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 process to protect the applicants' ideas, allow the provision of free and frank comments, and advice to inform the final decision on funding. This document outlines the Principles of Assessment and Decision making for the Research Councils and Innovate UK. It does not cover Research England's Assessment and Decision Making processes.

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) evaluates the individual merit of applications against published criteria. They can be a reviewer or a panellist, experts or a peer from business or academia, or other sectors, such as the public and charities.
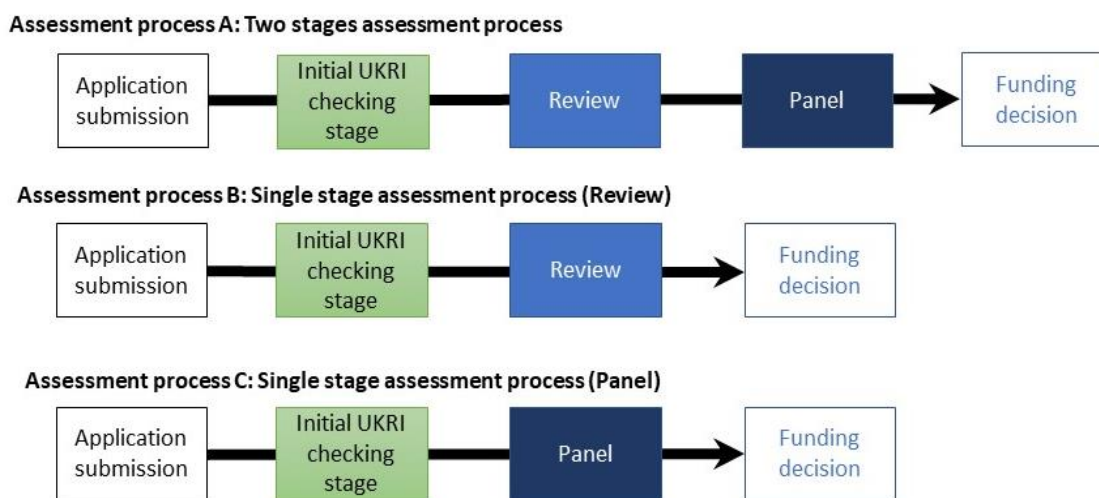
Assessment in our Councils and opportunities often involves a two-stage assessment process, where applications are considered by reviewers (by correspondence) and then by a Council panel (at a meeting) but can also take other forms such as one-stage assessment processes where applications are considered solely by reviewers (by correspondence) or solely by a Council panel (at a meeting). Under some circumstances an applicant may be asked to attend an interview as part of the assessment process. Assessment can also be made using Credit Committees[1] or sandpits[2] and some of our awards are made using algorithmic funding models[3] to determine the scale of the funding. Our assessment processes are designed to be proportionate and relevant to the funding opportunity. The assessment method to be utilised will be explained in the published funding opportunity. Some examples of our assessment approaches are illustrated in Figure 1 below:

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[1] A Credit Committee is an Innovate UK Loans committee utilised to assess Innovation continuity loans. They decide the final terms, amount and length of the loan offer.
[2] A sandpit is an interactive workshop, structured to drive lateral thinking and radical approaches to address research challenges, with the aim of producing research proposals. At the end of the process grants are agreed.
[3] A funding model where the amount of funding awarded is calculated using an algorithm. The algorithm determines the scale of the funding but does not influence the funding decision which will have already been made.

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Figure 1: Examples of some of the assessment approaches used by UKRI

Assessment process A: Two stages assessment process

Application submission → Initial UKRI checking stage → Review → Panel → Funding decision

Assessment process B: Single stage assessment process (Review)

Application submission → Initial UKRI checking stage → Review → Funding decision

Assessment process C: Single stage assessment process (Panel)

Application submission → Initial UKRI checking stage → Panel → Funding decision

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 – in a virtual or physical meeting - against other applications and with other panellists. Panels can operate in different forms (assessing submitted information, interviews, presentations) and have different roles (moderating, or provisioning of further expert/peer assessment, shortlisting).
The panel agrees on the categorisation, grading and/or ranking of proposals based on the published criteria and where necessary, broad feedback for applicants. The applications assessed may or may not have been through a review stage.

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.

To facilitate collaborative trans-national funding, the Global Research Council set out a Statement of Principles on Peer/Merit Review (2018)[4]. These principles reflect current principles in assessment and decision making in our Councils as set out below.

UKRI are committed to the Haldane Principle[5], 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 through the independent assessment of quality,

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[4] Statement of Principles on Peer/Merit Review, Global Research Council: https://bit.ly/2RK2QcY
[5] UK Government Legislation, The Haldane Principle:
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/section/103/enacted

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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
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 funding opportunity guidance 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 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[6] and Innovate UK website[7]

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[6] UKRI Gateway to Research webpage: https://gtr.ukri.org/
[7] Innovate UK funded projects: https://bit.ly/2PlNlaC

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As an organisation, we are committed to publishing data on how we spend taxpayers' money to fund research and innovation[8]. We publish data on the competitive funding decisions made by UKRI as well as information on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). 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 or act in one role is, or could be, impaired or influenced by a secondary interest, for example: a direct/indirect financial interest; non-financial, personal or academic interests; and/or competing loyalties. Reviewers with an actual or perceived conflict of interest are instructed to decline our request to review applications.

We guide our office administrators and panellists on ways to manage conflicts of interest. They are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the Seven Principles of Public Life and adhere to the UKRI Declaration of Interest Policy. 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.

UKRI takes 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 our office administrators.

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 opportunities 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 many funding opportunities go through a 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 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. UKRI supports the San Francisco declaration on research assessment (DORA)[9], and recognise the relationship between research assessment and research integrity.

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[8] UKRI funding data: https://www.ukri.org/funding/funding-data/
[9] Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA): https://sfdora.org/

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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.

UKRI refers to the core values from the 2019 research integrity concordat[10], of which we are a signatory, to underpin its decision-making (honesty, rigour, care and respect, openness and transparency, and accountability) and we expect assessors to take ethics and integrity into account when undertaking their assessments. UKRI also takes this into consideration when making its funding decisions.

UKRI believes that a commitment to good research conduct lies at the heart of an effective research system. UKRI expects all individuals involved in those communities, including researchers, research support staff, research managers and administrators, as well as assessors to abide by the principles set out in the 2019 research integrity concordat, and to work with due respect for one another within a supportive and open environment.

Individuals who act as assessors for UKRI are required to treat the material they are assessing in confidence: it may be disclosed to a third party only with the explicit permission of UKRI and for clear, documented reasons. Assessors must declare any conflicts of interest, including professional, personal or commercial conflicts, and must not take advantage of any information received as a result of their role in the assessment process.

Guidance for research ethics and good conduct is also available to assessors and applicants, in particular through the published UKRI policy and guidelines on governance of good research conduct[11] and other information available on the UKRI good research resource hub[12].

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[10] 2019 concordat to support research integrity: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/the-concordat-to-support-research-integrity.pdf
[11] UKRI Policy and Guidelines on Governance of Good Research Conduct: https://www.ukri.org/about-us/policies-standards-and-data/good-research-resource-hub/research-integrity/
[12] UKRI Good research resource hub: https://www.ukri.org/about-us/policies-standards-and-data/good-research-resource-hub/

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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[13]. (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.

Document Control

Version	Date Published
1.0	October 2020
2.0	March 2021
3.0	July 2023

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