



AHRC Moderating Panel Chair's Guidance

Contents

[Introduction](#)

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. The role of the Chair | 1 |
| 2. Start of the meeting | 2 |
| 3. The role of the panellists | 3 |
| 4. The role of panel meetings | 5 |
| 5. Conflicts of Interest | 5 |
| 6. Moderating approach | 5 |
| 7. Proposal grading and ranking | 6 |
| 8. Amendments, Conditions and Feedback | 6 |
| 9. Resubmission Policy | 7 |
| 10. Feedback on AHRC peer review processes | 8 |
| 11. At the end of the meeting | 8 |
| 12. After the panel meeting | 8 |
| Appendix A: Research Grants Scheme grading scale | 10 |
| Appendix B: Leadership Fellows Scheme grading scale | 11 |

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to help you as Chair, to prepare for the forthcoming panel meeting. In addition to this document, there will be the opportunity to speak to an AHRC staff member in a briefing session prior to the panel meeting. You should also feel free to contact the nominated AHRC Programme Co-ordinator/PSO if you have any questions you wish to raise prior to the meeting.

1. The role of the Chair is:

- to have read and familiarised yourself with all applications.
- to oversee and to run the panel meeting.
- to set the context and tone for the meeting in terms of process and methods of working, following guidance from the AHRC's pre-meeting briefing.
- to ensure that the meeting keeps to time.
- to seek clarification of the panel's views and to ensure there is appropriate discussion, before the panel agrees a grading for each proposal.
- to rank those proposals in the funding range with a score of 6-1.
- to ensure that AHRC procedures and protocols are followed and to refer to AHRC staff for guidance when necessary.
- to provide final approval for feedback, invited resubmissions and conditions on awards, where necessary.

- to ensure the AHRC is provided with a final and agreed ranked list of applications.
- to ensure the discussions by the panellists stay focussed on the comments from the reviewers and the PI's response to those reviews (i.e. ensuring they do not introduce new comments or criticisms).

You will not have been assigned any proposals to introduce; however, in order to chair the meeting effectively, **you are expected to have read all applications in detail to familiarise yourself with their content.** This is necessary for you to be able to regulate the panel discussions, i.e. so that you can be alert to any discussion which is not in line with the moderating process.

2. Start of the meeting

It is suggested that at the start of the meeting panellists introduce themselves by their name and institution.

You should briefly remind the panel of:

- their role as an introducer.
- the confidential nature of the process.
- the need to consider all applications on equal terms, considering only the information provided in the application, reviewers' comments and PI response and the potential for 'unconscious bias' to enter into people's judgements.
- the procedure for dealing with Conflicts of Interest.
- the role of a moderating panel, rather than an assessment panel, i.e. panellists must not assess the applications.
- the grade descriptors and their meanings.
- the ranking process.
- the opportunity for feedback on the AHRC review process. This will be discussed or collated at the end of the meeting or, if time at the meeting does not allow, by correspondence after the meeting.
- Briefly remind the panel of the post meeting administrative process following the meeting and decisions made.

It is suggested that the panel starts by looking at the collected pre-scores, which have been submitted by the introducers in advance of the meeting. If pre-scores demonstrate parity of grades across reviewers and introducers, extensive discussion regarding the final grade may not be required and you can simply agree the grade for that application. If any panel member wishes to discuss an application, then time must be allowed for this. Any application with a fundable grade will need to be discussed to enable it to be ranked, but this discussion should be brief.

After discussing the pre-scores, you should work through the applications in the order specified in the papers.

You might find that it takes some time for the panel to get into a rhythm of introducing, agreeing a final grade and ranking. It may be helpful, at the end of the meeting, to go back to the first few proposals, to ensure that the decisions are consistent with those made towards the end. If there is a large number of proposals to be moderated, you may find it helpful to set out the amount of time allocated to discussing each proposal to ensure that the meeting will run to time. This is something you will want to discuss with AHRC staff at the briefing and will depend on pre-scores, as some applications with parity of scoring might not need the same time allocated for discussions. For example, if there are 35 proposals to be discussed at a six hour meeting, you may suggest that, with two 10 minute breaks and half an hour for lunch, the panel should spend no more than an average of

ten minutes on each proposal in order to have sufficient time for the final ranking and any other discussion. It is important to be strict on timing to enable all proposals to be discussed fully in relation to pre-scores and it is useful to alert panel members to this at the start of the meeting.

3. The role of the panellists

Panellists are provided with all the necessary information prior to the meeting and are expected to:

- have familiarised themselves with the guidelines and assessment criteria for the scheme.
- have commented on and to have graded all proposals which they have been assigned as an introducer (Primary introducer, Secondary introducer or Supporting introducer).
- have alerted the office to any conflicts of interest, not picked up by the office.
- have submitted pre-scores ahead of the meeting.
- attend the panel meeting to agree final grades and rankings for all proposals.
- agree any feedback where applicable.

Panellists will be expected to submit their scores a few days prior to the meeting in order for the AHRC office to be able to collate the information. Where possible this information will be provided to you as Chair in advance of the meeting and a running order determined.

In undertaking the above tasks, panellists are expected to:

- exercise their knowledge, judgement and expertise in order to reach clear, sound, evidence-based decisions.
- to treat all applications as strictly confidential at all times.
- be always fair and objective and to adhere to [Research Council Equality and Diversity Policy](#) which states that:

The UK Research Councils are committed to eliminating unlawful discrimination and promoting equality of opportunity and good relations across and between the defined equalities groups in all of their relevant functions.

Accordingly no eligible job applicant, funding applicant, employee or external stakeholder including members of the public should receive less favourable treatment on the grounds of:

- gender
- marital status
- sexual orientation
- gender re-assignment
- race
- colour
- nationality
- ethnicity or national origins
- religion or similar philosophical belief
- spent criminal conviction
- age
- disability.

Equally, all proposals must be assessed on equal terms, regardless of the sex, age, and/or ethnicity of the applicant. Proposals must therefore be assessed and graded on their merits, in accordance with the criteria and the aims and objectives set for each scheme or call for funding.

Code of Conduct

AHRC is committed to ensuring that our decision making is fair, robust, transparent and credible. We are also committed to raising awareness of and taking steps to remove the impact of unintentional bias in our systems, processes, behaviours and culture, and to ensuring that our funding is not influenced by, for example, the gender of the applicant or by other protected characteristics. As Chair, you should start the meeting by reminding the Panel about the importance of safeguarding decision making and managing conflicts of interest.

Safeguarding decision making

AHRC is committed to ensuring that those who make funding decisions recognise the factors that introduce risk into the decision making process. To do this, it is important to raise awareness of and take steps to remove any impact of unintentional bias in our processes, behaviours and culture. We know that pressure to make decisions, time pressures, high cognitive load and tiredness all create conditions that introduce the risk of unintentional bias.

Many of these factors could be present in the panel meeting; therefore we ask that you are aware of this risk and safe guard the panel's recommendation by taking the actions described below.

You should ask the panel members to be aware of the biases that they will unintentionally bring to the process and remind the Panel of the importance of the following action points:

- All proposals or nominations must be assessed on equal terms, and objectively assessed on their merits using the criteria set for each funding mechanism.
- Decisions must be evidence-based and based on all the information provided.
- Question and challenge cultural stereotypes and bias, and be prepared to be challenged.
- Be aware that working with a high cognitive load, with time pressures and the need to make quick decisions, creates conditions for bias which could have an impact on the research we fund.
- try to slow down the speed of your decision making, allowing sufficient time for discussion of each application.
- Reconsider the reasons for your decisions, recognising that they may be post-hoc justifications.
- Question cultural stereotypes, being open to seeing what is new and unfamiliar.
- Remember you are unlikely to be fairer and less prejudiced than the average person.
- You can detect unconscious bias more easily in others than in yourself so create an environment in which all panel members feel able to call out bias when they see it.

For further information, the Royal Society has issued a Briefing and video on unconscious bias:

<https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/publications/2015/unconscious-bias/> .

As Chair, you should remind the Panel of the importance of objectivity in decision making and ensure that assessments are made based on evidence and with reference to the assessment criteria and scoring definitions.

Proposals are submitted to the AHRC in confidence and may contain confidential information and personal data belonging to the applicant (and other researchers named in the proposal). Please ensure therefore that all proposals are treated confidentially, [referring to the AHRC web site](#) for further guidance on confidentiality, data protection, and freedom of information.

4. The role of panel meetings

The purpose of panel meetings is to consider and reach final agreement on the grading and ranking of proposals and, where necessary, to agree broad feedback for applicants. The panel's ranked list is presented to AHRC Senior Management, who will make the final funding decisions. They will never overturn or alter the order of the list in making the funding decisions. The exception is applications submitted under the early career scheme for which proposals ranked lower than standard proposals may be funded.

Panel meetings also provide an opportunity for panellists to raise issues, such as the quality of peer review or the potential impact of the research proposed through the applications received to that meeting.

Comments and grades (with the exception of the final agreed grade) will not be used outside the peer review / funding decision making process, unless they are subject to specific legal requirements or to be used as the basis of feedback. The AHRC will only collect introducer forms in the case of drafting feedback and then only with the agreement of the panel.

5. Conflicts of interest

It is vital that panel members are seen to be completely impartial at all stages of the review process.

Panel members (including you as Chair) should not therefore take part in the moderation of any proposal where a conflict of interest could be construed. If you think you might have a conflict, as in the examples on the [AHRC website](#), please inform the staff member responsible for your panel at the earliest possible opportunity.

If anyone is in conflict with a proposal, s/he will be required to leave the room whilst the proposal is being discussed. If you are in conflict, we will nominate someone to deputise for you. All panellists are permitted to be present for the ranking of all proposals; however, it will be your responsibility to ensure that any proposal where a conflict has been identified is not discussed again in detail, to avoid any potential embarrassment. Should discussion need to take place, the panel member who is in conflict with the proposal should leave the room again.

6. Moderating approach

The panel operates using a [moderating approach](#). Introducers must base their grade and ranking decision on the peer reviews and the PI's response to those reviews. They should not introduce any new comments or criticisms to the proposal.

In considering proposals, panellists must ensure that their judgements are based solely on the aims and criteria for the scheme and the information that is provided in the application form, the reviews, and PI's response to these, where received. Panel members should not allow private knowledge of the applicant or the proposed research to influence their judgement.

Should panellists appear to be providing their own assessment of an application, rather than moderating the reviews and PI response, it is your role, assisted by the AHRC representative, to direct the discussion back to moderation.

7. Guidance for UKRI grant assessors (reviewers and board/panel members, etc.)

We are committed to support the recommendations and principles set out by the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA; <https://sfdora.org/read/>). You should not use journal-based metrics, such as journal impact factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, to assess an investigator's contributions, or to make funding decisions.

For the purpose of research assessment, please consider the value and impact of all research outputs (including datasets, software, inventions, patents, preprints, other commercial activities, etc.) in addition to research publications. You should consider a broad range of impact measures including qualitative indicators of research impact, such as influence on policy and practice.

The content of a paper is more important than publication metrics, or the identity of the journal, in which it was published, especially for early-stage investigators. Therefore, you should not use journal impact factor (or any hierarchy of journals), conference rankings and metrics such as the H-index or i10-index when assessing UKRI grants.

We encourage you to challenge research assessment practices that rely inappropriately on journal impact factors or conference rankings and promote and teach best practice that focuses on the value and influence of specific research outputs.

8. Proposal ranking and grading

Panels are asked to consider each proposal on its merits and award it a grade. Grading decisions at moderating panels are reached through discussion of the proposals taking into account the comments of the reviewers, the Principal Investigator's response to the reviews, grades and supporting comments of individual members of the panel.

AHRC does not use averages or 'weighted grades' in determining the grade; the panel needs to weigh up all the information that has been provided and make a judgement as to the appropriate grade.

Please note that early career applications should be ranked alongside the standard route applications using the same criteria and should not be given any special weighting by the panel. The funding formula used by AHRC ensures that early career applications have a higher success rate than the standard route.

All proposals need to be graded but only those graded 4 or above should be ranked. Using a decimal grading system for ranking is an effective and efficient mechanism and Introducers should award a decimal grade to each proposal with a view to the panel agreeing a final decimal grade. This allows the introducers to indicate the strength of their grading. For example, a good 4 might become 4.6; a weak 5 may be graded at 5.1; and, an excellent 6 graded at 6.8. The decimal is only for the purpose of ordering the applications and has no value outside the rank ordered list. The key is to make sure that the grade and its descriptor fit the quality of the proposal and that the panel is content with the ranked order of the proposals.

9. Amendments, conditions and feedback

The panel can make recommendations based on reviewers' comments, for the AHRC to take forward.

Costings: the panel may make adjustments to the costs identified in proposals prior to making awards if the reviewers indicate that the case has not been made for the costs and the applicant has not justified the case in their response.

Conditions: the panel can make agreed conditions based on reviewers' comments, for the AHRC to impose on the award. These could either be conditions that need to be met before an award is confirmed OR a requirement that the condition be met during the undertaking of the project.

Feedback: As the applicants have already received feedback in the form of the reviewers' comments, usually no further feedback is required. However, the panel can decide to provide feedback if
a) the application is likely to be successful and it wishes to highlight some advice within the reviews (not strong enough to be a condition)

b) where a proposal has two strong grades and one low grade and the panel has decided to give a low grade, feedback could highlight the reviewers' concerns that led to the lower grade.

Any feedback for both successful and unsuccessful applications should be agreed in principle by the panel at the meeting, providing either specific text or a clear set of bullet points, with the final text of the feedback being agreed by you as the Chair before being communicated back to the applicant.

10. Resubmission Policy

Resubmission of unsuccessful applications is not permitted except in very particular circumstances, where the panel may exceptionally decide to invite the applicant to resubmit the proposal.

This will happen only where the panel identifies an application of exceptional potential and can identify specific changes to the application that could significantly enhance its competitiveness. In this case, the panel does not need to agree a grade for the application but it will need to agree specific feedback – based on the reviewers' comments - to be provided to the applicant.

In order for a proposal to be invited for resubmission the panel should satisfy itself that it meets **all** of the following criteria:

- the core research ideas and approach are original, innovative and exciting and the proposal has outstanding, transformative potential. It has clear potential to secure a grading of 6 if the identified weaknesses can be satisfactorily addressed
- there should be clear potential for the revised proposal to significantly increase its overall grading and priority for funding
- the panel should be confident that issues identified in deeming a proposal to be unfundable can be addressed through resubmission and that these are surmountable. This does not necessarily mean that the panel is able to identify how this will be achieved, just that they are confident that it is possible (the PI response may also be taken into account in this context)
- the issues should be of sufficient scale and significance that they could not have been adequately addressed through the PI response or through the use of conditions. Requested changes should be of sufficient scale to require the proposal to go through the full peer review and panel moderation process

- the panel must be able to provide clear guidance on the key issue or issues which need to be addressed in any resubmission, referring to peer reviewers' comments and PI responses as appropriate.

We would normally expect invited resubmissions to be used in instances where the panel considers the proposed research to be particularly challenging, novel, complex, adventurous or risky and where it may be difficult to get everything right first time, or where the peer review process reveals issues or challenges that might have been difficult for the applicants to have anticipated in preparing the proposal (an example might be a development which has happened since the proposal was submitted in terms of new or recently published research or a change in 'real world' conditions affecting the project).

When invited resubmissions are submitted they will be assessed in the usual way in competition with all other proposals.

Invited resubmissions should not be used:

- where the identified weaknesses relate to under-development, poor presentation or other problems relating to the preparation of the proposal, which could reasonably have been expected to be addressed in submitting a proposal of this kind.
- for proposals where the core ideas, rationale and foundations, aims and focus or overall design of the project need substantial re-working, since such radically revised proposals could be submitted as a significantly re-worked new proposal rather than as a resubmission.

In addition, there are schemes/calls where invited resubmission is not an option due to the particular nature of the scheme/call, i.e. because the call is a one off and there will be no further rounds under which to submit applications. In such cases the panel may wish to consider the possibility of a conditional award (as detailed above), where appropriate.

11. Feedback on AHRC peer review processes

Should the panel have any feedback on the AHRC peer review process and/or documentation, this can be discussed and recorded once all applications have been assigned a final grade and ranked. If there is not sufficient time to discuss this at the end of the meeting, the chair may collect and collate any comments from panellists via email before forwarding them to an AHRC officer. These will be formally recorded and used by the AHRC peer review college team to inform the future development of peer review processes.

12. At the end of the meeting

By the end of the meeting, the panel should have provided an agreed grade or outcome for all applications and produced a rank ordered list. Any feedback for applicants, conditional awards or invited resubmissions should also be agreed.

You should ask panel members to leave behind any hard copies of proposals, notes etc. so that AHRC can dispose of it securely. Also, that any e-copies of documents that they have created must be destroyed.

Please remind panel members that the discussions and outcomes are confidential and must not be discussed outside of the meeting. Should they be approached by applicants to discuss their proposals, in any way, they must decline.

They may talk to applicants about the council's structures, policies and modes of operation, so long as the information is in the public domain (e.g. in the Research Funding Guide or on the website). They must not divulge information about individual awards or application statistics, unless the information is already in the public domain (via press releases, annual reports, etc.).

13. After the panel meeting

Where the panel has agreed feedback for applicants, conditional awards or invited resubmissions, you will be invited to agree the final wording to be communicated back to the applicant. This is to ensure it is a true reflection of the comments agreed by the panel at the meeting and/or to check that the condition has been met.

Immediately after the meeting, you will be asked to attend a short debrief session, so that the AHRC Officers can gain feedback from you regarding the running of the meeting, its content and any associated processes you may wish to discuss. The AHRC officer attending the meeting will have a completed Meeting Record form for your approval. This acts as the formal record of the meeting and will include the final wording of any feedback, conditions or resubmission guidance along with the final grades and ranking of the proposals. As Chair, you are required to sign the Meeting Record as an authorised record of the meeting.

Appendix A. The Research Grants Scheme grading scale

| Score | Description | Definition |
|-------|---|--|
| 6 | Exceptional Should be funded as a matter of the very highest priority | Work that is at the leading edge internationally, in all of the assessment criteria – scholarship, originality, quality and significance, and meets the majority of them to an exceptional level. Likely to have a significant impact on the field. The proposal’s evidence and justification are fully and consistently provided and management arrangements are clear and convincing. |
| 5 | Excellent Should be funded as a matter of priority | Work that is internationally excellent in all of the assessment criteria – scholarship, originality, quality and significance, and meets them to an excellent level. Will answer important questions in the field. The proposal’s evidence and justification are fully and consistently provided and management arrangements are clear and convincing. |
| 4 | Very Good Worthy of consideration for funding | Work that demonstrates high international standards of scholarship, originality, quality and significance. Will advance the field of research. It meets all assessment criteria. The proposal’s evidence and justification are good and management arrangements are clear and sound. |
| 3 | Satisfactory In a competitive context, the proposal is not considered of sufficient priority to recommend for funding | Work that is satisfactory in terms of scholarship and quality but lacking in international competitiveness. It is limited in terms of originality, innovation and significance and its contribution to the research field. It meets minimum requirements in terms of the assessment criteria and the proposal’s evidence and justification are adequate overall. |
| 2 | Not Competitive Not recommended for funding | Work that is of inconsistent quality with some strengths, innovative ideas and good components, but has significant weaknesses or flaws in its conceptualisation, design, methodology and management. Unlikely to advance the field significantly. It does not meet all scheme assessment criteria. |
| 1 | Unfundable Not suitable for funding | A proposal that has an unsatisfactory level of originality, quality and significance. Has limited potential to advance research within the field and may be unconvincing in terms of its management arrangements or capacity to deliver proposed activities, especially for the amount of funding being sought. Unlikely to advance the field. It falls short of meeting the assessment criteria for the scheme |

Research Grants Scheme guidance

Please refer to the [Research Funding Guide](#), sections 1.1-1.2.4 for guidance about the Research Grants Scheme.

Appendix B. Leadership Fellows Scheme Grading Scale

| Grade | Description | Definition |
|-------|--|--|
| 6 | <p>Exceptional</p> <p>Should be funded as a matter of the very highest priority</p> | <p>An outstanding proposal that is world-leading in all of the following: scholarship, originality, quality and significance. It fully meets all the assessment criteria for the scheme and excels in many or all of these.</p> <p>It provides full and consistent evidence and justification for the proposal and management arrangements are clear and convincing.</p> <p>A convincing case is made that the proposed Fellowship has outstanding leadership and transformational potential, commensurate with the applicant's career stage.</p> <p>A proposal will only be scored at this level if both the research and leadership elements of the proposal are considered to be at this level.</p> |
| 5 | <p>Excellent</p> <p>Should be funded as a matter of priority</p> | <p>A proposal that is internationally excellent in all of the following: scholarship, originality, quality and significance.</p> <p>It fully meets or surpasses all the assessment criteria for the scheme.</p> <p>It provides full and consistent evidence and justification for the proposal, demonstrates strong institutional support and management arrangements are clear and convincing.</p> <p>A convincing case is made that the proposed Fellowship has excellent leadership and transformational potential, commensurate with the applicant's career stage.</p> <p>A proposal will only be scored at this level if both the research and leadership elements of the proposal are considered to be at this level.</p> |
| 4 | <p>Very Good</p> <p>Worthy of consideration for funding</p> | <p>A very good proposal demonstrating high international standards of scholarship, originality, quality and significance.</p> <p>It meets all the assessment criteria for the scheme.</p> <p>It provides good evidence and justification for the proposal and management arrangements are clear and sound.</p> <p>A convincing case is made that the proposed Fellowship has leadership and transformational potential, commensurate with the applicant's career stage.</p> <p>A proposal will only be scored at this level if both the research and leadership elements of the proposal are considered to be at this level.</p> |
| 3 | <p>Satisfactory</p> <p>In a competitive context, the proposal is not considered of sufficient priority to recommend for</p> | <p>A satisfactory proposal in terms of the overall standard of scholarship and quality, but which is not internationally competitive and/or does not make a fully convincing case that the proposed Fellowship has significant leadership and/or transformational potential, commensurate with the applicant's career stage and/or which is more limited in terms of originality/innovation, significance and/or its contribution to the research field.</p> <p>It satisfies at least minimum requirements in relation to the assessment</p> |

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| | funding | criteria for the scheme, provides reasonable evidence and justification for the proposal and management arrangements are adequate overall. |
| 2 | Not Competitive Not recommended for funding | <p>A proposal of inconsistent quality which has some strengths, innovative ideas and/or good components or dimensions, but also has significant weaknesses or flaws in one or more of the following: conceptualisation, design, methodology, management, leadership and transformational potential, collaborative activities and/or institutional support.</p> <p>As a result of the flaws or weaknesses identified, the proposal is not considered to be of fundable quality.</p> <p>A proposal would also be graded 2 if it does not meet all the assessment criteria for the scheme.</p> |
| 1 | Unfundable Not suitable for funding | <p>A proposal which falls into one or more of the following categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • has unsatisfactory levels of originality, quality and/or significance • falls significantly short of meeting the assessment criteria for the scheme • contains insufficient evidence and justification for the proposal • displays limited potential to advance the field of research • potential outcomes or outputs that do not merit the levels of funding sought • is unconvincing in terms of its management arrangements or capacity to deliver the proposed activities. • displays inadequate institutional support • does not make a convincing case that the proposed Fellowship has leadership and transformational potential commensurate with the applicant's career stage • contains insufficient proposals for relevant collaborative activities |

Leadership Fellows Scheme guidance

Please refer to the [Research Funding Guide Leadership Fellows Scheme](#) for guidance about the Leadership Fellows Scheme.

