Interview Meeting Procedures

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EP.G.18A

Interview Meeting Procedures

Council Operating Procedures

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Purpose

This document provides instructions to Portfolio Managers on how to prepare and convene an Interview panel.

Scope

Standard process for interview meetings and should be used in conjunction with Prepare and convene a Meeting - **EP.G.15A**

Responsibilities

Convenor, Introducers, Chair - follows interview panel guidance.

Pre-requisites

Proposal are assigned to the interview meeting in Seibel

End Point

Interview meeting has taken place and actions from it are complete and the panel is status in Seibel is closed.

Introduction – Why an interview meeting

This COP provides additional guidance on the interview process and the protocols that should be followed at the interview meeting. It should be used in conjunction with Prepare and Convene a meeting COP EP.G.15A which will provide general guidance on the Panel Convenor actions. Please note for schemes that routinely have an interview stage, such as fellowships and programme grants, there will be specific interview guidance.

Considerations before you set up an interview meeting:

- What are you trying to achieve?
- How would having an interview achieve this?
- What format should the interview take e.g. presentations, or just questions?
- Who should attend from the group / individual applying?
- What types of meeting attendees do you need?
- Is this activity in line with the UKRI Principles of Assessment and Decision Making?
- Is the peer review process that you are planning appropriate to the type of proposed research and in proportion with the investment and complexity of the work?

Role of the Interview Convenor

- Brief the Chair before the meeting on the applications.
- At the start of the meeting ensure that everyone in the room knows what they are doing and what their roles are.
- Actively convene the meeting by being an active member of the meeting.
- Keep the Chair to time and push the meeting on if needed.
- Ensure that the meeting adheres to EPSRC policy and procedure and be prepared to intervene and challenge when necessary.
- Answer questions / queries that the panel may have.
- Suggest a solution and help the Chair to resolve conflict at the meeting.
- Have the final say on how the conflict will be resolved such as defer for more reviewers.
- Maintain the audit trail and keep a formal record of the panel decisions, feedback, conflicts of interest (and action taken), and overall scores.

You are not expected to convene a panel meeting if you have not completed the EPSRC Unconscious Bias training. The “Managing and Challenging Unconscious Bias as a Peer Review Panel Convenor” course is available via Oracle.

Role of the Panel Chair

The panel Chair should carry out the following actions

- Lead the panel meeting
- Facilitate discussions
- Keep the meeting to time
- Have an overview of all the applications at the meeting
- Lead discussions that help set the proposals in the wider context of the whole EPSRC portfolio
- Ensure (in co-operation with EPSRC staff) the UKRI Principles of Assessment and Decision Making are adhered to and procedures are followed.
- The Chair has the responsibility to ensure that the panel discussion is based on the assessment criteria and the evidence provided.
- The Chair should challenge inappropriate or irrelevant comments.
- Ensure that changes to scores or a proposal rank has a clear and complete rationale to back them up.
- Work with panel members and EPSRC staff before, during and after the meeting to ensure the panel considers all relevant information.
- Ensure panel advice has broad support of panel members, delivers EPSRC's strategic goals and is clearly and correctly reported to EPSRC.
- Specify any formal panel feedback that should be provided to the applicant

Pre-Panel Preparations

Interview Panel Participants

The interview panel will have typically four to five members. Conflicts of Interest are particularly disruptive to interview panels due to their smaller size and there are specific requirements in the EPSRC Policy on Conflicts of Interest (here) which must be followed. You are advised to recruit panel members as far in advance as possible and to consider approaching additional members to help mitigate against the impact of a panel member dropping out, or the last-minute discovery of a hard conflict of interest. It is easier to stand a panel member down than to find additional panel members at short notice. Information on the interviewees and their team (if appropriate) should be shared as soon as possible so prospective panel members can raise any Conflicts of Interest early.

All EPSRC prioritisation and interview panels must be mixed gender. **There is a 30% target for the under-represented gender for all panels. This target does not mean that every panel has to meet that 30%, but some panels will need to exceed this target if some do not meet it.** Other panel activities such as external advisory boards, mid-terms reviews are also expected to be mixed gender in line with this policy.

To better accommodate individual requirements, we would like to encourage colleagues to explore alternative options for participation, such as video conferencing.

Exceptions to this policy should be very rare and only in unexpected circumstances. For example, for a small panel of three or four members where someone drops out at the very last minute and no one else can be found.

Sensitive Information and Making Adjustments

It is the responsibility of the applicant to communicate any personal circumstances that may affect their application or interview for EPSRC to consider. The applicant should raise this in their Proposal Cover Letter, or through correspondence at the point of being invited to interview.

So that no applicant is unfairly disadvantaged the Convening Team and Portfolio Manager have a responsibility to address any matters that will require some form of consideration, such as timing or logistical arrangements. If appropriate this may include but is not limited to deferral of the interview to a later date, interview via video conference, or moving the interview slot to later in the interview schedule. Examples of circumstances that could be raised include, that the interviewee was deferred to a later meeting, the interviewee is currently on maternity leave, or the interviewee has a disability.

If you are uncertain of what can be requested, contact the Business Improvement team, or PSU HR for advice. Requests will be considered on a case by case basis, and the applicant should be consulted as well.
If appropriate and relevant the Convenor must ensure that the Panel Participants are aware of anything that has been agreed for example: ‘ Due to personal circumstances of the applicant, the interview was deferred to a later date’. The Convenor must ensure they have the applicants’ permission before sensitive information is shared.

Candidates are able to raise sensitive information with the panel in their interview, but panels are reminded that ALL applicants must be assessed against the published assessment criteria.

Proposal Cover Letter

Applicants can use the Proposal Cover Letter to express any other information they feel is relevant to their application. If the applicant is applying for a grant which has an interview assessment stage, they should inform EPSRC of any personal circumstances for EPSRC to consider.

This letter will only be seen by EPSRC and will not be sent to Peer Review. For sensitive information the applicant should state clearly whether the information is confidential.

The Proposal Cover Letter should also be used to highlight anything that has been discussed and agreed with EPSRC staff beforehand. For example:

- Applicant is on maternity leave until a certain date;
- Declaration of Interest;
- Additional information about eligibility to apply that would not be appropriately shared in the track record;
- Conflict of Interest for EPSRC to consider in reviewer or panel participant selection
- The application is an invited resubmission.

Invitation to Interview

The panel membership must be shared with interview candidates, who should be asked to highlight any conflicts of interest with panel members as soon as possible. Should the panel membership change e.g. a panel member drops out that cannot be replaced due to short notice, the Convenor should make reasonable effort to inform the interviewees in advance of their interview. It is the responsibility of the applicant to communicate any personal circumstances that may affect their application or interview; this should be made clear when they are invited to interview. Please see the Peer Review Too kit for the Interviewee Guidance template.

All interviewees must receive clear guidance in advance of their interview. If a scheme has an interviewee panel guidance document this should be sent to candidates. This should include:

- Details of their interview date, time, location. Including additional information on where to park, or how to get to the venue.
- Instructions for where to report, or who to contact on arrival
- The format of the interview
- Where a presentation is required - instructions such as whether slides or handouts are permitted, time limit, and where to send slides in advance, should be provided.
- Assessment criteria for the interview stage
- Who should attend, is it just the Principle Investigator, or their team members of collaborators
- Contact details of the Convener and the Convener Team
- Panel membership. (Note panel membership may not be confirmed at the Invite Applicant stage, but this must be sent to the applicant in advance). This should include all those in attendance at the interview, including the Convener, Head of Theme or any observers.

Meeting Papers

(full list and in timeline for EPSRC Peer Review Extranet work can be seen in the Prepare and convene a Meeting COP - **EP.G.15A**)

Papers for all grant related meetings should use the EPSRC Peer Review Extranet for all participants both external and internal to EPSRC. External participants will be invited to join the EPSRC Peer Review Extranet by DST in order to access the paperwork. **Printed papers are not provided by EPSRC.**

While it is the role of Delivery Support colleagues to upload and check panel documentation, it is the overall responsibility of the Convenor to ensure that the panel papers are correct **before** they are shared with panel members. This is particularly crucial for calls that use non-standard papers and where a different process is being followed as papers won't have automatic editing to remove conflicts of interest for example.
Note that schemes with interview stages will usually have an interview panel guidance document for panel members. This should be included within the meeting documents on the EPSRC Peer Review Extranet.

It is the responsibility of the convening team and Portfolio Managers to ensure that they are aware of any issues or relevant information that may affect an application, and that these are handled appropriately. This includes checking information raised by applicants in their Cover Letter, and the notes sections on Seibel. Please note information shared in the Cover Letter is for Office use and it is not shared with reviewers or panel members. **Personal information must be treated as Official Sensitive.** If it contains information that peer review should take account of, EPSRC must get permission from the applicant before sharing it. If you are uncertain how to handle personal information and the action you need to take please contact the EPSRC Business Improvement team.

Interview panel members will need to use the Interview Panel Introducer Form which is produced by the Meeting Convenor Tool. If there are additional assessment criteria these can be added to all Introducer Forms using the Meeting Convenor Tool.

All conflicts of interest must be recorded in panel documentation; this includes the rank order list.
Panel Convenor notes and Introducer Forms are official documents. Panel papers are not exempt from the Freedom of Information Act.

Support available for people with caring responsibilities

EPSRC is committed to attracting the best potential researchers from a diverse population into research careers and providing support to help them stay should their situation change. We have therefore developed these guidelines to highlight the support available to researchers, (both panel members and interviewees) with caring responsibilities.

Where participation in an EPSRC activity would involve additional care requirements, our expectation is that their employer is approached in the first instance to meet these costs. If their employer is unable to cover these additional costs then EPSRC may reimburse reasonable extra costs incurred. Making arrangements for the care to be provided is the responsibility of the carer themselves.

People invited to EPSRC events should check with the event organizer and confirm what costs can be reimbursed prior to attendance. Claims should be made using the relevant form here: https://epsrc.ukri.org/about/standards/travel/ (claimants should note that any tax liability is their own responsibility).

Setting of Interview dates

Care should be taken when fixing interview dates to ensure that no interviewee is disadvantaged by short timescales, or deadlines over /close to bank holidays or school holidays and that, once set, dates are not brought forward. If the date is changed because of a strong business reason then applicants should be notified as early as possible and applicants given an opportunity to raise any concerns.

Observers

For guidance on Observers refer to the Observer's section of the Prepare and Convene a Meeting COP. Observers at Interview panels should be kept to an absolute minimum to avoid making the panel composition appear too large.

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The Interview meeting

Format of Interview meetings

Be aware that working with a high cognitive load, time pressures and the need to make quick decisions creates conditions for bias which could have an adverse impact on the funding decisions we make.

At least 30 minutes is needed at the start of the day for the meeting attendees to meet and for the Convenor (EPSRC) to explain:

- What the Scheme/Call is trying to achieve, what types of attributes EPSRC is looking for.
- The format and process that will be followed for each interview
- The assessment criteria being assessed through interview and the questions that will enable the panel to explore the assessment criteria questions and how the interviews will be conducted can be discussed.
- More preparation time may be required when there are a greater number of criteria to be assessed i.e. expert interview panel to assess both the quality of science and the applicant.
- Whilst Pathways to Impact will no longer be used, potential Impact will need to be referred to when discussing the assessment criteria, especially with regards to Quality

For each interview

Adequate and consistent timings should also be adhered to for all elements of the interview to ensure fairness. As a guide these should be at least:

- At least 10 minutes before each interview to discuss the candidate and their application and decide which questions each interviewer will be asking.
- 5 - 10 minutes for an Applicant's presentation is recommended, (where applicable)
- At least 25 minutes for the Questions and Answers session (this can be extended to 35 minutes if the call/scheme doesn't require a presentation). See below for suggested interview questions.
- 15 minutes (minimum) for the closed panel post interview discussion, including independent recording their individual scores.

Timings must be consistent for all interviews in direct competition with one another.

Interview Protocol

EPSRC is committed to ensuring that those who participate in the interview process recognise the factors that introduce bias into decision making. To do this, it is important to raise awareness of, and take steps to remove the opportunities for unconscious bias in all aspects of our decision-making processes.

All those involved in peer review must help us safeguard our decision making by taking the following steps:

  - All interviewees must be assessed on equal terms and be objectively assessed on their merits using the criteria set for each funding mechanism.
  - The Panel Chairs and Conveners are responsible for ensuring there is a rationale for changing the panel score and ranking in meetings, and that this is based on evidence and the assessment criteria.

  - Question and challenge cultural stereotypes and bias in any EPSRC meetings and be prepared to be challenged by the Chair, Convenor or meeting participant

- Ensure that the panel has been provided with all relevant documentation and that all panel members are aware of the relevant background of all the interviewees at each interview. Before sharing sensitive personal information, you must have approval from the interviewee.

- It is important that the panel asks questions to enable the applicant to demonstrate evidence against the assessment criteria that were published in the call/scheme guidance.
- Provide printed copies of the assessment criteria and the scoring system at the meeting for quick reference
- In selecting interview questions, it is important to consider:
  - What are the key assessment criteria that need to be addressed at the interview stage?
  - Who is going to ask each question (or cover each criterion)?
- It is good practice for all interviewers to ask questions.
- If you are conducting group interviews, ensure that each interviewee present is engaged in answering questions
- Panel members are encouraged to take notes. Introducer Forms are provided for panel members to make notes before the meeting, during the interview, and to summarise final thoughts before the post interview discussion. Forms will be collected afterwards as they are part of the audit trail and to help feedback to applicants.
- It is good practice for panel members to keep eye contact if they have asked a question. The other panel members should take notes so that the lead questioner can focus on follow up questions to probe further for evidence.

Note Taking

An EPSRC staff member in attendance will take notes of each interview. Please see the Prepare and Convene a Meeting COP for guidance on note taking and retention.

Interviewee Presentation

If you are inviting the applicant to make a presentation as part of the interview you should carefully consider how it will be used so that the applicant will provide evidence against the assessment criteria.

- Which assessment criteria, that haven't been sufficiently covered in the application, will be addressed through the presentation? The interview is time-constrained, so ensure you have time to explore all the criteria.

- Is the interviewee permitted to use slides or bring handouts or visual aids? Where appropriate, EPSRC staff will ensure that any presentation submitted in advance (e.g. MS PowerPoint format) will be ready for use on the screen at the start of each interview.

In their presentation applicants could be asked to cover:

- Key points of the proposed research, highlighting what is novel/exciting about the work, including an indication of the importance and expected outcomes of the research.
- Articulating their vision for the research and their role in delivering that as well as the support and commitment shown to their career from their host organisation.
- Why they should be awarded, and how it aligns to EPSRC strategic priorities.

Repeat returning to the slides during the interview is not the most efficient use of time, and it can create additional time pressure. The introduction of additional or hidden slides during questioning, that were not included in the presentation are not permitted.

Suggested Interview Questions

Introduction

Whilst it is important to ensure that the right questions are asked it is equally important that they are asked consistently so that applicants are treated fairly and ranked against the same criteria. This does not mean that there should be no flexibility in the wording of questions as long as the same goal is achieved with each interviewee. The set of example questions listed below are not an exhaustive list and the panel must spend sufficient time at the start of the meeting to discuss and agree the core questions which each panellist will ask.

Standard Criteria

Quality/Excellence:

It is likely that the evidence for the Quality/Excellence criteria will be proposal specific based on information shared in the presentation or comments raised by the reviewers. If further evidence is required to fully assess quality/excellence and to have consistency across all applicants the following example questions can also be used.

- How would you benchmark your research against ongoing activity in your field nationally and internationally? What research evidence do you base this on?
- What key research challenges will be addressed? How are these challenges creative, ambitious and innovative?
- What evidence can you give that your team is world-leading?

Applicant and Partnerships

- As PI what is your main contribution to the grant and what is your role?
- How would you balance strategic priorities and what experience have you had?
- Who are the leading groups in the UK in this area of research? How will you interact with them?
- Why is the award of a grant timely at this point in the career?
- How will the grant award enhance the career path and help you achieve your goals?

- How will you ensure that you will achieve your career aspirations?
- How have you ensured that you have the correct balance of skills on your team?
  How do you inspire your team to ensure you get the best out of them?

- Give an example of how you might adapt your proposed research to take advantage of new research opportunities?
- How will you approach getting the best out of the people in your research group? What leadership attributes will characterise your grant?
- Demonstrate your experience in successfully leading large complex teams (Question for where leadership skills are essential)

National Importance

- Explain how your project may underpin or contribute to societal change and the success of the UK economy?
- How may your grant contribute to the health of other research disciplines and other current UK research?
- How will your research compliment other UK research already funded in this and related areas in the current EPSRC portfolio?
- Will your research help other related research disciplines?
- How will your research establish or maintain a unique world-leading research activity?
- To what extent does this research have the potential to meet national strategic needs?
- Describe how this research will provide the UK with a unique capability

Resources and Management

- How have you managed conflict within your project team in the past?
- How do you keep your team motivated?
- How have you managed your projects in the past?
- Describe the management structure and explain the rationale for having it, including the involvement of project partners?
- How have you determined potential risks previously and what contingencies did you put in place to manage those you had already identified?
- How have you stopped or started work on research ideas within your past research projects? How did you prioritise these ideas?
- How have you managed your project partners in earlier projects and any potential differences of opinion?
- What are your plans for managing the research over multiple institutions? How will the distribution of resources be handled? Give examples from current or past experience. (for multiple centre grants)
- How have you used flexibility of resources in previous projects to ensure that the best possible science is carried out?
- How have you formerly evaluated how the individual projects were going and decided future direction? (Longer, larger grant specific question)

Additional Criteria assessed through interview – not applicable to all Schemes and Calls

Impact

- What will be the main impact of your research and how will you ensure this is achieved?
- Based on past experience, how do you plan to disseminate the research, e.g. to research community and to a broader community?
- How will you ensure that your research achieves maximum impact? Can you provide examples of this from your current or past research?
- What are your plans for networking and prioritising collaborations?
- What are the common barriers to achieving impact? How will your approach avoid these?
  Based on evidence from past experience how will you develop and extend relationships with the academic and user community?
- How will you ensure the sustainability of the programme of work beyond the lifetime of the grant? What evidence can you provide based on current or previous work? (Longer, Larger grant specific question)

Fit to Call

Questions here will be more bespoke to address the aims and strategic priorities set out in the call/scheme.

- Explain how you believe your proposed research aligns with your institution's strategic priorities
- How will this grant enable you to take a longer term, more strategic and multidisciplinary view of your research (for longer grants)

Team / Personal Development

- How will you endeavour to ensure the careers of your team members, of all levels, will be actively developed? Give examples of how you have achieved this in the past.

Funding

- How will you ensure that your research will leverage funding from other sources? Give examples from current or past research.

Programme Grant specific criteria

Question examples can be found here

Overall Vision and Ambition

- Please describe the overall vision for your research?

Additionality

- What will this grant enable you to do that a standard research grant won't?
- How will the flexibility to use different approaches benefit the research?

Advocacy for Engineering and Physical Sciences

- What will the team do to influence policy makers of the importance of engineering and physical sciences?
- How are the public engagement activities applied for relate to the research of this grant?

Fellowship specific criteria

Question examples can be found in the interview panel guidance template here

Fellowship Vision

- Please describe the overall vision for your research?

Research Leadership

Communication and Ambassadorship

Personal Development

Possible concluding question: closing remarks

At the end of the Question and Answer session of the interview, the interviewee will be invited to make a brief a closing statement clarifying any final points and to raise any specific questions.

Is there anything more that you would like to share with the panel? Is there anything we haven't asked that you were expecting?
If the panel Chair has not asked this question the panel Convenor must remind the Chair or ask the question themselves. Standard questions relating to notification of outcomes can be answered by the Convenor.

Tips on crafting additional questions

It is important to remember that these questions are not exhaustive and that some new calls and schemes may require additional questions based on the specific assessment criteria. Care should be taken in crafting these additional questions. Here are a few tips that should help you in this process.

- Do not use any gender specific phrases
- Make questions open and evidence based. If you ask the applicant if they can do something, ask them to provide evidence from their current or past experience
- All questions must relate to one or more criteria of the specific scheme or call you are interviewing for, with the possible exceptions of 'ice-breaker' or concluding questions. Great care must be made not to introduce any bias or extra criteria at this point.

Closed Discussion and grading

(minimum 15 minutes)
After the interview, a closed session will be run for the panel to briefly discuss the applicant's performance at the interview.

Once the interview has concluded and the interviewee has left, panel members should refrain from any further discussion of the interview until they have independently completed and recorded their individual scores against all of the assessment criteria using the Introducer Form provided. Only then should discussion take place to reach a panel score. This process should help avoid any contextual affect which may influence scoring and which would not be criterion based.

Assessment of scientific methodology and all additional activities to realise the outcomes of the research should be collectively considered as part of the 'Quality' assessment criterion.

The panel will then agree a final score for the proposal which takes into consideration both the reviewers' comments, applicant's response and performance at interview.

Prioritisation: The panel will be then be asked to agree the final ranking for the proposals and to finalise the feedback.

For further guidance on providing feedback please see the Feedback COP EP.G20A. Please note that for quality assurance purposes, feedback should be checked by a colleague before it is shared with the applicant.

For details on post panel actions, please see standard Prepare and Convene a meeting COP EP.G.15A