

Principles and guidelines for peer review at the Swedish Research Council

The guidelines are based on eight principles

This document contains guidelines for the Swedish Research Council's peer review. The guidelines are based on the Swedish Research Council's eight principles for peer review of funding for research. The principles are intended to ensure that the scientific assessment is made by competent subject experts, based on relevant documentation and clear quality criteria, within the framework for good assessment culture. The guidelines shall provide concrete guidance on how the principles shall be complied with.

The guidelines for peer review of applications for research funding are arranged according to the eight principles. Please note, however, that when applying a particular guideline, several principles may need to be considered. The Board's decision to adopt the principles states clearly that: *"The principles should be read together. They may conflict with each other and therefore need to be balanced against each other. How the principles are balanced against each other must be discussed in each individual case."* The principles and their practical implementation should therefore be brought up regularly in the review work.

The character of the guidelines

The guidelines relate to peer review of applications for research funding at the Swedish Research Council. While they are general, there is room for variation justified by factors such as differences between calls and/or research areas, or variation justified by testing new ways of working. This means that different guidelines differ in character to some extent. The various types of guidelines are differentiated through the use of terminology.

1. **"Shall" guidelines:** These consist of clarifications of legislation or other mandatory regulations, or follow from requirements for the review work adopted by the Board. The guidelines must be complied with. If deviations from such guidelines are nevertheless noted, they should be followed up.
2. **"Should" guidelines:** These are of the type "comply or explain". This means that those responsible do not have to comply with each guideline at all times, but can instead choose other solutions that are considered to suit the circumstances better in the individual case – provided that those responsible for the call or the research area in question openly account for each such deviation, describe the solution chosen instead, and state the reasons for this.
3. **Call-specific guidelines:** These guidelines state that those responsible for each call or area shall formulate instructions or justify choices made specifically for the peer review of a specific call or a certain subject area. In these cases, the guidelines do not provide detailed directions for what is to be done, but request a system for and documentation of the process.

The Swedish Research Council's Principles and Guidelines for Peer Review of Research Funding

- Excerpt from Director General decision No GD-2019-186, Reg. No 2.4-2016-7045

1. Expertise in the assessment

The assessment of applications shall be carried out by experts with a documented high level of scientific¹ competence within the research field/s or discipline/s the application relates to, and the scientific peer review shall be based on clear quality criteria. Reviewers shall be appointed according to clear criteria in a systematically documented process.

- 1.1 The Swedish Research Council's peer review shall be conducted by review panels with scientific expertise of the breadth and depth relevant to the applications to be assessed.
- 1.2 Review panel meetings shall constitute a central element of the review process.
- 1.3 Scientific assessment and prioritising of applications should be separated from decisions on grants.
- 1.4 The expertise to recruit review panel members and external reviewers shall be in place.
- 1.5 For each call, there shall be documented instructions for:
 - a. who is recruiting
 - b. what specific merits and experience shall be represented on the review panel
 - c. any requirements on the composition of the review panel, such as subject area competence, limits on the number of members and gradual replacement of members between calls for the same form of grant
 - d. percentage of international members of the review panel.
- 1.6 The maximum mandate period for a review panel member shall be six years on the same review panel. After this, a waiting period of minimum three years shall apply.
- 1.7 The maximum period as chair is three years, as part of the overall mandate period of six years on a review panel. After this, a waiting period of minimum three years shall apply. An exception may be made for one-off reviews where continuity is considered particularly important.
- 1.8 The composition of the review panel shall comply with the Swedish Research Council's gender equality strategy in terms of gender (numerical gender equality).
- 1.9 Members of review panels shall be appointed according to the Swedish Research Council's conflict of interest policy and guidelines for managing conflicts of interest.

2 Objectivity and equal treatment

All assessments shall be carried out in an equivalent manner and be based on the quality of the research planned and executed and on the merits of the applicant, irrespective of

¹ Or artistic competence when relevant.

the applicant's origin or identity. To avoid any conflict of interest or partiality, assessments shall be based on clear quality criteria and formalised processes.

- 2.1 Ahead of each call, instructions shall be in place concerning the assessment criteria to be used. The application and weighting of grading criteria shall be reflected in the instructions for designing the applications.
- 2.2 The instructions for the project plan, CV and publication list shall be designed to optimise the documentation for review within each research area and grant format.
- 2.3 Bibliometrics shall be used with caution in the review, and only as part of an overall assessment of the merits carried out by reviewers with expertise in the area in question. Bibliometrical data gathered in conjunction with the application shall be relevant to the research area and the grant form the call relates to.
- 2.4 The basis for assessment shall be the application, which is assessed using the reviewers' scientific competence and judgment. Irrelevant information shall not be used in the assessment.
- 2.5 The assessment criteria shall be defined through guiding questions, so that it is clear what is to be assessed. The assessment criteria decided by the Director General shall be used, and additional criteria and guiding questions shall be adapted to the research area and call in question.
- 2.6 All assessments shall be conducted according to the Swedish Research Council's conflict of interest policy and guidelines for managing conflicts of interest, and according to the Swedish Research Council's gender equality strategy.

3. Promoting good research practice

The assessment assumes an ethical approach and a high level of integrity. The subject experts shall not carry out any preliminary ethical review, but should take into account how the applicant discusses and problematises the research question with regard to good research practice. If an application includes research that clearly breaches ethical rules and/or clearly contravenes Swedish or international law, this should be reflected in the assessment of the quality and/or feasibility of the research.

- 3.1 The call text shall include instructions for how the applicant shall describe the ethical considerations that are relevant to the research project in question, and whether the research project may entail potential risks to humans or the natural environment. It shall also include instructions for how experts shall assess this description in relation to the quality of the application. Part of this entails taking into consideration whether the applicant is complying with legal and formal requirements, for example relating to ethical review, that apply to the proposed research project.
- 3.2 Instructions shall be included for how deviations from ethical guidelines and good research practice as well as misconduct in research shall be managed in the peer review, and also how such deviations shall impact on the assessment.

4. Openness and transparency

The assessment shall be based on and justified by the documentation requested by the Swedish Research Council, which is typically an application for grant funding. The assessment of the documentation shall be made based on rules and guidelines set in advance and publicly known.

- 4.1 Information on significant steps in the review process shall be available to the applicants, the reviewers and other researchers.
- 4.2 Information on the members of the review panel should be publicly available before the call in question opens.
- 4.3 The reviewers shall base their assessment on the current application and not have access to previous assessments or applications. If a specific review process requires access to previous applications or assessments, this shall be made clear in the call text in question, and in the instructions to the reviewers.
- 4.4 There shall be instructions for how final statements should be written and what they should include.

5. Appropriateness for purpose

The peer review process shall be adapted to the call and the research area, and shall be proportional to the size and complexity of the call without neglecting the rule of law.

- 5.1 At least three panel members shall read each application ahead of the review panel's collective prioritising.
- 5.2 The decision on the composition of the review panel shall be justified by the panel's adaptation to the nature of the task and the number of applications the panel is to assess.
- 5.3 If applications are to be screened out, instructions for the review panel's screening procedure shall be included.
- 5.4 There shall be instructions for how consultation between panels or external reviewers shall be used in the assessment.

6. Efficiency

The total resources used in the application and assessment, in terms of both time used and cost shall be minimised for all involved, i.e. applicants, subject experts and Swedish Research Council personnel, with consideration for maintaining quality, objectivity, transparency and appropriateness for purpose.

- 6.1. For each decision about a call or review, we shall take into account what can be done to minimise the time spent and resources used (for applicants, review panel members, external subject experts and Swedish Research Council personnel) during the process from call to decision.
- 6.2. The call, application and review processes shall be predictable, and changes to the processes shall be implemented with a long-term perspective.

7. Integrity

All participants in the assessment process shall respect the integrity of the process and shall not disclose to any third party what has been discussed at the meeting or the opinions of other reviewers in the ongoing processing of applications. The final assessment shall always be documented and published once a decision has been made.

- 7.1. All communications between applicants and the Swedish Research Council concerning the review process, including the grounds for decisions, shall be carried out via the personnel responsible at the Swedish Research Council.
- 7.2. Reviewers shall not have contacts with individual applicants regarding the application or the review, either during or after the review process.
- 7.3. The starting point for peer review is always that the factual content of applications and information about applicants must not be disseminated during the assessment process. If a reviewer needs to consult a colleague with questions about part of an application, this shall be done with respect for the integrity of the applicant and the process.

8. The peer review shall be prepared and followed up in a structured manner

Review processes and reviewers shall be prepared and followed up according to clear criteria. All reviewers shall have access to the same type of background documentation for the review.

- 8.1 Review panel members and the review panel chair, as well as external reviewers, shall receive training at an early stage of the review process in:
 - a. how the assessment shall be made and what is to be assessed
 - b. the application of conflict of interest rules, and the Swedish Research Council's conflict of interest policy and guidelines for managing conflicts of interest
 - c. the application of the Swedish Research Council's gender equality strategy in the review of applications
 - d. how conscious and unconscious bias can impact on decisions
 - e. how aspects relating to good research practice and issues of research ethics shall be managed in the assessment
 - f. how final statements shall be worded
 - g. rules for communication among reviewers and between reviewers and applicants
- 8.2 The chair shall also receive training in all the stages of the review, including the recruitment practice when relevant, and the design and group dynamics of the review panel meeting.
- 8.3 There shall be written job descriptions for the tasks of the chair, panel members, and observers (if participating).
- 8.4 The peer review shall always be followed up systematically in order to continuously improve the review processes.

- 8.5 The follow-up of a call shall include the overall number of persons asked to participate in a review panel or, if any, as external reviewers, and a summary description of the reasons given for why panel members and external reviewers have declined to participate.
- 8.6 There shall be instructions relating to the handling of feedback and complaints from applicants.