



Peer review handbook

Doctoral programme grant within humanities and
social sciences 2026

Innehåll

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Foreword

I would like to welcome you as a review panel member for doctoral programme grant within humanities and social sciences at the Swedish Research Council. We are deeply grateful that you are taking on this task. You make an important contribution to the continuous work of ensuring that the Swedish Research Council supports research of the highest scientific quality. A well-executed and systematic peer review of applications is the foundation for ensuring that the best research receive funding. It is very important that each application is reviewed by experts in the field with the highest possible scholarly competence. We are therefore thankful that you are willing to give input to this work.

To ensure the scientific review is conducted on clear quality criteria within the framework for good research practice, the Swedish Research Council has adopted a number of guidelines for the review work. This handbook is an important tool for you as a review panel member. It contains instructions for how the review process for doctoral programme grant within humanities and social sciences is carried out.

We hope you will find the review process you have ahead of you rewarding to you personally and once again I warmly welcome you as a panel member to the Swedish Research Council.

Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson
Secretary General
Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences
Swedish Research Council

Introduction

The purpose of the doctoral programme grant within humanities and social sciences is to build up and strengthen scientific expertise and the long-term need for competence within humanities and social sciences by funding national graduate schools. The graduate school shall be linked to a Swedish Higher Education Institution (HEI) and at least one other HEI must join the application. The graduate school must offer a structured range of programmes, with joint courses and seminars of high scientific and educational quality which must be available nationally. A clear organisation and leadership, including a board or governing body with overarching responsibility for quality assurance of the activities of the graduate school in collaboration with the participating institutions is also necessary. Read the entire call text here: [Doctoral programme grant within humanities and social sciences - Swedish Research Council](#).

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.

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](#). In short, if you have a conflict of interest with an application, you must not take part in the handling or assessment of that application during any part of the process.

The following further 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

All applications submitted to the Swedish Research Council shall be evaluated objectively and therefore on a gender-neutral basis. We work to counteract discrimination in various ways. We also follow up the development of gender equality at Swedish higher education institutions. [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 and grade 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 Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Science will monitor and safeguard the quality of the review panel's work. The observer reports back to the scientific council and the secretary general responsible after the review.

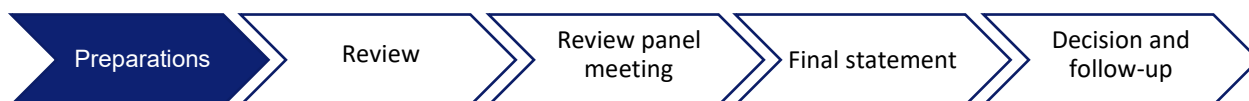
Swedish Research Council personnel

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 the Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences

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](#).

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.

Reporting scientific competence

In order to facilitate the allocation of applications to reviewers, you are asked to report your level of scientific competence for assessing each application at the same time as reporting your conflicts of interest in Prisma. The scientific competence is reported on a three-grade scale: low, medium or high. Please note that you may be asked to review an application even though you reported a competence level of medium or low.

In addition, the research officer will send you a link where you fill in your expertise and key words in a database. The information that you provide will help the chair allocate applications to the most suitable reviewers in the panel.

Technical preparations

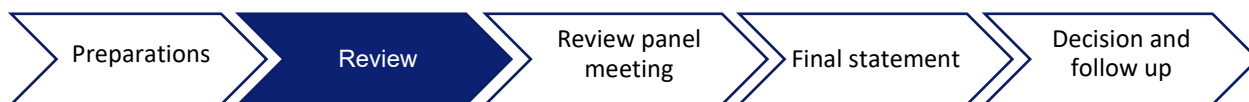
The review panel meeting will be held via the digital platform Zoom. [Download Zoom Desktop client to your computer before the meeting](#).

We recommend that you use a headset with a microphone, 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.	Before the first digital meeting
☐ Report any conflict of interest.	Before the deadline in Prisma
☐ Report scientific competence	Before the deadline

Review



During the review period, you shall:

- read, grade, and rank all applications assigned to you,
- write assessments and preliminary statements.

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 a minimum of three review panel members: one is rapporteur and the rest are reviewers.

If you are the rapporteur, you shall write a *preliminary statement*. This shall consist of a numerical grade and short written comments on all evaluation criteria. The comments shall highlight strengths and weaknesses in the project described rather than summarise its contents. The preliminary statement is primarily a communication with the other panel members. It is only them who will have access to it.

In the role as reviewer, you shall write an *assessment*. This shall consist of a numerical grade as well as written comments on all evaluation criteria. It shall highlight the application's strengths and weaknesses but do not need to be detailed. Your written assessments will be a support, both in the discussion during the review panel meeting and for the rapporteur when writing the final statement after the meeting. The formatting is free and can even be in the form of bullet points. It is only the other panel members who will have access to the assessments.

Ranking applications

Rank each application in relation to the other applications you have reviewed. The ranking supplements the grading and is crucial for preparing the sifting proposal. All reviewers' individual rankings are combined into a preliminary ranking factor for each application. This ranking factor then serves as a starting point for the sifting proposal. It is very important that all reviewers complete the ranking before the deadline, to be able to continue with the sifting process.

Sifting

After the review period has closed, a sifting takes place based on the reviewers' submitted grades and rankings. The sifting process enables more in-depth discussions of the applications that have a reasonable chance of being funded at the review panel meeting.

The chair, in collaboration with the vice chair, prepares a proposal for which applications should be sifted and which should move forward. The proposal is based on the panel members' individual rankings and scores, which are combined into a priority list where the applications considered to be of the highest quality by the review panel move on to be discussed at the review panel meeting. Applications where the three reviewers' rankings or scores differ significantly may also move forward if the chair considers that they should be discussed at the meeting.

Applications that are sifted do not receive specific written comments on their grades, since they have not been discussed in detail at a meeting. Instead, they receive only a standard statement describing the process.

As a panel member, you will review the sifting proposal, including proposed grades. You can then decide whether any of the sifted applications still should be brought forward to the review panel meeting.

To consider during the review

Deviations in the application

If you suspect that the content of an application does not follow good research practice or include incorrect information, please inform the Swedish Research Council personnel as soon as possible. Please do not wait until the review panel meeting. 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.

Assessment criteria

You shall assess the quality of the application based on four assessment criteria:

- Design of the graduate school
- Quality of the research
- Merits of the applicants
- Feasibility

The purpose of using several assessment 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

Design of the graduate school (1–7)

- To what extent do the aims, content, and organisation of the graduate school contribute to added value for doctoral education within the relevant field?
- To what extent does the planned educational offering – including joint courses, seminars, and supervision – support high scientific theoretical and methodological quality in doctoral education?
- To what extent does the graduate school contribute to developing the doctoral students' fundamental scientific competence and to strengthening originality and fostering innovative thinking in their academic work?
- Does the proposed model for doctoral education, and the structure of the educational programme, ensure high pedagogical quality in teaching and supervision?
- How is it ensured that the doctoral students become part of appropriate research environments at the participating higher education institutions?

Quality of the research (1–7)

- To what extent is the focus of the graduate school grounded in relevant and up-to-date research of high scientific quality?
- To what extent do the participating higher education institutions complement each other in terms of relevant and current high-quality research?

Merits of the applicants (1–7)

The assessment of the applicant's merits shall be done based on their relevance for the doctoral programme and in relation to the applicant's career age. Time off for parental leave, sick leave, or similar circumstances should be deducted.

- What experience do the project leader and participating researchers have in leading and conducting doctoral education?
- Are the applicant and participating researchers well-qualified within their respective fields?
- To what extent does the combined competence contribute to high quality in the doctoral education?

Feasibility (1–3)

- In what ways do the organisation and leadership of the graduate school ensure quality in its implementation?
- How does each of the participating departments/institutions contribute to the graduate school?
- How is the competence of supervisors ensured?
- Has the applicant demonstrated that there is a sufficient national supply of (potential) doctoral students?
- How is access to staff, infrastructure, and other necessary resources guaranteed?
- Is the budget of the graduate school realistic in relation to its aims, content, and organisation?

Overall assessment (1–7)

Weigh together the above subsidiary criteria into an overall grade that reflects your assessment of the application's quality.

Grading scales

The assessment of the design of the graduate school, the quality of the research, and the merits of the applicants 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 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 if a conflict-of-interest situation makes an application difficult to evaluate. In normal cases, the chair determines the need for external reviewers, and the research officer will contact the suggested reviewers. The external reviewers provide written assessments for each subsidiary criterion but no numerical grades.

Prepare for the meeting

Before the meeting, you should prepare brief presentations of strengths and weaknesses of the applications for which you are the rapporteur. If there are any external reviewers, their assessments should also be presented. The presentation should be brief and to the point, power point presentations are not needed. Please also prepare for the meeting by reading other panel members' comments. They become available in Prisma when the system closes for editing

Review: summary

What you need to do	When
☐ Grade and write comments (preliminary statement) on all applications for which you are the rapporteur.	Before the deadline
☐ Grade and write comments (assessment) 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

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 room or the digital 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 of the applications with the highest scientific quality shall be carried out. The applications will first be sorted based

on the joint grading. If two or more applications have the same grades, they will then be compared against each other.

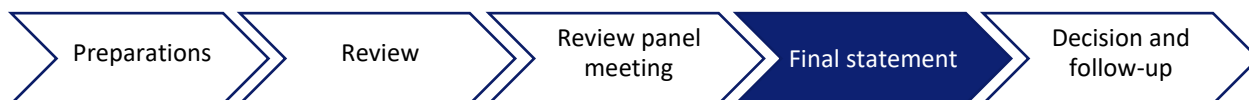
The result of the prioritisation is the review panel's proposal for applications to be recommended funding. A list with reserves shall also be produced.

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-making 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 shall modify the preliminary statement that you wrote before the meeting so that it reflects the review panel's joint assessment of the application. In addition to your notes from the meeting, the assessments from the other reviewers will be available to you in Prisma when you write the final statement. You usually have one week 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.

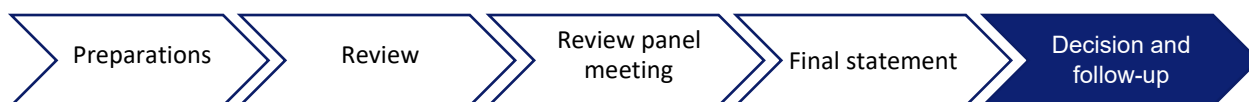
Completing the final statements, you must not

- 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 to the Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Science the decision on doctoral programme grants in this field. The Scientific Council's decision is based on: the priority list (including reserves) arrived at by the review panel; any justifications from the chairs; and the review panel's 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 also 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.