UKRI Principles of Assessment and Decision Making

UK Research and Innovation brings together nine Councils, delivering a wide range of research, innovation, training, and infrastructure funds. The research and innovation community submit applications for funding to our Councils in confidence. This duty of confidence extends to the Assessment[1] process to protect the applicants' ideas, allow the provision of free and frank comments, and advice to inform the final decision on funding.

Assessment is the process undertaken on submitted applications to determine whether an application is fundable, and which applications should be funded. Assessments in all its different forms, including Independent Review Assessment (Review) or Collective Panel Assessment (Panel), is fundamental to our business. An assessor (reviewer or panellist) can be an expert or a peer from business, academia or other sectors, such as the public and charities. Assessment in our Councils and opportunities usually involves a two-stage process, where applications are considered by reviewers (by correspondence) and then by a Council Panel (at a meeting).

Review involves the assessment of an application independently of other applications. A Review is based on the Reviewer's judgement of the assessment criteria alone, and it does not normally benchmark the assessment against other applications of the funding opportunity.

At a Panel meeting, the assessment of an application is carried out collectively against other applications and with other Panellists. As such, judgement and/or scoring of an application is based on panellists' consensus of the criteria and by benchmarking against other applications of the opportunity.

We recognise the benefits of simplifying and standardising the processes involved in research and innovation funding application. We continue to work to improve the experience of our applicants and assessors as well as communicating our decisions to the research community and the public. It is also important to note that we deliver a range of funding, which demands bespoke approaches and processes to ensure their appropriateness.

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To facilitate collaborative trans-national funding, the Global Research Council set out a Statement of Principles on Peer/Merit Review (2018)[2]. These principles reflect current principles in assessment and decision making in our Councils as set out below.

Our Research Councils are committed to the Haldane Principle[3], and ensure that our decisions about which research projects to fund are based on advice received from experts in the field. Our funding decisions are made on the basis of excellence, independent assessment of quality, and where applicable, impact. It is integral that our principles of assessment and decision making are in line with our values of collaboration, innovation, integrity and excellence, and that they contribute to supporting a world-leading research and innovation culture across the UK.

We are committed to the following principles in our assessment and decision making:

Expert Assessment
Assessors – including reviewers and panellists – assess the individual merit of all applications against published criteria. We provide guidance to reviewers before they undertake review of applications; panellists are also provided with extra induction materials. Our guidance and induction materials are tailored for reviewers and panellists.

Reviewers are expected to have peer recognition or established expertise in the field to review the application.

Our Councils have measurements in place to appoint panellists, and where applicable, 'peer review college' and other expert reviewer communities' members. Through the continuous review of the assessment processes, we ensure that our panellists have the appropriate range of expertise and knowledge to carry out assessments, which is especially important for the assessment of cross-disciplinary applications.

Transparency
Our Councils' funding guides are available online, including in the peer review webpage. We also publish assessment criteria and details of the assessment process in the call documents before the submission of funding applications.

Following the review of an application, we endeavour to, where possible, make the comments available to applicants in advance of the panel meeting, so that the applicants can respond to comments by reviewers.

After the funding decisions are made, we inform applicants on the outcomes of the funding decision.

We publish information on the funding decisions made by panels so that applicants and organisations can understand the relative position of their proposals compared with others

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assessed at the same panel meeting. Along with sharing reviewers' comments, we believe this will help applicants and organisations improve the quality of their applications.

We also publish details of funded research projects on Gateway-to-Research[4] and Innovate UK website[5]

As an organisation, we are committed to publishing data on how we spend taxpayers' money to fund research and innovation[6]. We publish data on the competitive funding decisions made by UKRI. We also publish data on our funding by regional distribution. This data includes quality-related research funding and Innovate UK grant allocations.

Impartiality

We take steps to manage conflicts of interest according to defined processes. Conflicts of interest in funding assessment arise under circumstances where the assessor's ability to apply judgement could be influenced by a secondary interest, for example: a direct/indirect financial interests; non-financial, personal or academic interests; and/or competing loyalties. Reviewers with a real or perceived conflict of interest are instructed to decline our request to review applications.

We guide our staff and panels on ways to manage conflicts of interest. UKRI staff and panellists are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the Seven Principles of Public Life and adhere to the UKRI Conflicts of Interest Policy[7]. We expect individuals involved in the decision-making process to be aware of circumstances under which conflicts of interest arise as defined by UKRI. Our processes have the flexibility to manage any arising conflicts of interest in panel assessments.

We take steps to mitigate against implicit biases that can be present in individuals, which can impact fairness and objectivity in funding decisions including providing guidance to panellists and staff.

Appropriateness

We aim to ensure that our assessment processes are appropriate to the proposed research and innovation with respect to its scale and complexity. Aims and objectives of funding calls along with timeframe and resource required are some of the factors that determine the design of the assessment process. As such, some of the funding decisions may be made after the review assessment, or considered directly by the panel, while most go funding calls through two-stage assessment process (independent review assessment followed by panel assessment).

We are committed to continually evolving funding assessment and design our assessment processes to reduce biases, which includes our commitment to responsible use of metrics in

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[4] UKRI Gateway to Research webpage: https://gtr.ukri.org/
[5] Innovate UK funded projects: https://bit.ly/2PlNIaC
[6] UKRI funding data: https://www.ukri.org/funding/funding-data/
[7] UKRI Conflicts of Interest Policy

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research evaluation. Therefore, we do not use journal-based metrics, such as journal impact factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, to assess an individual researcher's contributions, or to make funding decisions.

Confidentiality
Applications to our Councils, including related data, intellectual property and application documents, must be treated in confidence by any individuals or organisations involved in the assessment process. Confidentiality in the assessment process protects the applicant's ideas, intellectual properties and personal data.

The identity of the reviewers is kept anonymous to the applicant to allow the provision of free and frank comments and advice. We instruct reviewers to not inadvertently identify themselves in the text of the assessment.

Integrity and Ethics
Responsible research conduct is intrinsic to society's trust in research and innovation. We aim to promote and safeguard the public value of research and innovation and ensure that funding decisions are based on evidence and rigorous analysis.

Guidance for research ethics and good conduct is also available to assessors and applicants.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
We are committed to driving a culture of equality, diversity and inclusion providing the best opportunities for individuals and teams of people from all backgrounds to thrive. Our evolving processes are designed to reduce biases against gender, ethnicity or other protected characteristics, demonstrating our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion[8]. (Protected Characteristics covered by law are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation).

We will take steps to improve the assessment process by utilising the talent and resources offered by assessors from underrepresented groups such as women, early career researchers, and members of all ethnicities.

Separation of Duties
It is our legal duty to ensure that decisions on individual funding applications are taken following an independent assessment of their quality and likely impact. As such, research funding from UKRI must adhere to the Haldane Principle.

Assessment of an application is separated from its funding decisions, which are based on advice from assessors. Those who are assessing applications will not also be responsible for authorising the funding decision, which is made by our senior staff with the relevant delegated authority.

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[8] UKRI Policies on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: https://bit.ly/2CfI5IM

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