CIHR Pan-Canadian Network for HIV and STBBI Clinical Trials Research | Réseau pancanadien pour des essais cliniques sur le VIH et autres ITSS

CTN+ Competitions Review Process & Reviewer Instructions

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A. Introduction

With CTN+ grant renewal/revision in 2024, CIHR required very prescriptive changes in the structure and function of the network under the new Nominated Principle Applicant, Dr. Marina Klein. New and revised competitions were proposed for the Network and this document has been created to provide clarity for CTN+ Phase 1 grant (the CTN+ main infrastructure grant from CIHR) competition reviewers. Additionally, the revised competitions were designed to address challenges encountered during competition reviews in the previous grant.

It is intended that the level of review for each competition is proportionate with the level of CTN+ support, both cash and in-kind services, for the competition. The CTN+ Phase 1 grant competitions are:

Competition Name	Competition Focus	Purpose	Review Committee	Review Cycles/Year
Portfolio Competition	CTN+ Researchers who have successfully obtained grants that cover the full cost of their proposed study.	Provides applicants with the opportunity for pre-grant consultation to obtain a letter of support. CTN+ approved studies are eligible to receive in-kind research services.	Interdisciplinary Review Committee	3
Seed Funding Competition	CTN+ Early Career Researchers (within 10 years of first ability to hold independent grant funds). Postdoctoral Fellows supervised by a CTN+ Researcher	Provide funds and in-kind services for capacity building/feasibility/pilot studies. The applicant is expected to use the study data as proof-of-concept to then design a larger study.	Two-step process: 1) Regional Leadership Teams review and approve concepts for submission that align with their regional priorities. 2) Submissions from applicants invited to submit after step 1 are reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Review Committee.	1
Flagship Competition	CTN+ Researchers	Support the Study Lead and team with designing the study, wrap-around support for all research administration processes (for example, contracts, regulatory, statistics, and potentially funding submissions); and all required in-kind services from the CTN+.	Two-step process; 1) The CTN+ Think Tanks work with Researchers and study team to support concept design of multicentre, impactful clinical trials. 2) Study Lead presents their concept to the Interdisciplinary Review Committee.	2

The additional competition included in the CTN+ Phase 1 grant is the CTN+ Postdoctoral Fellowship Award Program. This program has a separate review committee and is not included in this document. The competition provides salary support up to $70,000 for fellows supervised by CTN+ Researchers and more information may be found at https://www.ctnplus.ca/postdoctoral-fellows/.

B. Competition Cycles

The CTN+ review meetings are conducted virtually three times per year in the following cycles:

Cycle 1

March/April each year; reviews conducted:

- Seed Funding
- Portfolio

Cycle 2

June each year; reviews conducted:

- Portfolio
- Flagship

Cycle 3

November each year; reviews conducted:

- Portfolio
- Flagship

To rapidly respond to public health emergencies, the Network may embed reviews of Network "Rapid Response" submissions during any of these cycles.

C. Conflict of Interest

If you have been involved in the development of a study, please declare your conflict of interest to CTN+ staff to refrain from reviewing and scoring that application. To the best of our ability, we have already identified those reviewers with conflicts.

D. Portfolio Competition

The CTN+ Portfolio Study Submission process occurs three times per year and is open to CTN+ Researchers who are in the process of seeking a primary source of funding for their project. The project must be:

1. interventional; and
2. align to the CTN's current scientific priorities (as reviewed and approved by the relevant CTN+ Regional Co-Leads).

First Competition Overview (Fall 2025 Submissions) – One-time Only Competition

This competition was a "catch-up" since there have been no study-related competitions since October 2023. CTN+ Researchers who had obtained a full-funding grant, whose studies align with the CTN+ Scientific priorities, who had CTN letters of support, and whose grants details were included in the 2024 CTN+ CIHR grant application were invited to submit for review. These applicants were not able to complete the steps outlined below for subsequent competitions. The reviewers should rank these applications simply on their quality/merit and decide if the study should become a CTN+ study because it is impactful.

Portfolio Study Review Process (from Spring 2026 onward):

Step 1: Letter of Support

With the exception of those studies outlined in the "First Competition Overview", for subsequent competitions, at the LoS phase for Portfolio Studies:

- CTN+ Researchers may receive methodology, community, knowledge mobilization, Indigenous Guidance Council, and regulatory consultation (as required) to help strengthen their grant application.
- CTN+ Researchers will request a cost-recovery estimate to include in their grant budget for CTN+ services such as statistics, methodology, database, data management, and advanced knowledge mobilization support.

Step 2: Full Submission Stage

Once the Researcher receives full funding for their study, they can then provide the CTN+ with their full submission using the Apply system before any of the three Portfolio submission deadlines. These full submissions are then provided to reviewers from the Interdisciplinary Review Committee.

All submissions will receive Community review. If the Research has obtained funding from a competition that provides "peer review", for example a CIHR Project Grant, then additional scientific/methodological review is not required.

As outlined in Step 1 above, in full submissions, Researchers can request a limited number of in-kind services from the CTN+, no funds will be provided for this competition. To review the full list of in-kind and cost-recovery services available, please refer to: CTN-Services-List.pdf

Review Process

This CTN+ competition was developed to encourage CTN+ Researchers to bring their funded studies to the CTN+ to ensure that the CTN+ is encouraging the best quality of study while also supporting, in a limited format, CTN+ Researchers to become more engaged with the Network. By providing pre-grant consultation, we believe our Researchers will have greater success with their applications. Once funded, and approved by the CTN+, the Network continues to provide in-kind resources that are not provided by funders. For example, those with Health Canada regulated trials can request regulatory and trial monitoring support, while all relevant interventional studies can ensure participant safety by obtaining review from the Data Safety Monitoring Committee and support in knowledge translation from the Network's Knowledge Mobilization Hub.

Reviewers will use the following simple rating scale for this competition. When reviewing the applications, reviewers will have access to the suggestions provided at the pre-grant consultation/Letter of Support Phase (Step 1 above) and will be able to determine if the applicant has constructively used the advice they were provided. In addition, as these studies are already reviewed by funders, the CTN+ reviewers are assessing if the study should become a CTN+ study based upon the quality of the study and the impact for the Network.

Descriptor	Range	Outcome Scores
Outstanding	4.5 – 4.9	May become a CTN+ study
Excellent	4.0 – 4.4	
Very good	3.5 – 3.9	
Good	3.0 – 3.4	May not become a CTN+ study
Average	2.0 – 2.9	
Below average	1.0 – 1.9	
Not acceptable	0.0 – 0.9	

E. Seed Funding Competition

Building on the success of the Pilot Study Funding Program that was implemented in previous CTN grants, the new regional Seed Funding competition, that occurs once per year, will provide funds and in-kind research services to support the conduct of capacity building pilot, proof-of-concept, or feasibility studies. Regions are provided with up to $50,000 annually for this competition and in-kind research services support will be available for applicants. Each CTN+ region determines their regional priorities and is allocated $50,000 in funds from the CTN+ grant to support either one or two regional-focused studies. Regions that supplement the program with additional funds may proceed with funding additional studies. The award is intended to pay for all of the direct costs associated with the study. This program is targeted to support new projects, thus applications from existing projects seeking top-up funding are not accepted.

This program focuses on supporting Early Career CTN+ Researchers and Postdoctoral Fellows of CTN+ Researchers. Successful applicants will gain experience on how to manage a study and how to implement a research project by collaborating with senior investigators and with the staff that provide clinical research support services. The Program is only open to CTN+ Researchers who are within ten years of their first position as an independent researcher, or if supervising a postdoctoral fellow, the Researcher must have the ability to hold funds and supervise fellows within their academic institution. Current CTN+ Postdoctoral Fellowship Awards program awardees are eligible to apply.

This competition occurs in two stages.

1. Regional Triage
   - Regions will determine the number of studies the competition will support within their region.
   - Applicants may only submit in one region, the region in which their institutional affiliation is based. In addition, each individual applicant may only submit one concept.
   - Concepts must align with both the CTN+ scientific and regional priorities, which are found on the CTN+ website (for your information, the links are: https://www.ctnplus.ca/priorities for scientific priorities and https://www.ctnplus.ca/about/ for regional priorities.)
   - No outside funds may be used. For example, applicants may not submit study concepts for which they currently have funding and additional funding from other competitions should not be requested. Applicants may use in-kind services from their institution, for example, statistical analysis or investigational study drug already held at their institution.
   - Regional leadership teams meet to review and rank the concepts. The concepts will be ranked upon their applicability to the CTN+ scientific and regional priorities, scientific merit (including the ability to use the data from the Seed competition to design a larger study for a grant application), feasibility, ability to proceed with the study within 12 months of approval, and regional capacity-building impact.
   - Top-ranked applicants are invited to provide additional details about their concept, including implementation, methods, and budget.

2. CTN+ Review
   - Via the CTN+ Interdisciplinary Review panel, non-conflicted, scientific, community, methodological, and if relevant, Indigenous experts, will be assigned for each full submission. The value of the Regional awards is provided to assist the reviewer with assessing the feasibility of the applicant's ability to develop and complete a study based upon the funding and in-kind services they will receive from the CTN+ region (for example, it is not feasible to complete a regulated, multi-centre clinical trial with the funding provided in this competition).
   - After reviewing each application, reviewers are asked to provide written comments along three review categories: Significance & Impact of Research, Approaches & Methods, and Expertise, Experience & Resources. These comments will be provided to applicants (for example, strengths and weaknesses with suggestions for improvements). Additionally, reviewers will assign a numeric rating to each submission, using the Rating Scale on the next page.
   - Successful applicants will be provided with their review score and, if applicable, reviewer comments.

Rating Scale

The rating scale is from 0.0-4.9. The table below outlines the rating scale and definitions. Reviewers are encouraged to use the full range of the scale.

Descriptor	Range	Outcome
Outstanding	4.5 – 4.9	The application excels in most or all relevant aspects. Any shortcomings are minimal.
Excellent	4.0 – 4.4	The application excels in many relevant aspects, and reasonably addresses all others. Certain improvements are possible.
Good	3.5 – 3.9	The application excels in some relevant aspects, and reasonably addresses all others. Some improvements are necessary.
Fair	3.0 – 3.4	The application broadly addresses relevant aspects. Major revisions are required.
Poor	0.0 – 2.9	The application fails to provide convincing information and/or has serious inherent flaws or gaps.