University of Liverpool
Peer review policy for external funding applications

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Responsible Department	*Head of Research and Partnerships Development, Research, Partnerships and Innovation.*		
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	Res & Impact Cttee	14 January 21	YES
	Senate	27 January 21	YES
Linked Documents	*Ongoing Peer Review activity links to Policy, as detailed on intranet:* https://staff.liverpool.ac.uk/research/rpd/peer-review-college/		
Does this replace any previous policies?	*No*		
Consultation	*Discussed at RISC committee.*		
Equality Impact Assessment	*Policy contains details of on-going Equality Impact Assessment to be evolved with HR*		
Data Protection	n/a		
Communication	*Through intranet page, peer review newsletter, and peer review briefing sessions*		

Peer review policy for external funding applications

1. Introduction

This policy covers the principles of internal peer review processes for external funding applications (for research and/or knowledge exchange activities) across the University.

Internal peer review of external funding applications is critical to promoting research excellence and improving research performance in a competitive international research environment. Peer review benefits the University by:
- Improving the quality of applications
- Supporting researcher career progression by enhancing the quality of research and improving understanding of funder requirements
- Contributing to a supportive environment for researchers by promoting communication and encouraging collegiate practice within and across Departments, Schools and Faculties.

Internal peer review contributes to wider societal impact by reducing the burden of applications on publicly funded Research Councils and charities, which has driven increased requests for institutions to manage the numbers of submitted applications (demand management). Funders are increasingly using demand management to ensure research excellence, efficiency and value for money.

Internal peer Review cannot completely replicate funder led peer review, as it pulls reviewers from within the institution. The principles within this policy detail the expectations in terms of confidentiality and conflict of interest that may arise in an internal scheme. The systems also differ in that funder peer review is focussed on scoring proposals in order to make funding decisions alone. The internal peer review college aims to be supportive (even where review is compulsory), acting as a 'critical friend' by providing constructive and specialist feedback on proposals before submission.

Internal review processes introduce an additional burden on academic staff and this policy has been designed to maximise impact on performance in the most efficient way.

2. Principles

Peer review panels

- Where possible, **internal review processes should promote early preparation of project proposals** along with early discussion of plans and requirements with Heads of Department and/or research leads, Professional Services, particularly Research Support Office. This allows time to put support in place that will help researchers design high quality projects and programmes.

- **Peer review processes will have academic leads** who act as chairs of meetings or oversee decisions. Leads are expected to have direct experience of the funder and their review processes.

- **Routine peer review panels are intended to raise success rates in areas of strategic priority**. Meetings replicate the approach used by funders and to ensure high quality of review, which can be enhanced through interdisciplinary panel discussion. Processes will be monitored and reviewed to ensure they are operating effectively.

- **Each application will be reviewed by at least two reviewers.** Peer Reviewers are selected on the basis of: experience with the funder (as reviewer or awardee); subject experience; availability; avoiding conflicts of interest; achieving an EDI balance to reflect the UoL research community. Requests for individual reviewers are monitored and RPD aim to keep demands on reviewer time at a minimum. Where possible, the RPD will try to avoid using the same reviewers repeatedly over a semester. Reviewers are encouraged to include their peer review duties on the Professional Activities module of [Liverpool Elements](#).

- In **demand management processes** each expression of interest will be reviewed by at least two reviewers with subject or funder expertise. Where the number of expressions exceed the number of submissions allowed by the funder, a meeting will be held to discuss proposals. More detail about demand management (in general) can be found here: https://staff.liverpool.ac.uk/research/rpd/peer-review-college/demand-management/

- It is acknowledged that panel discussions are the best way to make balanced and unbiased decisions, with a breadth of voices contributing, and consensus scores and feedback being provided to the PI. However, the very **short time-scales for some calls may prohibit a panel approach**, and in these cases individual reports via e-mail will be sort.

- **Applications must be kept confidential** and not shared with others outside the panel. **Reviewers have the right to anonymity** to ensure they feel confident providing constructive feedback. **Panel and mock interview discussions should be kept confidential** to show sensitivity to both applicants and reviewers. All panel members will receive a document ensuring that they understand these conditions ahead of each peer review panel.

- **Conflicts of interest:** It is not possible to avoid reviewing the work of colleagues, and it is the responsibility of reviewers to be as objective as possible. As required in the University's policy on [Disclosure of Interest](#), reviewers must declare any conflict of interest when agreeing to join a panel (e.g. close collaboration with the applicant, being a Co-Investigator or Principal Investigator on a proposal being considered by the panel etc.). These must be declared at the beginning of the meeting, and normal practice will be for a panel member to leave the room and not influence the consensus panel score.

- **Appeals:** except where demand management is required, **peer review is not intended to prevent applicants from submitting competitive applications**. Where a panel does not pass an application for submission, the decision has been discussed among all members along with alternative options such as submitting at a later date or applying to a different scheme. The panel decision is binding but if applicants feel their proposal has been misunderstood by reviewers or the panel, they should contact peerrev@liverpool.ac.uk. The peer review coordinator will liaise with the panel chairs for further assessment.

- **Panel observers:** early career researchers and professional services are able to observe panels with the agreement of the Chair of the meeting. For confidentiality reasons, only a limited number of observers per meeting will be allowed. Observers are required to keep all documents and panel discussions confidential, and will be asked to complete an exercise to help them reflect on the meeting they have attended.

Current schemes supported by Peer review

Compulsory schemes are implemented after consultation, discussion at Research & Impact Strategy Committee (RISC) and with the Pro Vice Chancellor/Associate PVCs for Research and Impact.

Information about schemes covered by University peer review is regularly updated here: https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/intranet/research-policy/peer-review-college/.

Information will also be disseminated through a Peer review newsletter, and regular peer review briefings that are open to all staff.

Where some schemes have a limited remit enabling applications from only one Faculty then that Faculty is enabled to operate its own peer review using the best-practice materials created for central peer review.

Mock interviews

Practice interviews are offered for large project grants for any funder or for fellowships such as UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships, Royal Academy of Engineering, NIHR, etc. Applicants who have reached the appropriate stage should contact peerrev@liverpool.ac.uk to see if an interview can be arranged.

Preliminary advice can be found here: https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/intranet/research-policy/peer-review-college/funder_interviews/

Mock interviews aim to replicate the funder's process for a candidate' interview, including inviting reviewers who reflect the makeup of the panel and sharing the application and reviewer comments with the internal panel. If the applicant and panel members all agree, interviews can be recorded for future reference; the recording should be treated as sensitive.

Mock interview panels are supportive and encouraging and aim to help people to gain an authentic experience and practice how to deal with pre-interview nerves, and to practice answering questions in a high-pressure situation. However, as an alternative, help can be offered to prepare a candidate in other ways (e.g. providing one-to-one practice sessions; reviewing slides; suggesting interview questions).

Monitoring and improvement

The effectiveness of centrally coordinated internal review processes will be monitored annually by Research & Partnerships Development and in conjunction with academic leads. Short term outcomes will be communicated regularly. The process will be modified in consultation with research leads and professional services where appropriate.

Data collected during peer review is the same as that collected when an applicant requests costings through IRIS, and for all other RPD activities to support research. In addition, names of reviewers and number of times reviewing are also collected in a spreadsheet.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: the peer review process aims to achieve an EDI balance which reflects the profile of researchers in the University and avoids bias for or against any groups, on any basis. EDI is being monitored initially through periodic sampling of specific peer review exercises and using anonymised data on participants supplied by Human Resources. EDI and avoiding unconscious bias are on the agenda and the Chair's briefing for all regular panel meetings, and members' attention is drawn to resources and training available with the University and outside, e.g. Royal Society.

Where performance is consistently below the level expected, review processes will be adjusted or paused.

Researchers are strongly encouraged to notify Research Support Office of the outcome of their applications at the earliest possible stage as this helps monitoring and communication of panel success rates.

Applicants are strongly encouraged to seek feedback from funders to inform development of future applications, and to share this information with the panel if planning a resubmission.

3. Scope

This policy covers the principles of internal peer review processes for external funding applications (for research and/or knowledge exchange activities) across the University. It is authored by Research & Partnerships Development (RPD) and applies to all peer review processes led by RPD only. It also represents best practice for peer review led at School/Institute and Faculty levels.