

## Report of the Working Group on Project Review mechanisms

**Terms of Reference:**

Established by the University Research Committee in 2010 to provide guidance to the Schools on the implementation of the University’s Policy on Internal Review of Research July 2009 (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/res/1-4-8.html>).

<b>Content:</b>	
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<b>2.</b>	<b>Implementation of an internal review system: key recommendations</b>
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<b>Annex B</b>	Template Internal Project Review Form for Research Proposals and Checklist for reviewers.

### Background

Success rates in the UK (Research Council competitions) averaged around 28% in 2005-06. Since then they have fallen to well under 20% in several competitions and this pattern is not uncommon amongst other major research funders. In a climate in which pressures on public funding have increased, it is increasingly important to submit high quality proposals that maximise chances of success. In addition, funders are under pressure to limit the number of poor quality bids they receive and have to review, so have introduced or are introducing a number of measures to prevent applicants with a poor track record repeatedly submitting unsuccessful applications.

In response to this funding environment, the University has introduced a policy of internal review of research (July 2009) to encourage research of the highest quality. This policy requires Schools to implement a system of internal review prior to formal authorisation and submission to an external organisation. As part of this policy the University Research committee established a working group in 2010 on internal review to develop guidance for Schools to help them implement this policy.

The working group considered various options and recognised that the nature of internal review systems will vary between Schools, and may also vary between types of research application, so the

working group developed a generic framework of the principles which should underpin such an internal review.

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## GENERIC FRAMEWORK FOR A REVIEW SYSTEM TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF RESEARCH PROPOSALS

### 1. Key principles of an effective internal review system

The working group identified four over-arching principles that are central to an effective review system:

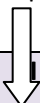
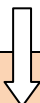
- Measures to raise quality have to be **timely**: intervention needs to be sufficiently early to have an impact on the proposal. The relationship between time allowed for grant preparation and grant quality is often quite strong: last-minute applications are often the ones that cause problems as they have been given insufficient internal project review and Research & Enterprise Services also have to rush their preparation.
- Measures to raise quality have to be **flexible**: they need to be tailored to the nature of the research, the type of funding bodies, and the timescale, funding level and personnel of typical proposals, all of which vary between research areas and hence between Schools. One size does not fit all.
- Measures to raise quality need to be **proportionate**: any scheme cannot be too burdensome or it is unlikely to be complied with and busy faculty will resent it. A threshold value, below which it is unlikely to be worth assessing quality, may be required.
- Any scheme to raise quality has to be seen to offer tangible benefits to the participants. This will aid compliance as well as improving the scheme's chances of raising research grant success. This is of ultimate benefit for both the applicant and the institution, so some sort of **monitoring** to assess whether any implementation of the policy is achieving this objective is worthwhile.

### 2. Implementation of an internal review system: key recommendations

#### *Nature of review*

The working group considered a range of internal review models operating at other universities (see Annex A), ranging from informal systems to those which were much more formal and highly centralised. The working group felt that Schools could adapt several of these different models in a flexible approach in which the nature of review depends on key features of the research proposal being considered. A possible framework for deciding on how best to review particular proposals is given in the two tables below:

i) **Determining the formality of the review:**

Characteristics	Nature the bid	Characteristics
Low value	<b>Value*</b> (price to funder)	High Value
Low	<b>Strategic importance</b>	High
Low	<b>Experience of applicant</b>	High
Low	<b>Reputational considerations/risks/impact</b> (e.g. institutional bid in response to an RCUK managed programme)	High
No external collaborations (single applicant) or UoS is a minor partner 	<b>Collaborative</b>	UoS leading and/or major role in a large collaborative bid 
<b>INFORMAL review required</b>		<b>FORMAL review required</b>
<p><i>*Schools should implement internal project review for proposals with an FEC value of £25k and above. For proposals below this value, Schools may nonetheless wish to review them, but this will be for individual Schools to determine. For example, early career researchers may be particularly encouraged to engage with the project review process irrespective of the value of their proposal.</i></p>		

ii) **Features of the informal and formal review process:**

	Informal	Formal
<b>Who</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mentor (nominated by applicant)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Panel (experienced researchers/external reviewers)</li> </ul>
<b>How</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Face to face or email</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Written recommendations</li> <li>Invited external (other schools / specialists)</li> <li>Mock interviews</li> </ul>
<b>When</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alongside formulation of the proposal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managed and early engagement</li> </ul>

The advantage of this “mixed” model is that it allows for flexibility and proportionality – Schools can choose a “light touch” approach for proposals below certain threshold values for example, or by type of proposal (e.g. early career fellowship). It may also help schools deal with the “capacity” problem of finding reviewers.

### 3. What is reviewed and who does the review?

Whether the nature of the review is informal or formalised, the WG considered key components (checklist) in undertaking reviews, and identified key contributors to these reviews as follows:

<b>Scientific Quality - “specialist” input</b> <b>From within the School/dept/group</b>	<b>Extended (social criteria) - “non-specialist” input</b> <b>Wider University community as appropriate</b>
Competence of the applicant Importance and originality of the research Research method Timeliness / urgency REF (publication) weighting potential Impact Plan clear and appropriate Outputs /deliverables relevant and clearly defined Risks identified & addressed Key strengths Key weaknesses	Relevance / applicability to Funder (addressing Funder’s needs/objectives) The “need” in the wider societal context (informed layperson) Clarity (as above) Completeness (specialist RM) Commercialisation potential where relevant Impact plan – lay perspective Project Management well defined Lay / practitioners perspective (communities of users)
<b>Other possible criteria / considerations:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial feasibility (FEC versus % of FEC funded, and contribution recovery)</li> </ul> <b>Organisational / strategic criteria, for example:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>In response to a strategic Managed Programme (with greater reputational implications)</i></li> <li>• <i>Increases interactions with certain funders / partner types</i></li> </ul>	

### 4. How should proposals be reviewed?

Many schools have already implemented a pro-forma system for internal project review which captures much of the above information. Some universities operate a “virtual review” environment

in which requests and draft proposals are uploaded to a secure area and reviewers can do the review on-line<sup>1</sup>. At Sussex, the introduction of a new institutional Research Management System, may facilitate School-based sign-offs for project review, where these are needed. Whichever is the preferred mechanism, it should in all cases be clear and effective, and outcomes monitored against it. A template pro-forma is provided as a guide at **Annex B** to assist schools at the early stages of implementing their own internal review process.

## **5. Key recommendations of the WG:**

1. The project review process should be supportive, and expeditious.
2. It should be academically-driven and be a natural part of academic debate and collegial support.
3. The internal review system should support the School's strategic research aims and can be used to foster collaboration between potentially competing bids (early identification).
4. Oversight for the project review process will be vested in Schools and managed via the School Research Committees (with responsibility for operational oversight by DRKEs ).
5. Schools need to provide clear guidance to applicants at what stage they need to engage with the project review process. Schools need to consider turnaround times taking account of external deadlines and the time needed to engage with professional staff in developing the proposal (conditions, contracts, budget, etc.).
6. The School Research & Knowledge Exchange Committee (via the DRKE) will provide the Head of School with an annual report of all faculty submitting grants for internal project review and will monitor the outcomes.
7. Schools should require staff to share the outcome of the external peer review process, including reviewers comments. These are invaluable in building the necessary intelligence to improve and strengthen research proposals.
8. Schools should develop and implement their own operational procedures to support project review. There is already existing good practice in several schools that can be drawn on. As a minimum, the School process, and the mechanism by which to request internal project review (for example an application form), should be clearly available to staff via a web resource. (In future, this may be provided by the Research Management System.)
9. It is highly recommended that faculty appointees who are new to applying for external research funding receive more focused support and encouragement during the internal project review process.

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<sup>1</sup> As part of an institutional "toolkit" to improve the quality of research proposals, Research & Enterprise are establishing an on-line library of successful bids via Huddle. This will be rolled out to all Schools over the Summer after initial testing with a pilot school (Psychology) is complete.

10. Schools are strongly encouraged to use the review system to discourage poorly drafted applications with minimal chances of success from being submitted.
11. A system of internal project review is required for all competitive grants by June 2011 – the level and type of review is to be determined by each School. The WG recommends that the University's Research & Knowledge Exchange Committee oversees a review of each School's project review system within 12 months of operation.

## **6. Summary**

- Internal review improves the quality of competitive submissions for research funding and hence strengthens applications before submission to an external funding body.
- It enhances the likelihood of funding in a peer-reviewed competition. Competition for peer-reviewed grants and the introduction of demand management systems, will continue to increase in the foreseeable future.
- Due to the diverse nature of research at Sussex, a highly rigid mechanism for review would not be appropriate and may result in poor compliance.
- However, both new and experienced investigators benefit from the process of project review of their research proposals.

**Professor Sue Hartley, School of Life Sciences**

**Chair of the Working Group**

**April 2011**

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Annexes:

Annex A: Summary of Responses from other Universities on Project Review

Annex B: Template Internal Project Review Form for Research Proposals and Checklist for reviewers.

## SUMMARY OF RESPONSES FROM OTHER UNIVERSITIES<sup>1</sup>

### Internal Peer Review Processes for Research Grant Applications

Responses were received from nearly twenty institutions, all of which either have a peer review system in place or are hoping to introduce one. A variety of systems emerged and a number of key models are detailed below. Many of the institutions who have introduced peer review commented upon how it had resulted in a noticeable improvement in the quality of applications submitted.

#### **System A: Application Mentor System (Russell Group university, Faculty based system)**

##### **Applications subject to review**

All applicants submitting proposals over £25,000 are requested to go through an 'application mentor system'.

##### **Criteria and selection of reviewers**

The applicant nominates a mentor to assist with and comment on the drafting of the application. The mentor can be a colleague from within or outside the Faculty.

##### **Format of review**

The mentoring takes place either face to face or by email. The mentor writes a report which is submitted to the Chair of the Faculty for their consideration. The Chair will then pass on any final comments and advice to the applicant.

##### **Timing of review**

The system takes place alongside the formulation of the application.

#### **System B: Grants Panel Scheme (Post-1992 university, School based system)**

All Schools are required to have a grants panel which has a remit to increase both the quantity and quality of research grant applications. The university has put up £10,000 per School over two years to support the running of the panels, after which time it is expected they will be generating sufficient income to cover their costs. Every School must provide a detailed plan of how they will spend this money.

##### **Applications subject to review**

Each School sets its own criteria on which applications are reviewed but every type of proposal should go through the process except for low level travel grants.

##### **Criteria and selection of reviewers**

The grants panel consists of experts from the School but must also include an outsider; the external reviewer is usually from another School but in theory could be from outside the university. The reviewers are drawn from experienced staff, such as grant holders and those who act as reviewers for funding bodies. The applicant approaches the Chair of the panel who assigns a reviewer or a number of reviewers to them.

##### **Format of review**

The applicant is assigned a reviewer who works with them to develop the bid and advise them on best practice. The applicant is also required to speak to other members of the panel for their advice such as the Research Administrator, Deputy Head and grants panel Chair.

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<sup>1</sup> Via ARMA (Association of Research Managers and Administrators)

### **Timing of review**

Applicants need to approach the Chair of the grants panel as soon as they are ready to start an application. The application cannot be sent to the central research office until it has been approved by the grants panel and been checked for other issues such as finance and ethics.

## **System C: Departmental Grant Application Review System (Russell Group university, School based system)**

### **Applications subject to review**

It is compulsory for all grant applications above £10,000 to be reviewed, unless they are travel grants or are of a non competitive nature.

### **Criteria and selection of reviewers**

Peer reviewers are selected both by request from the applicant and identification by the relevant research administrator. All academics and some senior postdocs are involved in the peer review process.

### **Format of review**

The applicant completes an internal review request form and emails it to the relevant grant review email account. All requests for review are logged on a secure database which is kept confidential to those involved in the process. The application is sent out to suitable reviewers by the appropriate grant review coordinator. The reviewers check the application and complete a grant review processing form where they comment upon the quality of the application in terms of track record, fit to funding scheme, presentation and scientific quality. The reviewer returns the form to the coordinator indicating the action they recommend. One to one feedback is also encouraged, especially in the case of early career researchers.

### **Timing of review**

The review can take place at any time of the process but is usually just before the application is ready for submission. If the reviewer feels that the proposal requires major amendments they can suggest that it is reviewed for a second time.

## **System D: Directed Review System (Irish university, centralised system)**

### **Applications subject to review**

This is a central system which may become faculty based in the future. The scheme targets programmes which the institution wishes to increase its success rate in – mainly large scale bids to major funding bodies such as research councils. It is compulsory for all applications to the targeted schemes to go through the system.

### **Criteria and selection of reviewers**

The institution monitors which committees and panels academics are on and approaches award holders and panel members to act as reviewers. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research contacts potential reviewers to request their participation in the panel.

### **Format of review**

Applications are sent to up to ten people to review – six to seven academics and three members of research office staff. The reviewers are given a checklist which is an amalgam of the university's and the funding body's criteria. The reviewers are given three to four weeks to check the applications and then attend a two to three hour meeting to review them. The research office writes up the notes from the meeting and emails them back to the applicant.

### **Timing of review**

Given the length of the process, applicants need to ensure their proposals are completed and ready for review at least six weeks before submission.



## **System E: Research Review Committee System (Russell Group university, School based system)**

### **Applications subject to review**

All proposals are reviewed regardless of funding body.

### **Criteria and selection of reviewers**

It is compulsory for all applications to be assessed by a Research Review and Ethics Committee made up of professorial staff who act as lead reviewers and other senior academics.

### **Format of review**

The reviews are carried out by three members of the Research Committee, one lead reviewer and two others. The process is completed electronically and the reviewers remain anonymous.

### **Timing of review**

The review is undertaken when the application is almost ready for submission, although applicants do not have to submit the final version of the proposal. There is a five day turnaround for the work.

## **System F: Devolved Peer Review System (Post-1992 university/Russell group university)**

### **Applications subject to review**

It is compulsory for all applications to be reviewed regardless of the applicant, funding body or value of the grant. Before the Research Funding Officer submits an application they must receive an internal form signed by the applicant's Head of Department confirming that the proposal has been through the internal peer review system.

### **Criteria and selection of reviewers**

The institutional requirement is for all applications to be peer reviewed but it is left to individual Schools to organise and operate this policy. The criteria and selection of reviewers therefore varies from School to School, in some Schools applications are reviewed by the Head of School or Research Leader and in others they may be aided by or pass this over to other senior academics, especially where the field of research is significantly different.

### **Format of review**

The reviews are paper based and are not conducted anonymously.

### **Timing of review**

The review takes place once the grant-writing process and costing is complete, although in practice many applicants seek advice from senior colleagues at an earlier stage.

# Template

## Internal Project Review Form for Research Proposals

### Part A : PI to complete

<b>Name/s of applicants:</b>
<b>Source of intended funding:</b>
<b>Approximate sum being sought:</b>
<b>Title of project:</b>
<b>Deadline/submission date:</b>
<b>Project proposal – <i>please insert/attach a copy of your proposal (early rough drafts are preferred)</i></b>
<b>Suggested Reviewers – <i>please suggest two reviewers who might provide appropriate critique (although these may not necessarily be selected for use)</i></b>
1.
2.
<b>Date submitted for internal review (please allow nn days to the external deadline):</b>

Now please submit the completed form and your draft proposal to NAME (REC) E-mail: [@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:@sussex.ac.uk)

Your proposal will be sent to two appropriate reviewers to review the proposal and you will receive their comments within 10 days of the submission date.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Part B : For School REC

### FOR OFFICE USE:

Deadline for review feedback to be returned to PI:	DATE
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		Date sent out to reviewer:	Date returned:	Date Feedback to PI
Reviewer 1:	NAME			
Reviewer 2:	NAME			

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## Part C: REVIEWERS to complete

### Reviewers response:

In additional to answering the questions on this form, please mark sections of the draft document that:

- need clarification
- where content is confusing or incorrect
- where content seems inconsistent from section to section

(A Checklist is available at the end of the document as a guide)

What are the proposal's strengths?

Describe the three major weaknesses of the proposal (if any):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**Does the proposal raise an important question/problem?**

**Would the proposed research contribute to resolving the question/problem?**

**Is the writing clear and concise?**

**Are the paragraphs organized to allow for intelligent skimming?**

***Any additional comments:***

SAMPLE

## CHECKLIST

**The following is a checklist to aid reviewers in considering areas that are weak and may need additional work:**

- importance and originality of the proposed research
- soundness of the study design / appropriateness of the approach
- adequacy / appropriateness of analysis proposed
- appropriateness of references cited
- clarity of presentation
- completeness of presentation
- accurateness or adequacy of the abstract
- are the outputs and deliverables clear and consistent with the study design/description?
- are any risks adequately addressed?
- Is the impact plan clear and appropriate?

### **Are any sections too long?**

- Abstract
- Background/Intro
- Specific Aims
- Significance
- Study Design
- References

### **Are any of the sections too short?**

- Abstract
- Background/Intro
- Specific Aims
- Significance
- Study Design
- References