Preparing the Request for Provincial Funding Contributions towards CFI-awarded Infrastructure Awards

The Ministry of Economic Development and Trade (EDT) has limited funds available through its Research Capacity Program that it uses to support new research infrastructure at post-secondary institutions. The program uses a cost sharing approach by directing these funds primarily towards infrastructure that has been nationally successful within CFI competitions. The following FAQ’s are to help investigators craft a successful provincial request.

1. **Who reads my request for provincial funds?**
   A panel of advisors and experts, assembled by EDT. The panel has access to the CFI assessments as well as the relevant provincial strategic documents and the UofA’s Comprehensive Institutional Plan.

2. **Is this a competitive process?**
   Yes. The demand for the funds exceeds the available funds.

3. **Who else is competing for these funds?**
   Every researcher in the province who has received a CFI award in the current year’s cycle of CFI competitions.

4. **Does the UofA get a “block” allocation of these provincial funds?**
   No. There is no portion of the total funding available set aside for each separate university. It is a province-wide competition.

5. **What is the first thing I should do?**
   Read the Research Capacity Program (RCP) Guidelines. Note the Strategic Alignment outcomes (p. 4) and the Review Criteria (p. 8). Have the Research portion of the Comprehensive Institutional Plan available, including the appendix.

6. **Will the panel of experts that advise on provincial decisions be experts in my field?**
   Not in the way you are.

   “The RCP’s Multidisciplinary Review Panel members are chosen based on their research record, area of expertise, senior leadership and knowledge of the research funding environment, and for their collective ability to bring multidisciplinary expertise to the review process.”

   Most of the proposals that will be considered by the province for possible matching are those which CFI has already funded (June CFI applications do not have results released at the time of submission to EDT). Thus, the panel knows that each application it looks at is already above the bar, at least from CFI’s national perspective. While the panel does conduct its review independently of the CFI
decision to fund, it is important to keep in mind that the applicant pool contains people who have been vetted at the national level within the CFI process.

7. **What are some features of a compelling application for Research Capacity Funds?**
   a. Has section headings, at least one for each of questions that the application is asked to address. It is recommended to use the bulleted topics listed under the Alberta Alignment Module Instructions section as headings.
   b. Presents information about research and the infrastructure at *a higher level of detail* than in the CFI application proper, in a way understandable to an intelligent, multidisciplinary group of people who are advising a government ministry on infrastructure funding investments.
   c. References *specific* priorities of the both institution and the province (see below).
   d. As much as possible, has *an outward, broad-looking perspective* of the impact of the research infrastructure investment (see below).
   e. Is able to express *specific benefits and impact*, usually by appealing to the research domain itself.

8. **How can I present a higher level of detail than in the CFI application?**
   a. Offer an intuitive overview of the research area, at least as a lead off.
   b. Don't use too much of the limited space re-stating what is in the CFI application, and especially do not include *detailed* equipment specifications, *detailed* methodologies, and so forth.
   c. Get across the idea that the infrastructure requested has some particular capability, and why this particular capability is essential and required for supporting the research program, all at a very succinct and high-level perspective. Your full CFI application will be available to the panel; therefore, *do not cut and paste from the CFI application.*
   d. Do not include citations from publications.

9. **What are non-specific priorities and rationalizations?**

   These may include: “Retaining and attracting excellent people,” “training HQP,” “having integrated facilities,” “creating a knowledge economy...”

   “This requested infrastructure will retain excellent researchers like me and my colleagues. People need outstanding infrastructure and cutting edge facilities, otherwise we will not be able to retain and attract the best.”
   a. *True:* but every application probably has sentences like those
   b. *Alternative:* “The primary users of this infrastructure were recruited in the past N years, demonstrating a strategic institutional commitment to build (or establish) strength in <area X>.”
“This infrastructure is essential to attracting and training HQP, which is a priority of the province and the university, bringing the very best students and PDFs into Alberta, thus serving the Alberta knowledge based economy”

a. True, but every application will have sentences like that.

b. Alternative: “Over a five year period, the infrastructure will allow an estimated N trainees (X PDFs, Y grad students, M ugrads) to acquire skills A, B, and C. These skills are becoming more important in fields/sectors D and E because...”

10. What are specific provincial priorities?

a. Specific priorities are found in the RCP guidelines. This document includes a Strategic Alignment section that outlines the Government of Alberta’s research and innovation outcomes and priorities. Note that the GoA is focusing on key strengths in energy, environment, food, fibre/bioindustrial, and health.

b. Note that special consideration will be given to projects that align with the GoA’s Climate Leadership Plan (see link on p. 4 of the SRP Guidelines).

c. These outcomes just illustrate specific priorities/themes/areas of interest to the province that appear in various mandate and strategy documents, in non-specific broad priorities of “environmental stewardship,” or “effective resource management.” It’s ok to speak to the broad ones, but it’s best to include specifics.

11. What about institutional priorities?

a. It is important to use the Comprehensive Institutional Plan to reference institutional priorities and areas of investment, again at this level of specificity. The Panel is expecting references to this particular document. In addition, you may also be able to include knowledge of strategic initiatives (e.g., hiring trends) in your own department or faculty; include those as well.

b. The objective is to show how your area of research and the requested infrastructure (more so than you personally) represent strategic importance to the university in what it aims to achieve.

c. Here, too, it is important to be specific: “Achieving a global reputation for excellence” is not specific. “International collaborations” is not specific, unless something like this is possible: “The research is the basis for emerging institutional exchanges, joint degree programs, joint collaborations with <university X> in <country Y>, which advances the institution’s objective for increased international research consortia.” Even if it is not your research program specifically, perhaps the point can be made for the broader initiatives you relate to. Seek advice here.
12. **What do you mean by taking a broad, outward-looking perspective when discussing how the infrastructure enhances expertise or promotes excellence?**

Consider these two arguments:

a. “This infrastructure is essential to my research program, to be competitive, to move my career forward, and to be a top leader in my field. It enhances what I can do and is, in fact, critical to my program.”

b. “This infrastructure supports research agendas that are addressing questions A, B, and C, which are important because of ...; it fills a critical gap in the institution’s general capacity to address such-and-so type of challenge in this field; it provides teams with looking at issues such as X, Y, and Z in other fields the possibilities of integrating blah blah blah into their considerations; it complements the current investment in blah blah but does not duplicate those facilities; it establishes a capacity in X here, rather than having this work done out of province, thereby ensuring that the analytic skills associated with D and E are acquired by HQP here. And it ensures that the institution continues to have leading edge facilities in the areas of X, to sustain (or grow) its impact in X.”

13. **But what if I do discovery research of a sort that does not map to any of Alberta’s priorities? Does this mean I’m out of luck?**

No. The case here is built differently. UofA researchers who do not directly or even remotely map to the Strategic Alignment outcomes have received substantial provincial infrastructure dollars to match a CFI award. The same questions must be answered, but there is a more strategic and nuanced approach to making points about excellence and impact, and institutional investment in the area, with supporting evidence. RCP does and will support excellence, no matter what the area. If you think you are in this situation, you might wish seek the input of your Associate Dean (Research) or one of the AVP’s (Research).

14. **Who should write the SEGP funding request?**

a. Preferably you, as PI since you know the project best. It should be obvious that the writer is highly familiar with the research, skilled at describing it at the right level and with the right language for a multidisciplinary panel that is advising a government entity on funding investments, is able to take the time to identifying the right pieces from provincial and institutional documents to emphasize in making the case, is aware of complementary facilities and initiatives, and so forth.

b. PIs who are new to Alberta might wish to enlist the advice of senior colleagues in their area and their Associate Chair (Research).