

Additional Information

Distributed Peer Review – Rules and Guidelines

Introduction

The [Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy](#) 2022 recommended that funders should consider innovative models of application assessment to improve and simplify processes. Subsequently, the [Review of Peer Review](#) 2023 study specifically explored the use and effectiveness of peer review mechanisms in grant-making processes. They recommended that funders use a range of review interventions in order to vary their assessment processes, i.e. application, review, and decision-making processes should be tailored for each scheme.

Distributed peer review (DPR) is one such review intervention. In DPR, applicants are also assessors and review other proposals submitted to the same funding opportunity to decide who gets funding. By submitting a proposal, applicants agree to act as reviewers and to have their proposal reviewed by their peers. This innovative approach has produced positive results so far and is being trialled by the UKRI Metascience Unit.

DPR has the potential to democratise the peer review process by improving the speed and quality of feedback available to applicants, as well as increasing the consistency and expertise of reviews. This is because a larger pool of reviewers is available, and each proposal is reviewed a greater number of times. DPR reduces the administrative burden on external peer reviewers and shortens the review process by eliminating the need to recruit and convene external review panels.

Rules and guidelines for applicants

All applications for the AIRR Innovator route will undergo DPR.

By applying for this scheme, you are consenting to take part in a trial of Distributed Peer Review (DPR). Please do not apply for this opportunity if you would prefer not to take part in the DPR process.

By submitting an application, applicants accept the following terms and conditions:

- All applicants will receive an average of five applications to review.
- The reviewer is expected to carefully read all the assigned applications, rate them and provide feedback to the applicants following the rules and guidelines.
- Failing to provide the reviews by the deadline will lead to the automatic rejection of the application submitted by the given applicant.
- If an applicant's set of reviews are found to be of consistently poor quality (for example, they do not justify the overall scores given), their own application may not proceed.

A common concern with DPR is that applicants may give tactically lower scores to improve their own relative position. The DPR process is designed to ensure that it is extremely difficult for applicants to 'game' the system. For example:

- 1) Reviewers will be assigned to different pools from the applicants they review. As a result, they are not 'competing' against the applicants whose proposals they review.
- 2) No two applicants from the same institution will receive each other's application.

If an applicant does attempt to 'game' the overall scoring system (for example, by giving consistently negative reviews and low scores without clear justification), their own application may not proceed.

Rules and guidelines for reviewers

By submitting an application, you have accepted to review on average five applications submitted by your peers. As such, you are expected to deliver the evaluations and the comments by the deadline (see opportunity timeline). You will have four weeks to complete your reviews. Failing to submit the assigned reviews on time will lead to the automatic rejection of the proposal in which you are the applicant.

Applications will be divided into two groups, with reviews allocated from the other group to ensure that their own relative position is unaffected by the scores they give someone else.

During the whole review process, you are expected to behave ethically. This covers confidentiality matters, but also the feedback you will be providing for each of the applications you are assigned. Any attempts to 'game' the system, i.e. by providing consistently bad reviews and low scores without justification, will lead to the rejection of your application.

As a reviewer, you are supposed to provide constructive feedback, using appropriate, factual, and non-offensive language. In doing this, keep in mind that your comments will be passed unedited to the applicants. UKRI will take seriously cases of offensive and inappropriate language used by the reviewers.

We will consider obvious conflicts of interest when matching proposals to reviewers. You will have the possibility of declaring conflicts of interest when reviewing proposals. Note that you should restrict yourself to those where you feel you are not able to express an objective opinion. Conflict flagging must not be used to reduce the number of reviews you have to deliver by the given deadline. In instances where a conflict has been identified, it is likely you will be reassigned other applications to review.

- As a reviewer, you must provide your feedback in a completely anonymous way. The phrasing must be neutral and must not disclose, directly or indirectly, your identity.
- The use of generative models (ChatGPT, CoPilot, etc.) in the preparation of reviews is not permitted in view of the confidentiality of the review process. Documents provided for review are confidential and may not be used as input for generative models. Please refer to the [UKRI Policy on the use of generative AI in applications](#).
- No filtering will be applied during the proposal-reviewer assignment. The level of expertise of the reviewers will reflect that of the underlying applicant population.

Important note on confidentiality:

As a reviewer, you will have access to information which is covered by intellectual property.

None of that information can be disseminated, copied, or plagiarised. Should you have downloaded or printed the proposals which were assigned to you, you must remove/destroy them at the end of the review once the process is completed. UKRI will take violations of the non-disclosure agreement seriously. Please refer to the [UKRI Peer review service standards and code of practice](#) for further information.

Providing your review

Reviews are performed using the AIRRPortal, the online AIRR application and reviewing system. Your AIRRPortal account will list your allocated reviews and the deadlines for these, under:

- 'Calls' section > 'Reviews' sub-section > 'My reviews' page

To start the process for providing a review, click on the ellipsis or more options icon against the proposal to be reviewed. You will then have the option to start the review or send the review back.

- If you send the review back, you must inform airr@ukri.org, stating which proposal review you have sent back and your reasons for rejecting it; otherwise, your own application may not proceed.

When you accept the review, you will see the 'Create review' page. Here you can:

- read the application online in your browser
- open and download the two attachments uploaded by the applicant (these can be seen by clicking the download icon next to the attached file name).

If, having read the proposal, you identify a conflict of interest, then you may send the review back; however, you must inform airr@ukri.org, stating which proposal review you have sent back and why, otherwise your own application may not proceed.

Your review comments should be provided using the 'Comments' text box in the 'Summary' section. Do not use the 'Notes (not visible to user)' text box, as any text in this box will be ignored.

You can save your unfinished review to come back to later. We recommend using an alternative writing tool, such as Word, to write your review and then copy it into the text box.

You will need to structure your review using the assessment criteria as subheadings. Remember that your feedback will be passed on to the candidates unedited and that you are solely responsible for the content and integrity of your comments.

When each review is finished, click 'Submit review.' Please note that once submitted, reviews cannot be edited.

If you have any issues with providing a review, then please contact airr@ukri.org.

Assessment criteria

- Are the project objectives in scope for the AIRR programme?

- Has the project demonstrated how it has the potential to advance current understanding and impact world-leading research, society, the economy, or the environment?
- Has the project demonstrated how it will contribute to building capacity across the AI ecosystem?
- Has the project demonstrated that the AIRR resources requested are appropriate and justified?
- Has the project demonstrated that it has identified and evaluated the relevant ethical or responsible research and innovation considerations, including how to manage these considerations?

Scoring

You also need to rate each application from zero stars (poor) to five stars(exceptional). The scoring range definitions are as follows:

- Five stars: Exceptional. The application is outstanding. It addresses all the assessment criteria and meets them to an exceptional level.
- Four stars: Excellent. The application is very high quality. It addresses most of the assessment criteria and meets them to an excellent level. There are very minor weaknesses.
- Three stars: Very good. The application demonstrates considerable quality. It meets most of the assessment criteria to a high level. There are minor weaknesses.
- Two stars: Good. The application is of good quality. It meets most of the assessment criteria to an acceptable level, but not across all aspects of the proposed activities. There are weaknesses.
- One star: Weak. The application is not sufficiently competitive. It meets some of the assessment criteria to an adequate level. There are, however, significant weaknesses.
- Zero stars: Poor. The application is flawed or of unsuitable quality for funding. It does not meet the assessment criteria to an adequate level.

Feedback to applicants

As the DPR is intended to provide feedback, it is particularly important that you, as a reviewer, provide comprehensive and constructive feedback to your peers. In this process, it helps to keep in mind that you should provide feedback of the same quality you are expecting from your peers. Keep in mind that your feedback is going to be passed unedited to the applicants, and that you are responsible for the content of the comments and their integrity. Also, consider that the main purpose of the feedback is to describe the strengths and weaknesses of applications in a constructive manner. The following points should help you to write helpful reviews:

- Familiarise yourself with the specified assessment criteria and scoring system.

- Bear in mind that you may be reviewing applications from different disciplines than your own.
- Provide comments and recommendations that are consistent with, justify, and explain your scores.
- Ensure your comments are comprehensive but concise.
- Be objective and as specific as possible when commenting on the proposal. Avoid generic statements that could apply to most proposals.
- You do not need to summarise the proposal: the applicants know it very well. If useful, start with a brief outline of the application.
- Clearly identify the major strengths and weaknesses of the application in a constructive manner, to help the applicant understand which aspects of their proposal are strong, and which could be improved.
- Take care to ensure that the strengths and weaknesses you identify do not contradict each other.
- Do not ask questions: this is not an iterative process. If the question stems from a weakness, state the weakness explicitly.
- All reviews should be impersonal, critiquing the proposal and not the applicant. For example, do not write "The applicant did not [...].", but instead write "The proposal did not [...]."
- Write in plain English, avoiding jargon.
- Use complete sentences when writing your reviews. Try to use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
- Do not use inappropriate, offensive, sarcastic, and/or insulting language, even if you think a proposal could be greatly improved.
- Once you have completed your assessments, re-read your comments as if you were the recipient. If they do not sound useful and/or constructive, edit them.
- Check that the strengths and weaknesses identified are consistent with the assigned grade. Avoid cases in which you do not list any weakness but give a poor grade.