

# Peer Review College Newsletter

December 2010



## Christmas Message

I am really pleased to have the opportunity to write to you all at the start of this holiday season. It is now six months since we brought this current peer review college into operation, and since then we have considered 1900 research proposals, involving the provision of 7800 individual reviewer reports, resulting in the award of 710 research grants with an overall value of £477 million. This clearly shows both the scale and importance of the role you all play as college members in helping us to deliver our mission.

We are entering a period of significant change, with all the doubts and uncertainties this brings. The first change is already well underway, and that is the transfer of our operational grants processing activities into the RCUK Shared Service Centre. I am certain that this change, which took effect earlier this month, will, over time, lead to significant benefits to both the research councils and the research communities they support. It is intended to be entirely transparent, involving no change in how you submit either proposals or reviews, although there will inevitably be some changes in your working contacts, with much of your routine interaction now being with the SSC teams. A great deal of work has been done to make this transition as smooth as possible, but it is still a major change so I hope you will bear with us if there are any problems as we move this forward.

More challenging will be the introduction of our next four-year delivery plan, based on the budgets allocated to us following the recent spending review. I expect to have received details of our budget allocation by the end of this year, and to be able to start setting out our plans for the coming period early in the New Year. I will ensure that you are kept informed as this progresses.

Finally we intend to make a series of changes to try and use our college to better effect, to develop a better relationship with you all by empowering you to better engage with us in a variety of ways, and to try and give more back to you in return for the important help you give us. Some changes have already been identified and will be implemented over the coming months, but we will also be initiating a period of consultation with you to identify how best to achieve these goals.

I should like to finish by taking this opportunity to wish you all a very enjoyable and relaxed Christmas, and a happy and successful New Year.

Dave Delpy



## Review of Pathways to Impact

EPSRC has undertaken a review of the introduction of pathways to impact (PTI) into research proposals. The review examined ~10% of research and fellowship proposals on which a funding decision was made during the 12 month period ending June 2010. The review looked at how the Impact Summary and Pathway to Impact had been completed, particularly at the types and range of the impacts identified, and of the activities identified to help realise them, and the resources requested to do this. It also examined how well postal peer review had identified the strengths and weaknesses of these elements, and at how panels used this information in determining their overall rankings.

A full report of this review will be published next year, and this article provides a summary of the findings, with a particular emphasis on those aspects that relate particularly to peer review.

Applicants were found to be taking the PTI document seriously and trying to address the EPSRC requirements. They were generally better at identifying the potential impact of their work, using the full range of different impact types in this, than they were in describing the activities they would undertake to help realise them. Many PTIs were quite vague in this respect, lacking detail about what would actually be done or when.

Where activities were identified, dissemination predominated e.g.: websites and journals. There was also good evidence of strong public engagement activity. Generally though there was a lack of imagination with few new ideas being documented. There were a lot of the 'usual' conferences and journals and little consideration of different audiences. The review found that Impact was not embedded in the applications but was rather an afterthought. There was little mention of timelines and on the whole these were presented as an addition to the end of the project rather than being integral through its life. More consideration needed to be given to longer term impact.

There were several issues identified regarding peer review of the PTI:

- There was clearly some confusion about what the reviewer report should comment on. Many reviewers joined the applicants in focussing on identifying the potential impact, with some basing their assessment mainly on the importance of that impact, with relatively few commenting on the appropriateness of the activities proposed.
- The comments were often quite terse, particularly where the review was supportive. It is important that all comments are clearly justified to help panels in making their ranking decisions.
- At panel the scores assigned for impact sometimes reflected the overall view of the proposal rather than the specific merit of the PTI (poor PTI scored up on otherwise strong proposals and vice versa).

EPSRC guidance on completing PTI documents will be updated to address the issues identified in this review. The guidance on completing peer review forms will also be updated, and EPSRC will look at whether the Impact questions on the review form can be made clearer. Clearer guidance will be developed for scoring impact at panel, and panel convenors will challenge scores that do not reflect reviewer comments.



## Monitoring levels of creativity and transformative research

All research proposals need to demonstrate novel, exciting research – at least if they hope to attract funding. However, what is less clear is to what extent they need to demonstrate obvious creativity to succeed. After all, a successful proposal can quite validly build logically on prior work, or apply established knowledge to a new and important problem. As part of its ongoing mission to foster transformative research EPSRC is trying to start answering this question and is trialling a new system to monitor creativity levels within research proposals. The creativity ratings, decided by Peer Review panels, will not influence funding decisions, but will be used to track creativity trends across the research portfolio.

The data will then be used to evaluate EPSRC's aim to foster transformative and creative research and to allow potential barriers to be identified.

Paula Duxbury, EPSRC said: *"Monitoring the level of creativity and adventure in proposals is not an easy task. It is very subjective and it requires an element of crystal-ball gazing in the assessment of potential. Nonetheless, despite the obvious drawbacks and weaknesses, we want to attempt to do this."*

The basis of the proposed monitoring framework is to introduce a process that will take place during a panel meeting to record levels of adventure and creativity in the proposals at the meeting. This will take place as a trial at the forthcoming panels, and then reviewed for incorporation into the panel process.

Conducting this as part of the peer review meetings will have three principal advantages:

- it will gather data across the all programmes and schemes and will allow us to make comparisons;
- broad participation should increase the reliability of results;
- it will allow changes and trends to be tracked.

For each research proposal the speakers will rate the levels of creativity and adventure in the proposal according to the following:

A – Builds on current work and is the accepted way forward.

B – Some work packages deviate from the accepted way forward and show elements of adventure and creativity.

C – The majority of the work packages show high levels of adventure and creativity eg new methods, new techniques, bringing together existing approaches to form new directions.

D – Entire proposal presents high levels of adventure with a highly creative approach with the potential of the research to be transformative eg creation of new area of research, paradigm shift, disrupting current approaching/methodology.



The process will take place during the panel meeting after each individual proposal has been discussed, given an overall score and ranked by the panel. Panels would then be asked to give a rating to each proposal on the above basis. The ratings are awarded to proposals on an absolute basis, not relative to one another.

The data collected will be used to generate trend data to see if there are any significant changes in the level of perceived adventure and creativity.

This data will **not** be used when ranking proposals at a panel and it will have no relevance to the ranking or funding decision.

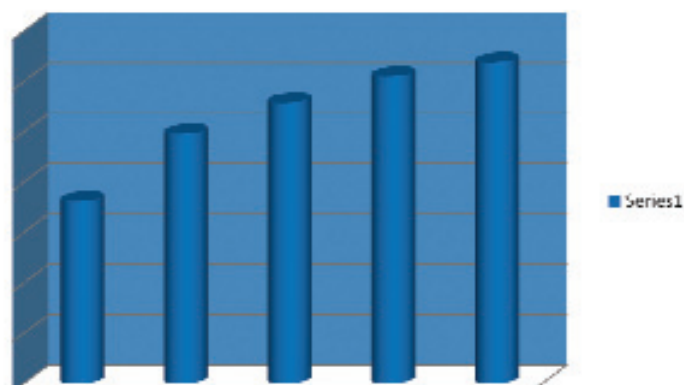
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## College Training

The on-line college training was launched just over a month ago and hundreds of you have now plucked up the courage to give it a try. Despite rigorous testing there were some initial teething trouble with the technology and we apologise to anyone who had a bad experience as a result. These have now, to the best of my belief, been identified and fixed so please do give it another try if you had problems the first time.

Views on the training have clearly been mixed. A few hated it – and told us so in no uncertain terms. A similar number found it very good and similarly told us. The great majority simply came, did it, and left again. Each of you will react in your own way to this style of training, and it will not suit all of you. If you really do hate it then feel free to walk away but please do give it a try first – you might be pleasantly surprised! The usage to date suggests that most of you will find it something you can work with. The average completion time so far is 1 hour 14 minutes, with more than 85% of users completing in a time between 50 minutes and 1 hour 20 minutes.

We are only asking you to complete this training as we feel it offers something of value for you. The training is about peer review, but very explicitly about peer review for EPSRC, how this fits within our overall grant assessment process, and how your contribution is used. In agreeing to serve as a college member you undertook to provide a number of reviews for us each year – effectively that you would invest an amount of



take up trend for college training

your valuable time and energy on our behalf. The aim of this training is to enable you to be sure that this investment of yours is as influential and effective as possible. For us the benefit is that this will increase the effectiveness of our overall process, while we can also give greater assurance to the wider community about the general adoption of best practice within this process.

I would therefore like to change the hundreds of college members who have undertaken the training into thousands and would urge all of you who have yet to try it (and that group who have stepped on for a minute or so before rushing away again) to give it a go. The link to find the training is <http://www.epsrc.info/>. You are all pre-registered as users so simply need to log on to the site. Your registered user name is the e-mail address you have recorded in your personal details on Je-S and the initial password to access the site is TRAINING. A number of people have asked why you

cannot use your Je-S username/password for this. Je-S is an RCUK SSC system so EPSRC does not own or have rights to it. It contains large quantities of very sensitive data and has in consequence quite robust security protection and are, quite reasonably, unwilling to see this extended to other less secure systems. This training is not sensitive in that sense and our need is simply to limit access to the targeted audience so a simpler access process is appropriate.

The training is intended to work with any current operating system for Mac or PC and to work with a wide range of browser software ( Microsoft IE 6.x Microsoft IE 7.x Microsoft IE 8.x Firefox 3.x Google Chrome 3.x Safari 528.x) Other browsers may also support this training but this not assured. It is a Flash based product so you will need a current version of Flash to run it. This is an Adobe product, can be downloaded at no cost from their web-site (note you should only do this where you have permission to do so from your system administration where this is needed) and is increasingly ubiquitous in supporting a wide range of web applications. There is a high bandwidth version for general use and a low bandwidth version for wireless laptop and other restricted bandwidth uses.

Contact: [college@epsrc.ac.uk](mailto:college@epsrc.ac.uk)

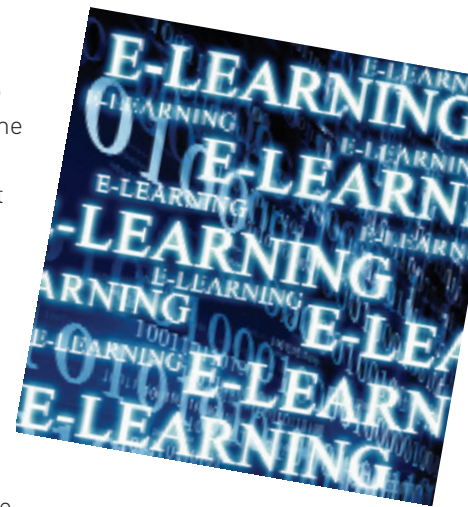
## News Bulletins

### Revision to Reviewers forms

In response to feedback from reviewers over the 18 months since we introduced the current reviewer forms into use, we are taking the opportunity to make a minor improvement to them. There has been a general view that the tick boxes against the individual sections of the form have not added value, and have at times been a hindrance. We are therefore removing these from the forms.

Revised forms will start to be issued from Je-S shortly seeking a text answer only for each section of the form and with the only tick box being retained to record your overall score. Please ensure that your text response clearly identifies whether you feel that the assessment criteria for each section have been effectively met or not.

Please continue to complete the tick boxes if you receive a request with a form that still displays them.







## **Transfer of Grants Administration to the RCUK Shared Service Centre**

EPSRC has begun the transfer of its grant administration processes to the RCUK Shared Service Centre, a process that is expected to complete in December. The transfer of grants to the SSC begins on 19 November. To ensure a smooth transition, the grants database will be frozen from this date. The EPSRC grants progress checker and Grants on the Web will not be updated until data can be supplied by the new grants system. A new pre-award tracker will be available through Je-S once the new system is on-line and will replace the current EPSRC grants progress checker. All other services will continue as normal, although applicants may experience slightly longer processing for proposals submitted during the transfer period. From early December onwards, the SSC will be the point of contact for all queries regarding the processing of proposals. Grant holders should continue to use Je-S to manage their awards but any queries about this should be made to the SSC. Grant applicants with policy and eligibility queries should continue to liaise with their Research Council contacts. EPSRC will continue to make funding decisions, as well as select reviewers and panel members, and focus on delivering the long term vision set out in its Strategic Plan. More information is available on the EPSRC webpage at <http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2010/Pages/grantsoperations.aspx>

## **Under New Management**

Stephen Powell will be familiar to many of you, as the name on much of the formal correspondence you have had about your membership of the college, as the editor of past issues of this newsletter, and in many cases as the person you have at some point contacted with questions or concerns about your college appointment. In fact Stephen was on the project team that put in place the very first college back in 1995, and since then has been responsible for operational management of the college and has helped bring six separate peer review colleges into being. However, all eras come to an end and at the start of this month Stephen has transferred into a new role with the Shared Services Centre, where his knowledge and expertise will help support the operation of various types of college across a number of research councils. We wish him well in his new role. His input will be missed here, but we will seek to continue to support your role as college members with the same mix of friendly helpfulness that he always brought to the task.

## **Problems with expertise data**

Unfortunately we have found further problems with the expertise data we collected from members when we issued the original college invitations earlier this year. We have recently found 12 instances where data has been mistranscribed meaning that college members have had someone else's expertise recorded against them. Those affected have been contacted directly but I must again apologise for the problems that arose in collecting and uploading this information.

The numbers are apparently small BUT we can identify no systematic basis for how this happened so cannot easily identify other possible cases. The records so far identified all held data that was incorrect but which otherwise was entirely valid. Such cases are effectively undetectable by our normal data checking methods. This means we simply do not know if there are other similar cases. Errors in this data may cause us to misdirect proposals for review. If you have been sent proposals that are oddly outside your expertise then this may be the result of this sort of data corruption. Again, please accept my apologies if you find this has happened to you.



There are also a number of members who have still to provide us with their expertise data. Changes to Je-S meant that all such information held prior to June this year was over-written and only expertise supplied subsequently is now shown. If you have not already done so can I please again urge you to log onto Je-S and check your records as a matter of urgency and correct them if you find things are amiss.

**To Receive College News Bulletins as they are issued simply subscribe to the College News Forum – these items will then be sent to your e-mail address when they are posted.**

## Editor's End-Piece

As this is my first College Newsletter I thought I would use this space to introduce myself, and say a little bit about the Newsletter. My name is Paul Tomsen and I have been many years with the research councils having joined the then Science Research Council back in the early seventies. Many of you may have interacted with me over the years in my various roles with: The LINK Scheme; Chemistry; Photonics; and the Life Science Interface (and sadly some of you probably held SRC/SERC doctoral studentships when I managed that activity early in my career!). I am now a Senior Peer Review manager in EPSRC responsible for both managing and developing the EPSRC peer review process, including all aspects of the peer review college.



My hope is to start issuing the Newsletter on a rather more regular basis than in the past. EPSRC issues a great deal of information and guidance to the community, and there seems little point in just replicating this. However this is usually targeted to the wider community or to grant applicants so I will try to use the newsletter to focus on those aspects more relevant to college members in their roles as reviewers or panel members. At the same time I am sure that the newsletter will be most effective if it contains the sorts of things you want to see. So, if there is a type of information you would like to have and that is not currently included then let me know and I will see what can be done. Please comment on this, or with general feedback on the newsletter, to [college@epsrc.ac.uk](mailto:college@epsrc.ac.uk). To follow up on things in any specific article please use the specific contact details in that article.

Cheers for now and have an enjoyable Christmas

Editor: Paul Tomsen; [College@epsrc.ac.uk](mailto:College@epsrc.ac.uk)

### 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>