Welcome by the editor

Welcome to the latest edition of the College Newsletter. This edition includes a video from Samantha Francis – Head of Peer Review in EPSRC.

Last year saw the end of Phase 1 of the College project with the successful recruitment of over 1000 new College members and an increase in College diversity. This is by no means the end of our quest to improve the way that we maintain and manage our College. Phase 2 will continue during 2017 with two work streams looking into the selection of reviewers and the recognising excellence in peer review. Our Business Integrators Team will be investigating ways in which we can encourage more members from the business community and international experts.

2016 also saw the completion of a Balancing Capability research area refresh. The outcome of this was published at the end of February. There is an update in this newsletter and a link to the main article on the EPSRC website.

Role of the College

To watch the video of Samantha Francis, Head of Peer Review in EPSRC updating College Members on the outcome of the recent Peer Review College renewal click on the image below

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Balancing Capability

2016 Review of Research Areas

The goal of the Balancing Capability strategy is to align the EPSRC portfolio to areas of UK strength and national importance and maintain the UK’s strength in international research.

Professor Philip Nelson, EPSRC's Chief Executive, said: "Balancing Capability is an important tool, together with our other strategies of Accelerating Impact and Building Leadership, to help us to deliver against the goals in our Strategic Plan and the four Prosperity Outcomes (Productive, Connected, Resilient, and Healthy Nation) in our Delivery Plan."

We are committed to funding excellent research across our portfolio, and, similarly, to maintaining the right conditions for supporting the best researchers to explore their ideas. Excellence is always the primary consideration as judged by peer review. Regardless of any designation and suggested trajectory for a research area, we will continue to support the highest quality research wherever it arises.

We are in constant conversation with the academic community, finding out what is developing and where talent lies. So this exercise is not an isolated process and we remain flexible and responsive to changes and discoveries. We recognise how integral the sciences and engineering are to the country’s success but we also know that resources are limited and we have to assess where we need to focus funds strategically.

Please follow this link for the full news article:
https://www.epsrc.ac.uk/newsevents/news/balancingcapabilityresults/

The EPSRC Blog

Visit the EPSRC blog where there are new blogs by Dr Ruth Mallors-Ray on Balancing Capability, Miss Emma Metcalfe-Smith on Interdisciplinary Research and the New Year’s Resolutions from leaders in the EPSRC arena:
https://www.epsrc.ac.uk/blog/
Changes in Process

Combined Panel for Physical Sciences Applications

Since September 2016 the Physical Sciences Theme has been running a combined panel for standard and first grants, and the first stage of assessment for fellowship applications. Before this date chemistry, physics, and materials proposals were considered in separate, parallel meetings.

A combined panel meeting has allowed the theme to make efficiency savings in the panel process while also increasing the frequency of meetings. Research proposals are now considered seven rather than five times a year, and fellowships three instead of twice. In turn this has allowed the theme to decrease the number of late papers for meeting participants and speed up the funding decision for applicants. No change has been made to the budget which was never separated into allocations for chemistry, physics, or materials. It also brings the Theme in line with the other EPSRC Themes’ processes, and will result in efficiency savings.

Fig 1 Previous Physical Sciences theme panel process

Roling Members

Roling Members

ROL= Rank order list

Fig 2 Physical Sciences theme panel process from September 2016

The change was made following engagement with the Strategic Advisory Team and discussions with previous panel chairs. The decision has been highlighted to the community since February 2016. This has included a news item and briefing on the EPSRC website and discussions at the physical sciences regional workshops, both in March 2016, and has been a topic raised during portfolio manager interactions and team visits to universities.

Now that the Theme has run three combined panel meetings an initial evaluation of the process will take place. Longer term, the theme plans to evaluate the new process more fully 12-18 months after its introduction. This will include understanding what, if any, impact the process has had on the type of research funded and seeking opportunities to refine the process.
Unconscious Bias

The long-term strength of the UK research base depends on harnessing all the available talent. As an investor in research, we are committed to attracting the best researchers into research and innovation careers.

Working through RCUK we will deliver the RCUK Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Action Plan which has the objectives of:

- Leading by example
- Challenging bias and ensuring fair and inclusive funding processes
- Leading and supporting change in our research community.

The EPSRC Equality and Diversity Team are working with psychologists Pearn Kandola to develop an Unconscious Bias Training Programme for EPSRC staff, Council members and our advisory boards. There will also be an online training module for Peer Reviewers and Panel Members which will be made available later in 2017. The training will help us to: understand how unconscious bias can impact our decision making; recognise the importance of managing unconscious bias in our work; explore the practical steps we can take to reduce the impact of unconscious bias.

What is Unconscious Bias?

Unconscious bias happens by our brain making incredibly quick judgments, assumptions, interpretations and decisions without us realising.

Our biases are influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences. We are ALL affected by unconscious bias. The impact of unconscious bias can be managed by the way in which decisions are made.

The outcome of the 2016 College Renewal

We had a very positive response to our first ever call for College Members with over a thousand applications. This enabled us to increase diversity without losing our long standing experts. We were very pleased with the number of College Members who agreed to continue serving. We now have a membership that reflects the expertise that we require for our portfolio and new delivery plan whilst helping new members to develop their understanding of Peer Review to meet EPSRC’s future needs.

Why be a College Member?

College members have an opportunity to be more involved with EPSRC, gaining strategic knowledge whilst also being able to influence strategic thinking. Members see what drives the allocation of science funding and gain an insight into the current research landscape whilst also developing an understanding of how decisions are reached.

We asked two of our members to write a short piece for our website on their experience of being a college member. These articles can be found here: https://www.epsrc.ac.uk/funding/assessmentprocess/college/memberselection/insiderview/
Why is the College Training important for you?

All College Members have access to the on-line training package allowing members to keep abreast of process changes as they occur. Once completed the training stays available for members to dip into and use as a resource tool. We encourage all members to keep in touch with changes as the modules are refreshed several times a year.

Important Changes to the Online Training

On the 4th February 2017 we released new versions of the on-line training modules.

Changes included:

Module 1 – [Course Introduction]
• minor text changes

Module 2 – [Strategic Criteria]
• minor text changes

Module 3 – [Postal Peer Review]
• changes to reviewer diversity in the quiz’s

Module 4 – [Peer Review Meetings]
• Addition of ‘Fairness’ to the Principles of Peer Review – slide 20
• Taking positive steps to safeguard our funding decisions’ – additional slide on unconscious bias and fairness in meetings - Slide 21

Notes from the Editor

For many of our newer College Members this will be the first newsletter since becoming a member. Previous editions can be found on the EPSRC website; I hope you find them informative.

As always we appreciate any feedback that will help us to improve future editions and are always looking for suggestions for future articles. Please contact us at: College@epsrc.ac.uk

Ali Griffiths
EPSRC Peer Review Team

Further Information

Details about EPSRC and the peer review process may be found at http://www.epsrc.ac.uk. EPSRC’s current support may be found through the easily searchable “Grants on the Web” facility at http://gow.epsrc.ac.uk