

Peer Review College Newsletter

Autumn 2011

Introduction

As promised in the last issue, the main feature article this time sets out to provide more information about the changes we are making to our grant assessment process so that so that our funding decisions can be more clearly strategically based, and in particular about the revised mechanisms that will be used to ensure that such decisions continue to be appropriately informed by peer review.

Also in this issue is an article on changes being made to our policy on repeatedly unsuccessful applicants, arising from a review of the first year of operation of this policy, and also an article about how we will manage ongoing college membership. This includes a mechanism by which potential college members can be identified by the community and I would like to thank all those members who responded to the invitation for suggestions about this in the previous issue. Your input has been very helpful and has substantially shaped this process.

National Importance in Peer Review

In the last issue of the newsletter there was an article about changes we were planning to make to the way we support research. In this article I will try and explain further how the first of these changes will work in practice, and in particular what this will mean for you when you are asked to review proposals or serve on a peer review panel.

First of all let me reiterate why we feel we need to do this. The UK research base faces major challenges that need to be addressed if we are to continue to be a global player in research. The UK cannot compete globally on volume and increasingly faces competition on quality in all areas of research. So we have to be more strategic in our approach. We need to identify where the UK has unique capabilities and strengths that other countries do not have, or where in addition to academic excellence there are significant opportunities for existing industry or to grow new industries, and where we can become world leaders in emerging research areas and technologies.

As the major national funder of research in engineering and physical sciences for the UK EPSRC has articulated a very clear goal of Shaping Capability – namely to focus our portfolio in areas of international research excellence and national importance. We will therefore base all investment decisions over the Delivery Plan period on international excellence, national importance (set in a global context) and the EPSRC portfolio while continuing to encourage the free generation of ideas, curiosity and research creativity.



As explained in the previous newsletter peer review is central to achieving this goal and therefore we need to adapt our current process in support of it. There are two key changes and we will be phasing the implementation of these changes over the next six months. The first of these changes relates to the national importance of the proposed research. Starting from November 15th, applicants will need to include within their case for support a statement explaining how their proposal meets this new assessment criterion. In this statement they need to clearly identify the national importance of the research over a 10 to 50 year time frame in relation to other research in the area, showing how the research underpins or contributes to priority areas for other research councils, or how it aligns to national UK priorities, explaining the global impact of the work, or how it responds to user/stakeholder pull. Examples of importance would include:

- Key to maintaining the health of other research disciplines
- Directly contributes to addressing key UK societal challenges
- Contributes to current or future UK economic success
- Enables future development of key emerging industry(s)

This requirement will apply to all types and classes of research proposal, including fellowships.

To reflect this change, revised reviewer forms will be introduced for use for proposals which have to meet this new requirement. These new forms, and revised guidance on completing them, can be found here. We have taken the opportunity to update several sections of these forms as follows:

1. **Pathways to Impact:** The requirements here have not changed but the text of the question has been changed to improve its clarity and reflect the revised guidance that we issued last year;
2. **Resources and Management:** This question has been amended slightly to reflect the revised arrangements for supporting equipment (explained in the previous newsletter);
3. **National Importance:** The introduction of an additional section to comment on how well the applicants have made their case for the national importance of their research.

Under this section you are asked to comment on how well the applicants have made the case that their research aligns with UK strengths and priorities. You should base your assessment on the strength of this alignment rather than the absolute importance of the anticipated research outputs, which should only influence your assessment if you feel it to be unusually important or particularly weak. The case for importance will be significantly based on anticipated outcomes that might not be delivered. This uncertainty should not normally be a factor in reaching your assessment. However, if you feel the outcomes are strongly overstated, or there are good reasons for believing they are very unlikely to be realised, you should score the proposal accordingly.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE DATA PROTECTION ACT 1998
In accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998, the personal data provided on this form will be processed by EPSRC.
database and/or manual files. Further details may be found in the guidance notes.
EPSRC Reference: []
Linked Reference: []

Standard Grant Peer Review

Applicant Details
Applicant: [] Organisation: []

Title of Research Project
Title: []

Review Information
Reference: [] Reviewer Reference: []
Due Date: []

Research Council Contact Details
EPSRC Administration Contact: [] Email: [] Telephone: []

Quality
Please comment on the degree of excellence of the proposal making reference to:
• The novelty, relationship to the context and insights
• The innovation, advance and transformative aspects described
• The appropriateness of the proposed methodology
For multi-disciplinary proposals please state which aspects of the proposal you feel qualified to assess

The nature of the case that can be made will vary by the nature of the research being proposed. A very fundamental, blue-skies proposal will need to make a different sort of case to a project seeking to directly address a current real-world problem. Similarly the case for a large research consortium will be different to that for a small proof of concept exploration. To judge all these different proposal types against a single standard benchmark would be arbitrary and unfair so what we are seeking instead is a relative assessment based against your view of what would be a reasonable expectation for that type of proposal.

The second change relates to fit to the EPSRC portfolio. Fit to the EPSRC portfolio, using the information developed and published in the "Our Portfolio" section of our web page, will be considered as part of the peer review process. The details of this change will be developed with a group of key external stakeholders drawn from the wider research community including from our Council, Strategic Advisory Network, Strategic Advisory Teams and previous panel members. There are a number of options we wish to test and pilot and changes will not be implemented until a later date to enable us to take on board input from this group. Further information about this and how it will be implemented will be the subject of an article in a later newsletter.

If you would like further information about the various changes that have been introduced into EPSRC application and peer review requirements this year then EPSRC are arranging a series of three regional meetings. These will cover changes relating to support for equipment and changes to the assessment criteria used in judging research proposals, and includes an interactive workshop on how to identify and describe National Importance in the context of a research proposal.

The three meetings have been arranged for:

12th December	LONDON	Copthorne Tara Hotel,
13th December	MANCHESTER	Mercure Manchester Piccadilly Hotel,
14th December	EDINBURGH	Hilton Edinburgh Grosvenor Hotel,

If you would like to register your interest for these events to receive further information please email EPSRCDSTHub@epsrc.ac.uk. While EPSRC will make every effort to accommodate everyone who wishes to attend, should an event become oversubscribed it may be necessary, to ensure a fair representation across universities, to limit numbers from any one institution.



Repeatedly Unsuccessful Applicant (RUA) Policy

The RUA Policy was introduced in 2009 because of concerns over increasing levels of demand and the various consequences of this in terms of peer review, particularly the decreasing success rates and markedly reduced response rates to review requests. Since the introduction of this Policy we have seen a real improvement in research proposal funding rates with the overall rate for 2010/11 increasing to 36% from a previous level of 26%. Over the same period we have seen a substantial improvement in reviewer response rates, driven mainly by a substantial improvement in responses by college members, for which we would like to offer you all some well deserved congratulations along with our grateful thanks.

We have carried out a review of the policy which considered feedback received from the Research Community. Following this review several policy changes will be implemented with affect from October 2011.

Policy changes

- Out of EPSRC Remit Office Rejects will no longer be included in the calculations. However we always encourage applicants to send an enquiry to the EPSRC Remit Group prior to submitting an application if there is uncertainty as to where the proposed research best sits.
- Applications that are Office Rejected for other reasons (submitted incorrectly, not within call guidelines, etc.) will still be included.
- Specific calls that include an EPSRC sifting stage will still be included in the policy but those applications that are invited to the second stage/interview panel will not be included in the 'bottom' half of the list' calculation. However the decisions on all the applications will still count towards the applicant's personal success rate.
- Meeting prioritisation rank lists with less than 10 applications will be excluded from the calculations (as opposed to the current minimum of 5). However please note that the decisions on these applications will continue to be included in an applicant's personal success rate calculation.

These changes have been applied from 1 October 2011 and will affect decisions made after this date.

Changes to the Research Office Summary reports

In response to comments received, we will continue to calculate the summary reports sent to research offices on a monthly basis but will only email them when there has been a change to one of the lists ('constrained' or 'warned'). We will highlight people who have been included or removed since the previous report. Twice a year in April and October will email a copy to all Research Offices who have a colleague on one of the lists.

We continue to seek feedback from PIs affected by the policy and their Research Offices to understand how the policy has changed submission strategies and on what support is provided to applicants. We will review the policy again over the coming months.

Further details of the policy are available [here](#).

Arrangements for Managing and Refreshing the College

In the previous issue we explained the change we had made in moving away from fixed period college appointments to open ended appointments, and why we felt this to be beneficial to EPSRC and the research community. Now in this article we will explain the processes we are putting in place for managing and refreshing the college membership.

The college is very much a functional body, and its overall size is determined essentially by the anticipated volume of reviewing activity that it will need to undertake. Under previous arrangements ~25% of the membership was renewed every three years, under current arrangements we expect the rate of change to be ~10% each year. Populating the college is a complex process as it has to be balanced against a range of different requirements (see table). For this reason we have always solicited nominations for the college rather than held a simple election. Following nomination we have operated a selection process to map nominees against a matrix that ensures we attain the requisite balances across the college, and for this reason nomination has never guaranteed appointment.



College Balance

In populating the college it is necessary to ensure an appropriate membership distribution to meet a number of specific requirements:

Expertise: the college needs a sufficient spread of expertise to cover the full breadth of the EPSRC remit, distributed to effectively meet anticipated demand levels across the different subject areas;

Diversity: The college membership should reflect the wider research community in terms of distribution by:

- age,
- gender
- ethnicity;

Regional: the college membership should be distributed such that membership is not unreasonably concentrated in any region, organisation or group of organisations.

We intend to continue to operate a very similar process. A fundamental purpose of the college is to enable the community to identify those individuals who they feel to be suitable to peer review their proposals, and thus to give general assurance of the quality and appropriateness of peer review within of our process. It is therefore essential that any revised process should continue to afford the community both this opportunity and assurance. To refresh the college we will therefore draw on two sources for new members:

- 1) We will continue the existing policy where anyone appointed to an EPSRC fellowship is automatically invited onto the college (we current anticipate ~70 new fellows each year).



- 2) We will maintain a “nominee-pool” from which the remaining new members will be drawn. Nominations in the pool will remain valid for up to three years but will lapse if the nominee has not been invited to become a college member within that period. There are four routes by which this pool will be populated:
- a) **Community nomination:** individuals can be nominated at any time who meet specified criteria (able to demonstrate an appropriate degree of scientific standing, including an ability to attract funding from EPSRC and/or equivalent funding agencies commensurate with their career stage) supported by five references from independent researchers of good standing and who have recently peer reviewed for EPSRC.
 - b) **EPSRC nomination:** non-college members identified in our data records with a current track record in reviewing for EPSRC where either:
 - i) their reviews are consistently rated as appropriate and helpful at panel;
 - ii) they have been significantly identified as an applicant nominated reviewer;
 - c) **Industrial Partner nomination:** EPSRC will periodically seek suggestions from our Industrial Partners for appropriate college members drawn from the user base;
 - d) **International Partner nomination:** EPSRC will periodically seek suggestions from our International Partners, including via RCUK International Offices, for appropriate college members drawn from outside the UK.

Full details of the Community Nomination process, and the mechanism for submitting nominations, will be published on our web site very shortly.

We will undertake a refresh of the college every year in the summer with the first such refresh now taking place in 2012. The refresh will first of all replace all those members who for various reasons opt to stand down from the college. We will also examine college response rates and members who have consistently failed to provide requested reviews will have their membership terminated. We will then re-examine the desired balance across the college. Unfortunately we expect each year to find a number of existing members who no longer fit the balance requirements for the college and we will have to ask them to stand down to enable the appropriate re-balancing to occur. Such requests will be based solely on these structural considerations and will make no implication about their performance as a college member, their ability as a researcher or their perceived standing in the community.

Membership Matters

Congratulations

EPSRC wish to extend its warmest congratulations to the following members, upon their election to fellowship of the Royal Academy of Engineering:

Professor Simon Biggs
Professor Nicholas Buenfeld
Professor Eileen Harkin-Jones
Professor Andrew Keane
Professor Mohamed Missous
Professor Jason Reese
Professor Andrew Sherry
Professor E Hugh Stitt

In Memoriam

Sadly we again have to report the loss of college members, having recently learned of the deaths of Professor David Langford and of Professor Ulrich Nehmzow. Our thoughts are with their family and friends at this time.

Standing Down

The following long-standing members have chosen to stand down from the college:

Professor Geof Ashwell
Professor Jon Dobson
Mr Philip Gray
Professor John Winfield

We wish to record our grateful thanks for the important contribution they have made over many years (over 16 years of continuous membership in one case) .

Gone Away

We appear to have lost contact with the following college members:

Professor Paul Bowen, previously at University of Cape Town
Doctor Franz Bucar, previously at Karl-Franzens Universitat, Graz
Mister Ian Care, previously at Rolls-Royce
Professor Roger Coleman, previously at Royall College of Art
Professor Mark Daymond, previously at Open University
Professor Juergen Dix, previously at Technical University, Clausthal
Doctor Peter Foote, previously at BAE Systems
Doctor Stephen Garwood, previously at Rolls-Royce
Doctor Ian Grout, previously at University of Limerick
Mister Chris Jack, previously at Rolls Royce
Doctor Dan Kells, previously at BAE Systems
Doctor Serena Margadonna, previously at University of Edinburgh
Mister Paul McKee, previously at British Telecom Research Labs
Doctor Michael Percival, previously at Rolls-Royce
Professor Thomas Pichler, previously at University of Wien
Professor Stephen Prosser, previously at TRW Automotive Centre
Professor David Rankin, previously at University of Edinburgh
Doctor Amir Rezai, previously at BAE Systems
Professor David Rickerby, previously at Rolls-Royce
Doctor Michael Robertson, previously at The Centre for Integrated Photonics
Doctor Saeid Sanei, previously at Cardiff University
Professor Karen Scrivener, previously at Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne
Professor Mehdi Tavakoli, previously at TWI Ltd
Professor Colin Whitehouse, previously at Daresbury Laboratory
Doctor Yang Yang, previously at UCL
Professor John Yates, previously at University of Sheffield

If anyone is still in contact with any of these can you please encourage them to update their contact details on Je-S? Alternatively ask them to drop a note to college@epsrc.ac.uk if they feel it is no longer appropriate to continue as a college member.



Cybersecurity Greenpaper

The Global Uncertainty Programme is one of six RCUK priority themes and brings together the activities of all seven UK Research Councils to better integrate current research investments as well as support new multi-disciplinary research. This Programme has published a green paper for cybersecurity research which can be downloaded from the GU website.

EPSRC is leading the cybersecurity aspects of this programme on behalf of RCUK and is seeking to:

- Connect academic researchers, business and other users of research with each other as a means of further strengthening the UK cybersecurity research community;
- Communicate research results, needs and ideas between academic researchers, security professionals and government;
- Commission, where necessary and as funds allow, new research in the most promising areas, addressing priorities agreed among academic researchers, business and government stakeholders.



There will be a cybersecurity research 'showcase' event on **Wednesday 23rd November 2011** at Church House Conference Centre, London. This will bring together academic researchers and key problem owners to share information on current activities, issues and research programmes. Invitations were issued in July 2011 but College Members with an interest who would like to attend can still email alex.hulkes@epsrc.ac.uk to register your interest. Note that if the event becomes over-subscribed priority will be given to attendees who hold grants to support research relevant to this area.



Editor's End-Piece

When I was asked to take this role on I was warned the main problem for newsletter editors is actually finding copy to include. So far circumstances have been such that I have not faced this problem, indeed rather the reverse. Will I continue to be this fortunate? Well the odds seem very against it. So, if there is something you would like to see covered in the newsletter, either an article about some aspect of EPSRC you would like to know something more about, or a standing item of some sort, please let me know and I will see what I can do.

The next few months will be busy. We will of course need to implement the process changes described in this (and the previous) issue, both for peer review and for identifying potential new college members. Once those are in place we will undertake our first exercise to refresh college membership.

EPSRC has an ongoing responsibility to assure the quality of the peer review process it operates. In this context can I repeat my perennial reminder about the on-line training and urge those of you yet to do so to give it a try. It can be found at <http://www.epsrc.info/> and should only take ~ 30 minutes to complete.

Feedback on this newsletter, on the issues it raises, or on anything relating to your membership of the EPSRC College is welcome and can either be posted for wider debate via the Discussion Forum on the training site at <http://www.epsrc.info/> or privately by e-mail to college@epsrc.ac.uk

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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>