



Guidelines for peer review at the Swedish Research Council

The Board of the Swedish Research Council has adopted eight principles for peer review at the Swedish Research Council. The purpose of the principles is to provide a basis for safeguarding the scientific assessment, based on clear quality criteria with competent reviewers, within the framework of a sound peer review culture and good research practice. Based on these principles guidelines for the Swedish Research Council's peer review of research funding has been developed. The guidelines provide concrete guidelines for how the principles for peer review shall be complied with.

The guidelines for peer review of applications have been subsumed under the principles adopted by the Board, and under the brief preambles adopted by the Board, where the principles are clarified. The principles are numbered from 1 to 8. It should, however, be noted that when applying a 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. Implementing the principles in practice needs to be the subject of an ongoing discussion. The principles should therefore be recurrently raised in the review work."

While the guidelines 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. Some guidelines consist mostly of clarifications of legislation or other mandatory regulations, or follow from requirements for the review work adopted by the Board. These guidelines must be complied with, and follow-up should be carried out in the event deviations from such guidelines are nevertheless noted. Other guidelines are of the character "comply or explain". A further type of guideline states that those responsible for each call or area shall formulate instructions or justify choices made specifically for a call or a subject area.

The three types of guidelines are differentiated through the use of terminology. In the first case, the word "*shall*" is part of the wording of the guideline. In the second case, the word "*should*" is used. In the third case, the guidelines state that those responsible for the call shall formulate instructions for, or specifically justify aspects of the peer review.



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

1. Expertise in the assessment

The assessment of applications shall be carried out by experts with a documented high scientific¹ competence within the research area or areas or the disciplinary area or areas to which the application relates and the scientific review shall be based on clear quality criteria. Reviewers shall be appointed according to clear criteria in a systematically documented process.

Guidelines:

1. The Swedish Research Council's peer review shall be conducted with the help of review panels with broad and deep scientific expertise of relevance to the form of grant to be reviewed.
2. Review panel meetings shall constitute a central element of the review.
3. Scientific assessment and prioritising of applications should be separated from decisions on grants.
4. Scientific expertise is required to recruit review panel members and external reviewers.
5. For each call, there shall be documented instructions for:
 - who is recruiting review panel members and external reviewers,
 - what merits shall be represented on the review panel,
 - any requirements on the composition of the review panel, such as research area competence, limits on the number of members, and gradual replacement of members between calls for the same form of grant,
 - percentage of international members of the review panel.
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.
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.
8. Review panels shall comply with the Swedish Research Council's gender equality strategy and have numerical equality (i.e. minimum 40% of each gender).
9. Appointments to review panels shall comply with the Swedish Research Council's conflict of interest policy.

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

¹ Or artistic competence when relevant.



Guidelines:

1. Ahead of each call, instructions shall be formulated for which grading criteria to be applied and prioritised. The application and prioritising between grading criteria shall be reflected in the instructions for submitting an application.
2. The instructions for the project plan, CV and publication list shall be designed to optimise the basis for review within each research area and form of grant.
3. Bibliometrics shall be used only 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 form of grant the call concerns.
4. The basis for assessment shall be the application, which is assessed using the reviewers' scientific competence and judgment. Information that is not relevant to the assessment shall not be used.
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 always be used, and additional criteria and guiding questions shall be adapted to each research area and form of grant.
6. All assessments shall comply with the Swedish Research Council's conflict of interest policy.

3. Ethical considerations

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

Guidelines:

1. There shall be clear instructions for how applicants shall account for, and how reviewers shall assess the account of, the ethical considerations relevant to the research project in question, and whether the research project may entail any potential risk to humans or the natural world.
2. The assessment shall pay attention to the requirement for ethical review of research relating to humans or animals.
3. Instructions shall be drawn up in conjunction with the call for how deviations from ethical guidelines and good research practice as well as misconduct in research shall be managed in the peer review, and 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 in a typical case is an application for research funding. The assessment of the documentation shall be based on rules and guidelines set in advance and publicly known.



Guidelines:

1. All steps in the review process shall be known to the applicants, the reviewers and other researchers.
2. Information on the members of the review panel should be publicly available before the call in question opens.
3. The reviewers shall base their assessment on the current application and not have access to previous assessments, and should only exceptionally refer to previous applications. In the event the review process requires access to previous applications, this shall be made clear in the instructions for the call in question.
4. For each call, 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 legal security.

Guidelines:

1. At least three panel members shall review each application ahead of the review panel's collective prioritising.
2. When deciding on the composition of the review panel, the adaptation of the group to the nature of the task and the number of applications the panel has to assess shall be justified.
3. For each call where applicable, there shall be instructions for how applications are sifted.
4. There shall be instructions for how consultations 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, reviewers and Swedish Research Council personnel, with consideration for maintaining quality, objectivity, transparency and appropriateness for purpose.

Guidelines:

1. For each decision about a call or review, it shall be taken into consideration what can be done in order to minimise the time spent and resources used (for applicants, review panel members, external reviewers and Swedish Research Council personnel) during the process from call to decision.
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 review 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 opinion of other reviewers in the ongoing processing of applications. The final assessment shall always be documented and published once a decision has been made.



Guidelines:

1. The review task shall be carried out with great integrity. Reviewers shall not have contacts with individual applicants regarding the application or the review, either during or after the review process.
2. All communication between applicants and the Swedish Research Council concerning the review process, including the grounds on which decisions are made, shall be carried out via the personnel responsible at the Swedish Research Council.
3. There shall be instructions for how reviewers shall proceed when they encounter limitations or problems in reviewing parts of the subject content of an application.

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 documentation for the review.

Guidelines:

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:
 - how the assessment shall be made and what is to be assessed,
 - application of conflict of interest rules and the Swedish Research Council's conflict of interest policy,
 - the application of the Swedish Research Council's gender equality strategy in the review of applications,
 - how implicit bias can affect opinions,
 - good research practice and ethical considerations,
 - how the final statements shall be worded,
 - rules for communication among reviewers and between reviewers and applicants,
 - the chair shall also receive training in all the stages of the review, including recruitment practices and the design and group dynamics of the review panel meeting.
2. There shall be written descriptions for the task of the chair, panel members, and observers (if any participate).
3. The peer review shall always be followed up in a systematic way in order to continuously improve the review processes.
4. 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 participation.
5. There shall be instructions relating to the handling of feedback and complaints from applicants.



