

ESRC code of practice for reviewers

ESRC expects members of the Peer Review College, and others who are invited to review research proposals, to abide by the Code of Practice. ESRC believes that reviewers should uphold the entitlement of applicants to be treated fairly and to be given support for their learning. Assessing proposals is the primary purpose of reviews. However, the ESRC commitment to implementing the 2008 Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers implies that review feedback should assist applicants with learning how to develop strong research proposals. Learning support can be provided by reinforcing what applicants have done well and indicating how their proposal could be improved.

Reviewers are expected to act with integrity, reflecting six key principles of ethical reviewing whenever applicable.

Confidentiality

Reviewers undertake to keep confidential all information which they acquire and generate in the course of conducting their reviews of research proposals. This information should be transmitted to others only in accordance with the ESRC's review procedure. Such information must be stored and disposed of securely. It must be used solely for the purposes of evaluating the proposal according to the spirit and the letter of the ESRC guidance.

Respect

Applicants should be treated with respect throughout the review process. Their proposal typically represents a considerable emotional and intellectual investment, and what they submit for consideration is likely to represent their best effort. Reviewers are expected to assess the merits of the proposal, including the ability of the applicants to carry out the proposed programme of work, and make constructive criticisms where there are significant weaknesses. But they should never conflate judging the proposal with judging the applicants. Any comment is unacceptable which others might construe as personally defamatory.

Applicants' proposal also represents their intellectual property, a product of their creativity and knowledge. Reviewers should respect this intellectual property, and avoid any plagiaristic and unacknowledged appropriation of the applicants' ideas.

Impartiality

Reviewers should adopt a stance of impartiality, assessing the proposal solely on its own merits according to the ESRC's assessment criteria. But they should beware the intrusion of their own theoretical or methodological preferences as bases for their judgements. Reviewers are expected to be open to different approaches to investigation, new disciplinary thinking and methodological novelty. Reviewers should also provide a review which takes account of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal; a review which only accentuates the positive aspects of a proposal is of limited use to the ESRC in the assessment of the relative merits of proposals.

Any conflict of interest that might threaten the impartiality of the review must be declared to ESRC officials at the earliest opportunity. It is prudent for reviewers to include under consideration anything that applicants might, in principle, perceive to threaten the impartiality of the review if they were ever to discover the identity of the reviewer.

Transparency

The basis for the reviewer's grading and judgement of the proposal against each assessment criterion, and for the overall grading and judgement of the proposal, should be made clear. Reviewers should indicate in the accompanying feedback what evidence (or lack of it) from the proposal, or from the reviewer's wider expert knowledge, warrants the judgements that have been made.

Reviewers are expected to work to the highest standards of thoroughness and objectivity so that they are in a position to provide transparent judgements which are clearly warranted by such evidence or expert knowledge.

Developmental assistance

The primary duty of reviewers is to inform the ESRC introducers and panels of assessors. Yet reviewers also have a secondary duty to inform the applicants through their feedback in a way which is designed to maximise applicants' potential for learning as researchers. Such feedback offers reinforcement of what applicants have done well, and offers pointers to how their proposal (and possibly future proposals) could be improved. But reviewers should also note that their comments will be fed back, unattributed, to the applicants. So it is important to avoid writing anything that might disclose your identity to them.

Timeliness

Reviewers who accept the ESRC's invitation to review a research proposal simultaneously undertake to submit a review in which all components that they feel competent to address have been fully completed, within the requested timescale. Where unforeseen delays occur, reviewers are expected to inform the ESRC at the earliest possible opportunity.