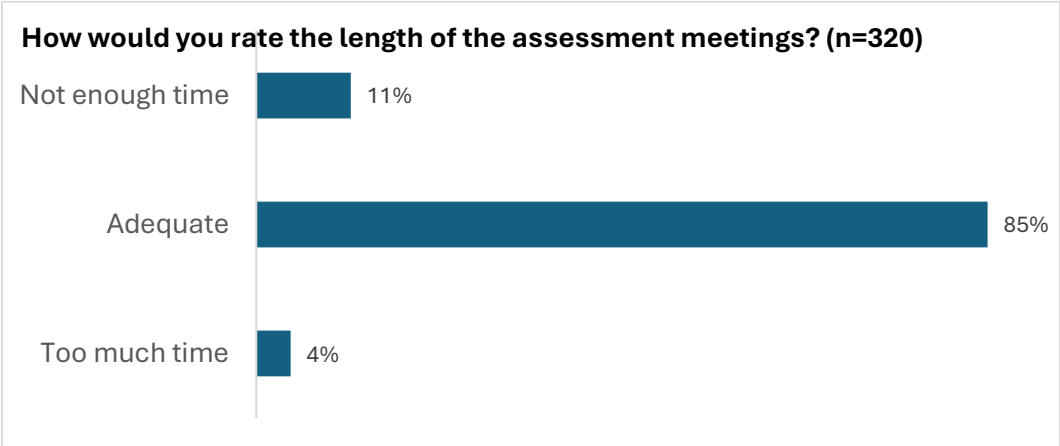
“The [virtual] Teams format is challenging. I know it is efficient - especially [when] the peer group meets more than once. However, conducting peer assessments in person is far more dynamic and provides more opportunity to make meaningful connections with the other peer assessors.” – Thomas Sparling, Peer Assessor, Strategic Funds

Virtual settings make it harder to resolve conflicts immediately, and delays and isolation can affect the committee's well-being. In-person interactions are seen as more effective for healing and resolving negative incidents promptly.

Face-to-face engagement is especially valuable to Indigenous peer assessors. Being together creates a space for ceremony and relationship building. This helps to acknowledge the reciprocal commitment, foster a sense of accountability, and support an understanding of shared values.

The majority (85%) of peer assessors felt the length of the assessment meetings was adequate (see figure 4 below).

Figure 4: Assessment Meeting Length



Recommendations related to virtual meetings include:

- Exploring further if a return to an in-person process is better for some committees, for example, for Indigenous committees and Deaf and disability arts committees.

2.2.4 Multidisciplinary Committees

The views on multidisciplinary assessment committees are varied. For some, the multidisciplinary make-up of peer assessment committees is seen as effective and a move towards more equitable granting. For others, the effectiveness and fairness of multidisciplinary assessment committees is questionable.

Multidisciplinary committees have the benefit of supporting jurors from various disciplines to offer unique perspectives on projects, facilitating a comprehensive assessment of an application. It also helps to avoid a sectoral challenge of many people knowing each other in a particular discipline. Multidisciplinary committees are seen as a learning opportunity for developing emerging artists.

Those who question multidisciplinary assessment point to the difficulties of evaluating applications in unfamiliar artistic fields, and the risk of blind spots, perceived unfairness and potential biases within or across different disciplines. This limitation is

most pronounced in the Explore and Create program where artistic merit remains one of the evaluation criteria, and assessment committees are dealing with a particularly high volume and diversity of applications. In Explore and Create and Arts Abroad/Arts Across Canada there is some disagreement (11% and 9% respectively) with the survey question, “The committee had knowledge relevant to the applications we were evaluating” in contrast to all other programs which had 0% disagreement.

The shift to multidisciplinary assessment has introduced challenges including ensuring access to disciplinary expertise when there are conflicts of interest and supporting peer

“The multidisciplinary nature of the committees is interesting to an extent, because it allows hybrid artistic projects and practices to be evaluated from different lenses and it promotes the breaking down of boundaries between artistic communities. I believe this is crucial for Inter-arts applicants but unsure it should be spread across the board. I think the range of files assessed by a committee could focus more narrowly on artistic discipline families. This was done to an extent (ours was 'performance-based' and included dance, theatre, music and sound-art projects), but the discussions could be less superficial and more nuanced if the files and assessors had a narrower field of expertise such as sound/music, dance and choreography, theatre, etc. It feels more fair to applicants as well.” – Anonymous, Peer Assessor

assessors to feel comfortable assessing applications involving an unfamiliar field of practice.

Working in a multidisciplinary environment is more time consuming because assessors reviewing applications from a different artistic discipline than their own spend time on research to learn and understand more about other disciplines.

The following suggestions relating to multidisciplinary committees were identified:

- Support more cross-calibration across committees.
- Support assessors on how to contribute and comment on applications where the project is in a field of practice that they are unfamiliar with.
- Have a roster of advisors from different fields of practice who can be called on to support and answer questions as well as standby assessors who can step in if there is an assessor who is not able to carry out their role on the committee.
- A sizable minority of assessors argue for a return to a disciplinary approach on committees where evaluation of artistic merit is primary to – in their view – achieve a fairer and more competent assessment.
- Better communicate the value of multidisciplinary assessment committees to peer assessors, Canada Council staff, applicants, and the arts sector. The redressing of historic inequity and barriers to accessing funding is a compelling argument but not obvious to everyone.

2.2.5 Assessment Criteria and Scoring

Assessors highlighted the need for more clarity and a better understanding of the relevance of assessment criteria, particularly those related to diversity, impact and feasibility. More precise and transparent criteria is seen as critical for a fair evaluation.

It was also indicated that not all assessors have experience with budgets and suggested that the process could be streamlined if the review of budgets were completed by Canada Council staff.

Peer assessors do not always use the full scoring range and often tend to score within a narrower band, which is likely a result of the natural tendency to score towards the middle of the range. This can make final decisions more difficult and extend the overall process.

“It’s incredibly difficult to compare and score emerging vs. mid-career artists. There are aspects of the Canada Council’s evaluation rubrics that feels like when I, as a peer assessor, apply it as accurately as I can, means that interesting and promising projects fall through the cracks sometimes.” – Ess Hoedlmoser, Peer Assessor, Explore and Create

There are systemic barriers to scoring that need to be better explored as it was observed that despite a better diversity of identities involved in peer assessment committees, questions remain on whether the scoring still favours established applicants. Some assessors noted their program officer was effective at facilitating an awareness of possible biases. Other assessors noted that can biases such as geography, personal preferences, or discipline can come into a process.

“I really liked the basic short summary of the criteria - this was most useful for reference when going through the applications. That said, I would like there to be a few examples (or a few more) included in the guide materials.” – Anonymous, Peer Assessor, Explore and Create

The following recommendations on improving assessment criteria and scoring were identified:

- Review best practices (such as those from academia or the private sector) on reducing biases and update practices and training accordingly.
- Develop ways to encourage the full use of scoring ranges, such as rubrics for peers with definitions associated with numbers.
- Have Canada Council staff conduct budget review separately from the peer assessment process.

2.2.6 Applications

Assessors provided a range of feedback on applications. This included changes that would help in the assessment process, as well as observations regarding ways to adapt application formats and methods to help engage a broader range of applicants. Some assessors observed that the application process as it is currently designed privileges applicants who are good at responding to questions and creating written proposals and supporting documents. They suggest that grants would be more accessible if there were ways to provide more access to organizations or individuals for whom a written application is not the best way for them to tell their story.

“Cutting out the budget and resume would streamline the amount of time it takes to assess a project and you would really just be paying attention to the application and the sample.” – Lizelle Sambury, Peer Assessor

Several ideas on how applications could be improved were identified. These include:

- More direct questions in the application.
- Timely communication of process changes.
- Providing space on the application to justify remote allowance so assessors can better understand what the extra fees would be used for.
- Artists selecting the group they want to be assessed by.

- Omitting resumes (this is seen by some assessors as creating a bias as people are given competency boosts based on extrapolating from their resume).
- Making questions about building relations and Indigenous knowledge-sharing mandatory, where applicable, instead of optional.
- Communicating with applicants if their application is going to a multidisciplinary committee.
- Communicating with applicants on how competitive the process might be, how applications are assessed, and expected success rates.
- Preparing guidelines on the use of artificial intelligence by applicants.

“My colleagues and the program officer were highly engaged and passionate about making a difference in the lives of the artists we were evaluating. I was actually somewhat surprised that the process was less technical and more experientially informed than I thought it might be. Folks shared their knowledge and practices to help everyone understand the applications to the best of their ability. Overall, I really valued the diversity of experience, knowledge, and practice that was brought to the process.”
– Lowell Gasoi, Peer Assessor

2.2.7 Feedback to Applicants

The lack of feedback to applicants following the assessment process is seen as unfair and frustrating for artists and organizations whose applications are not successful. The primary interest in providing feedback is to strengthen future applications. Staff sometimes receive calls from applicants wanting to discuss feedback who just want to be able to voice their frustration about unsuccessful applications.

Assessors recommended:

- Providing feedback to applicants.
- Allowing comments on selected projects.
- Making the peer assessment score sheet public to promote transparency and learning opportunities.

“I would advocate for a return to applicants being allowed to get feedback about their applications. Sometimes it feels unfair that someone will not receive funding nor have the opportunity to understand what aspects in particular they could improve upon.” – Anonymous, Peer Assessor, Explore and Create

2.3 Recruitment and Supports

2.3.1 Recruitment of Assessors

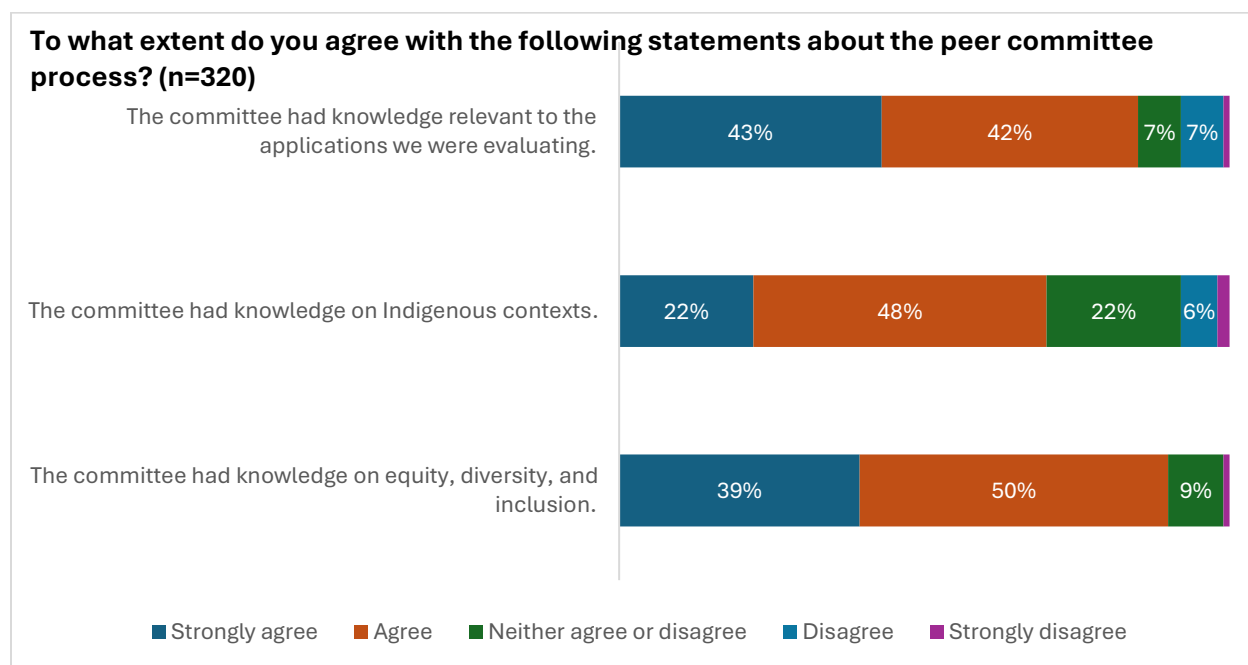
Recruitment of peer assessors is more challenging for some programs than others. Successful recruitment demands significant effort and determination from program officers. The selection of assessors is a complex and challenging process with staff seeking assessors who align with a consensus-making process, the Canada Council's strategic priorities, and their ability to productively contribute to the process. Program officers would like to see more engagement and outreach into communities to help with recruitment challenges. It is helpful to blend experienced assessors with folks that are new to the Canada Council and have never done peer assessment before.

Peer assessors' view is that committees have knowledge relevant to the applications they evaluated (85% strongly agree or agree).

Knowledge on Indigenous contexts is not as strong (60%). Knowledge on equity, diversity, and inclusion is high (89%). See figure 5 below.

“It was all well organized. You can feel the weight of the responsibility, but also the support from the Canada Council employees. The entire process is very respectful. Conflicts of interest are openly discussed. It's a good framework.” – Eli Jean Tachchi, Peer Assessor

Figure 5: Committee Knowledge



Several assessors stressed the importance of having a diversity of assessors on a committee, in terms of artistic practices as well as cultural and regional perspectives.

This diversity enriches exchanges and brings a variety of viewpoints to the evaluation of funding applications.

Recommendations related to recruitment of peer assessors include:

- Exploring standing committees for peer assessment as a way to reduce the urgent need to be recruiting new peers.

2.3.2 Supporting Peer Assessors

Peer assessors feel well supported. Many assessors commit additional time to the process because they want to do a good job.

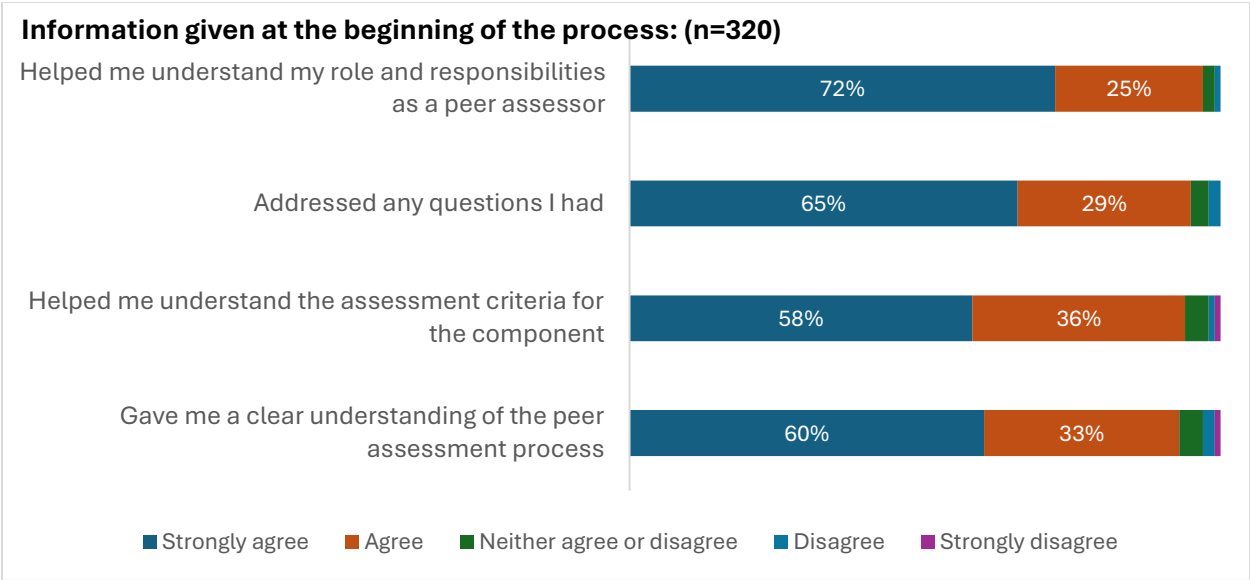
Peer assessors emphasized the importance of the support provided by Canada Council program officers and assistants throughout the assessment process. They are seen as patient, professional, well organized and helpful. Staff provide valuable assistance, clarify evaluation criteria and help ensure the integrity of the process.

There are concerns that fees have not adequately increased in the past five years and for some, are not fair given the amount of work assessors are putting in.

The information given at the beginning of the process is very well received by peer assessors. It helped them understand their role and responsibilities as a peer assessor (97% strongly agree or agree), addressed any questions they had (94%), helped them understand the assessment criteria for the component (94%), and gave them a clear understanding of the peer assessment process (93%). See figure 6 below.

“As a first-time peer assessor, my experience was overwhelmingly positive, reflecting the well-structured and supportive nature of the process. To further enhance this experience for new and returning assessors alike, continuous access to training materials and best practice guides were invaluable. Additionally, incorporating more opportunities for feedback exchange among peers might deepen the learning experience, fostering an even more collaborative and insightful assessment environment. Establishing a mentorship program for novice assessors by pairing them with experienced ones could also offer personalized guidance, enhancing confidence and proficiency in the assessment process.” – Anonymous, Peer Assessor

Figure 6: Information given at the beginning of the process



Staff reflected that better management of the information shared with peer assessors could strengthen the process. Staff do not always have access to all the information that assessors might want. At other times there is too much information that peer assessors are expected to sift through, particularly financial information. It was noted that Canada Council could better explain the outcomes-based funding model. Assessors expressed a desire for more communication and feedback throughout the process, and that they appreciate feedback from the Program Officer at the end of the process. Assessors also identified the need for clearer guidelines, more clarity on Canada Council’s strategic priorities, and a better articulation of assessment criteria. Staff identified that it would be useful to have a packaged orientation.

Some programs do a full orientation and engagement at the start of the process (for example, in the Explore and Create program the first two meetings are dedicated to this). This helps ensure assessors understand what’s expected from them, especially in the virtual process where assessors read applications on their own and score them for six to eight weeks without the opportunity to ask important questions. Supporting Artistic Practice takes a different approach and presents pieces of the orientation as needed, rather than do the full orientation up front. They find this makes it easier for the peers to retain that information. Surfacing and troubleshooting issues and assumptions early in the process is seen as very helpful (this takes different forms in various programs, for example, calibration meeting, pre-score meeting and ranking meeting).

There are different opinions about how transparent to be with peer assessors on the budget available for grants. For example, the Creating, Knowing and Sharing program

staff view it as important because it is unfair to put time and effort into assessing a applications without an idea of how many applications will be funded. Other programs are reluctant to reveal total amounts as that may shape decisions.

A strong assessment process has at its foundation a safe space where issues could be raised, effective negotiation could happen, and existing norms could be challenged. Feedback from peer assessors indicates that a safe space for deliberations is the norm and the current orientation to harm reduction, cultural safety, and security helps to enable good conversations. Communication can be hard within diverse groups and assessors and staff highlighted the need for creating a sense of belonging. Making sure that all peer assessors can give consistent feedback in a safe space helps avoid negative experiences from discouraging future involvement, especially for Indigenous peers so they can voice their opinions and influence change.

Suggestions for improvement in how peers are supported include:

- Provide peer assessors (and staff) with training and resources on trauma informed practices and how to engage with triggering or challenging materials.
- Improve ways to make peers feel recognized and connected.
- Reassess compensation for assessors and the time allotted to review each file.
- Expand training or resources to help strengthen assessment skills on topics including constructive criticism, bias and objectivity, decolonization, equity and inclusion, and financial literacy.
- Provide assessors with access to examples of strong applications.

2.3.3 Accessibility and Accommodation

Supporting peer assessors who are Deaf, have disabilities or who have been impacted by trauma is seen as very important. There can be greater consideration and support to accessibility and accommodation in the assessment process. Some programs have more capacity to involve assessors who are Deaf and have disabilities, and this capacity is largely contingent on having staff involved who happen to have specialized knowledge and experience.

Applications from Deaf and disability arts are often reviewed by committees with individuals who are Deaf or have disabilities, however, it was observed that this could be done more and be better supported.

The shift to virtual meetings has increased accessibility for some and eliminated it for others. The absence of transcriptions for support materials, such as images, is needed to support assessors who are partially sighted.

It is recommended that:

- Committees be constructed so that assessors who are Deaf or have disabilities are reviewing all applications from Deaf and disability arts communities.
- Expand the scope of accommodations provided so that a greater diversity of disabilities can be included in committees.
- Ensure that accommodation and support can be provided for assessors who have been impacted by trauma.
- Provide better advance communication on triggering materials that may be part of an application.
- Conduct more testing of tools for peer assessors who are Deaf or have disabilities.

2.3.4 Supporting Staff

Staff identified that communication between programs regarding peer assessment is currently not very robust.

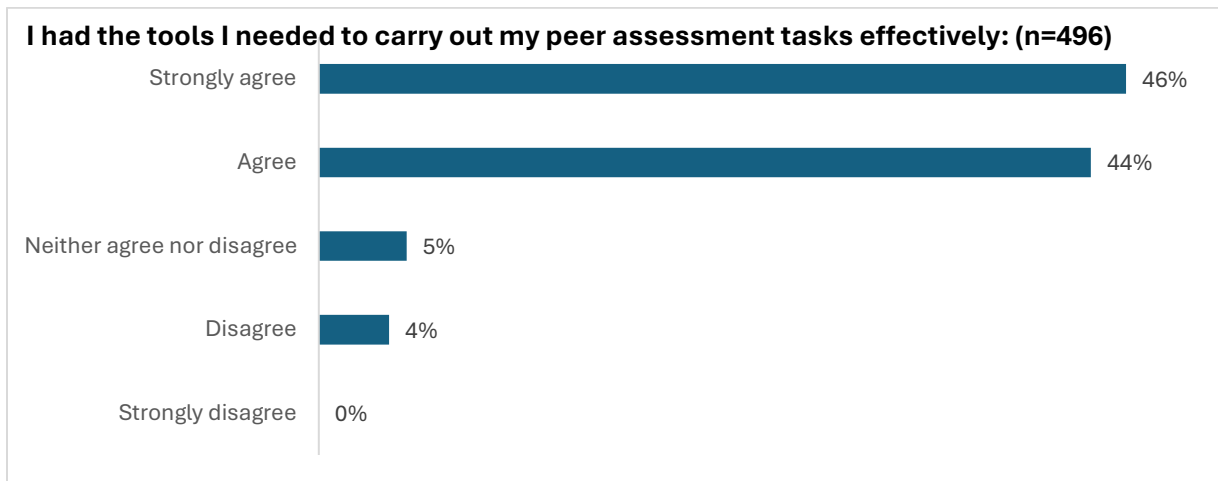
Canada Council staff identified that they would like to be better supported with more opportunities for knowledge-sharing across programs. There are innovations and good practice that tend not to be shared as there are limited opportunities for this kind of exchange. This would help staff learn from each other about internal processes and the differences between programs. This will be increasingly important as program officers retire or switch roles.

Staff also identified an interest to have better training and resources on trauma-informed care.

2.3.5 Technology and Tools

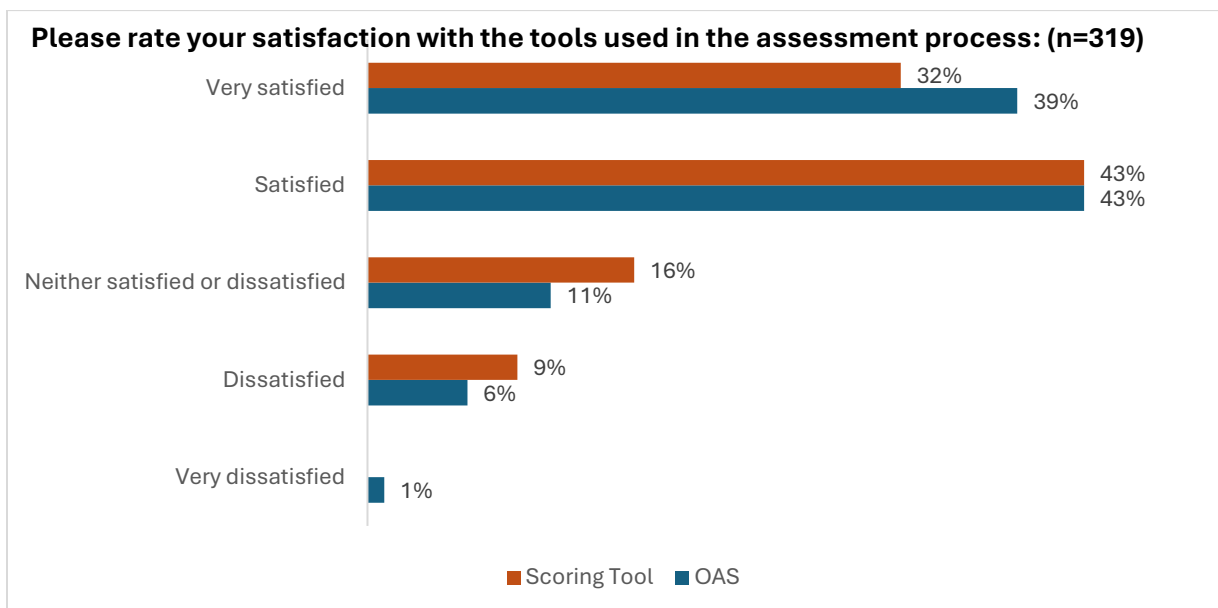
Assessors appreciate the tools and technology platforms that support the assessment process. When asked if they had the tools needed to carry out peer assessment tasks effectively, 90% of peer assessors agreed or strongly agreed.

Figure 7: Tools to Carry Out Peer Assessment Tasks



There is also strong satisfaction with the online assessment site (OAS) and the scoring tool. Participants appreciated the use of online tools to facilitate the evaluation process and the general approach to scoring.

Figure 8: Satisfaction with the online assessment site and the scoring tool



There is, however, a consistent message from staff and assessors that the technology and tools that support the assessment process can be improved. Improving the scoring tool and moving to a more integrated portal are the top concerns. Program Assistants recognize that the anticipated system improvements currently underway will help with the demands of scheduling, collecting signatures, and processing payments. They also

anticipated that there will still be significant demands on chasing after peer assessors for action or information.

Assessors criticize the complexity and usability of the online assessment site. They propose improvements such as more user-friendly file-reading tools, rich formatting in apps, a clearer naming system for digital files, and restrictions on file sizes from applicants. Assessors report technical issues with the online assessment site including difficult-to-read text size, blurry PDF files and issues with attachments that assessors must troubleshoot on their own time.

Many assessors find the scoring tool complicated and confusing, and this limits their ability to evaluate applications objectively. There are concerns raised about the complexity of the Excel spreadsheet and its use for scoring. They suggest improvements such as having all scoring done online, providing clearer instructions for the scoring tool, and migrating the Excel spreadsheet to an automated online form.

Staff also observe that there are technical challenges and glitches with the Excel-based scoresheet. An integrated scoresheet within the Online Assessment Site would be very helpful. They also note that technical improvements to allow for downloading multiple files would help.

“Everything involved in consulting documents on the portal—the legibility of the documents was very low, which meant more than not that we had to download them and constantly zoom in. The portal itself isn’t exactly easy to navigate—getting used to it requires a lot of time (and unsuccessful searches in various tabs).” – Anonymous, Peer Assessor, Supporting Artistic Practice

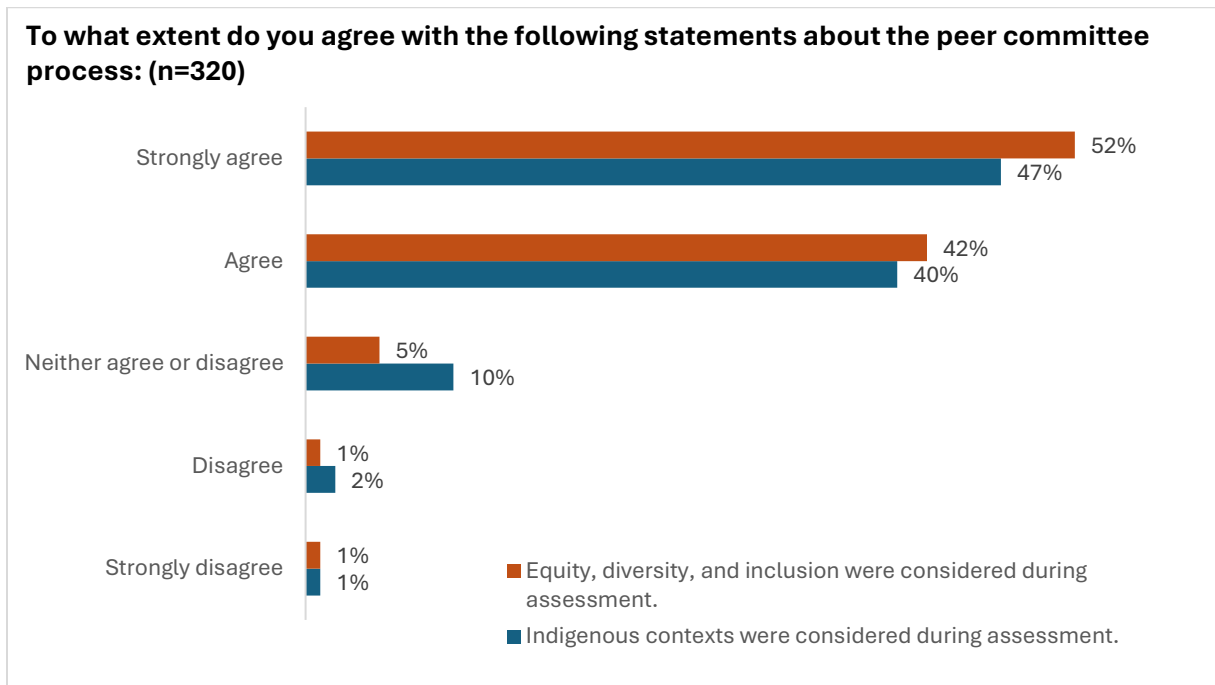
2.3.6 Facilitating Equitable Access

Assessors emphasized the importance of diversity and inclusion in the assessment process. They highlighted the value of having diverse juries with varied backgrounds and perspectives and ensuring that equity, diversity, and inclusion considerations are part of deliberations. The challenge of achieving comprehensive representation across various disciplines and regions within a limited committee size was acknowledged. The need for more bilingual assessors and more translated materials was identified.

“The way marginalized groups are treated is problematic. I am often the voice of language minorities on committees, but I don’t often have the opportunity to share my perspective on submissions from French-language minority communities because I always end up in conflicts of interest and having to withdraw. I understand conflicts of interest, but someone needs to find a way to present the context (or reality) of Francophone Canada. I have never gotten to.”
 – Anonymous, Peer Assessor

The extent to which Indigenous contexts and equity, diversity, and inclusion were considered during assessment is very strong as noted in figure 9 below.

Figure 9: The extent to which Indigenous contexts and equity, diversity, and inclusion were considered during assessment.



Some assessors expressed concern about how conflicts of interest can affect the representation of strategic priority groups, for example, linguistic minorities. When a peer assessor discloses a conflict of interest they do not review and score that particular application, and as a result, this may limit the peer assessor's opportunity to present perspectives from these communities. For the Creating, Knowing and Sharing program, conflict of interest extends beyond traditional financial and influential conflicts to include value-based conflicts such as ethics and spirituality. This approach aims to create a safe space for individuals to withdraw from assessments if they feel their values conflict, ensuring accountability to the community.

Some assessors identified they would like to see ways to encourage more representation from applicants and assessors from remote and rural communities, and more representation from areas other than central Canada. Other assessors noted they appreciated the geographic diversity and representation. It was also noted that a more consistent definition of rural and remote communities across programs would be helpful.

"The assessment process could have more representation from individuals residing in smaller centres and from Atlantic region. Presently it seems that the majority of jurors on a given committee are from urban, central & western portions of Canada. This can inadvertently put applications from rural regions or smaller provinces at a disadvantage when it comes to ranking, as jurors from urban, central and western portions of Canada may have more in common contextually." – Anonymous, Peer Assessor, Arts Across Canada

Recommendations on equitable access include:

- Improve the presentation of contextual elements of applications from Canada Council's strategic groups and communities for better understanding by peer assessors and to address shortfalls when an assessor cannot review a file because of a conflict of interest.
- Prioritize recruitment of peer assessors from different regions and expand outreach into rural and remote communities by program officers as well as by community ambassadors.
- Create a network of "grant whisperers" — experienced peer assessors willing to offer help and support to the community with a focus on incorporating this support system into the application process, gathering information, and building a network of individuals eager to assist.

2.4 The Benefits of Peer Assessment

2.4.1 The Benefits for Peer Assessors

For peer assessors, the assessment process is a professional development opportunity for artists to understand the programs at Canada Council and to engage with colleagues from across the country. Many peer assessors found the experience inspiring, educational, and valuable for their own artistic practices.

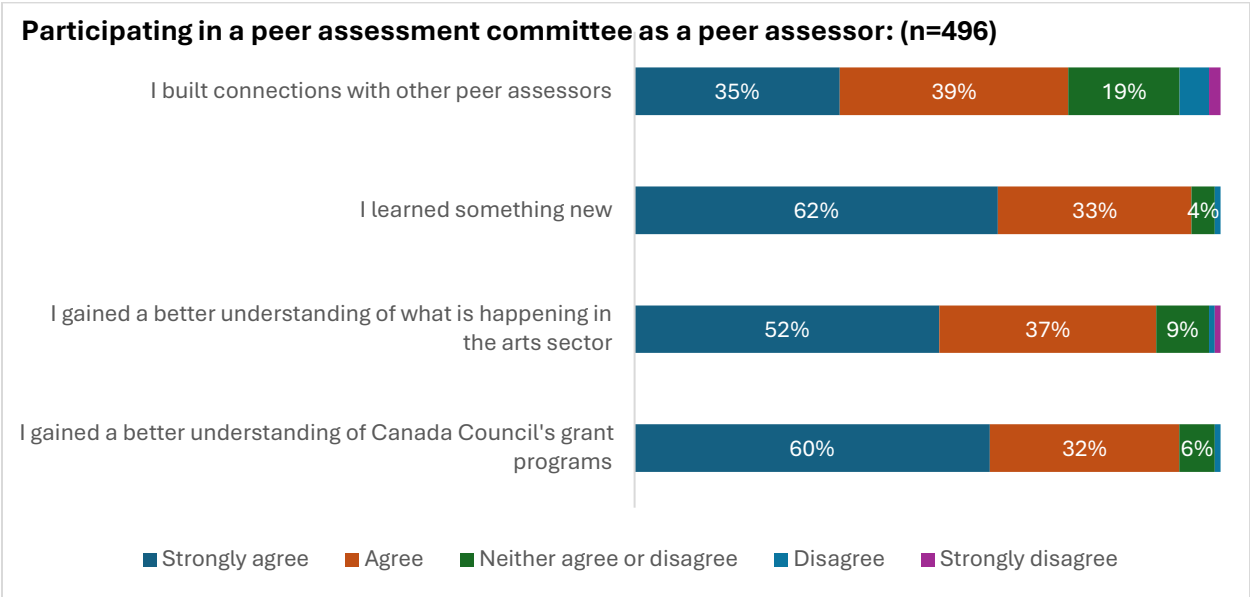
“One of the positive points is the Canada-wide connections you make as a peer assessor. I’ve never taken part in person, but I can imagine the connections made are even stronger that way.” - Anonymous, Peer Assessor

It also provides an opportunity to connect and exchange ideas with peers from different disciplines and regions. Assessors appreciate the opportunity to discover and learn about a wide range of artistic projects happening across Canada, providing insights into new projects, different artistic practices, and the current state of the arts in the country. As noted in figure 10 below, peer assessors indicated that they benefitted from the peer assessment processes in multiple ways. They

“I valued understanding how these peer committees work, and seeing the extremely thorough and thoughtful the process is. Our group leader was quite skilled at providing context and understanding, while giving us full autonomy as jurors to make decisions as a group. It was extremely enlightening to see what artists across Canada, across all disciplines are working on, and to see connections between the themes and concepts people were exploring. I felt quite validated by the intersections with my own practice, and excited by the conversations I was able to have with my fellow assessors.” - Carlie Howell, Peer Assessor, Explore and Create

reported gaining a better understanding of Canada Council grant programs (92% strongly agreed or agreed), gaining a better understanding of what is happening in the arts sector (89%) and learning something new (95%). A majority agreed or strongly agreed that they had the tools to effectively carry out their peer assessment tasks (89%). Fewer respondents indicated that the process promoted building connections with other peer assessors (74% strongly agreed or agreed, and 19% strongly disagreed).

Figure 10: Benefits of Peer Assessment



2.4.2 Connection to the Arts Community

The peer assessment process is seen as a way to strengthen community relationships. Peer committees provide a connection with the community and are a source of perspective on the sector for the Canada Council. When peer assessors see themselves as partners and are confident in the approach, they go back to community and share their experiences with potential future applicants and future peer assessors.

For some, the interactions with peer assessors have become more transactional interactions with the shift to virtual meetings and higher application volumes. The result may be that there is less of a professional development benefit for peers, which has consequences for them becoming better ambassadors for the Canada Council.

There are some emerging ideas that would support community relationships. One is the creation of standing committees. Another is conducting peer assessment committee meetings in the communities of the peers as a way to foster relationships, build consensus, make peer assessment visible to voices not traditionally reached by standard communication strategies, and contributing to economic development within the community.

Trends and Challenges

This section reviews the trends and challenges peer assessors are noticing in their review of applications.

3.1 Recurring Themes

The insights from assessors on common themes in grant applications are as follows:

Diversity and inclusion: Many applicants emphasize the importance of diversity and inclusion in their projects, focusing on gender, Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQI+ and other marginalized communities.

Indigenous representation and cultural identity: There is a call for increased representation and support for Indigenous artists, as well as a focus on preserving and celebrating Indigenous cultural identity.

Climate change and the environment: Numerous applicants explore themes related to climate change, environmental activism, and the impact of the climate crisis.

Mental health and trauma: Many artists address trauma, mental health struggles, and the healing power of art.

Social justice: Many projects aim to address social justice issues, the needs of equity-deserving communities and challenge systemic oppression and fascism.

Identity and self-expression: Many applicants focus on exploring personal identity, ancestry, and self-expression through their artistic work.

Innovation and experimentation: Artists aim to push boundaries and innovate in their respective fields, incorporating AI, technology, multidisciplinary approaches, and new mediums.

Collaboration and networking: The need for collaboration, networking, and community engagement is highlighted by applicants.

Funding and resource challenges: Artists express financial struggles and the need for more arts funding and resources.

“Organizations lack resources. Artists are forced to spend a lot of time on management and artistic projects suffer as a result.” – Dominique Leduc, Peer Assessor, Supporting Artistic Practice

3.2 Key Challenges in the Arts Sector

Assessors identified the following as the key challenges currently faced by artists and the arts sector in Canada.

Financial challenges: Artists are facing increasing difficulty in making a living from their work due to a lack of funding opportunities and increasing competition for grants. Artists also face rising costs of living and production, making it harder to access tools, materials, and affordable studio spaces needed to sustain their artistic practice.

Artists' mental and physical health: Artists across the country are struggling with mental and physical health issues exacerbated by the economy and the pandemic.

Inclusivity and diversity in the arts: The arts world is striving for inclusivity but still faces challenges in achieving equity and inclusion for Indigenous, racialized, and other marginalized communities. Addressing engagement and access barriers for newcomers and non-English or French speakers is seen as important for their inclusion in the arts sector. There are disparities in funding and opportunities between urban and rural areas, as well as differences in support to Indigenous,

“Artists are having increasing difficulty making a living as creators and focusing on their work. The arts have become 'the second job', 'the side gig', the 'paying hobby'. This imperils art and artists in all disciplines.” – David Demchuk, Peer Assessor, Explore and Create

racialized, and other marginalized communities. Some assessors are calling on the arts sector to do more to address systemic issues of racism, colonialism, and discrimination.

Other themes identified include building and retaining audiences, pandemic recovery, digital transformation, the cultural and economic devaluing of art, revitalizing a critical culture for art, and the need for more accessible and barrier-free spaces.

3.3 Supports to Arts Sector

Assessors highlighted various supports that would be beneficial for the arts sector.

Increased Funding: Assessors emphasized the need for more funding across various areas, including support for artists, organizations, projects, and operational costs. This includes the need for more funding and financial support for artists at different stages of their careers, and increased accessibility and inclusivity for marginalized artists. This also includes support for organizations to innovate and “think outside the box.” There is a desire for long-term, multi-year funding, and stable core funding for small arts organizations.

Support for Artists: Assessors noted the importance of providing support to artists at different stages of their careers, including mid-level artists who may be facing challenges or life changes, emerging artists in need of mentorship, and first-time grant applicants. Mentorship programs, training opportunities, help in navigating the funding system, and resources for grant writing and financial management were also suggested.

Accessibility and Inclusion: There was a strong emphasis on supporting marginalized artists, including artists who are Deaf or have disabilities, 2SLGBTQI+ artists, Indigenous artists, Black artists, and racialized artists. This included assessing applications with an Indigenous lens, recognizing and supporting quality over quantity, and addressing inequities through longer-term support. Suggestions also included increasing access to conferences, symposia, workshops, and funding opportunities, providing financial literacy education for artists, and ensuring that assessment processes consider the perspectives of Elders in Indigenous contexts.

Policy and Government Support: Assessors called for stronger advocacy to support increased government investment in the arts and policy changes to support the sector.

Collaboration and Networking: Ideas included fostering cross-country and cross-discipline networking opportunities through conferences, symposia, and workshops. It was also noted that connecting art with community settings and engaging communities in artistic practices can promote cultural understanding and appreciation.

Other ideas included supporting arts service organizations, investing in arts research, providing resources for capacity building, creating meeting places and cultural spaces to strengthen community ties, enhancing arts education and promoting cultural diversity in schools, investing in arts infrastructure, including affordable studio spaces and training facilities, and strengthening international connections.

“Uplifting experimental and culturally innovative approaches that are grounded in a high respect for artistic practice. Providing audiences with tools to engage and find their own unique access points to the work. More support for producing educational contexts for art. Encouraging artistic experimentation and development with audience education. Events for CCA funded artists to meet and celebrate each other's work. Opportunities to view and experience CCA funded work that is outside of one's discipline. Having panelists take their peers to see work they find important and riveting.” – Anonymous, Peer Assessor, Arts Across Canada

Conclusions

Peer assessment is an essential process for the Canada Council's granting programs. It is highly regarded by peer assessors and staff.

There is much that works well in peer assessment, including:

- The professionalism and support of Canada Council staff.
- The diversity of assessment committees.
- The knowledge and perspective of assessment committees.
- The constructive meetings and exchanges among peers.
- The integrity, transparency, and inclusiveness of the assessment process.
- The benefits to assessors (understanding Canada Council programs better, perspective on the arts sector in Canada, and new learning) and to the Canada Council (perspective on the arts sector in Canada and relationships with the arts community).
- The information provided at the beginning of the process.

These observations, as well as the consistently positive results in the survey across all programs and strategic priority groups, indicate that the peer assessment process is robust in many ways.

There are also many suggestions for improving the peer assessment process, including:

- More consistent and clearly defined assessment processes.
- Clearer and better-defined assessment criteria.
- The development of strategies to reduce bias in assessment processes.
- The provision of feedback to applicants.
- The recruitment of more peer assessors from different regions.
- Supporting the challenges of multidisciplinary assessment with strategies such as cross-calibration across committees and having a roster of advisors from different fields of practice.
- Communicating the benefits of multidisciplinary assessments better.
- Strengthening accessibility and accommodations for assessors who are Deaf, have disabilities or have been impacted by trauma.
- Developing strategies to address the higher volume of applications including improved pre-screening, improving the budget evaluation process and implementing shorter application forms.
- Expanding training and resources including guidance on constructive criticism, bias and objectivity, decolonization, equity and inclusion, and financial literacy.
- Developing an alternative to the Excel based scoresheet and more integration of functions within the Online Assessment Site.

- Knowledge sharing between program officers, especially across programs.

Peer assessment has not evolved sufficiently to keep pace with changes in the Canada Council's granting, strategy, and priorities. Peer assessment is critical to the success of the Canada Council and the process would benefit from refinements and adaptations.

Greater consistency and clarity on the process will help improve overall efficiencies and fairness. There is a risk that peer assessment could become increasingly transactional and extractive, jeopardizing the Canada Council and the greater benefits of the assessment process. Efforts to move towards more consistency and efficiency must also balance the critical relationship building that comes through the assessment process, and the need for flexibility to address the unique needs of each program and committee.

These areas for improvement underscore the need for in-depth reflection and potential changes to improve the integrity, transparency, and effectiveness of the assessment process.

Appendix A

Focus Group and Interview Guides

Peer Assessor Focus Group and Interview Guide

The Canada Council for the Arts has hired Imprint Consulting to conduct a research project to better understand the effectiveness of the Canada Council's peer assessment practices and to explore ways to improve the process from the perspectives of peer assessors and Council employees. You were invited to participate in this discussion because you served on a peer assessment committee at the Canada Council between 2022 and 2024.

This research project also includes discussions with Canada Council employees involved with peer assessments, and a survey for peer assessors who have served on a committee between 2022 and 2024.

Participation in these focus groups (interviews) is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw at any time. Any information that participants provide during the discussion will be presented in aggregate only and you will not be identified by name. If a quote attributable to you is used in reporting, your consent will be obtained beforehand.

The discussion will be recorded if all participants consent to being recorded. The recording will not be shared beyond Imprint's team and will be used only for notetaking and analysis related to the project. All recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the project.

The focus group (interview) will be facilitated by Imprint Consulting.

The agenda and questions for the focus group are as follows:

1. Introduction of facilitators and land acknowledgments.
2. Overview of the research project.
3. Introduction of participants, including summary of how participants have been involved with peer assessments.
4. In your experience, what works well with the Canada Council's peer assessment process?
5. In your view, what needs to be improved with the Canada Council's peer assessment process, and what are your ideas for improvements?
6. Concluding thoughts from participants.

Program Officer and Program Assistant Focus Group Guide

In February and March 2024, Imprint Consulting is facilitating a series of discussions with Canada Council employees who are involved in the peer assessment process. These discussions are part of a research project designed to better understand the

effectiveness of current peer assessment practices and to explore ways to improve the process from the perspectives of employees and peer assessors.

As part of this research project and in addition to these discussions with Canada Council employees, a survey to peer assessors is being launched in February 2024. In the coming months, there will also be a series of focus groups with peer assessors.

Participation in these focus groups is voluntary and participants may choose to withdraw at any time. Any information that participants provide during the discussion will be presented in aggregate only and they will not be identified by name.

The discussion will be recorded if all participants consent to being recorded. The recording will not be shared beyond Imprint's team and will be used only for notetaking and analysis related to the project. All recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the project.

The focus group discussions are facilitated by one of the consultants at Imprint. Members of RMDA team will be present at the sessions in a listening capacity.

Meeting Agenda:

1. Introduction of facilitator and land acknowledgments.
2. Overview of the research project and introduction of participants.
3. How are you involved with peer assessment?
4. What works well with peer assessment?
5. What needs to be improved with the peer assessment, and what are your ideas for improvements?
6. Concluding thoughts from participants.

Program Director and Program Manager Interview Guide

The Research, Measurement and Data Analytics (RMDA) section of the Canada Council has hired Imprint Consulting to conduct this study which aims to improve the Canada Council's peer assessment processes.

We would like to get your perspectives on what is working well and what could be improved in the peer assessment process, as well as your thoughts on what you would like to learn about peers' and staff's perceptions of the process.

Guiding Questions (to be covered in the interview):

1. Please introduce yourself, your role at Canada Council, and your experience with peer assessment processes.
2. Could you tell us about your program and how peer assessment works in your program?
3. What are the aspects of the peer assessment process that you think work well?

4. How can the process be improved? What are the improvements that you believe to be most critical?
 - a. To make the process more equitable.
 - b. To better support peer assessors.
 - c. To better support applicants.
5. What would you want to learn about how peers and staff perceive the overall process?

Survey Instruments

Peer Assessment Feedback Survey (2022-23)

Survey of peer assessors from April 2022 - March 2023 (432 invited, 41.4% response rate).

Thank you for participating in a peer assessment committee with the Canada Council for the Arts. In order to improve our granting programs and assessment processes, we are asking peer assessors to complete a survey about their experience. We appreciate your time and greatly value your feedback.

Individuals who are Deaf, have disabilities, or who may experience language barriers, and require accommodation to fill out the survey can contact Gem Roberts at Imprint Consulting by email.

If you would like to view the entire survey before completing it online, click [here](#). This will show you the entire questionnaire for reference.

Your participation is voluntary. Your responses to the survey will have no impact on your relationship with the Canada Council for the Arts. All responses are confidential and any public reporting will be in aggregate only, with no identifying information. If quotes are used in the report, they will not be attributed and will contain no identifiable information unless consent is provided. The results from the survey will only be used for the purpose of this research.

Please read our privacy statement by clicking [here](#).

If you have any questions about the survey, or if you experience any technical difficulties with the survey online, please contact Gem Roberts at Imprint Consulting by email.

INSTRUCTIONS: The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. On each screen, after selecting an answer, click on the Previous Page or Next Page buttons at the bottom of the screen to move backwards or forwards in the survey. If you leave the survey before completing it, your answers up to that point will be saved. Using the unique survey link that was sent to you by email, you will be returned to the screen you were viewing when you left.

When answering all the following questions, please respond in relation to your participation in peer assessment committees at the Canada Council for the Arts during the period from April 1, 2022, until March 31, 2023.

Overall, how satisfied were you with this peer assessment process?

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What did you value the most about the peer assessment process?

What changes would most improve the peer assessment process?

Please select how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know
Overall, I was satisfied with the assessment meetings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Satisfaction With Peer Assessment Tools & Process - B2

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know	Not applicable
I had the tools I needed to carry out my peer assessment tasks effectively.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Participating in a peer assessment committee as a peer assessor - B3

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know	Not applicable
I gained a better understanding of Canada Council's grant programs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I gained a better understanding of what is happening in the arts sector.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I learned something new.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I built connections with other peer assessors.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please share any additional comments on the peer assessment process and tools and how these could be improved.

Peer Assessment Feedback Survey (2023-24)

Survey of peer assessors from April 2023 – November 2023 (385 invited, 50.9% response rate) and from November 2023 – April 2024 (253 invited, 51.0% response rate).

Thank you for participating in a peer assessment committee with the Canada Council for the Arts. In order to improve our granting programs and assessment processes, we are asking peer assessors to complete a survey about their experience. We appreciate your time and greatly value your feedback.

Individuals who are Deaf, have disabilities, or who may experience language barriers, and require accommodation to fill out the survey can contact Gem Roberts at Imprint Consulting by email.

If you would like to view the entire survey before completing it online, [click here](#). This will show you the entire questionnaire for reference.

Your participation is voluntary. Your responses to the survey will have no impact on your relationship with the Canada Council for the Arts. All responses are confidential and any public reporting will be in aggregate only, with no identifying information. If quotes are used in the report, they will not be attributed and will contain no identifiable information unless consent is provided. The results from the survey will only be used for the purpose of this research.

Please read our privacy statement by [clicking here](#).

If you have any questions about the survey, or if you experience any technical difficulties with the survey online, please contact Gem Roberts at Imprint Consulting by email.

INSTRUCTIONS: The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. On each screen, after selecting an answer, click on the Previous Page or Next Page buttons at the bottom of the screen to move backwards or forwards in the survey. If you leave the survey before completing it, your answers up to that point will be saved. Using the unique survey link that was sent to you by email, you will be returned to the screen you were viewing when you left.

When answering all the following questions, please respond in relation to your participation in peer assessment committees at the Canada Council for the Arts during the period from April 2023-October 2023:

Overall, how satisfied were you with this peer assessment process?

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What did you value the most about the peer assessment process?

What changes would most improve the peer assessment process?

Information given at the beginning of the process:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know	Not applicable
Helped me understand my role and responsibilities as a peer assessor.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Addressed any questions I had.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helped me understand the assessment criteria for the component.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gave me a clear understanding of the peer assessment process.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How would you rate the length of the assessment meetings?

Too much time	Adequate	Not enough time
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the peer committee process?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know
The committee had knowledge relevant to the applications we were evaluating.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The committee had knowledge on Indigenous contexts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The committee had knowledge on equity, diversity, and inclusion.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interactions between peer assessors were respectful.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Indigenous contexts were considered during assessment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Equity, diversity, and inclusion were considered during assessment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Canada Council staff facilitated meetings effectively.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall, I was satisfied with the assessment meetings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

To what extent do you agree with the following statement about the tools used throughout the peer assessment process?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know	Not applicable
I had the tools I needed to carry out my peer assessment tasks effectively.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please rate your satisfaction with the tools used in the assessment process.

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	I don't know	Not applicable
The Online Assessment Site	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Scoring Tool	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Participating in a peer assessment committee as a peer assessor:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know	Not applicable
I gained a better understanding of Canada Council's grant programs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I gained a better understanding of what is happening in the arts sector.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I learned something new.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I built connections with other peer assessors.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please share any additional comments on the peer assessment process and tools and how these could be improved.

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Please list up to three responses for each question.

	1	2	3
What recurring themes or similarities from the applications stood out to you?			
Based on the applications you assessed, what are key challenges for the artistic and cultural sector that stood out to you?			
What supports to the sector would be most helpful?			