

1.1.1 Assessment criteria policy – PSED alignment

Responsibilities: the emphasis on ensuring that the assessment criteria are clear, consistent, and aligned with the purpose of the opportunity complements the duty to pay due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination.

Metrics: considering a range of research and innovation outputs instead of relying solely on journal-based metrics aligns with the PSED's objective of advancing equality and fostering good relations as journal-based metrics can be influenced by various biases which may favour established researchers and well-funded institutions, perpetuating existing inequalities in the research community. Considering other outputs in assessment supports a broader recognition of diverse contributions, underpinning a more inclusive assessment framework.

1.1.2 Assessment criteria policy – areas for improvement

A more detailed explanation of how alternative research outputs will be evaluated and the criteria used for such evaluations could strengthen how UKRI meets the PSED.

1.1.3 Funding assessment and decision-making policy and principles

Definitions: the inclusion of assessors, reviewers and panellists from diverse backgrounds—business, academia, public sector, charity, and the public—should enable a broader perspective during the assessment, which could foster good relations and understanding between different groups of people. This multidisciplinary approach to assessment could also support taking into consideration the needs of people from protected groups.

Responsibilities: by pledging to use a diverse range of experts for assessments, UKRI indirectly supports the PSED mandate to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. The provision to appoint panellists with a range of expertise, including those with knowledge relevant for cross-disciplinary applications, could further advance this goal by ensuring that a variety of perspectives and needs are considered. The provision of guidance for assessors and panellists should serve to standardise the assessment process, potentially reducing the scope for unconscious bias or discrimination, thereby aligning with the PSED's requirement to eliminate unlawful discrimination.

Transparency: The opportunity for applicants to see and respond to anonymised reviewer comments, as well as to receive timely feedback on the outcomes, should foster good relations and understanding between different groups. This aspect could be especially beneficial in advancing equality by enabling applicants, including those from protected groups, to improve future applications.

Impartiality: the need for a fair and unbiased assessment process is highlighted which complements paying due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination. Further mitigation against bias is provided by informing all panellists on the importance of fair and objective decisions, UKRI takes steps to minimise discriminatory practices.

Conflicts of interest: the strategy to identify and manage conflicts of interest among reviewers, panellists, and staff adds another layer of impartiality. Managing these conflicts in accordance with a formal Declaration of Interest policy ensures that the evaluation process is less likely to be influenced by personal or institutional biases. Providing specific guidance on how to identify and manage conflicts of interest not only enhances transparency but also aligns with the PSED's requirement to foster good relations among different social groups.

Appropriateness: the focus on appropriateness in the assessment process aims to create a more equitable environment, which should support the objectives of the PSED. The commitment to collect information and data in a manner and timing that supports effective assessment contributes to the goal of advancing equality of opportunity, by aiming to ensure that all applicants, regardless of their background or protected characteristics, are evaluated on the merits of their proposals and the alignment with the funding opportunity's aims.

Metrics: the decision not to use journal-based metrics recognises the limitations and potential biases inherent in such metrics, which can disproportionately affect researchers from underrepresented groups or non-traditional research areas.

Confidentiality: this is particularly significant for applicants from protected groups who may have concerns about how their information is used and who may be disproportionately affected by any misuse of data.

Anonymity: keeping the identity of reviewers anonymous to the applicant could facilitate more honest and unbiased assessments, which in turn could contribute to the PSED's goals of advancing equality of opportunity.

Confidentiality: instructing reviewers to maintain confidentiality in their assessments and not to discuss their involvement publicly could support the preservation of integrity of the assessment process. This could be particularly beneficial in maintaining good relations among different groups by ensuring that the assessment process is viewed as fair and impartial.

Integrity and ethics: The provision of resources on research ethics and good conduct could contribute to an understanding among assessors and applicants of the value of ethical considerations in research and innovation. This could potentially advance equality of opportunity by supporting a shared ethical framework for the conduct of research, which can be especially important for projects that involve participants from protected groups.

Equality, diversity and inclusion: the explicit focus on EDI in UKRI's assessment and decision-making processes appears to be designed to directly implement the PSED principles.

Equality impact assessments: the decision to conduct Equality Impact Assessments for all new funding opportunities should support a systematic approach to advancing equality of opportunity.

EDI data: publicly disclosing EDI data should enable an objective evaluation of how well the institution is meeting its PSED obligations, and inform continuous improvement.

Panel selection: the transparent and robust process for selecting panellists and reviewers, with a focus on utilising talent from underrepresented groups, further aligns with the PSED's objectives. This process could help to encourage people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low, another specific requirement of the PSED.

Separation of duties: An independent assessment of quality should mitigate the risk of discrimination as it aims to minimise the potential for biases or conflicts of interest that could unfairly impact the funding outcome. This separation of roles helps to create an assessment environment where applications are more likely to be evaluated solely on their merits.

1.1.4 Funding assessment and decision-making policy and principles – areas for improvement

- The pledge to use a diverse range of experts could benefit from more explicit measures to support EDI, such as analysis of EDI expert data.

- The practice of allowing reviewers to choose the applications they review has its advantages, such as the potential for more engaged and insightful reviews. However, it does introduce a potential point of bias. While anonymising applications could mitigate the risk of bias, reviewers could still potentially identify applicants through the subject matter, research style, or other indirect indicators, especially in smaller or more specialised fields. While full anonymisation may not be entirely feasible, a hybrid approach could be considered where reviewers could be provided with a list of anonymised abstracts or summaries to choose from, rather than full applications. This would allow them to select projects of interest without knowing the identity of the applicants, thereby reducing the scope for bias.
- It might also be valuable to implement a system that tracks the choices made by reviewers over time to identify any patterns of bias, conscious or unconscious. If any such patterns are detected, they could be addressed through further training or changes in the review process.