

Strengthening Indigenous Research Capacity

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION - Progress Report 2020-21





Illustration Donald Chrétien

The Honourable François-Philippe Champagne, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry

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It takes a solid foundation to support long-term growth. Since 2019, the Strengthening Indigenous Research Capacity (SIRC) initiative has been laying the foundation to implement Canada's first-ever interagency strategic plan for Indigenous research and research training.

Persisting through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic—which has had a profound impact on both Indigenous communities and Canada's research community—Canada's research funding agencies have come together and built the structures needed to achieve real and lasting change.

These efforts have been respectful and collaborative, in keeping with the spirit of the strategy itself. They are rooted in co-development with Indigenous partners, drawing on meaningful new relationships and research that addresses community priorities. This report provides the highlights of our progress to date and sets the stage for what is yet to come.





Strengthening Indigenous Research Capacity
Renforcement des capacités en recherche autochtone

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How SIRC came to be

In its 2015 report, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada highlighted the important role of research in advancing reconciliation.

Two years later, the Canada Research Coordinating Committee (CRCC) was created to increase cooperation and alignment among Canada's three research funding agencies—the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)—in collaboration with the National Research Council (NRC), the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI), Canada's chief science advisor, and the deputy ministers of Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada and of Health Canada.

Among its priorities, the CRCC sought to co-develop a new, interdisciplinary Indigenous research and research training model with Indigenous communities. The Government of Canada committed \$3.8 million to SSHRC in Budget 2018 to support that effort, which resulted in [*Setting New Directions to Support Indigenous Research and Research Training in Canada 2019-2022*](#), a strategic plan identifying new ways of doing research by and with Indigenous communities, and of building research capacity within those communities.

The planning process included 14 regional engagement events and a national dialogue event in March 2019 that brought together 300 Indigenous Research Capacity and Reconciliation–Connection Grants recipients, as well as Indigenous community members and representatives of the agencies, to explore emerging themes and priorities in Indigenous research.

SIRC is a collaborative tri-agency initiative to implement the strategy and its four strategic directions:

1. Building relationships with First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples
2. Supporting research priorities of Indigenous Peoples
3. Creating greater funding accessibility to granting agency programs
4. Championing Indigenous leadership, self-determination and capacity-building in research

That work is being carried out in line with a set of essential principles, including a commitment to Indigenous self-determination, the decolonization of research, accountability, and equitable access and support for Indigenous students and researchers.





Acknowledgements

With headquarters in Ottawa on traditional Algonquin territory, Canada's federal research funding agencies pay respect to the Algonquin people, the traditional guardians of that land, and recognize their longstanding relationship with that territory, which remains unceded. The agencies pay respect to Indigenous Peoples across Canada: First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples from coast to coast to coast; traditional knowledge keepers young and old; and the courageous leaders of Indigenous communities past, present and future.

The work underway through the SIRC initiative would not be possible without the expertise, knowledge, contributions and support of many Indigenous scholars and partners. The agencies particularly wish to acknowledge their collaboration with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation in advancing Call to Action 65 of the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, which was the impetus for the engagement process that led to the co-development of the Setting New Directions strategy.

Message from the agencies

As Canada continues to build a path toward reconciliation, we remain committed to doing our part to fulfill the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This includes supporting research by and with Indigenous Peoples to advance the priorities of communities across the country. We acknowledge that much work remains to be done. We are grateful for the opportunity to lead the implementation of the strategic plan for Indigenous research and research training, *Setting New Directions*, on behalf of CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC and the CFI.

More than just a progress report, this document is a reiteration of our commitment to that strategy and its aims. Along with our partners, we will sustain the effort to realize the principles and directions of the strategy, engage in open and transparent dialogue, and champion Indigenous leadership in research.

Despite the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic created in 2020-21 for Indigenous communities and the Canadian research enterprise, and despite the delays it introduced, we are pleased to report on the important steps taken to lay the foundation for implementing the strategy. We look forward to building on it in the coming years, as the pandemic subsides and as opportunities return, and to engage face-to-face with Indigenous communities and research organizations.

Purely on its own, the creation of *Setting New Directions* was a milestone of great significance. It was achievable only with the sharing of stories, expertise, lived experiences and visions for Indigenous research and research training contributed by First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. We thank all those who participated in our 14 engagement events across the country, as well as the 116 researchers and research teams who answered SSHRC's special call for Indigenous Research Capacity and Reconciliation–Connection Grants, contributing papers that informed the strategy (see Appendix 3 of *Setting New Directions* for the list of award holders).

An especially important piece of the foundation laid last year, as described in this report, was the formation of the Reference Group for the Appropriate Review of Indigenous Research—a body made up exclusively of Indigenous scholars, recruited through a process that has since provided a template for assembling one of the key mechanisms of the strategic plan: the Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research.

Going forward, we will continue to lead the implementation effort with all our partners to strengthen Canada's research enterprise and advance these crucial objectives in support of reconciliation.

Alejandro Adem, President, NSERC

Ted Hewitt, President, SSHRC

Michael Strong, President, CIHR

Message from the director

The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission states that “the benefits of research extend beyond addressing the legacy of residential schools. Research on the reconciliation process can inform how Canadian society can mitigate intercultural conflicts, strengthen civic trust, and build social capacity and practical skills for long-term reconciliation.” Over the past year, our country has witnessed the impact and the power of Indigenous community-led research, and our commitment to supporting research by and with Indigenous communities remains steadfast.

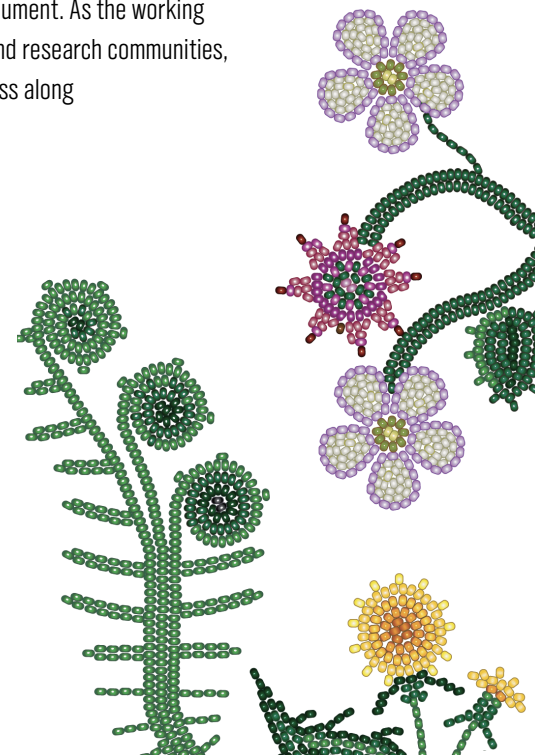
The Indigenous strategic plan is deeply rooted in community perspectives, and its implementation will be achieved by building a community of its own. By bringing together scholars, community leaders, elders and youth, each stage of the implementation will be guided by a group that reflects a diversity of expertise and Indigenous knowledge.

Building this community will be a gradual process, and that is why the past year has been spent building the frameworks and platforms for these groups to come together. While the COVID-19 pandemic undeniably slowed the progress of the SIRC initiative in 2020-21, much important foundational work was achieved, particularly in forming the working groups and governance frameworks necessary for successful implementation of the Indigenous research and training strategy.

In the upcoming year, a key next milestone will be the launch of the Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research, a body that will ensure all future SIRC activities are informed by Indigenous perspectives. However, the Leadership Circle is more than an advisory body: its members will be active guides and participants in the process of implementing the strategy.

While the title of the strategy is *Setting New Directions to Support Indigenous Research and Research Training in Canada 2019-2022*—implying an end date of 2022—the fact is that this implementation effort is long-term and will require ongoing engagement with diverse groups to ensure a distinctions-based approach. The strategic plan is, in many ways, a living, ‘evergreen’ document. As the working groups gain traction and our relationships deepen with Indigenous Peoples and research communities, the initiative will develop a logic model and ways to formally measure progress along that continuing journey.

Nico Paul, Director, Indigenous Strategy, SSHRC



Leadership

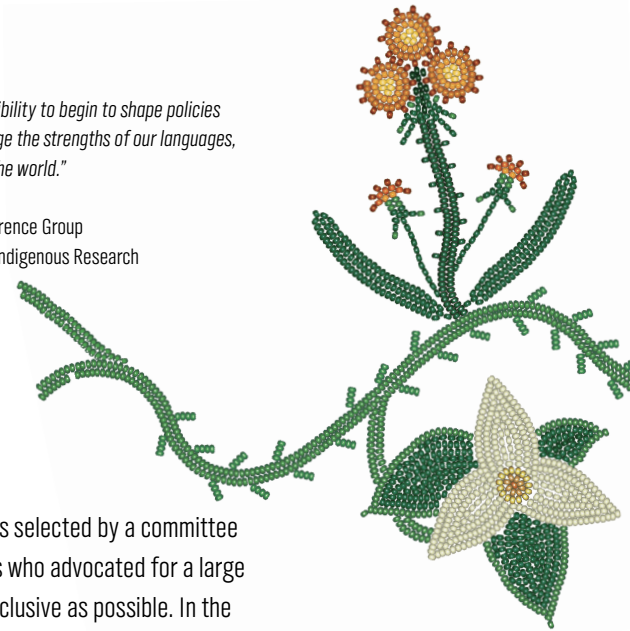
Creating a culturally safe environment for Indigenous research

Peer review is a longstanding Western academic practice and deeply embedded in research granting processes. For Indigenous communities, organizations and scholars to participate in Canada's research enterprise, review processes must be ethical, relevant and culturally appropriate. The external Reference Group for the Appropriate Review of Indigenous Research, comprising First Nations, Inuit and Métis scholars, was established last year and will help guide this transformation.

Representing youth, knowledge keepers and academics at various stages of their careers—as well as northern, urban and community perspectives—the gender-balanced Reference Group brings deep understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems and the peer review challenges experienced by Indigenous research teams. The group developed terms of reference and, going forward, will review models and develop guiding principles to help harmonize the review of Indigenous research across the three federal research funding agencies.

"We have a voice and a responsibility to begin to shape policies and processes that acknowledge the strengths of our languages, cultures and ways of being in the world."

Kimberly Fairman, Chair, Reference Group for the Appropriate Review of Indigenous Research



The Reference Group was selected by a committee of Indigenous academics who advocated for a large body that would be as inclusive as possible. In the end, the committee appointed 18 members. As part of the submission process, applicants shared how being a member of the Reference Group would benefit them, personally, as well as their communities, organizations and institutions.

““ The 18 members of the Reference Group represent diverse experiences, points of view and Indigenous cultures.

The call for expressions of interest and the selection process for the Reference Group provided an effective, repeatable model that was then used to recruit members for the planned Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research. That effort concluded just prior to the end of fiscal year 2020-21, with Leadership Circle membership to be announced in early 2022. The Leadership Circle will provide important guidance on the overall implementation of the strategy, including the recommendations of the Reference Group.

Engagement

Building stronger relationships with Indigenous communities

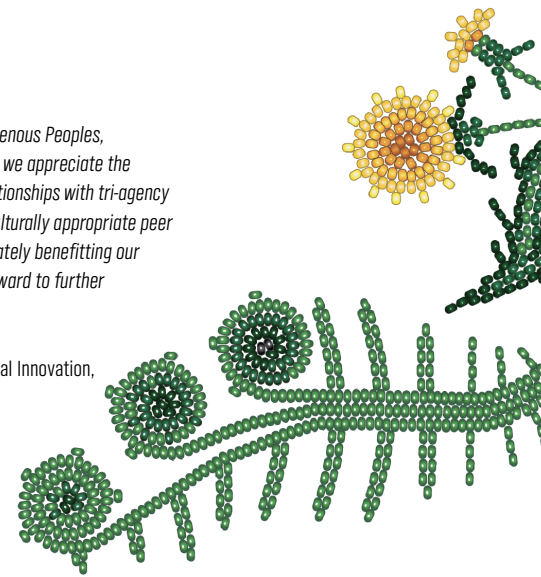
Sustained engagement is key to developing meaningful, trusting and mutually beneficial relationships—but this was a challenge in 2020–21 as First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities experienced disproportional impacts of COVID-19 and face-to-face meetings weren't possible. Fortunately, the engagement process that produced the Indigenous research strategy had forged important connections that could be leveraged during the pandemic year and built on going forward.

Despite these challenges, tri-agency staff continued to engage actively with Indigenous partners and organizations who were able to meet virtually, including not-for-profit organizations and postsecondary institutions. Where possible, Indigenous Elders were invited to open and attend meetings in a virtual context. Online conferences and symposia provided further opportunities to meet and exchange new ways of supporting research by and with Indigenous communities, such as the World Virtual Indigenous Circle on Open Science and the Decolonization of Knowledge, hosted by UNESCO in November 2020.

In June 2018, 116 SSHRC Connection Grants were awarded through a special call to support Indigenous research and reconciliation. This resulted in high success rates for Indigenous organizations, while enabling communities to set their own research agendas.

“Community-based research, by and for Indigenous Peoples, is critical for our self-determination. At FNTI, we appreciate the opportunities that we have had to build relationships with tri-agency staff. We feel that this will lead to a more culturally appropriate peer review process and funding programs, ultimately benefitting our learners and their communities. We look forward to further engagement!”

Keith Williams, Director, Research and Social Innovation,
First Nations Technical Institute



Building on this success, in winter 2021, the tri-agency Working Group Focused on Administrative Barriers to Indigenous Community-Led Research met with several not-for-profit organizations to obtain feedback on their experiences of applying for eligibility and administering research funding. These lessons will be used to develop new pilot tools, improving and simplifying future processes.

“ The agencies seized opportunities during the pandemic to engage virtually with Indigenous Peoples, including at online conferences such as the International Indigenous Research Symposium.

Those kinds of inputs and interactions will continue to be critical to the ongoing success of the SIRC initiative—furthering the commitment of Canada's research funding agencies to co-develop solutions with Indigenous Peoples and strengthen Indigenous research leadership. With the prospect of face-to-face meetings slowly becoming possible once again, engagement will resume, helping to guide the final stages of strategy implementation.



Cooperation

Collaborating for a more accessible and harmonized research system

Emerging from the engagement activities with Indigenous partners, the strategic plan includes a mechanism to simplify and harmonize processes across the three federal research funding agencies. The implementation of an interagency governance structure, combined with the identification of dedicated resources to support the strategy over the last year, has enabled SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR and the CFI to renew their commitment to the strategy and to collaborate more effectively to develop consistent, streamlined research funding policies in order to remove systemic barriers to accessing research funding for Indigenous Peoples.

Representatives of the agencies and the CFI came together throughout 2020-21 to coordinate implementation of the Indigenous research and training strategy across existing programs and policies. Members agreed to pool resources, harmonize approaches and work more collaboratively to implement the strategy—sustaining their efforts, despite resource constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic, to advance work on issues such as reducing administrative burdens on Indigenous applicants, revising merit review processes, removing systemic barriers and more. The Committee on Indigenous Research and Reconciliation (IC-IRR) was created to anchor the collaboration and is accountable to the agencies and the Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research for the implementation of the strategy.

The committee actively sought opportunities to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into internal agency conversations, and to facilitate cultural exchanges; for example, by inviting staff to share perspectives and customs and to conduct meetings in a culturally relevant and appropriate way. By bringing the various individual agencies together, the IC-IRR creates visibility into other agency-specific activities underway that complement and support the aims of the strategy.

Working in a spirit of cooperation, partnership, respect and recognition of Indigenous rights, the IC-IRR will provide an ongoing platform for the research funding agencies to share resources, brainstorm and create joint learning opportunities. It will coordinate the efforts of all SIRC working groups, ensure the forthcoming Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research has the information it needs to provide oversight of the implementation of the SIRC and advise the presidents of the agencies and the CFI. It will also take guidance from the Leadership Circle.

““ The new governance structures will enhance coordination between the granting agencies and strengthen accountability to Indigenous Peoples, a key principle of the strategic plan. The IC-IRR will report on progress and take guidance from the Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research.

Activities to date

At the centre of the year's work was the establishment of three working groups to address specific priorities and aspects of the Indigenous research strategic plan. Each laid the groundwork in 2020-21 to support ongoing progress.

Tri-agency Indigenous Funding Opportunities Working Group

Creating meaningful opportunities for Indigenous research starts by ensuring funding is accessible and relevant to Indigenous communities, scholars and organizations. Beyond having funds in place, this requires programs and mechanisms that are appropriate to the needs, priorities and knowledge systems of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.

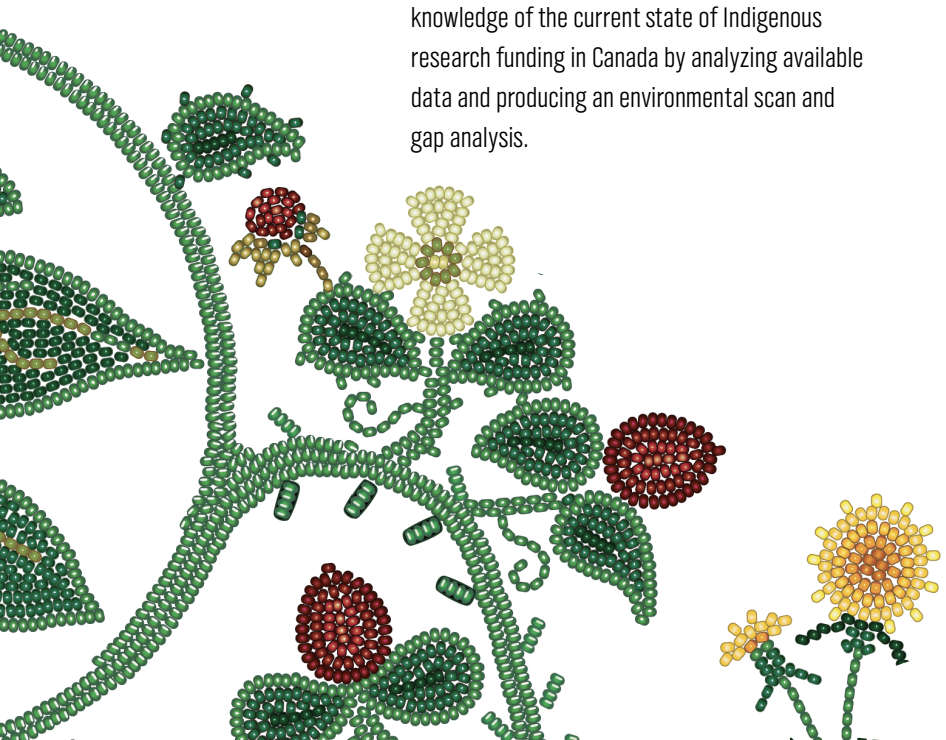
The Indigenous Funding Opportunities Working Group was created in 2020-21, with a mandate to analyze and recommend improvements to existing tri-agency funding opportunities and to inform the development of future research programs to support reconciliation. As a first step, the group began to build baseline knowledge of the current state of Indigenous research funding in Canada by analyzing available data and producing an environmental scan and gap analysis.

The scan and gap analysis yielded preliminary insights into eligibility, funding objectives, forms and processes, adjudication and review, and how funding results are announced. Recommendations included broadening eligibility for Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleges and organizations, creating funding opportunities based on Indigenous perspectives and priorities, and providing multiple application channels. The working group also recommended a review of funding guidelines aligned with Indigenous knowledge concepts and promoted data ownership as a priority.

The working group's findings will be shared and validated with Indigenous partners and research teams in the coming months, and data gathering and evaluation will continue in 2021-22. Where quantitative data are not available, the working group will establish a qualitative understanding of key issues. In light of this ongoing work, the group will further develop its initial recommendations and prepare a final set for review by the Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research.

Indigenous Funding Opportunities Working Group achievements at a glance

- Environmental scan of current Indigenous research funding landscape
- Data-based gap analysis
- Initial recommendations to be presented to the Leadership Circle and the agencies





Tri-agency working group focused on administrative barriers to Indigenous community-led research

The administrative structures and processes of Canada's research system were not originally designed with the needs, cultures or knowledges of Indigenous Peoples in mind. To foster Indigenous research, administrative barriers must now be identified and mitigated. The Administrative Barriers Working Group, established in February 2019, is one of the primary instruments for making that happen.

The working group aims to enable Indigenous communities, scholars and organizations to conduct research, disseminate knowledge and administer federal research funding themselves. Its efforts to date have focused on three specific considerations: Indigenous Peoples' eligibility to apply for research funding, Indigenous organizations' ability to administer research funds, and access to research support funding.

Administrative Barriers Working Group achievements at a glance

- Development of tools and models to make application processes more efficient
- Identification of mechanisms for indirect financial or operational support

Last year, the group took steps toward these goals—starting with tools and models to make application processes more efficient. These include the revised Financial Management Risk Assessment Questionnaire and updated ethics guidance models. The working group will also engage with various groups to identify mechanisms that provide research support funding or operational support for Indigenous research projects seeking tri-agency funding.

In 2021–22, the Administrative Barriers Working Group will seek to make further progress in its three focus areas and to work more closely with Indigenous organizations through engagement and pilot tests of tools and resources. This outreach will include organizations currently eligible to administer federal research funds as well as those that are not—to gain a broad view of the challenges faced. Indigenous organizations and individuals will be consulted as well, to identify appropriate support mechanisms related to the costs of managing research.

Reference Group for the Appropriate Review of Indigenous Research

To build meaningful relationships, support Indigenous priorities and champion Indigenous leadership in research, it is essential to engage with, listen to—and follow—Indigenous Peoples. The 18-member external Reference Group for the Appropriate Review of Indigenous Research, established in 2020, is an important mechanism for this.

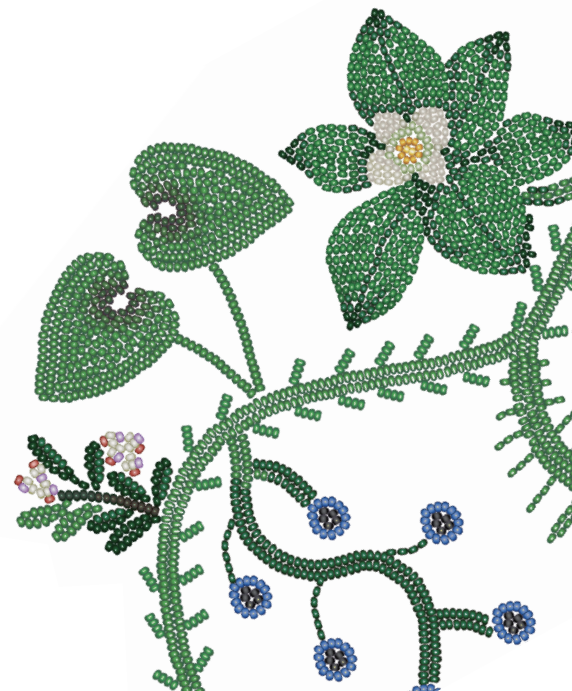
The Reference Group was formed through an open, transparent, Indigenous-led call for expressions of interest. Given the complications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal research funding agencies ensured the application process was flexible, adaptable and accessible to all interested candidates, regardless of access to technology and broadband.

The group, which aims to evaluate and propose changes to research merit review processes to make them more culturally appropriate for Indigenous Peoples, met virtually for the first time in December 2020. Before the end of the fiscal year, the group had agreed on terms of reference that strongly emphasize consensus-based decision making. Going forward, the group aims to meet frequently. It will develop policies, frameworks and guidelines for the appropriate review of Indigenous applications, propose strategies to increase the number of reviewers who can conduct ethically and culturally safe research proposal evaluations, and seek ways to integrate Elders into the Reference Group's work.

Because merit reviews have implications for other parts of the research process, the group expects its recommendations will ultimately be broad and far-reaching, and plans to work closely with the other SIRC working groups to share information and Indigenous perspectives, helping to integrate the efforts of the initiative overall and drive real progress toward reconciliation in research. The Reference Group will report to the Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research once that body is formally established in 2021-22.

Reference Group achievements at a glance

- Formation of Indigenous selection committee to choose reference group members
- Call for expressions of interest and successful selection process
- Initial meetings and agreement on terms of reference



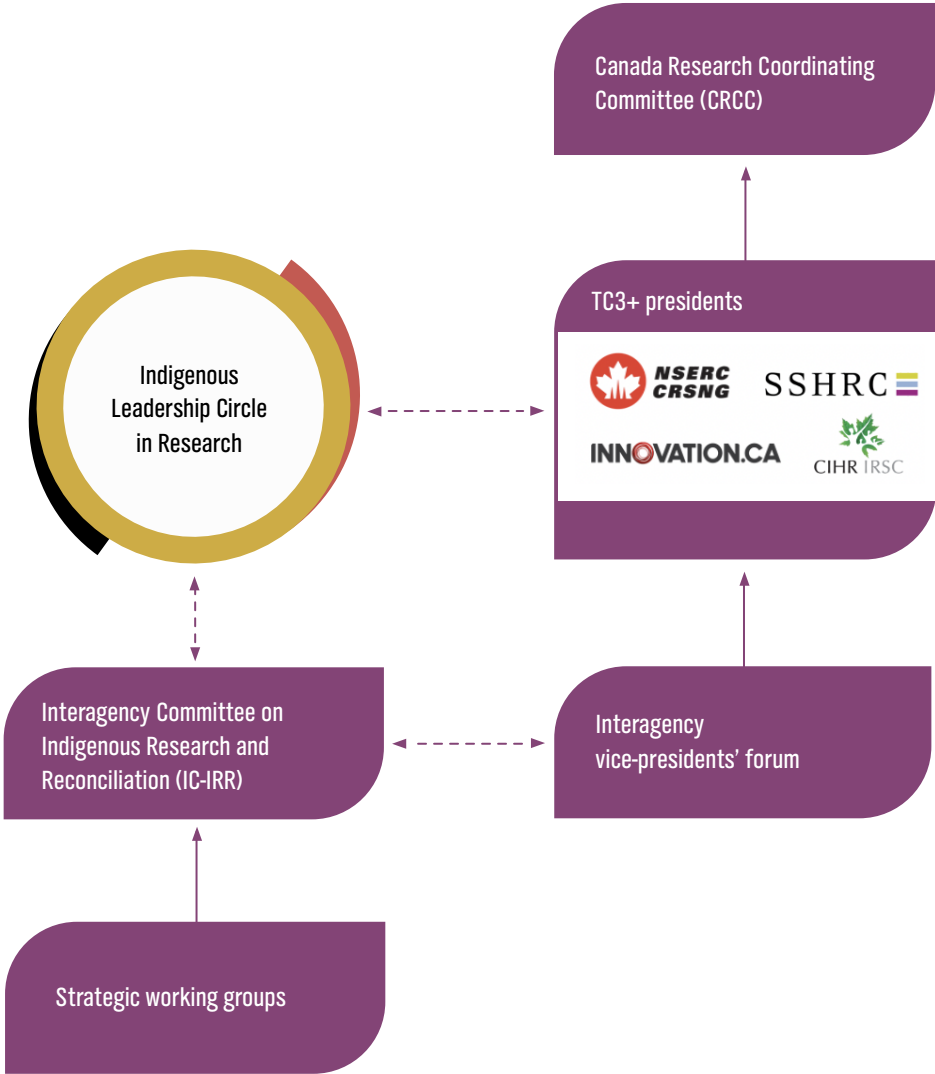


Looking forward

As the SIRC initiative advances, it will be important to measure progress toward fulfilling the directions of the strategic plan. The Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research will play a key role in this, reviewing and guiding the implementation approach and determining how that progress is measured. As the strategic plan itself is an evergreen document, implementation must be flexible. The plan will be co-developed with that in mind, articulating a vision and timelines for implementation.

In the near term, the working groups and the reference group will incorporate ethical conduct in research as well as Indigenous data governance into their scope. The federal research funding agencies will undertake measures to support the hiring of Indigenous Peoples and provide training to build cross-cultural awareness and understanding. Further attention will also be given to the co-development of potential resources to support implementation of the strategic plan, Indigenous leadership in research, and capacity-building. Finally, in-person engagement activities will resume in the coming months, as pandemic restrictions are lifted and communities begin to re-open.

SIRC governance structure





Strengthening Indigenous Research Capacity