Peer review handbook

Research environment grant and Starting grant, 2025
Educational sciences

Contents

Foreword

I warmly welcome you as a member of this year's review period in educational sciences at the Swedish Research Council!

Educational science research sheds light on assessment and knowledge results, multimodal learning, inclusion and equality, digital technologies in education, multilingualism, organisational policies as well as many other aspects of education and learning. The research is conducted in several different scientific disciplines and contributes to knowledge development and strengthens the scientific basis for education.

The chair and reviewers of the panels carry out a very important task within the Swedish Research Council's assignment to support research of highest scientific quality. Researchers jointly review and assess the scientific quality of applications that deal with learning, teaching and education, and contribute to knowledge development in the field.

This peer review handbook includes information on the Swedish Research Council’s principles and guidelines. Please read the instructions carefully as they will help you in the work that awaits you.

We are grateful and happy that you have taken on this important mission and are looking forward to collaborating with you. Once again very warm welcome to the Swedish Research Council. We hope you will find the review work rewarding.

Pernilla Nilsson

Secretary General, Committee for Educational Sciences

The Swedish Research Council

Introduction

This handbook is designed to reflect the review process step by step. We want to make it easy for you as a panel member to find the information you need for the tasks to be carried out in each step.

Research environment grant

The purpose of the research environment grant is to strengthen national and international research environments, and to enable strategic initiatives of high quality and excellence. The grant shall promote collaboration between a team of researchers working towards a joint research goal in the longer term, and contribute to career development. The collaboration can either be related to research linked to a national or international infrastructure, a collaboration between researchers at different universities, or a multi-disciplinary focus within educational sciences. The research team in the environment shall be well established in the international research community, and make significant contributions to national and international research. Read the call text on vr.se.

Starting grant

The aim of the starting grant is to give junior researchers the opportunity to establish themselves as independent researchers in Sweden. Read the call text on vr.se.

Important starting points and principles

Peer review

The Swedish Research Council regards peer review as a guarantor that our support goes to research of the highest scientific quality in all scientific fields. The Board of the Swedish Research Council has formulated guidelines for peer review based on eight principles. Read the guidelines for peer review.

Conflict of interest

To avoid any conflict of interest situation, we have established strict guidelines. Read the Swedish Research Council's conflict of interest policy and guidelines for managing conflicts of interest.

If you have a conflict of interest, you must not take part in the handling or assessment of that application during any part of the process. The following applies for panel members:

- Any application where you are the applicant or participating researcher must not be reviewed by your review panel.

- Any application where a close relative of yours is the applicant (does not apply to participating researchers) must not be reviewed by your review panel.

You are obliged to notify any conflict of interest for all applications handled by your review panel.

Gender equality

The Swedish Research Council aims to ensure that women and men have the same success rates and receive the same average grant amounts, taking into account the nature of the research and the form of support. Before the review panel agrees on the priority list, the approval rate shall be calculated for women and men respectively. Any differences must be commented on by the review panel. Read our policy and our guidelines concerning gender equality.

Confidentiality and integrity

Handle the applications and the review of them in a confidential manner:

- Do not disseminate documents that you get access to.
- Delete documents that relate to the review work after completing the task.
- Do not speak to outsiders about what was discussed during the review.
- Do not use information in the application for personal gain.
- Let the Swedish Research Council personnel manage all communications with applicants.

AI in the assessment of applications

Generative AI tools (ChatGPT or similar) must not be used in the scientific assessment of the applications. There is however no prohibition against using digital AI tools for tasks such as improving the language in written statements on applications, as long as this does not entail factual contents or the applicant's personal data being disseminated.

Roles in the review process

Chair and vice chair

The role of the chair is to lead and coordinate the work of the panel. The vice chair's task is to stand in for the chair of the review panel in situations where they cannot or should not take part, such as when the chair has a conflict of interest.

Panel member

As a panel member, you may be a reviewer or a rapporteur. In both roles, you shall read, grade and rank the applications ahead of the review panel meeting. The rapporteur is responsible for presenting the application for discussion at the meeting. As rapporteur, you are also responsible for summarising the review panel's final statement on the application after the meeting.

Observer

An observer from the Committee for Educational Sciences will monitor and safeguard the quality of the review panel's work. The observer reports back to the committee and the secretary general responsible after the review.

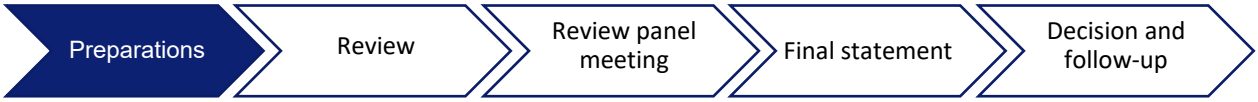
Swedish Research Council personnel

The research officer and senior research officer ensure that the rules and procedure established for the process are complied with. They also support the chair and panel members in the review process.

Secretary general for scientific committee

The secretary general has the overall responsibility for the review process and for questions of a scientific nature. The secretary general also handles any complaints following the grant decision.

Preparations



Prisma

As a reviewer, you work in the web-based system Prisma. The first thing to do is to create an account in Prisma, if you do not already have one. Make sure all your account information and personal data are correct. You must also decide whether or not you want to receive remuneration for your review work. Follow the instructions in Prisma's user manual.

Allocation of applications

The chair will allocate the applications to members of the review panel. Each application shall be read by at least three reviewers.

Reporting any conflict of interest

Once you have been notified that the applications are accessible in Prisma, you must report any conflict of interest. You should therefore check who the project leader and participating researchers are for all applications allocated to the review panel. Please contact the Swedish Research Council personnel and/or the review panel chair if you have any questions about conflict of interest. If you discover later on in the process that you have a conflict of interest, this must be reported as soon as possible to the chair and the research officer.

Technical preparations

The review panel meeting will be held via the digital platform Zoom. Download Zoom Desktop client to your computer before the meeting.

Make sure you have access to a stable network connection. Your computer also needs to have a built-in or external camera and microphone. We recommend that you use a headset with a microphone, as this provides the best sound, both for yourself and for other participants. If you do not have access to one, you may buy one at the Swedish Research Council's expense, at a maximum cost of 50 EUR or equivalent. We also recommend that you use a large screen next to your laptop computer, if possible.

Preparations: summary

What you need to do	When
☐ Provide account information in Prisma.	Before the first digital meeting
☐ Download Zoom and check your technical equipment.	Before the first digital meeting
☐ Report any conflict of interest.	Before the deadline in Prisma

Review

During the review period, you shall:

- read the applications allocated to you,
- write assessments and preliminary statements,
- grade all the applications you have reviewed.

Once the review process has ended, you will get access to all panel members' assessments in Prisma. Prepare for the review panel meeting discussion by reading the other panel members' assessments.

Individual review

Each application is reviewed and graded by at least three members of the review panel: one rapporteur and two further reviewers.

If you are the rapporteur, you shall write a *preliminary statement.* This shall consist of a numerical grade and detailed written comments on all evaluation criteria. The comments shall highlight strengths and weaknesses in the project described.

In the role as reviewer, you shall write an *assessment*. The assessment shall consist of a numerical grade and written comments. The comments should focus on strengths and weaknesses, but do not need to be detailed. Your notes will be a support in the discussion during the review panel meeting, and after the meeting, when the rapporteur writes the final statement.

Deviations in the application

If you suspect that the content of an application does not follow good research practice, please inform the Swedish Research Council personnel as soon as possible. Continue with the review unless we notify otherwise. The Swedish Research Council is responsible for further investigation in cases of deviations in the application.

Irrelevant information

Base your assessment only on the contents of the application itself. Irrelevant information must not impact on the assessment. Disregard facts that you believe you know despite them not being included in the application.

Do not disseminate information about the application

You must not disseminate information about the applications or applicants outside of the review panel. Only in exceptional cases, and on condition that you do not show the application itself, it may be justified to ask a colleague about for example the use of specific methods or new research findings.

Ethical aspects

The applicant shall state whether there are any requirements for permits and approvals for the research planned. If there are such requirements, the applicant shall also describe how the permits and approvals will be obtained. If parts of the research will be conducted abroad, the applicant must be able to describe how this may affect any requirements for permits or approvals. Necessary permits and approvals must be in place when the research begins. The assessment of legal and formal requirements is a part of the **feasibility criterion**.

The assessment of ethical aspects also includes examining how applicants reflect on ethical considerations. The evaluation of ethical considerations is part of the criterion for the **scientific quality of the project**.

Sex and gender dimensions

The assessment of scientific quality includes reviewing how the sex and gender dimensions are included in the applications. The applicant shall justify their answer, irrespective of whether it is relevant or not. Read the instructions for how applicants shall consider sex and gender dimensions in research.

Assessment criteria: research environment grant

You shall assess the scientific quality of the application based on six criteria:

- Scientific quality of the project
- Novelty and originality
- Merits of the applicant
- Added value
- Feasibility
- Relevance

The purpose of using several criteria is to achieve a multi-faceted assessment. The criteria are evaluated on a seven-degree or a three-degree scale.

Please use the guiding questions we have produced for each criterion to support the assessment of the application.

Guiding questions

Scientific quality of the project

- To what extent is the environment's programme and its questions of the highest scientific quality?

- To what extent does the environment define the research problem clearly and systematically, and describe its theoretical basis and previous results within the research field?
- To what extent are the methods for material/data collection and analysis suitable and consequential?
- To what extent does the proposed collaboration forms in the research environment create clear added value?
- To what extent are ethical aspects well considered and dealt with? Does the applicant pay sufficient attention to risk/value/suffering to humans, animals, nature and/or parts of or the whole of society?
- How are issues relating to sex and gender dimensions justified and handled in the research plan?

Novelty and originality (1–7)

- To what extent does the research expand or challenge current knowledge, ideas, and practices within the scientific field/fields?
- To what extent does the research combine concepts and theories, approaches, and methods, and/or material/data in a novel way?
- To what extent has the goals of the research the potential to achieve scientific and/or societal impact?

Merits of the applicant (1–7)

The assessment relates to both the project leader and the participating researchers who carry out the main scientific work. Merits are assessed in relation to the applicant's career age and to the research task. The applicant's merits in the application (publications and other outputs, and CV information) shall primarily confirm the competence to carry out the research described.

- In what way is there relevant expertise within the environment to implement all parts of the programme? Is there any other relevant expertise in the environment, over and above the project leader and the participating researchers?
- To what extent have the participants displayed abilities for independent and creative scientific work?
- How do the participants' scientific production and other merits compare in a national and international perspective?
- To what extent do the participants have the relevant and supplementary competence required to implement the research task?
- To what extent does the applicant have experience of leading major research projects or research environments?

Added value (1–7)

- To what extent does the applicant adequately describe how the environment participants together plan to build up, develop, and maintain the proposed research environment in the long term?
- To what extent will be environment strengthen and improve the quality of research at national and international level?

Feasibility (1–3)

- To what extent are the work allocation, time plan, and budget realistic?
- To what extent are the organisation and activities of the research environment well worked-out?
- To what extent is there access to material/data, equipment, research infrastructure and/or other resources that are required for implementing the research?
- Does the applicant take adequate account of relevant legal and formal requirements for the proposed research, such as ethical approvals and guidelines?
- To what extent are gender equality aspects addressed in the preconditions and implementation of the research?

Relevance (1–3)

- To what extent can the application be considered to cover an environment grant in educational sciences?
- To what extent is the application relevant to strengthening the educational sciences field in other respects?

Overall grade (1–7)

The above subsidiary criteria are weighed together into an overall grade according to the seven-grade scale. Normally, the scientific quality of the application should be given the most weight in the overall assessment. The criteria novelty and originality and merits may only in exceptional cases outweigh weaknesses in scientific quality, and then only minor weaknesses. It is a prerequisite for being awarded a grant within educational science that the proposal is feasible and relevant, and that the applicant has a solid and relevant competence for the purpose.

Assessment criteria: starting grant

You shall assess the scientific quality of the application based on five criteria:

- Scientific quality of the project
- Novelty and originality
- Merits of the applicant
- Feasibility
- Relevance

The purpose of using several criteria is to achieve a multi-faceted assessment. The criteria are evaluated on a seven-degree or a three-degree scale.

Please use the guiding questions we have produced for each criterion to support the assessment of the application.

Guiding questions

Scientific quality of the proposed research (1–7)

- Is the proposed project clear, well-justified, and convincing?

- To what level of quality are the research summary, problem definition, and design implemented/described?
- In what way are the choices of theory, data/material, analysis method, infrastructure, equipment and field work suitable for answering the questions?
- Are the ethical considerations for the proposed project properly described and addressed? Does the applicant adequately consider risk/value /suffering for humans, animals, nature and/or society?
- How are issues relating to sex and gender dimensions justified and handled in the research plan?

Novelty and originality (1–7)

- In what way does the project have the potential to generate new fundamental questions, new knowledge and new focuses for research?
- Does the project show signs of innovative application of existing methods/technologies in new areas?
- Does the project show signs of use of new technologies, methods and ways of analysing data?

Merits of the applicant (1–7)

The assessment relates to the project leader who carry out the main scientific work. Merits are assessed in relation to the applicant's career age and to the research task. The applicant's merits in the application (publications and other outputs, and CV information) shall primarily confirm the competence to carry out the research described.

- How significant is the applicant's scientific production, impact, and other merits in a national and international perspective relative to the research area, the application and the applicant's career stage? Here, the emphasis should be on scientific achievements after the doctoral degree.
- What is the applicant's scientific competence within the research area of the application?
- Has the applicant shown the ability to work independently?

Feasibility (1–3)

- Is the project practically and technically feasible?
- Is the time plan realistic?
- Does the project have access to personnel, infrastructure and other necessary resources?
- Is the project budget realistic in relation to the project's purpose and design?
- Does the host institution's support letter show that they support the applicant's project?
- Does the applicant adequately consider relevant legal and formal requirements for the proposed research, such as ethical permits and guidelines?

Please observe that it is important that the project budget in relation the aim and design of the project is weighed into the assessment of Feasibility.

Relevance to the call (1–3)

- Does the application concern a starting grant within educational science?
- Is the application relevant to the call in other respects?

Overall grade (1–7)

The above subsidiary criteria are weighed together into an overall grade according to the seven-grade scale. Normally, the scientific quality of the application should be given the most weight in the overall assessment. The criteria novelty and originality and merits may only in exceptional cases outweigh weaknesses in scientific quality, and then only minor weaknesses. It is a prerequisite for being awarded a grant within educational science that the proposal is feasible and relevant, and that the applicant has a solid and relevant competence for the purpose.

Grading scales

The assessment of the scientific quality of the application, novelty and originality, merits and added value is done on a seven-degree scale.

Grade	Explanation
7	Outstanding Exceptionally strong application with negligible weaknesses
6	Excellent Very strong application with negligible weaknesses
5	Very good to excellent Very strong application with minor weaknesses
4	Very good Strong application with minor weaknesses
3	Good Some strengths, but also moderate weaknesses
2	Weak A few strengths, but also at least one major weakness or several minor weaknesses
1	Poor Very few strengths, and numerous major weaknesses

The assessment of feasibility and relevance is done on a three-degree scale.

Grade	Explanation
3	Feasible
2	Partly feasible

1	Not feasible

For all criteria, you can also mark “Insufficient (0)”, if you consider that the application lacks sufficient information to allow you to make a reasonable assessment of the criterion. Please note that any such mark may only be used in the individual review before the review panel meeting, and not in the final grade.

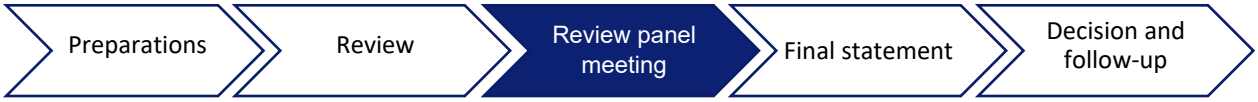
External reviewers

External review may be used if the joint competency of the review panel is not sufficient for a thorough review or in a conflict of interest situation. In normal cases, the chair determines the need for external reviewers and the research officer will contact the suggested reviewers.

Review: summary

What you need to do	When
☐ Grade and write detailed comments (preliminary statements) on all applications for which you are the rapporteur.	Before the deadline
☐ Grade and write comments (assessments) on all applications for which you are a reviewer.	Before the deadline
☐ Prepare for the meeting by reading other panel members’ comments and any external assessments.	Before the meeting
☐ Prepare a brief presentation of strengths and weaknesses in the applications for which you are the rapporteur.	Before the meeting
☐ Contact the Swedish Research Council personnel and the chair if you discover that you do, after all, have a conflict of interest with any of the applications, or if you discover any problem with an application.	As soon as possible
☐ Contact the Swedish Research Council personnel if you suspect any deviation from ethical guidelines or good research practice.	As soon as possible

Review panel meeting



Discussion of applications

The chair leads the discussion of the applications. As a rule, the rapporteur begins by presenting an application's strengths and weaknesses. Thereafter, the other reviewers can give their assessments. The chair is responsible for ensuring any external assessments are included in the discussion.

For each application discussed at the meeting, the panel shall agree on subsidiary grades and an overall grade. The rapporteur shall take notes to support the wording of the panel's final statement.

All applications shall be treated equally

The review panel is responsible for ensuring each application is assessed on its own merits.

- Irrelevant information shall not be discussed.
- The applications shall compete with each other on equal terms.
- No application shall be given a higher or lower grade because it belongs within a certain subject area.
- The panel shall not carry out any quota-based allocation between scientific disciplines.
- An application is guaranteed a new assessment under each call – even if similar applications have been submitted in conjunction with previous calls.
- There must be a balance in the time the review panel allocates to each application.

Conflict of interest during the review meeting

Persons who have a conflict of interest in relation to an application should not take part in the discussion of that particular application. They should leave the meeting while the application is discussed. If you discover any possible conflict of interest (your own or another's) during the meeting, you should bring this up with the chair and the Swedish Research Council personnel in private.

Prioritisation

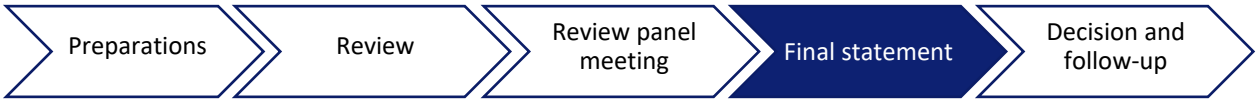
Once all applications have been discussed, and the panel has agreed on a joint grading for each application, a prioritisation shall be carried out of the applications with the highest scientific quality. This prioritisation shall conclude with the review panel's proposal for applications to be awarded grants within the panel's budgetary framework. A prioritisation list with reserves shall also be produced.

The review panel shall consider the approval rate for women and for men during the summarising prioritisation. The goal is to have the same success rates for women and men. Therefore, when applications of equivalent quality are compared during the prioritisation of applications within a review panel, the application that results in a more even outcome of the success rate shall be prioritised.

Review panel meeting: summary

What you need to do
☐ Agree on subsidiary grades and an overall grade for each application discussed.
☐ Agree on a proposal for the applications to be awarded funding within the review panel's budgetary framework.
☐ Agree on a prioritisation list with reserves.

Final statement



The rapporteur writes a final statement

The discussion at the review panel meeting forms the basis for the review panel's joint final statement. The final statement is the end product of the review process to which each application is submitted. It forms the Swedish Research Council's basis for decision in the matter, and is also sent to the applicant in conjunction with the grant decision being published.

You are responsible for writing final statements on the applications for which you have been the rapporteur. After the meeting, you should write *final statements* that reflects the review panel's joint assessment of the applications. You usually have one week in which to write final statements following the end of the review panel meeting.

The chair reviews all final statements

Once the final statements are completed, they are checked by the chair and by the Swedish Research Council personnel. The chair is responsible for ensuring the final statements on the applications discussed at the review panel meeting reflect the panel's discussion, and that the written justifications correspond to the grades. In conjunction with the chair's review, you may be asked to supplement or adjust a final statement.

General advice and recommendations on final statements

The final statement shall reflect the review panel's joint and overall assessment, including any external assessments.

Completing the final statements, you must

- focus on describing the main strengths and weaknesses of the application.
- ensure the written justifications correspond to the grading – feel free to use the definitions in the grading scale in your written comments.
- consider the guiding questions for the different assessment criteria.
- write concisely, but not too briefly – the content is more important than the length of the text.
- comment on whether the review panel has weighed in deviations from the Swedish Research Council's general instructions in the assessment of the application.
- be constructive and factual in your comments.

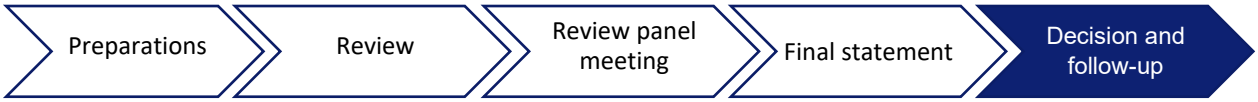
Completing the final statements, you must not

- summarise the content of the application or the merits of the applicant.
- introduce personal comments – the final statement shall constitute the review panel's joint assessment.
- state quantifiable data.
- state any personal information about the applicant.
- write any recommendation whether to refuse or approve an application in the final statement.
- comment on whether an application belongs in the review panel, as all the applications allocated to the panel shall be assessed.

Final statement: summary

What you need to do	When
☐ Write the review panel's final statement in Prisma on the applications for which you are the rapporteur.	One week after the review panel meeting
☐ Supplement final statements following review by the chair if you have been asked to do so.	After the review panel meeting

Decision and follow-up



Decision

The Board of the Swedish Research Council has delegated the decision to the Committee for Educational Sciences. The decision is based on the priority lists (including reserves) arrived at by the review panels, any justifications from the chairs, and the review panels' final statements. The decision is published shortly thereafter on vr.se and in Prisma. In conjunction with the publication, the applicants are informed about the outcome.

Follow-up

Following each review, internal follow-up is carried out of the process and the outcome. An important starting point for this follow-up is the feedback you provide as a panel member in conjunction with the review panel meeting. We also produce statistics of various kinds.

Complaints and questions

If you as a review panel member receive any question about the assessment of an individual application, you must refer this to us. The Swedish Research Council personnel make sure that all complaints or requests for clarification are handled.