In this Newsletter

This Newsletter is being distributed to members of the Peer Review College in the form of a PDF file, rather than it being printed and posted. We hope that this format is acceptable to members, and that you will appreciate the considerable savings in administrative costs which this has made possible.

Introduction from Dave Delpy, Chief Executive of EPSRC

I wanted to take this opportunity to introduce myself as Chief Executive of EPSRC, and to thank you for your continued support as a member of the EPSRC Peer Review College. The College is EPSRC’s primary source of scientific knowledge and expertise, and I hope that you will continue to work with us to promote research excellence and knowledge transfer.

Science has no boundaries, and is a global endeavour. Consequently the College is made up of individuals from many backgrounds: academics, representatives of the international community, and from business and commerce. You have all been nominated by your peers as individuals they have confidence in to assess their research proposals, and to remain impartial and unbiased in your views. You should therefore be rightly proud to be a member of the College, as we are proud to have you as a member.

In partnerships with bodies such as the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), and the other Research Councils, EPSRC works to fund research of the highest international standards. Your contribution to that process is vital.

Dave Delpy
EPSRC Chief Executive
Meeting Documents on CD: More choice for Panels

We will soon be able to offer panel members the choice of having meeting papers sent to them on CD rather than on paper. Currently the only option is hard copy. We are doing this to cut down on printing costs, to help minimise the amount of paper we use, to reduce courier costs and (literally) to ease the burden of carrying papers when travelling to a meeting venue.

The CD volume is user friendly; papers are all hyperlinked and it is easy to navigate between documents. We should also be able to provide laptops to read the CDs on the day of the meeting for those who do not wish to bring their own laptop along.

Panel members will be offered the choice of CD or hard copy when we are arranging the details of the meeting.

Contact: Douglas Niven. Douglas.Niven@epsrc.ac.uk

Principles of Peer Review

We make all our funding decisions based on expert advice so peer review is at the heart of our business. We think it’s important that we use peer review with integrity in a consistent way. As such we have drawn together a number of principles for peer review which we believe constitute a robust and quality assessment process:

- Transparency: all peer review process details and assessment criteria will be published before proposals are submitted
- Appropriateness: peer review processes will be used that reflect the level of investment and complexity of the work
- Managing interests: all participants in the peer review process must declare interests that relate to the proposals being considered
- Confidentiality: proposals should be treated in confidence
- Expert assessment: expert peer reviewers will be used to assess the scientific merit of proposals
- Prioritisation: proposals will be prioritised if the expert assessment has been sufficiently supportive
- Right to reply: principal investigators should be given the right to reply to expert reviewers’ comments if the proposal is to be prioritised
- Separation of duties: funding decisions will be separate from peer review decisions
- No parallel assessment: we will avoid carrying out multiple parallel assessments of a proposal’s relative merit

You can expect these principles to apply to responsive mode, new calls for proposals and for all grant schemes which are subject to peer review. If there are any exceptions to these principles we will clearly state this at the time the call or scheme is established. Please note that these principles apply to full proposals only. Grant schemes such as Doctoral Training Grants, which are calculated by an algorithm are also exempt.

Further information on these principles is available from our website.
Improving the Quality of Reviews: Written Comments Take Precedence

Full electronic peer review was introduced by EPSRC in May 2007, bringing new functionality to peer reviewers, applicants and Research Organisations. Enhancements through Je-S include access to reviewers’ comments for investigators and the availability of full documentation for reviewers online. These changes should ensure that applicants and reviewers can complete their tasks with the minimum of fuss which, in turn, should help to ensure that peer review flows more smoothly.

Although the Je-S interface is very much improved, every now and then a reviewer submits an assessment which is not usable. This happens in less than 1% of cases, but as delays in receiving usable comments can extend the time it takes to process applications we would like to reduce them as much as possible.

Most commonly, comments are judged to be unusable because they are too sparse, for instance giving one-word answers, or too bland, failing to justify criticisms or praise. Such reviews do not give Prioritisation Panels enough evidence on which to base a decision, and in the past have been excluded from the process.

On their own, the tick-box ratings in a sparse or poorly-justified review are not particularly useful. Written comments are far more valuable, and are given a much greater weight in panel deliberations. From now on, rather than simply not using them at all, reviews which do not contain sufficient commentary will be returned to reviewers through Je-S, along with some explanation of where extra comment is required.

This doesn’t mean that short answers are not acceptable, or that every section in a review should be completed to the same level of detail. We will be looking at reviews as a whole when deciding whether they are useful. By applying our understanding of the requirements that panels have in making decisions we hope to be able to improve the quality of peer review.

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College Launch Days

As you will have read in the last edition, we have been considering whether to run a mid-term event for members, possibly along the lines of the College Launch Days run successfully in early 2006 and 2003. We sought your views on the appropriateness of our holding such an event, and on what you would like to see covered.

Following an analysis of the responses, and of the costs such an event would incur, we have now concluded that it would be better to hold back on this for now. The EPSRC website contains details of our current thinking, as well as relevant facts and figures. Similarly, the publications ‘Newsline’ and ‘Connect’ are sent to all members periodically, and also contain useful information.
Final Reports: Narrative not required from April

Along with the other Research Councils, EPSRC is developing a new final reporting process. This process will be more efficient and effective in capturing both the short and longer term outcomes from the grants we fund. While it is being developed, we are modifying our current final report process in preparation for the change. As a result, from 1 April 2008 onwards we will not require a narrative report when final reports are submitted.

Grant holders will still be required to complete a final report form to provide information on the outcomes of a grant. They will also be required to submit a short statement explaining any significant differences between the planned and actual expenditure on the grant. Neither of these will be sent out for peer review. We hope these changes will reduce the reporting burden for researchers, and ease the demand on peer reviewers.

Motivation for this change comes from the recent RCUK Peer Review Efficiency Project, which found that more than 80% of the full economic cost of the final reporting process went into the preparation of the report by the investigators and host organisation. Between them, the Research Councils are expected to make £30m of peer review efficiency gains over the Comprehensive Spending Review period (2008-2011) and the changes being planned for final reporting will make the single largest contribution to this target.

Some final reports are currently in the middle of their assessment. Unless otherwise communicated, these will be peer reviewed and graded to provide the feedback the investigators and research organisations were expecting when they submitted them. Despite not requiring the final report narrative, we are still keen to hear of successes and the impact of our grant funding. The information provided on the report form is evidence essential in analysing the performance of the engineering and physical sciences research community.

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Reviewers’ Incentive Scheme - Recognising and rewarding your work

The essential role played by reviewers has always been recognised as central to the success and integrity of EPSRC’s peer review activities. The willingness of reviewers to participate is primarily due to high levels of goodwill and a feeling that reviewing is as an act of service to the community; something that ‘goes with the territory’ in academic life.

With increasing and competing demands on reviewers’ time, EPSRC has sought ways to both raise the profile of reviewing and improve return rates. A significant step in achieving this was the launch in 2001 of the Referees’ Incentive Scheme. Following a very positive review in 2004, the scheme has progressed from a pilot to a fully fledged part of our operations. Now, reflecting the harmonisation of terminology across the Research Councils, this activity has been renamed the Reviewers’ Incentive Scheme

The scheme will continue to use a points system to distribute an annual fund amongst UK university departments in proportion to the amount (and timeliness) of reviewing undertaken by academic members. One point is credited for each usable review, with another added if
received by the requested date. By the time the next round of payments has been made in early 2008, £4.5M of additional research funding will have been distributed through the scheme.

The Reviewers’ Incentive Scheme rewards the contribution of UK academic reviewers by allowing them to earn additional research funds for their departments. However, we are very conscious that EPSRC relies on a wide range of reviewers and in the year ahead we will be considering how the valuable contributions of those from industry or at overseas institutions can also be recognised. We welcome your comments on or questions about the Scheme.

Contact: ris@epsrc.ac.uk

Why be a College Member?

In the last Newsletter, we asked why you chose to become a member of the College. We received a number of responses, and they showed that the vast majority of academic members based in the UK see membership as a sense of duty to their colleagues, and to their discipline.

Industrial members of the College will typically look at things from a different standpoint. Two responses from members working in industry were particularly interesting, and extracts are shown below. The first came from an employee of a large company, whereas the second is from someone working in a smaller organisation.

“There is no prestige or status for individuals within the company (even though I do try to emphasise the significance of the numbers of ‘Company X’ staff who were appointed to the most recently formed College). Similarly, many of our staff do not need to keep abreast of the academic literature and programmes, so their involvement in the College is not as valuable as for academics in universities.

So you may ask why do we support the College? In ‘Company X’, it is mainly those engaged in work with universities that have the credentials to qualify them to do so. They value the interaction with academics, and the opportunities to maintain awareness of proposals and hence the broader directions of university work.”

Another member expressed the view:

“I work in industrial research - concentrating on the long term thinking for the future of the company over a long timescale. The work involves pushing the boundaries of the scientific understanding and questioning fundamental principles. The company’s products compete favourably across the world, this means that the research we do has to compete at the same level. This makes me principally a scientist who happens to work in industry.

That is the background, but basically it comes down to an interest in science, and my science fortunately fits with the company’s interests. I am just a scientist that happens to work in industry and enjoys being part of this community of like-minded people. That is what makes me get involved in external activities. As far as benefits to the company or kudos for me within the company - there is little advantage. They probably think I am mad for taking on all these external activities.”

We continue to appreciate the contributions of all reviewers, and thank respondents for the time taken in providing us with an insight into the conflicting demands and pressures on their time.
Interesting Statistics

The tables below show data on responses from College members to requests to review proposals over the period 1 January 2007 to 30 June 2007. In this six month period, a total of 6090 reviews were sought from College members (and 2666 from non-College members). Also shown is the average time to respond.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of response</th>
<th>College Members</th>
<th>Average Days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Responded</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Late</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable - conflict of interest</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable - other</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable - outside experience area</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable - too busy</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unuseable</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useable</td>
<td>4311</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
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</tr>
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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

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