



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

AHRC Audio Slide-Show Transcription

Peer Review Interview 3

What characteristics do you need to be a Peer Reviewer?

This audio slide-show features interviews with:

Dr Ruth Livesey, Royal Holloway, University of London

Dr Kate Bradley, University of Kent

Professor Sita Popat, University of Leeds

Narrator:

At the recent 'Follow the Members' Peer Review Event members of the AHRC's Peer Review College got together to look at the characteristics needed to be a Peer Reviewer.

Interviewees introduce themselves:

My name is Ruth Livesey and I'm in the English Department at Royal Holloway, University of London. I'm Kate Bradley, I'm a lecturer in Social History in the School of Social Policy at the University of Kent. I'm Sita Popat, I'm Professor of Performance and Technology in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds.

There now follows a conversation between the three interviewees, each paragraph represents a different comment:

I suppose my sense of the key characteristic is fairness really, fairness to the work that's gone into the proposal, into the ideas that have underpinned it even if they're not the ideas you would have to assess the strength of those ideas in their own right. So, fairness with a sense of ambition for the intellectual development of your discipline but also the research culture in the Arts and Humanities as a whole.

Yes, I think when you're giving feedback to people it needs to be fair so if there's something they've not done and should do you need to say that. But I think also people need to be mindful of the language they use as well and to be willing to put things in a way that's constructive and helpful and the person will actually listen to.

Yes, because the important thing of course is that there is the right to reply and that actually if you make constructive and critical comments in a positive way they may be able to come back to that comment usefully on it. It may be that perhaps something has

not been articulated entirely as clearly as it might be and it is simply a matter of clarification that they need to make in their right to reply. It may be that there is a flaw that they can take away that useful criticism and consider resubmitting if appropriate or developing in a new way. Being aware of the fact that there is an element of dialogue in the review process, and it's only actually coming to an end when it reaches the panel, and using that to shape the way in which we frame questions and comments.

There's a balance I think between really confident in your expertise in an area but not being too possessive about that territory I suppose is what I'm thinking, that when someone's writing a grant that somehow intersects with your own interest to be alright about ceding ownership of that space and thinking actually no, this is doing something different.

And the question of interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary comes up as well and how, when perhaps one isn't an expert in all the disciplinary areas within the grant, that one can still comment positively and usefully on the elements that one is familiar with and also think about how that might intercept with other areas but not close it down, not respond negatively to that, which is partly about generosity and also partly about just being open minded.

And I think being aware that certainly with multi and interdisciplinary projects there is likely to be different reviewers of different specialisms so you can say this is coming particularly from the viewpoint of an historian or visual arts or whatever and that is quite important as well.

Questions I think are a really useful way to engage with it because they're not going to come across as aggressive, hopefully if you ask them in a sensitive manner, in a sensible manner and they do give opportunity for the right to reply to be a useful tool, but they do also hopefully open up ideas and thinking for that person if they then decide to stop and take this away and redevelop it later.

I think like, in all peer reviewing as well it must be a balance I imagine between being really attentive to the detail of something in how its conceived but not in a sense coming across as picky. I think we've all had those referees reports where you think well why does that matter, you know it's the big concept is what matters but on the other hand I haven't been through the training process yet but I imagine a lot of that kind of mock panel exercise must be about that balance between a detailed response that's therefore constructive to the panel so that their attention is drawn to stuff, on the other hand is constructive and gives respect to the project as it's conceived as a whole.

Certainly from the panel's I've done it's been very useful, I've sat on two panels for the AHRC and it's been very useful where the reviewer has given a good balance of both the positives and the negatives and not just picked away at the negatives so that there's a real sense of the scope and potential of the project. It's been interesting to read some of the reviews that have come through to the panels, sometimes we've had reviews where people clearly haven't read the application carefully and that's obviously a big issue and so taking the time to read it carefully, to look at it. One review that said why do these people need funding to go New York when in fact they were only going to York for example! So clearly we want to be confident that the reviewer has actually read it properly and understood it and is then in a good position to give critical feedback.