AHRC Moderation Panel:
Guidance for Chair and Panellists

Contents

1. Introduction

This document is to help you 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 moderation process will be run through the UKRI Funding Service platform (TFS). Details of how to access the system will be provided within your TFS 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 Zoom.

2. The Aim of the Moderation 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 (and the applicant's response to those expert reviews) have been secured for this meeting, therefore, overall grading and ranking must be based solely on these materials. The panel's ranked list will be used by AHRC to determine a funding recommendation.

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 conditions on awards where appropriate
- to ensure that AHRC is provided with a final and agreed ranked list of applications
- to ensure the discussions are based solely on the expert reviewer comments, and the applicant's response to those comments (i.e., ensuring that panellists do not introduce new comments or criticisms)

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 the application in any capacity should receive less favorable treatment on the grounds of protected characteristics (Equality Act 2010):

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

All applications must be moderated on equal terms, regardless of the protected characteristics of the applicant. Applications must therefore be moderated 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, we will ensure that our funding is not influenced by, for example, the gender of the applicant or by other 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 the panel meeting; therefore, we ask that you are aware of these risks and safeguard the panel's recommendation by taking the actions described below:

- all applications must be moderated on equal terms and objectively moderated on their merits using the criteria set for each funding mechanism
- decisions must be evidence-based and based on all the information provided
- question and challenge cultural stereotypes and bias, as well as being prepared to be challenged
- be 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
- try to slow down the speed of your decision making, allowing sufficient time for discussion of each application
- reconsider the reasons for your decisions, recognising that they may be post-hoc justifications
- question cultural stereotypes and be open to seeing what is new and unfamiliar
- remember you are unlikely to be fairer and less prejudiced than the average person
- you can detect unconscious bias more easily in others than in yourself, so all panel members should feel able to call out bias when they see it

For further information, the Royal Society has issued a Briefing and video on unconscious bias.

Applications are submitted to the 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.

6. Role of Introducers

To assist in this meeting process, three panel members have an 'Introducer' role for each application and these are nominated prior to the panel meeting. Each application has a First Introducer, a Second Introducer, and a Third Introducer, 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.

From UKRI's Funding Service platform you can view the introducers' list, which sets out your assigned roles for any of the applications for which you have one of the three introducer roles, along with any additional information regarding the applications to be considered. For the applications where you have been assigned a role of 'Introducer,' your judgements must be based solely on the aims and criteria for the funding opportunity and information that is provided in the application, the expert reviews, and the applicants response to those expert reviews, where received.

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 moderate the application against the aims of the funding opportunity (including the expert reviewer comments, and the applicant's response to those comments) 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 discussion and promotes a robust moderation process.

6.1. Introducer Comments

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

You should:

- view the scoring range (TFS **'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. You will have the opportunity to revise your score at the panel meeting.

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

7. Conflicts of Interest

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

Panel members (including the Chair) should not moderate 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 TFS meeting for the first time.

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

Anyone in conflict with an application must leave the meeting whilst it is being discussed. 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.

8. Moderation Approach

When moderating the applications, panellists must ensure that their judgements are based solely on the aims and objectives for the funding opportunity, and the information that is provided in the application, as well as the expert reviews, and the applicants response to those expert reviews, where received.

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

Should panellists appear to be providing their own assessment of an application, rather than moderating the expert reviews, and the applicant's response to those expert reviews, the Chair will direct the discussion back to moderation, supported by AHRC colleagues (if appropriate).

You should:

- ensure you have read the entire application thoroughly
- familiarise yourself with the aims of the funding opportunity that you are moderating
- 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. General Points

You should note:

- important issues identified by the expert reviewer comments which the Project Lead failed to address in their applicant response
- any discrepancies between expert reviewer comments
- any comments on the general level of resource requested (i.e., when requested resources are considered excessive or inappropriate)
- specific feedback that may need to be provided to the applicant
- where the expert reviewer comments were of insufficient quality to aid the discussion

You are advised to pay particular attention to the expert reviewers' comments rather than the grade that has been provided, as grades are not always consistent with the comments, especially around the margins of a particular grade (i.e., one expert reviewer may think of an application as a 'high 7', but another will think of it as a 'low 8').

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 (i.e., 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 moderators refer to the justification to understand the more costly resources in detail.

8.2. 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 the expert reviewer comments that you will moderate.

Please refer to the Funding Finder to look at the specific assessment areas for the opportunity you will be moderating.

9. Guidance for UKRI Application Moderators (reviewers and board/panel members, etc.)

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, other commercial activities, etc.) 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 moderating 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 the panel convener 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 ordering 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 (i.e., 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 integer score will be fed back to the applicant.

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 the 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.

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. Resubmission Policy

Resubmission of unsuccessful applications is no longer permitted except in very particular circumstances, where the panel may exceptionally decide to invite the applicant to resubmit their application.

This will happen only where the panel identifies an application of exceptional potential and can identify specific changes to the application that could significantly enhance its competitiveness. In this case, the panel does not need to agree a grade for the application, but it will need to agree specific feedback (based on the panellists' comments), to be provided to the applicant.

In order for an application to be invited for resubmission the panel should satisfy itself that it meets all of the following criteria:

- the core research ideas and approach are original, innovative, and exciting and the application has outstanding, transformative potential. There should be clear potential for the revised application to significantly increase its overall grading and priority for funding, if the identified weaknesses can be satisfactorily addressed
- the issues should be of sufficient scale and significance that they could not have been adequately addressed through the use of conditions. Requested changes should be of sufficient scale to require the application to go through the full moderation process again
- the panel must be able to provide clear guidance on the key issue or issues which need to be addressed in any resubmission

We would normally expect invited resubmissions to be used in instances where the panel considers the proposed research to be particularly challenging, novel, complex, adventurous or risky and where it may be difficult to get everything right first time, or where the moderation panel process reveals issues or challenges that might have been difficult for the applicants to have anticipated in preparing the application (an example might be a development which has happened since the application was submitted in terms of new or recently published research or a change in 'real world' conditions affecting the application).

When invited resubmissions are submitted, they will be assessed in the usual way in competition with all other applications.

Invited resubmissions should not be used:

- where the identified weaknesses relate to under-development, poor presentation or other problems relating to the preparation of the application, which could reasonably have been expected to be addressed in submitting an application of this kind
- for applications where the core ideas, rationale, and foundations, aims and focus or overall design need substantial re-working, since such radically revised applications could be submitted as a significantly re-worked new application rather than as a resubmission
- in addition, there are opportunities where invited resubmission is not an option due to the particular nature of the funding opportunity, i.e., because the opportunity is a one off and there will be no further rounds under which to submit applications. In such cases the panel may wish to consider the possibility of a conditional award (as detailed above), where appropriate

13. Feedback on AHRC Processes

Should the panel have any feedback on AHRC policy, process and/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 collect and collate any comments from panellists via email before forwarding them to an AHRC officer. These will be formally recorded and used by AHRC to inform the future development of processes.

14. After the Panel Meeting

After the panel meeting, 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.

15. Panel Outcomes

Panellists can find AHRC panel outcomes and attendance on the UKRI Website.

Please note that due to UKRI's transition to TFS, there may be a delay in the external publication of panel outcomes and attendance.

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.