AHRC Assessment Panel:
Guidance for chair and panellists

Contents

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1. Introduction

This document is to help you to prepare for the forthcoming panel meeting. In addition to this document, you should also feel free to contact the meeting's nominated AHRC officers if you have any questions you wish to raise prior to the meeting at Operations@ahrc.ukri.org.

The assessment process will be run through the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Funding Service. Details of how to access the system will be provided within your Funding Service invitation email, and additional information can be found on the UKRI website.

You will be notified if the panel meeting is taking place in person or will be held virtually via Microsoft Teams.

2. The Aim of the Assessment Panel Meeting

The purpose of this panel meeting is to consider and reach final agreement on the grading and ranking of applications and, where necessary, to agree broad feedback for applicants.

Please note that written expert reviews have *not* been secured for this meeting. Instead, it will be the responsibility of the assessment panel to fulfil the expert review function through robust discussion of each application at the meeting.

The panel's ranked list will be used by AHRC to decide recommendation for funding (or which applications proceed if there is a further assessment stage). The panel will not decide how ma ny applications will ultimately be taken to a further stage (if applicable).

Panel meetings also provide an opportunity for panellists to raise issues, such as the potential impact of the prospective research.

3. The Role of the chair

The role of the chair is:

- to understand the aims and ambitions of the funding opportunity

- to read and familiarise themselves with all submitted applications

- to understand the UKRI Principles of Assessment and Decision Making

- to oversee and to run the panel meeting, ensuring that it keeps to time

- to set the context and tone for the meeting in terms of process and methods of working, following guidance from AHRC colleagues

- to remind panellists that all application discussions should be strictly confidential

- to remind panellists of the procedure for dealing with Conflicts of Interest

- to seek clarification of the panel's views and to ensure there is appropriate discussion, before the panel agrees a grading for each application

- to rank those applications in the funding range with a score of 1–10 (see Appendix A)

- to ensure that AHRC procedures and protocols are followed and to refer to AHRC staff for guidance when necessary

- to provide final approval on feedback, and highlight issues (if needed to be followed up on an additional stage) and conditions on awards where appropriate

- to ensure that AHRC is provided with a final and agreed ranked list of applications

We will arrange a chair's briefing prior to the meeting taking place. This is an opportunity to discuss the running of the day and address any queries.

4. The Role of the deputy chair

In the event of the chair being absent, or conflicted, the role of the deputy chair would be to oversee the running of the meeting as above (section 3, the Role of the chair).

5. The Role of the panellists

Panellists will be provided with all the necessary information prior to the meeting and are expected to:
- familiarise themselves with the guidelines and assessment criteria for the funding opportunity
- understand the UKRI Principles of Assessment and Decision Making
- to comment on all applications to which they have been assigned an introducer role (First Introducer, Second Introducer or Third Introducer) and to provide pre-scores in advance of the meeting
- to alert AHRC to any conflicts of interest they may have, including potential conflicts not picked up internally by AHRC
- to attend the panel meeting to agree final grades and rankings for all applications
- to agree any feedback where applicable

In undertaking the above tasks, panellists are expected to:
- exercise their knowledge, judgement, and expertise to reach clear, sound, evidence-based decisions
- treat all applications as strictly confidential
- always be fair and objective and to adhere to the principles outlined in AHRC's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan

Accordingly, no applicant or anyone involved or named in an application in any capacity should receive less favourable treatment on the grounds of protected characteristics.

All applications must be assessed on equal terms, regardless of the protected characteristics of the applicant. Applications must therefore be assessed and graded on their merits, in accordance with the criteria and the aims and objectives set for the funding opportunity.

5.1. Code of Conduct

AHRC is committed to ensuring that our decision making is fair, robust, transparent, and credible. We are also committed to raising awareness of and taking steps to remove the impact of unintentional bias in our systems, processes, behaviours, and culture. In addition to this, we will ensure that our funding is not influenced by protected characteristics.

5.2. Safeguarding Decision Making

AHRC is committed to ensuring that those who make funding decisions recognise the factors that introduce risk into the decision-making process. To do this, it is important to be aware of and take steps to remove any impact of unintentional bias in our processes, behaviours, and culture. We know

that pressure to make decisions, time pressures, high cognitive load and tiredness all create conditions that introduce the risk of unintentional bias.

Many of these factors could be present in panel meetings and therefore, we ask that you are aware of these risks and safeguard the panel's recommendation by:

- assessing all applications objectively on equal terms using the criteria set for each funding opportunity

- making evidence-based decisions, based on all the information provided

- questioning and challenging cultural stereotypes and bias and being prepared to be challenged

- being aware that working with a high cognitive load, with time pressures and the need to make quick decisions creates conditions for bias which could impact the research we fund

- trying to slow down the speed of your decision making, allowing sufficient time for discussion of each application

- reconsidering the reasons for your decisions, recognising that they may be post-hoc justifications

- questioning cultural stereotypes and being open to seeing what is new and unfamiliar

- remembering that you are unlikely to be fairer and less prejudiced than the average person

- feeling empowered to call out bias when you see it – you can detect unconscious bias more easily in others than in yourself.

You can find further information on unconscious bias on the Royal Society website.

Applications are submitted to AHRC in confidence and may contain confidential information and personal data belonging to the core team (and others named in the application). Please ensure that all applications are treated confidentially, referring to the AHRC website for further guidance on confidentiality, data protection, and freedom of information.

In addition to this, you are not permitted to use generative AI tools to develop your assessment. Using these tools can potentially compromise the confidentiality of the ideas that applicants have entrusted to UKRI to safeguard. For more detail, please see our policy on the use of generative AI.

6. Role of Introducers

Ahead of the meeting, panellists are assigned the role of First, Second or Third introducer on a number of applications. Each application has 3 , unless otherwise stated. Introducers should lead discussion on the application with prepared notes and will have assigned the application an initial grade prior to the meeting.

In the Funding Service, you can view the introducers' list which sets out your assigned roles for any of the applications for which you are an introducer, along with any additional information regarding the applications to be considered. You are asked to read these applications, consider the assessment criteria provided in the funding opportunity guidance and make your own assessment of the application, assigning a grade and producing notes to help your introduction of the application.

As you will be aware, within a single panel, it is not possible to achieve total coverage of the full range of subjects and the wide diversity of applications submitted to AHRC. Therefore, you may have been assigned some applications that do not fall within your precise area of subject expertise; however, you will still need to assess the application against the aims of the funding opportunity, guided by your experience as both a reviewer and a researcher. You are asked to read as many applications as you can, as this facilitates a full discussion and promotes a robust assessment process.

6.1. Introducer Scores and Comments

Your pre-panel scores should be entered into the Funding Service **'pre-panel score'** tab and submitted by the deadline specified for your panel meeting.

You should:

- view the scoring range (Funding Service **'pre-panel score'** tab)

- enter your score between 1 and 10, including up to 2 decimal places if required (Appendix A). **Note** that a score of 10 is the maximum available when submitting your pre-scores

- ensure you select the '**save and submit'** option once you are satisfied with your scores, noting that you are unable to amend them after they have been submitted. However, you will still have the opportunity to revise your scores at the panel meeting

Once submitted, pre-scores will be shared to the panel, chair and AHRC staff.

In some instances, the funding opportunity may require you to submit comments, you will be notified by
AHRC if this is the case. The Funding Service provides functionality for comments
up to 1,000 words. You shouldn't use the comments space for making personal notes as an aide mémoire to support you when it comes to the panel meeting and discussion. (Please note: If a freedom of information request is made, these comments would be disclosed. If this happens, you will remain anonymous).

7. Conflicts of Interest

Everybody involved in UKRI decision-making and funding processes must comply with the UKRI declaration of interests policy and guidance.

It is vital that panel members are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the assessment process.

Panel members (including the chair) should not assess any application where a conflict of interest could be construed. If you think you might have a conflict, please inform the staff member responsible for your panel at the earliest possible opportunity.

Please note that you will be asked to confirm any further conflicts when granted access to the Funding Service meeting for the first time. If you mark any conflicts of interest within the Funding Service, please also inform your AHRC contact for the meeting as soon as possible. If you mark any conflicts accidentally, just let your AHRC contact know, and they can remove these for you.

Further information on potential conflicts of interest can be found on the UKRI website.

Anyone in conflict with an application must leave the meeting while it is being discussed. AHRC will inform you of the process on the day.

If the chair is conflicted, AHRC will nominate someone to deputise. All panellists are permitted to be present for the ranking of all applications. In the case that further discussion of applications with conflicted members is required, the relevant panel member should leave the meeting again. If this is an application the chair is conflicted on, then the previously nominated deputy will act as chair once

more.

You can find further information on potential conflicts of interest within [the UKRI declaration of interests: guidance for assessors, reviewers and panellists](#), and on [the AHRC website](#).

8. Assessment Approach

When assessing the applications, you are carrying out the same kind of assessment, with the same rigour, as if you were acting as an expert reviewer, except that you are addressing your comments to the panel rather than to the applicants, as there will *not* be an applicant response.

To fully understand the quality and content of the applications, you must ensure your judgements are based solely on the aims and objectives and the assessment criteria for the funding opportunity, and the information that is provided in the application.

Panel members should not allow private knowledge of the applicant or the proposed research to influence their judgement and are expected to decline invitations to sit on a panel if their private views, knowledge, or relations will affect their judgement of applications.

You should:

- ensure you have read the entire application thoroughly
- familiarise yourself with the aims of the funding opportunity that you are assessing
- be aware of the full range of grades and their descriptors at your disposal (see Appendix A)
- contact AHRC staff if anything is unclear

8.1. Analysis

You should:

- always provide evidence to support your observations. Use only the information provided in the application
- consider the information you are asked to provide under each heading or item in the funding opportunity assessment criteria, ensuring sufficient detail is provided for each

- give a clear assessment of strengths and weaknesses of the application and indicate whether these are major or minor concerns
- provide an evaluation of the risks associated with the application
- contextualise the application that you are assessing within current work in the field, and comment on its relative importance or significance
- be receptive to new ideas and approaches to thinking within your discipline as well as methodology
- identify any inconsistencies and contradictions in the application
- in the case of interdisciplinary applications, assess if the different disciplines meet up in a coherent way
- provide enough information to enable a judgement on the relative quality of this application compared to other applications

8.2. General Points

You should:

- provide an impartial, objective, fair and analytical assessment of the application you are reviewing
- ensure you provide an evaluation, not a description of the work proposed
- ensure your grade is justified by, and consistent with, your comments

All costs justified as reasonable for the research proposed are allowable and should be accepted. Comments on the justification can only be considered for:

- 'Directly Incurred' costs
- the level of effort from any member of the core team (for example, the time they are spending on the application)
- 'Other Directly Allocated' costs (except charge out costs for departmental technicians and administrative services)
- 'Exceptions' costs

Please be aware that it is now UKRI policy to only request high-level budgets and we therefore ask that you refer to the justification to understand the more costly resources in detail.

Applications may include costs for reasonable adjustments. Where an application includes costs for reasonable adjustment, UKRI will ensure they are eligible, and these should be accepted without comment. You can find [further information on disability and accessibility support for UKRI applicants during the application and assessment process on the website.](#)

8.3. Assessment Criteria

Each section of the application includes the original guidance provided by AHRC to the applicants. By clicking on the 'View Application Question' section, you will be able to see the bullet points that applicants were asked to address in their application. All criteria are equally weighted and should form the framework for your assessment of each individual application.

Please refer to the [Funding Finder](#) to look at the specific assessment areas for the opportunity you will be assessing.

9. Guidance for UKRI Application Assessors (reviewers and board or panel members)

We are committed to support the recommendations and principles set out by the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)](#). You should not use journal- based metrics, such as journal impact factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, to assess any member of the core team's contributions, or to make funding decisions.

For research assessment, please consider the value and impact of all research outputs (including datasets, software, inventions, patents, preprints or other commercial activities) in addition to research publications. You should consider a broad range of impact measures including qualitative indicators of research impact, such as influence on policy and practice.

The content of a paper is more important than publication metrics, or the identity of the journal in which it was published. Therefore, you should not use journal impact factor (or any hierarchy of journals), conference rankings and metrics such as the H-index or i10- index when assessing AHRC applications.

We encourage you to challenge research assessment practices that rely inappropriately on journal

impact factors or conference rankings and promote and teach best practice that focuses on the value and influence of specific research outputs.

If you are unsure about DORA, please speak to your AHRC contact or the panel chair.

10. Grading and Ranking Applications

Regardless of whether you are First, Second, or Third Introducer or not assigned to an application that you have read, it is acceptable to begin to think about a relative 'rank' for applications which you have graded similarly. This will help you gauge how you think applications might fare against each other when ranking during the panel meeting.

The panel will agree an overall grade from 1–10 for each application, reached through discussion of the applications, considering the introducers' initial grades and comments, alongside the comments of the panel. The overall grade will be used in determining the applications relative ranking.

All applications need to be graded, but only those graded 6 or above should be ranked. A decimal grading system is an effective and efficient mechanism for the ranking of applications. This allows the introducers to indicate the strength of their grading. For example, a good 6 might become a 6.6, a weak 6 a 6.1, and an excellent 9 a 9.8. Applications can be graded a maximum score of 10. The decimal is only for the purpose of ranking the applications and has no value outside the rank ordered list. The key thing is to make sure that the grade and its descriptor fit the quality of the application (for example, an application graded '6' fulfils the criteria for a grade of 6), and that the panel is content with the ranked order of the applications. The chair, in conjunction with AHRC staff, has the discretion to change the threshold above which applications should be ranked and will advise on the day if this is the case for your panel meeting.

The panel should rank applications relative to one another as they proceed through the meeting. At the end of the meeting, the panel will review the ranked list before finally agreeing the ranked order. The panel will not use averages or 'weighted grades' in determining the final grade; the panel needs to consider all the information that has been provided and make a judgement as to the appropriate grade. Please note that only the whole number will be fed back to the applicant, and not the decimal score.

The grade descriptors will be available in the meeting, should panellists need to refer to them at any point during the discussion.

11. Amendments, Conditions, and Feedback

The panel can make recommendations on individual applications based on panellists' comments, for AHRC to take forward, for example:

Costings

Where the panel considers that significant resources or an aspect of a programme of work are not fully justified, the panel can recommend that associated costs are removed from the project. It should be done in exceptional circumstances where the application is otherwise competitive. **There is no need to consider the removal of non-eligible costs, as these will be automatically removed by AHRC.**

Conditions

The panel can suggest conditions for AHRC to impose on an award where the application is otherwise competitive. These could either be conditions that need to be met before an award is confirmed or a

requirement that the condition be met during the undertaking of the application. Once the award holder has advised AHRC that they have met the conditions imposed for the award to be granted, AHRC will expect the chair or a designated panel member to advise on whether they are satisfied the conditions have been met.

Feedback

The panel can decide to provide feedback if the application is likely to be successful and it wishes to highlight some advice from the panel, but where it is not significant enough to be made a condition of the award.

For assessment panels, where applicants will not have had the benefit of seeing expert reviewer comments, the panel may wish to provide applications with specific feedback where there is something significant to be communicated to the applicant that is not covered by the grade descriptor. In doing so, unsuccessful applicants should receive more detail than successful applicants to help them prepare future applications.

Any feedback for both successful and unsuccessful applications should be agreed in principle by the panel at the meeting, providing either specific text, or a clear set of bullet points, with the final feedback text being agreed by the chair before being communicated back to the applicant.

12. Feedback on AHRC Processes

Should the panel have any feedback on AHRC policy, process or documentation, this can be discussed and recorded once all applications have been assigned a final grade and ranked. If there is not sufficient time to discuss this at the end of the meeting, the chair may collate any comments from panellists via email before forwarding them to AHRC staff. These will be formally recorded and used by AHRC to inform the future development of processes.

13. After the Panel Meeting

After the panel meeting, if there is a further assessment stage, AHRC will select the applications that will go forward to that stage based on the ranked list provided. Therefore, it is vital that panel members do not divulge or discuss panel meeting outcomes with individuals outside the meeting. Maintaining confidentiality is paramount.

All announcements of outcomes and funding decisions will be made by AHRC. Any panel member who is asked directly for feedback by applicants should refuse and advise applicants to direct all such requests to AHRC.

Following the meeting, you must delete all associated notes and copies of documents you have created.

14. Panel Outcomes

You can find AHRC panel outcomes and attendance on the UKRI website.

Please note that due to the transition to the UKRI Funding Service, there may be a delay in the external publication of panel outcomes and attendance. Once we are able to communicate these more broadly, we will publish panel members' full names, meeting roles, and their research (or other) organisations on the AHRC website. If you would **not** like your name to be published as part of the panel attendance record, please inform peerreviewcollege@ahrc.ukri.org following the panel meeting.

Appendix A: Panel Score Grading Scale

Score	Score definitions
10	The application is **exceptional**; it **very strongly** meets all of the assessment criteria to the highest standard. The panel agrees that it is difficult to articulate how the application could be improved.
9	The application is **outstanding**; it very **strongly** meets all of the assessment criteria.
8	The application is **excellent**; it **strongly** meets all of the assessment criteria.
7	The application is **very good**; it meets the assessment criteria well **but with some minor weaknesses**/limitations.
6	The application is **good**; it meets the assessment criteria well but with **some clear weaknesses**/limitations.
5	The application is **adequate**; it meets the assessment criteria but with clear weaknesses/limitations.
4	The application is **weak**; it meets the assessment criteria but with **significant weaknesses**/limitations.
3	The application is **poor**; it meets the assessment criteria but has **major weaknesses**/limitations.
2	The application is **unsatisfactory**; it **does not meet one or more of the assessment criteria**.
1	The application is **unsatisfactory**; it **does not meet any** of the assessment criteria.