UK Research and Innovation

███

18 October 2022

Dear ██████████ ,

Freedom of Information request: FOI2022/00293

Thank you for your Freedom of Information request received on the 9 September in which you requested the following:

Your request:

Three years ago, I conducted an analysis of ESRC peer-reviews. This illustrated some significant issues in consistency and reliability (https://ideas.repec.org/p/qss/dqsswp/1905.html).

Could the ESRC please provide me with the following:

1. Details of any further research the ESRC have conducted or commissioned into the consistency or reliability of their peer-review process.
2. Whether they have conducted any review into the use of "nominated reviewers", and any outcomes from this. If no such review has been conducted, please could this be stated.
3. Whether the ESRC or UKRI has made any changes since 2019 of how it quality assures its peer-reviews and grant allocation processes.

Our response

I can confirm UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) hold some information relevant to your request. Please see the information below.

In relation to question 1, ESRC has not conducted or commissioned any further research into the consistency or reliability of the peer review process. UKRI is however conducting a Review of Peer Review and ESRC, as part of UKRI, has provided significant input into process changes, which where appropriate are being harmonized across UKRI. The Review of Peer Review dovetails with the UKRI Simpler and Better Funding (SBF)/UKRI Funding Service (TFS) programme, which is being managed as an 'agile' project, which means that policy/process review changes will be implemented on an ongoing incremental basis. The Peer Review project is a long-term review, and initial changes are being implemented in line with TFS onboarding of Council opportunities. The current TFS Roadmap indicates Dec 2023 as the deadline for business as usual (BAU) service for running all Council opportunities. More information on Simpler and Better Funding is available here[1].

On question 2, ESRC has not conducted a review of the use of nominated reviewers and is aware of both benefits and challenges with using nominated peer reviewers. This is likely to be revised through TFS to enable a consistent approach going forwards. "User" reviewers are particularly valuable to ESRC to help identify expected impacts of research outcomes that are out of the academic arena. The SBF programme is reviewing the breadth of UKRI Research Council policy on capture of data related to applicant 'Nominated Reviewers'' and although it is unlikely that nominated reviewer functionality will be developed within TFS (certainly in the short term), Councils do have the

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[1] https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/improving-your-funding-experience/

ability to request applicant nominated reviewers where there is a specific business requirement for opportunities set up in TFS.

On question 3 in regard to our grant allocation process, we appoint reviewers from the UK and overseas with recognised expertise in the relevant areas of research to review proposals, independently of other proposals. Reviewers are asked to use our published criteria to assess whether proposals are fundable. UKRI have guidance on 'How we make decisions'[2] on the UKRI website; this includes a link to the UKRI Principles of Assessment and Decision Making pdf document. ESRC produced a 'code of practice for reviewers'[3] to uphold the entitlement of applicants to be treated fairly and to be given support for their learning.

In regard to quality assurance, ESRC staff are regularly trained and updated on harmonised policy and expectations regarding peer review and grant allocation processes.

Particularly, ESRC checks the usability of reviews received, including:
- Whether the reviewer is assessing the proposal solely on its own merits according to the ESRC's assessment criteria
- Whether the reviewers have identified themselves in some form, as ESRC has a duty to ensure that their anonymity is maintained
- Whether a reviewer's comment (which others might construe as personally defamatory) is unacceptable.

Further ESRC has recently updated the peer review training tool available here[4].

Further assurance of the peer reviews submitted is mediated through assessment panels. Following work carried out by an external consultant, panel assessment processes have been revised to ensure that a fair process is followed, and equal time and consideration is given to all applications.

If you have any queries regarding our response or you are unhappy with the outcome of your request and wish to seek an internal review of the decision, please contact:

Head of Information Governance
Email: foi@ukri.org or infogovernance@ukri.org

Please quote the reference number above in any future communications.

If you are still not content with the outcome of the internal review, you may apply to refer the matter to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the review procedure provided by UKRI. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: www.ico.org.uk.

If you wish to raise a complaint regarding the service you have received or the conduct of any UKRI staff in relation to your request, please see UKRI's complaints policy: https://www.ukri.org/about-us/policies-and-standards/complaints-policy/

Yours sincerely,

Information Governance
Information Rights Team
UK Research and Innovation
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[2] https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-we-make-decisions/#:~:text=UKRI%20funds%20research%20and%20innovation,the%20research%20quality%20is%20highest
[3] https://www.ukri.org/publications/esrc-code-of-practice-for-reviewers/
[4] https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-reviewers/peer-reviews/guidance-for-peer-reviewers/