

Peer Review College Newsletter

Summer 2011

Introduction

This issue of the college newsletter introduces a number of key changes to the way in which EPSRC will operate over the coming years, changes which will impact on what we support, how we support it, and, of particular relevance to college members, how we will select these. Why are we doing this? Well this is in response to the challenges EPSRC now faces. Our funding allocation for the current spending review was widely recognised as good in the context of the current economic climate and in comparison to what was happening more broadly across the public sector. However it does not wholly protect us and we face major challenges. We need to maintain the international standing of UK EPS research against increasing international competition, while the resources available to us mean the volume of research activity we can support will decline, and we face significant constraints on our ability to support capital infrastructure. Business as usual simply is not a viable option.

EPSRC set out its long term aspirations in the Strategic Plan which it published early in 2010. At the beginning of this year the Delivery Plan was published, setting out which elements of this it would aim to undertake over the current spending review period, with the resource allocation provided. Now it has published its Implementation Plan which gives further detail of how this will be done.



The EPSRC Implementation Plan

Developing the shape of the portfolio

EPSRC supports excellent, long term research and high quality postgraduate training in order to contribute to the economic competitiveness of the UK and the quality of life of its people. At any one time we are supporting a portfolio of research and training of between £2-3 billion.

To maintain the UK's global research standing in light of increasing international competition, and with limited funding available to us, we must focus our investments to remain internationally leading in areas that are of long-term strategic importance to the UK. To better do this, in future, all our investment decisions will be based on the **international excellence** of the research, its **importance**, and the **existing capability** in the UK, while continuing to encourage the free generation of ideas and curiosity-based research.



We are now assessing research areas within the portfolio and taking decisions about the **relative** scale of our investment in these areas. These decisions will state whether we intend to 'grow', 'maintain' or 'reduce' a research area **as a proportion** of the total EPSRC portfolio, indicating the overall trend we would like to see. A 'reduce' category does not necessarily mean we will not accept proposals in that area, but it is likely to mean that competition for funding in these areas will be greater so that only exceptional proposals will be funded. In addition we may wish to encourage an area to focus on research that meets particular industry needs or that could play a key role in an important challenge area, such as energy.

Our decisions as a research sponsor are based on our expert knowledge of the whole UK landscape, the best available information (such as EPSRC data on Grants on the Web, UK Research Assessment Exercise, funding from other bodies, international reviews and other reports), and advice from key groups and individuals (such as strategic advisory teams, learned societies and industry partners).

We have mapped EPSRC's current portfolio and for part of the portfolio we already have sufficient information to determine how we would see a research area changing as the portfolio develops. We will be taking input and assessing the rest of our portfolio as we progress with a view to mapping the whole EPSRC portfolio by 31st March 2012.

What does this mean in practice?

Applicants will from now onwards need to consider their research in the context of international excellence and national importance. Before applying they need to consider their research proposal in relation to the "Our Portfolio" section of the EPSRC website and the relative scale of our investment in the relevant research area(s), and be aware of whether we intend to 'grow', 'maintain' or 'reduce' these as a proportion of the total EPSRC portfolio.

From autumn onwards, anyone applying to EPSRC will need to include in their case for support information about the importance of their research in relation to the national/international context and the strategic fit of their proposals with respect to the portfolio we are looking to create (as described in the "Our Portfolio" section of the EPSRC website). Confirmed timescales and guidance on how to include this additional information in the case for support will be on the EPSRC website in September.

Peer Review

Peer Review remains fundamental to our decision making. While our peer review process will need to incorporate these new requirements, it will continue to operate broadly as it does now. The key change is that from this autumn onwards, you will be asked to consider importance as well as excellence as primary assessment criteria when you review proposals.

Panel meetings will continue to be asked to prioritise proposals on the basis of reviewer comments, but will again be required to ensure that their eventual rank listing takes full account of both quality and importance as the primary criteria. Panels may also comment on strategic fit to the research areas in the 'Our Portfolio' section of the EPSRC website.



Timescales

Changes to all forms, guidance and peer review processes will be in place from the autumn. The confirmed date that this will occur will be displayed on the peer review section of the website in September.

We will be publishing more information about the role of peer review in the coming months, and in particular will publish a further edition of the College Newsletter to include detailed information about changes to applicant guidance, revisions to the reviewer forms, and to the guidance on completing reviews. Updates can be found in the Funding (<http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/funding/apprev/Pages/default.aspx>) section of the website and via bulletins through the college training message board.

Wakeham Efficiency Savings

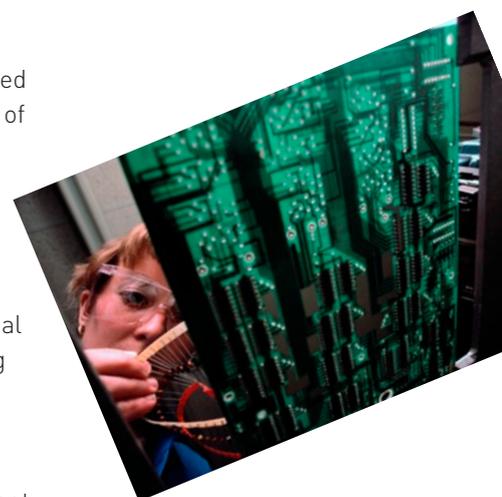
In response to a review led by Professor Sir William Wakeham, RCUK has published a report *Efficiency 2011-15: Ensuring Excellence with Impact*. This looks at a variety of ways in which the use of research funding can be maximized to help maintain the volume of research activity that can be supported.

Most of this relates to how estate and indirect costs are calculated and used in universities. Changes have been agreed and are now being implemented, and all resulting savings will remain in the science budget – available to support additional research activity. As before, these costs will be determined administratively, using formulae agreed with each university so will not be included in the peer review assessment of proposals.

There was one other area where the review found significant scope for improvement, and that was the provision and operation of equipment. Here there is now a pressing need for all research councils to realise savings following reduced capital budget allocations over the new sending review period. This is particularly true for EPSRC. We have announced interim arrangements for supporting equipment and will in due course confirm details of the long-term revised arrangements which will certainly have implications for peer review.

The first significant change relates to non-capital equipment costs. With effect from 1 May 2011 the threshold for equipment being treated as capital has been increased from a unit cost of £3,000 to a unit cost of £10,000. This moves a lot of minor equipment out of the capital heading. Equipment and related costs under this threshold can be requested, and will be reviewed and funded, in the normal way without change.

For equipment costing £10,000 or more then new arrangements will apply. These will come fully into force in the autumn, with the introduction of revised application requirements and reviewer forms, and further guidance on this will be issued closer to the time. Interim arrangements have been introduced that come into use immediately and until such time as the long-term arrangements can be implemented. How applications will be treated will depend on the cost of the equipment being sought, with equipment costing up to £121,588 being managed in one way, and different arrangement where the cost exceeds that sum. This oddly precise figure is actually the sterling equivalent of €150,000, the threshold above which equipment has to go through formal EU tender procedures, based on an agreed exchange rate.



During this interim period all proposals should be reviewed in the normal way with no special consideration given to equipment requests, although how well the need for requested equipment has been justified will have greater significance. Proposals will go to panel, and be ranked in the normal way. Proposals identified for funding but which involve purchase of capital equipment will however be subject to a further process stage before a grant can be approved. The nature of that extra step will depend on the cost being sought:

For equipment costing less than £121,588 EPSRC will enter into discussion with the submitting organisation who will need to find either: a contribution of at least 50% of the cost of the equipment; or identify a viable way of undertaking the research without purchasing the equipment (this might include agreeing additional recurrent costs to enable existing infrastructure to be used). If neither option can be met then, regretfully, it will not be possible to fund that proposal.

Equipment costing in excess of £121,588 will in future be treated as a strategic investment. Applicants seeking such equipment will be asked to prepare an additional business statement, setting out the broader strategic case for the acquisition. This case (not the original proposal) will then be considered by a central strategic research infrastructure panel where the applicants will normally be given the opportunity of presenting their case and answering any questions the panel may have.

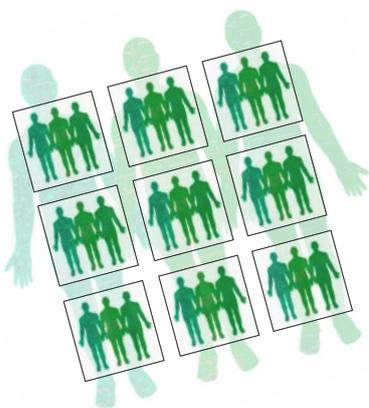
College Membership

Refreshing the College

In the past, colleges were appointed for a fixed period, usually of three or four years, at the end of which there would be a major exercise to appoint a whole new college. This college is different and you may have noticed that this time the appointment is a life sentence, with no end date. Why have we done this? Well, for three reasons: firstly the renewal exercises were very big and expensive and we no longer have the resource to support them; secondly it was not efficient as we found that at each renewal over 70% of members were reappointed from the previous college; and thirdly we found this approach was rather inflexible, making it difficult to respond to major changes – such as developing new areas – within the lifetime of the college.

Of course, appointing all the members in perpetuity is not obviously flexible either, so how will we manage this? The intention is to undertake a “light-touch” refresh of the college every year, where we will replace up to 10% of the existing membership. Sadly each year we do lose a few members to death or serious ill-health while a larger number of members ask to stand down as a result of changes in their circumstances. So our first step will be to replace these. We will then look to the balance of the college in terms of expertise, age and gender, and geographical distribution, taking into account any changes in the composition of the wider research community and in the spread and volume of research proposals being received. Where necessary this may involve asking some existing members to stand down.

Will we look at member performance in undertaking such a refresh? With one exception we do not monitor performance, and have no standards or metrics to support this. The exception is response rate. In accepting college membership, there is an agreement to undertake reviews for us. If a member is consistently not



responding to review requests sent to them with no good reason then we will ask them to stand down (as an aside, should there be a period when, for any reason, you will be unable to review for us then you can go onto Je-S and mark yourself as unavailable and we will send you no further proposals to review until the period completes).

Exactly how we identify potential new college members is still being developed. One key principle we need to retain is that college members continue to have an endorsement from the wider community as being appropriate to review their proposals. The challenge is to find a light-touch mechanism that does this, while remaining suitably open but robust enough to resist crude manipulation by pressure groups. If you have any thoughts on this might be done please feel free to send them to college@epsrc.ac.uk

Membership Matters

New Members

It has long been EPSRC policy that recipients of our fellowships should be given an automatic invitation to the college. It is therefore with great pleasure that we extend a warm welcome to the following new members, appointed to the college on becoming successful recipients of our prestigious Challenging Engineering awards.

Dr Russell Davenport – University of Newcastle
Dr Brian Gerardot – Heriot-Watt University
Dr Muki Haklay – University College London
Dr Jennifer Hastie – University of Strathclyde
Dr Ian Kinloch - University of Manchester
Dr Peter Martin – University of Manchester
Dr Eleanor Stride - University College London

In Memoriam

We have sadly been recently informed of the deaths of the following college members:

Our thoughts and sympathy are with their family and friends.

Professor David Cockayne
Professor Alexai Ivanov
Doctor Tahir Malik
Professor Marshall Stoneham

Standing Down

The following members have resigned from the college:

We would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude for their efforts on our behalf and to publicly acknowledge the importance of their contribution in this way to UK research.

Mister Kevin Coleman
Professor Monique Frize
Professor Jerry Griffiths
Professor Richard Hartley
Professor Tim Hughes
Professor Mary Marshall



Gone Away

We appear to have lost contact with the following members whose circumstances seem to have changed:

Doctor Kumar Abhinava - previously at Lilly
Doctor J Blake - previously at Wye College
Mister Anthony Cross - previously at BAE Systems
Doctor Tony Gillespie - previously at DSTL
Doctor Nigel Jackson - previously at QinetiQ
Professor David Oxenham - previously at DSTL

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 the EPSRC College address if they feel it is no longer appropriate to continue as a college member.

Congratulations

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

Professor Jeremy Baumberg
Professor Hagen Bayley
Professor John Goodby
Professor Ian Horrocks
Professor Sir Colin Humphries
Professor Steffen Lauritzen
Professor Tom McLeish
Professor Mervyn Miles

News Bulletins

International Collaboration

EPSRC's Infrastructure and International programme is looking to collect examples of where EPSRC funding has helped build international partnerships. If you have held an EPSRC grant that has led to a strong and beneficial relationship with either an overseas institution or company then we would be keen to learn the details. If any college member based outside the UK is involved with such a collaboration that has benefitted from EPSRC funding, or is aware of this elsewhere in their organisation, then we would be very interested in learning your perspective on this. Further details and the contact for more information about this can be found at <http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/pubs/mags/connect/2011/81/Pages/international.aspx>

Delayed Due Dates for Reviews

We have become aware of a small but highly significant difference in process behaviour following our transfer to our new grants processing system. With our previous system a review request would stay open no matter where that proposal was in the assessment process. Reviews could still be submitted (and occasionally were!) after assessment was complete and the decision announced. The new system is different and moving the proposal beyond key stages in the assessment process automatically cancels any outstanding review requests, closing them in Je-S so that it becomes impossible to submit the review. This led to a number of awkward incidents where requests were cancelled without notice. We have now put a procedure in place to try to avoid this, but it will remain an issue particularly if reviews are submitted later than the requested due date.

Normally we request that completed reviews are returned within three weeks. A significant minority of reports are in fact submitted later than that, but are often still timely and usable (and valuable). It is important that we do not lose such reports. If



you cannot provide a report within the requested three weeks, but could do so with some more time, then you are able to ask for the due date to be extended accordingly. To avoid the risk of cancellation it is now important that you do this, rather than simply submit the report late. Requests to extend the due date should be made to the Shared Service Centre.

Editor's End-Piece



Well, there is a lot in this issue about change so I thought I would spend my few moments at the end here focusing on what is staying the same. First of all I would reiterate a point made earlier. Peer review remains the rock on which our decision making process is based and, all these changes notwithstanding, the fundamentals of that process remain unchanged. Equally unchanged is EPSRC's intent to continue to deliver a quality process that is fair, open, robust and effective. This of course is where you come in, as the college is as fundamental to peer review as peer review is to EPSRC. I am confident, based on experience to date, that you will continue to provide the level of input necessary to ensure the quality of this process.

Another unchanging aspect of my life is the extent to which college members write to me raising issues about the EPSRC grants process. Of course, they do this more often as an applicant than as a college member. Sometimes there is a surprising divergence of view point between these roles, as for example in a number of recent cases raising concerns about review quality and arguing that reviewing standards need raising. None of those writing had themselves taken the on-line reviewer training, and one had previously written objecting to being asked to undertake it, yet one key reason for providing it was to address exactly these concerns. More disappointing still was where another college member challenged the appropriateness of the reviewers selected to comment on his proposal. Investigation showed not only that the reviewer causing him the most concern was in fact one that he had himself nominated (a situation that is far from unique) but also that he himself had not provided us with any expertise information - this despite my regular nagging that you all check and update this and regular statements about its importance in helping us best target appropriate reviewers. We are committed to trying to make our peer review process as good as possible, but we really need your help in attaining this.

Feedback on this newsletter 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 If there are any topics you would like to see covered in a future newsletter then let me know and I will see how it might be included.

Paul Tomsen

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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>