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Evaluation of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Named Grants

Final Report
February 3, 2014

***Evaluation of the Organization
for Economic Co-operation and
Development Named Grants***

Final report

***Evaluation Directorate
Strategic Policy and Research Branch
Employment and Social Development Canada***

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List of Acronyms

CERI	Center for Education Research and Innovation
EDCOM	Congressional Commission on Education
ELSA	Employment, Labour and Social Affairs
ESDC	Employment and Social Development Canada
FAA	Financial Administration Act
LEED	Local Employment and Economic Development
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OWPPI	Older Workers Pilot Projects Initiative
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RIRB	Research Investment and Review Board
SEB	Skills and Employment Branch
SIR	Strategic Intergovernmental Relations
TIOW	Targeted Initiative for Older Workers
YES	Youth Employment Strategy

Management Response

The Strategic Intergovernmental Relations (SIR) Directorate acknowledges the contribution of the OECD Named Grants evaluation to discussions of policy and program development in relation to this program. SIR is pleased to see the results of this evaluation, which indicate that the program is relevant to federal and departmental priorities, fills a need, and provides value for money. The program also has long-term, though sometimes indirect, links to policy development, particularly in areas considered to be a policy priority in Canada. SIR will continue to monitor the areas identified as considerations for potential improvements in the report.

1. Introduction

This report presents findings of an evaluation of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Named Grants program¹. The objective of the Named Grants is to provide funding to the OECD to conduct the Canadian component of international comparative research related to topics such as labour/employment, skills/learning and social policy.

OECD research enables Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) to benchmark its policies and programs against those of other countries at similar levels of development as well as to participate in forward-thinking international research projects. Participation is motivated by recognizing a need to fill a knowledge gap in Canadian policy research on issues broadly recognized as policy priorities in Canada.

The OECD Named Grants have the potential to enrich the department's policy knowledge in areas within its responsibility. The results of the research are used to provide the department with relevant knowledge and policy recommendations to improve ESDC's suite of programs and policies.

¹ The administration of these grants is not a standard "program" as such, but rather a mechanism to provide funding for studies to be conducted that will provide information of use to the Department of Employment and Social Development Canada. In this report the term "program" will be applied.

2. Program Background

The Grant is a voluntary contribution for projects of interest. This means that ESDC funds projects only if they are deemed to have policy importance and are a priority to the Department. Since the amount of the Grant is funded internally from existing Vote 5 contribution levels, funds are assigned to the grant at the beginning of each fiscal year by identifying it as an unfunded priority on the departmental financial pressures list. Payments are made to the OECD in accordance with the Treasury Board (TB) Policy on Transfer Payments.

Prior to the current fiscal year, funding for the grants was provided for a total of up to \$300,000 per annum. As a result of departmental reduction action plan activities, the amount of the Grant was reduced to a maximum of \$100,000 per year beginning in 2013-2014, consistent with other cuts to the Department's external research budget. ESDC's funding is used for preparation and edition of the reports produced and for publication costs². Between 2008 and 2012, two to six projects were funded per fiscal year.

2.1 Employment and Social Development Canada Participation in OECD Prioritization of Projects

ESDC works extensively with five OECD committees/programs, providing input through these committees into the OECD selection of priorities and projects: Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (ELSA); Education and Skills, including the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); the Center for Education Research and Innovation (CERI); the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Board of Participating Countries; as well as the Local Employment and Economic Development (LEED) committee. On a biennial basis, each of the OECD committees prepares and submits a Program of Work and Budget submission for approval by the OECD Council and Budget Committee. The Programs of Work focus on expected results which the OECD and its member countries expect to deliver. ESDC plays a role in the development and approval of the committees' Programs of Work through its engagement in the OECD committees. The development of Programs of Work is an iterative process and there are opportunities to influence the work agenda, provided ESDC is able to establish its priorities ahead of key discussions at the OECD.

² Although the amount allocated to the Grant has been reduced to \$100,000, the Grant authorities remain at \$300,000.

2.2 Prioritization within Employment and Social Development Canada

In 2007, the Skills and Employment Branch (SEB) of ESDC transferred the administration of the OECD Named Grants to the Strategy and Intergovernmental Relations Directorate (SIR) of the Strategic Policy and Research (SPR) Branch. A standing committee of ESDC directors-general involved with the work of the OECD was established in early 2012. The role of the committee is to improve department-wide OECD management. The committee meets periodically, but at least quarterly, with the first meeting having been held on February 21, 2012.

ESDC's participation in particular OECD projects is based on those activities which support the departmental mandate and reflect the expressed needs of Canadian stakeholders who are seeking to supplement existing Canadian research in socio-economic trends and in practices in labour market programming. Although the OECD Named Grants fall outside of the Departmental Policy and Research Plan (DPRP), proposed projects are mapped closely to research themes and programs and selection is made with close collaboration of policy/research experts within the Department. The Director General of the Policy Research Directorate also sits on the OECD DG committee, ensuring coordination with departmental research priorities.

Since 2012, all external and internal research must receive approval from the Research Investment and Review Board (RIRB) which was established to better align ESDC's research capacity with departmental and governmental priorities. The RIRB is composed of the Assistant Deputy Ministers of SEB, Strategic Policy and Research, Income Security and Social Development (ISSD) and Learning Branches. Its function is to monitor investments and provide guidance and coherence. Due to issues with the timing of the Research Plan and the ad hoc nature of OECD projects, SIR has developed a process to replace RIRB review of projects. Projects are now presented to a special extended PRPC meeting, which recommends projects for approval prior to being submitted to the OECD DG committee. The DG committee then seeks Ministerial approval for the projects selected. This process allows the Department to obtain Ministerial approval in time for OECD project details to be negotiated by the International Relations team, and for invoices to be issued and paid by the end of the fiscal year.

3. Rationale for the Scope and Focus of the Evaluation

The evaluation of OECD Named Grants was undertaken as the program has not been evaluated since its inception in 2003 and Section 42.1 of the *Financial Administration Act* (FAA) stipulates that all on-going Grants and Contributions programs must be evaluated on a five year cycle. Besides ensuring departmental compliance with the FAA, the evaluation was designed to meet Treasury Board Secretariat requirements that evaluations include a review of program relevance, effectiveness and efficiency. The evaluation was calibrated to ensure that resources used were commensurate with the program budget of \$100,000 per year.

Consideration was initially given to how best to address both relevance (alignment with government and departmental priorities and the need for the program) and performance questions (effectiveness, efficiency and economy) using methodologies such as a bibliometric analysis or a survey of end-users, including academics. These approaches were rejected because they would entail more time and cost than would be warranted for a program of this size and would not produce substantially more valuable information than could be achieved by adopting less resource intensive methodologies.

Consequently, while still attending to quality, evaluation efforts were calibrated to include the following components: a document review of all relevant program documents, a focus group interview with the SIR Directorate responsible for overseeing the administration of the program, and four key informant interviews with program end-users within the Department.

3.1 Limitations

One of the main challenges in qualitative research is the generalizability or representativeness of the statements provided. The potential for biased statements arising from interviewees with a stake in the program and who may report favourably on program performance is equally a challenge. To mitigate this limitation, specific examples were solicited to substantiate statements and documents, as available, were reviewed to corroborate examples provided by the informants.

3.2 Evaluation Questions

Four main questions emerged during the evaluation as relevant to assessing program relevance and performance:

- ❓ **1. Relevance:** How does the program align with governmental and ESDC priorities?
- ❓ **2. Performance:** Is the research of good quality?
- ❓ **3. Performance:** How is the product/research used for policy development?
- ❓ **4. Efficiency and Economy:** Is the Grant an efficient means of obtaining the results? Is the OECD Named Grants program good value for money?

4. *Main Findings*

4.1 **Relevance: How does the program align with governmental and Employment and Social Development Canada priorities?**

One of the key program objectives is that projects fill knowledge gaps on issues broadly recognized as policy priorities in Canada. ESDC takes measures to ensure that any decision to fund a particular project is carefully considered and rigorously discussed in light of emerging social and labour market challenges in Canada. By participating in OECD committees/working parties, ESDC has opportunities to assess and comment on project proposals as they are developed. Program officials who manage the OECD Named Grants assess OECD projects of potential interest, and provide advice from a research and policy perspective to senior management on which specific projects need funding.

Information on current and expected OECD work plans is shared with policy and research units within the Department. This provides officials and experts within the Department the necessary information to examine how proposed OECD activities align (or not) with departmental needs and to eventually identify areas of common interest between the OECD and ESDC.

The ability of the projects to deliver on ESDC's specific research and policy needs is consistently monitored throughout the project's lifecycle. This is done collaboratively by the program area sponsoring the research and SIR. They ensure that every project meets Departmental objectives by carefully negotiating the content of the project and deliverables with the OECD and other participating countries. The objectives of the projects are clearly stipulated at the outset through the Grant Agreements between the OECD and ESDC. The program area sponsors, in collaboration with SIR, actively provide comments and feedback

on Canada's views on draft and final OECD reports associated with specific projects. Given the high degree of interaction between the OECD and ESDC throughout the conduct of the project, ESDC is provided with ample opportunity to assess progress toward those objectives and often insists on corrective action on the part of the OECD before projects are deemed complete.

4.2 Performance: Is the research of good quality?

As a measure of quality, overall satisfaction related to the manner in which the OECD undertakes the work was assessed. Specifically, quality of work was defined in program documentation as including the comprehensiveness of consultative efforts, sensitivity to the interests and concerns of involved parties in the field of study, the provision of appropriate consideration to the uniquely Canadian situation, and respect for the work schedule laid out in the original work plan.

In addressing issues of quality, key informants indicated that they are usually satisfied with OECD projects. When issues of quality arise, which were identified as being rare, they have often been attributed to weak data, not poor analysis by the OECD³. With regard to consultation and sensitivity to the concerns of involved parties in the field of study, respondents noted that the OECD includes other levels of governments in the research both at the project implementation stage and at the final report preparation stage. There is also multi-stakeholder involvement at the planning stages and as the project evolves, which was identified as ensuring good quality and useful products. With regard to addressing the uniquely Canadian situation, a senior level key informant noted that the reports provide "solid recommendations that grasp the Canadian reality." Additionally, the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including other levels of government, is designed to ensure adequate reflection in the reports of the Canadian situation. In terms of respect for the work schedule laid out in the original work plan, respondents noted that the OECD has always been on time in meeting negotiated timelines.

³ Where possible, projects that are considered for funding are assessed against the ability of the OECD to complete high-quality work given the nature of data that is available to them.

4.3 Performance: How is the product/research used for policy development?

The program documentation does not identify the anticipated program outcomes. However, a review of the documentation and input from key informants revealed the following overall outcome for the program:

Research projects fill knowledge gaps in Canadian policy research on issues broadly recognized as public priorities in Canada and are used in the development of policies.

Since 2003, the Department has funded 36 OECD projects (see Annex A for a list of funded projects) with the intended objective of developing evidence-based policies in Canada. Key informant respondents cited a number of OECD projects, including the following, as examples of projects that have influenced policy decisions:

Sickness, Disability and Work; Breaking the Barriers, Canada – Opportunities for Collaboration (2010)

The thematic review on reforming sickness and disability policies was provided as an example of OECD Named Grants research being used for “conceptual” policy development. The report fed into many internal discussions held in the Summer/Fall of 2011 aimed at identifying policy directions in support of promoting employment among persons with disabilities in Canada. According to one respondent affiliated with the file, the OECD research identified broad challenges in ESDC programs and policies with respect to persons with disabilities, namely that the programs tend to work in silos and that Canadian programs have poor program indicators and measures of what works. By identifying broad, systemic issues with Canadian policies, the OECD helped the working groups better focus their investigation. Further, the OECD report listed best practices, which were implemented in various countries to simplify the delivery challenges and which were internally assessed for their applicability in the Canadian context. The review influenced the Departmental work plan and research questions and elevated internal debate about how to better serve persons with disabilities. Issues around service delivery raised in the final report of this thematic review are also informing ongoing work by the Policy Research Directorate in building various areas of a forthcoming (2014-2015) departmental research program on service delivery for the disabled.

Scoping Paper on the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Cash Benefits Compared with In-Kind Services, ELSA (project not yet completed)

Although the final findings of this project have yet to be released, respondents noted that it will fill a gap in the current Department Policy Research Plan under the themes of Families, Children and Youth (Child and Adolescent Outcomes) as well as Income Security (Income Security Architecture). The early findings of the scoping paper on the efficiency and

effectiveness of cash versus in-kind benefits showed that there is greater value in providing cash benefits versus in-kind benefits for achieving outcomes related to progress for children and families.

Skills for Competitiveness Study (2008-12)

This study was identified by SEB as fundamental to advancing program policy on the Enabling Fund for Official Language Minority Communities. By using the local labour market areas as defined by commuting pattern data and applying the OECD-LEED Skills Equilibrium typology developed in the Skills for Competitiveness study, EDSC has been able to organize small labour markets and local workforces according to actual local skills needs and opportunities. This new understanding in turn provides direction for effective planning and interventions to address shortages, identify mismatches, and capitalize on new opportunities while making efficient use of resources. SEB considers the study to be an important part of an employment tool to fix local labour market issues and respond to community-work related needs by identifying tailored solutions to local issues.

Thematic Review of Policies to Improve Labour Market Outcomes for Older Workers (2003-05)

The OECD thematic review on increasing the employment prospects of older workers is cited as having provided valuable policy recommendations for the ongoing policy work on how to ensure Canadian labour markets adapt to an aging demographic. Canada participated in the older workers review with 20 other OECD countries. This study demonstrated that although Canada was in a good situation in comparison with other OECD countries, older workers still needed some active labour market interventions to assist them in remaining in or accessing the labour market. One of the recommendations with respect to improving the employability of older workers was to build upon the lessons learned from the Older Workers Pilot Projects Initiative (OWPPI), based on which the Targeted Initiative for Older Workers (TIOW) was introduced in 2006. The study was useful to Canada as it allowed comparison with practices in other countries to inform future policy development. The formative 2010 evaluation of the TIOW indicated that the design incorporates many of the lessons learned from the OWPPI. In 2012, the OECD published a follow up to the initial study, entitled *Demographic Change and Local Development: Shrinkage, Regeneration and Social Dynamics*, in which it cited best practices and lessons learned from ESDC's Targeted Initiative for Older Workers.

Thematic Review on Policies to Facilitate School-to-Work Transitions and to Improve Youth Employment Prospects (2005-07)

ESDC's participation in the OECD Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (ELSA) Programme Thematic Review on School to Work Transitions was one of the components used to inform policy directions for the renewal of the Youth Employment Strategy (YES) which began in late 2006. The project provided a diagnosis of the labour market situation of youth, examined policies that promote employability and facilitate youth transitions to

jobs, proposed strategies and income support for youth, and identified demand-side barriers to youth employment. The Canadian component of the review included a focus on skills, central to YES. The paper also provided an overall assessment and reform recommendations for each participating country.

Product use in policy discussions

Findings from the Named Grant reports typically make their way into high level discussions within ESDC. However, as with all research, it is difficult to ascertain the precise role that the OECD Named Grants play in the policy process for a variety of reasons. First, the decision to use this information is not always immediate; neither does it take the exact form in which it is recommended in the various reports. This makes an evaluation of impact on policy development difficult to undertake. One respondent questioned the ability to determine the influence of such work altogether, noting that it is difficult to determine whether OECD projects are central to, at the periphery of, or without influence on the policy directions taken on some of the Department's initiatives and programs.

Secondly, while the international evidence contributes to policy work by providing benchmarks as well as knowledge on how policy questions are handled in other countries, it is one factor among many others. The difficulty in attributing a causal link between OECD research and policy development is summarised by one respondent who indicated that "policy development is mostly influenced by domestic considerations," although the international evidence may come to reinforce domestic factors. These projects are not expected, then, to have a contemporaneous impact, nor a one to one correspondence between OECD recommendations and ESDC's policy development. Rather, the value is in the reports' capacity to crystallize thinking and amalgamate other considerations into policy discussions to provide policy options that are anchored in evidence. The general consensus among the majority of the respondents was that the OECD reports fill this role.

4.4 Efficiency and Economy: Is the Grant an efficient means of obtaining the results? Is the OECD Named Grants program good value for money?

The respondents generally agreed that the OECD Named Grants provide good value for money. A view shared by almost all of the respondents was that few other organizations apart from the OECD would have the capability to effectively analyse Canadian data and policies and compare them to many other countries in a reliable manner, at comparable economies. According to respondents, the OECD is considered to be the best organization to provide such coordination and analysis because, as a multilateral organization, it considers one country's situation and the policy responses to social issues/challenges in comparison to other countries in the same or similar situations using reliable and comparable data sources.

Key informants indicated that this type of comparative work would be far more difficult and significantly more costly if it were conducted without leveraging funds from other countries and without their collaboration. As summarised by one manager of the fund, the participation of several countries in a given project creates a “multiplier effect”; while ESDC only contributes a portion of the total cost of the project, it benefits from all of the analysis that is undertaken. Because Canada is one country among many others that are invited to participate, the real cost is shared. Therefore, the impact of each dollar spent is multiplied by the pooling of resources of many countries.

Value was also noted not only in relation to returns on investment and the quality of the products but in terms of the uniqueness of the analysis and the strong perception of the neutrality of the OECD reports and findings. As indicated by many, as a result of these projects Canada’s policies and programs can be assessed in relation to evidence provided by impartial experts and compared to other countries.

There is also value in the fact that the OECD’s studies and reports result in media reports (written, radio, television, web-based, etc.) that raise issues to public attention.

Although not asked directly, many respondents expressed concern regarding the reduction in the funding envelope. While they agree that the impact will not be immediate as projects tend to take a few years before they are completed, they note that the reduction may compromise their capacity to influence the OECD’s agenda and may constrain their ability to enrich the Department’s thinking and policy work. Many indicated that continuing at the lower level of funding would probably reduce ESDC’s participation in projects and only those with the clearest explanations and most discernible impact would go forward. It may also result in longer term projects, including the second part of two-part projects, not being funded.

Most agreed that in-house work is often less efficient and less comprehensive than having the OECD do all of the analytical work. In response to a question about what can be accomplished without the Grants, one respondent noted that this has been attempted on occasion, but the results were more difficult to obtain and comparisons between Canada and other countries were less reliable. Program staff communicated that they are currently finding it challenging to choose amongst projects that could advance Departmental work in various – but equally important – policy realms: social affairs, labour market, skills and learning.

Some respondents noted that the granting process itself requires streamlining to reduce current administrative burden. Several changes have already been made to the granting process to make it more efficient, and SIR reports that these have been successful. Additional work could be explored to continue efforts to modernize the granting process and make it more efficient and flexible.

5. Conclusion

The evidence collected suggests that the program is relevant to federal and departmental priorities, fills a need, and provides value for money. It has long- term, though sometimes indirect links, to policy development, particularly in areas considered to be a policy priority in Canada. As such, the OECD Named Grants program seems to be meeting its objectives and continues to be relevant to current and future policy needs.

The evaluation illustrates that, although the program has a small budget, the research conducted leverages resources from other participating countries to obtain results that are used to benchmark Canadian policies and programs against those of other countries. Overall, it appears that the value of the program lies in its ability to provide strategic policy intelligence that is considered reliable because it uses comparable data and analysis for a variety of countries and does so for a relatively modest price.

During the evaluation, two areas for potential improvement were identified for consideration. These include:

- Ongoing monitoring and dialogue within the Department regarding the overall impact that the reduction in the funding envelope is having in completing high priority projects.
- Continued efforts to explore ways to streamline the granting process.

ANNEX A

GRANTS FUNDED THROUGH THE OECD GRANTING AUTHORITY

PROJET NAME	COMMITTEE	FUNDING PER FY	#
Study on skills upgrading for the low-qualified	LEED project	\$50,000 (CND) FY 2003/04 \$50,000 (CND) FY 2004/05	1
Thematic review on the reconciliation of work and family life (Also known as the Thematic review on family friendly policies)	ELSA project	\$24,000 (CND) FY 2003/04 \$56,000 (CND) FY 2004/05	2
Thematic review on older workers	ELSA project	\$35,000 CND FY 2003/04 \$65,000 CND FY 2004/05	3
Translation of the Canadian report from the thematic review on older workers	ELSA project	€13,000 (euros) FY 2005/06	4
Study of Local Integration of Immigrants into the Labour Market	LEED project	\$101,782 (CND) FY 2005/06	5
Comparative early learning and childcare study (Thematic Review Early Childhood Education)	EDCOM project	€30,000 (euros) FY 2005/06	6
Continuing education and training module	EDCOM project	\$16,000 (CND) FY 2005/06	7
Thematic review on policies to facilitate school-to-work transitions and improve youth employment prospects	ELSA project	€80,000 (euros) FY 2005/06 €15,000 (euros) FY 2006/07	8
Forum on the new Jobs Strategy	ELSA project	€72,500 (euros) in 2 payments FY 2006/07	9
Study on globalisation and structural adjustment	ELSA project	€25,000 (euros) FY 2006/07	10
Integrating employment, skills and economic development	LEED project	€76,067 (euros) in 2 payments FY 2006/07	11
Designing a Job Requirements Approach Module for the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)	ELSA project	€16,000 (euros) FY 2006/07 €1,500 (euros) FY 2007/08	12

PROJET NAME	COMMITTEE	FUNDING PER FY	#
Labour Market Adjustment in Canada in the Context of Globalization	ELSA project	€8,000 (euros) FY 2007/08	13
Thematic Review on Reforming Sickness and Disability Policies to Improve Work Incentives	ELSA project	€57,000 (euros) FY 2007/08	14
Vocational Education and Training	EDCOM project	€28,000 (euros) FY 2007/08	15
Social Outcomes of Learning (SOL)	EDCOM project	€20,000 (euros) FY 2007/2008	16
Globalisation and Linguistic Competencies (CERI project)	EDCOM project	€40,000 (euros) FY 2007/08	17
New Millennium Learner Project (CERI project)	EDCOM project	€25,000 (euros) FY 2008/09	18
PISA – skills at 15 & pathways through learning & work	EDCOM project	€27,500 (euros) FY 2008/09	19
Women and Pensions Report	ELSA project	€30,000 (euros) FY 2008/09	20
Skills for Competitiveness: Tackling the Low Skilled Equilibrium	LEED project	€50,000 (euros) FY 2008/09 €15,000 (euros) FY 2009/10	21
Managing Flexibility and Accountability	LEED project	€45,000 (euros) FY 2008/09 €20,000 (euros) FY 2009/10	22
OECD Family Database	ELSA project	€50,000 (euros) FY 2009/10	23
The Jobs Potential of Shifts Towards a Low-Carbon Economy	ELSA project	€35,000 (euros) FY 2009/10	24
Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care	EDCOM project	€10,000 (euros) FY 2009/10	25
Assessed Learning Gains over 8 years among Young Canadians	EDCOM project	€20,000 (euros) FY 2009/10	26
Supporting OECD Work with Emerging Economies	ELSA project	€25,000 (euros) FY 2009/10	27
Next Steps - The Jobs Potential of Shifts Towards a Low-Carbon Economy	ELSA project	€35,000 (euros) FY 2010/11	28
Supporting the OECD Skills Strategy/Displaced Workers	ELSA project	€30,000 (euros) FY 2010/11	29
OECD Family Database – Child Well-being Module	ELSA project	€45,000 (euros) FY 2010/11	30

PROJET NAME	COMMITTEE	FUNDING PER FY	#
Leveraging Training and Skills Development in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (TSME)	ELSA project	€65,000 (euros) FY 2010/11	31
Skills beyond School	EDCOM project	€28,000 (euros) FY 2011/12	32
Local Job Creation: How Employment and Training Agencies Can Help	LEED project	€100,000 (euros) FY 2011/12	33
Scoping Paper on the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Cash Benefits Compared with In-Kind Services	ELSA project	€30,000 (euros) FY 2011/12	34
Thematic Review of Displaced Workers, National Report	ELSA project	€60,000 (euros) FY 2012/13	35
French translation and copy-edit of the <i>Thematic Review of Displaced Workers: Canada Report</i>	ELSA project	€12,500 (euros) FY 2012/13	36