

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN PANEL MEETINGS: BEST PRACTICE

UKRI has a responsibility to promote equality and diversity throughout its activities as part of its public sector duties. More information can be found at: <https://esrc.ukri.org/about-us/policies-and-standards/equality-and-diversity/>. Our ambition is for ESRC, as part of UKRI, to be recognised as a leader in equality, diversity and inclusion in the research community, working with partners throughout the sector. Individuals acting on behalf of ESRC, including Council, advisory network members, and members of commissioning panels are both protected by and expected to act in accordance with the law.

Unconscious bias occurs when people favour others who are similar to them (for instance those who look like them or who share their values and beliefs). Unconscious bias is the consequence of the human brain using shortcuts to speed up decision-making. Our biases are influenced by our background, cultural environment and own experiences.

The GAP Secretariat have developed the following set of best practice guidelines and principles to promote equality, diversity and inclusion and mitigate against unconscious bias at Panel Meetings. These guidelines are based on external expert advice received after a cross-RCUK project looking at the issue. This project involved consultants observing a range of panel meetings and providing both generic and council-specific feedback.

Unconscious bias is most likely to occur when individuals:

- are under pressure
- have a high cognitive load
- need to reach closure
- are tired or hungry (cognitive resources are depleted by low blood sugars)
- resort to overall impressions

It is the responsibility of the office to work to ensure that commissioning processes create the right conditions to maximize fairness and objectivity and minimise the likelihood of unconscious bias affecting panel decisions.

Guidelines

- 1) Panel membership should be **diverse** in order to ensure that a wide range of views are represented. Within the constraints of ensuring that a panel has the necessary expertise, attention should be paid to ensuring gender balance, ethnic diversity, geographic diversity, institutional diversity and diversity of career stage. A panel EDI data tool has been developed by colleagues in the Insights Team to allow call leads to view EDI data relating to panel composition.
- 2) Panel Chairs should read an **Implementation Intention Statement** at the beginning of each meeting to set the tone for discussions. The statement used at the GAPs reads as follows:

“It is our intention to ensure that the panel’s deliberations today are fair and equitable and we will achieve this through paying close attention to the scoring criteria and definitions, and by challenging any imprecise language used by panel members which might allow unconscious biases to creep into the panel’s discussions.”

- 3) The **score definitions and assessment criteria** used by the panel should be available in hard copy at the meetings and Chairs should refer to them throughout the meeting. Proposals should, in the first instance, be scored in relation to the criteria and not compared directly with one another (although this may be necessary in the ranking discussions).
- 4) **Conflicts of Interest** should be carefully managed. Panel members should not be picked to introduce proposals if they have a known conflict of interest, and should leave the room for the duration of the discussion of the proposal if they have a conflict of interest. It may be that on the day conflicts of interest which were not previously known will emerge (especially for members who have not been asked to act as an introducer or reader for a particular proposal). Panel members should be reminded at the beginning of the meeting that they have a responsibility to declare any conflict of interest unknown to the office as soon as they realise they are conflicted. Such conflicts should be treated in the same way as known conflicts. Perception is important. The acid test is whether a member of the public, knowing the facts of the situation, might reasonably think that the judgement could be influenced by the potential conflict of interest.
- 5) The use of **‘Readers’** should be seriously considered as part of the panel process. Members of the panel are allocated a number of proposals as Introducer and a further set as ‘Reader’. Readers do not formally introduce and score the proposals, but are asked to read specific proposals and come to the meeting prepared to discuss and give their views on these proposals. This ensures that there is a good breadth of opinion represented in discussions and no one individual has undue influence on decisions.
- 6) The **Panel Chairs and Secretaries in particular should be mindful of potential biases and should be quick to challenge imprecise language**, particularly where members refer to feelings and impressions (‘I like this...’, ‘I find this exciting...’, ‘I feel...’, ‘I get a sense that...’) Other panel members should also feel empowered to constructively challenge potential bias where they identify it. It is important to ensure the discussions are **evidence-based** and refer throughout to the assessment criteria and score definitions for the call. Introducer comments should show engagement with reviewer comments, as their role is not to ‘re-review’ the proposal but rather to ‘review the reviews’. Although their role is primarily one of moderation, panel members may introduce additional concerns if they are flagged as such. However, if the introducer considers that a proposal is not sufficiently well reviewed they should recommend well in advance of the meeting that it be sent back for additional peer review (and potentially deferred to the next meeting for open call proposals).

- 7) The Panel Chairs and Secretaries should be on the look out for instances of **'priming' or 'groupthink'** where it appears that panel members are being unduly influenced to adjust their scores or comments by other 'louder voices' in the room, but have given a strong justification for their higher/lower score in their comments (if they have produced written comments). In such cases it is the Chair's role to ensure that the **discussion is balanced and every member has an opportunity to be heard** and influence the overall panel score.
- 8) Panel **workloads should be realistic** and allow **sufficient time** for meaningful discussions. The Office should work to ensure that panels are not required to discuss too high a number of proposals for a one-day meeting by setting the cut-off for the discussion zone at a level where we are not required to discuss a large number of proposals which are not likely to secure funding. If necessary, meetings should run over two days. Panel Chairs and Panel Secretaries should take a sensible approach to ensuring that the meeting stays on track and in order to avoid imposing additional time pressures. A meeting schedule with rough timings can be helpful.
- 9) Panels should not pay particular attention to **track record** of applicants. Whilst track record may play into panel decisions it should not be emphasised to the extent that innovative/potentially high impact work by less established researchers is disadvantaged. It is important that panels assess the application in front of them and **do not 'read between the lines'** or give the benefit of the doubt based on the reputation of the individual applicant or team, as this would be a form of confirmation bias.
- 10) **Comfort breaks** in the morning and afternoon should be at least 10 minutes long, and preferably 15 minutes. The **lunch break should be at least 30 minutes long**, and ideally will last 45 minutes. This allows panel members sufficient time to recharge throughout the day and helps to reduce cognitive load. There should be **adequate supplies of refreshments** (tea and coffee, fruit and biscuits) available throughout the day in order to protect against low blood sugars and fatigue amongst the panel.
- 11) Panel member **absences** can cause difficulties and limit the range of perspectives included in the discussions. Although this can be mitigated by having the panel Secretary or Chair present the Introducer's report and supplementary written comments solicited from the absent member, there is a temptation for panels to give more weight to the comments of those members who are present and therefore a **potential unjustified weighting** given to those views. Where possible, all panel members should be present at the commissioning meeting, and where it is not possible Panel Chairs should take care to ensure that the views of absent members are not dismissed without full consideration.
- 12) **Detailed notes** should be taken in the meeting for each proposal and **summarised** for the panel by the Panel Chair and Secretary for proposals relevant to the final ranking discussion. It can be useful to assign a provisional ranking to each proposal during the course of the meeting to ensure that proposals are fresh in the panel's minds. However, it is important that the proposal is given a final score in its own right first, and

only then should the panel compare it with others which have already been discussed. Sufficient time should be allowed for the final ranking discussion so that it is not rushed at the end of the meeting.