



Background to the AHRC's Peer Review College

1. The AHRC is fundamentally committed to competitive bidding and assessment by process of peer review. As a Peer Review College reviewer you form a key part of this system, which is designed to ensure that peer review is conducted with the utmost attention to fairness and transparency, and to the requirements of academic rigour.
2. In autumn 2004 a Peer Review College was created with an initial membership of 460. Today it stands at just over 900 members strong. A full list of Peer Review College members can be found on the AHRC website at: <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk>.
3. When the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) was established in 1998, it set up eight peer review panels to assess research applications. Panellists were selected to serve on the panels on the basis of their high standing as scholars and researchers, and we aim to achieve a broad spread of subject expertise across the membership of each panel. Panellists have a broad knowledge and understanding of the subject areas that fall within their panel's remit. They do not, however, have a detailed knowledge of every specialism with which their panel is concerned and for this reason we seek advice from specialist reviewers. During the first six years of operation, this was accomplished by asking applicants to identify external assessors/independent evaluators who would provide the panel with an academic evaluation of their application. Panels were then equipped to determine a final grade for each application, taking account of the information provided by the applicant and the assessors/evaluators, and most crucially, to prioritise and rank the applications received to the scheme round.
4. This dual approach to peer review worked well and, importantly, secured the confidence of the sector during the initial years of the AHRB, when applying for funding was such a relatively new exercise. After four years, however, it was considered appropriate to set up a review group to ascertain whether the structure was 'fit for purpose'. The group's review concluded that the existing approach worked well overall and that there should not be radical change. It did, however, consider that some changes could be made to make the process more effective and efficient.
5. The most important area concerned the quality of evaluations that the panel received. Under the former system where evaluators were nominated by applicants, a high proportion of reviewers gave a high quality and high priority grading (A+), and in many cases provided a personal testimonial or uncritical

assessment, as opposed to a more objective analysis. This limited the evidence-base for the work of the panels, which had the difficult task of prioritising proposals in the context of a finite number of awards.

6. In taking account of practice in other subject areas and by other funding agencies, the review group concluded that a College of peer reviewers would be well placed to provide these robust assessments in that:
 - its members would be independently identified as researchers of high standing who could comment authoritatively on applications for funding;
 - through induction days and written guidance, members of the College would be trained in the requirements of AHRC's schemes and programmes; and
 - College members would be expected to review several proposals in the course of each year, compared to former reviewers who were only approached once or twice over a two-year period.

This latter issue would enable College members to build up experience and expertise over time, and to be well placed to develop the comparative picture of quality that is so crucial to the work of the panellists.

7. The College also provides other benefits in that:
 - It provides a base of experienced reviewers from which panellists can be chosen;
 - it provides a means for the AHRC to consult and communicate with the research community, for example in relation to new programmes and schemes, and to receive feedback on its activities; and
 - it broadens the knowledge and experience of, and contact with, the AHRC beyond the panels, helping universities better to engage with the AHRC, to understand its priorities and goals, and perhaps most importantly, to understand what makes a good application for funding.
8. In May 2005 a 'Review of the Peer Review College' was undertaken. Despite being conducted at an early stage of the College's development, it was found that the quality of reviews that are so vital to the work of the AHRC's peer review panels were proving to be more critical and useful, and the profile of grades more diverse.
9. To ensure that members of the College provide reviews that add value to the peer review process all are expected to attend an induction event, to be trained in the main aspects of the role of a College member. The events aim to equip members in making robust, comparative reviews of the strengths and weaknesses of proposals made to the AHRC's programmes.

Recent Developments

10. Since June 2007 the AHRC has been using the Research Councils' Je-S (Joint Electronic Submission) System for Peer Review of proposals. This system means that members of the Peer Review College can view proposals online and complete an online review form.
11. In line with changes being made to the AHRC's assessment processes, nominated reviews are no longer permitted. Since March 2008, schemes which had allowed for a nominated review now include an additional assessment from the College.
12. From January 2008, HEI staff with technical expertise were recruited onto the College as Technical Reviewers. These members are called upon to comment specifically on the technical feasibility of research proposals.
13. In 2008, the AHRC undertook a review of its Decision Making Structures (DMS), including its assessment procedures. Some of the decisions affecting the College are:
 - From 2009, to replace the standing peer review panels with non-standing panels with membership convened from the College.
 - For those non-standing panels which receive independent peer reviews, to make grading and ranking decisions based upon expert reviews and PI responses.
 - For those non-standing panels which do not receive independent peer reviews, to assess, grade and rank applications.
 - To widen membership of the College to cater for the diversity of the AHRC's funding portfolio.
 - To introduce a number of categories of College membership additional to those covering subject expertise. These classifications cover the following areas: Non-HEI, KT, Large Collaborations International and Technical. College members can fall into more than one category, depending on experience.

These new decision making structures will make more extensive use of PRC members' expertise by allowing them to also act as panellists.