Guidelines for Screening of Rating Applications by Conveners of Specialist Committees
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Screening of Special (earlier) Re-evaluation applications (back)

Why Special (earlier) re-evaluations? (back)

“Special re-evaluation
An applicant may apply for a special re-evaluation sooner than the five year cycle if, since a previous evaluation, an applicant has shown such progress that, in the opinion of the relevant authority at the employing institution the existing rating is quite inconsistent with the applicant’s present standing. A newly prepared application must be submitted to the NRF, together with a motivation from the appropriate authority stating the reasons why a special re-evaluation is requested. Applications in this category will be screened by a panel for validity of the claims before being processed.”

Some applicants were on the cusp between broad categories (C and B) at their previous evaluation and since then had produced an output (e.g. an influential book) with high impact which will reduce the uncertainty that had existed before and is quite likely to move the applicant to the higher broad rating category if being re-evaluated. In these cases the motivation provided in the application should make the case for why the present standing of the applicant is now quite (i.e. considerably) inconsistent with the current rating of the applicant.

How should Special Re-evaluations be screened? (back)

Screening should focus on:

- Comparing the two applications (the assigned PO will email you the applicant’s previous application, RRAP sheet as well as feedback to the applicant or any other material you need relating to the previous evaluation);
- Reviewing the credibility of the motivation provided in the application;
- Other things to look out for:
  i. If the application has been evaluated very recently (i.e. a year or two ago), it is most unlikely that the applicant will have had time to make a substantial difference in his/her standing;
  ii. Is the high impact publication / work already long enough in the public domain to influence reviewers’ opinion of the applicant’s entire portfolio;
  iii. Is there a reasonable chance that the applicant will move up a full category (e.g. form C to B) and not just a sub-category (C3 to C2). In the latter case, it is not recommended to approve the Special Re-evaluation as it will only contribute to reviewer fatigue.
Screening for appropriateness of primary panel (back)

Why is it important for an applicant to be evaluated in the most appropriate primary panel? (back)

A key document that informs the selection of the most appropriate primary panel for the applicant is the disciplinary based Key Research Areas and Types of Research Outputs (including boundaries and overlaps between Specialist Committees (SC’s)) (KRAB) document with a section for each SC. Members of SC’s are officially appointed for a four year term and represent a research field (e.g. Electrical and Electronic Engineering on the Engineering SC) as described in this document.

KRAB is furthermore important as disciplinary publishing practices differ and it therefore outlines research output types taken into account in the rating process and their relative importance. The member of the SC who works in the same field as the applicant is best placed to decide what represents appropriate research output types and to nominate reviewers for the applicant. At panel meeting deliberations the SC member working in the same field as the applicant also has to provide contextual knowledge of disciplinary nuances when assessing the reviewer reports.

The choice of primary SC to handle an application is initiated by the applicant but needs to be reviewed by the members of the SCs to see whether it fits.

Things to look out for:
- Field of specialisation for PhD of applicant;
- Listed research specialisations / research fields of applicant;
- Department in which applicant is employed;
- Research output types (refer KRAB) listed by applicant; and
- Names of journals (who are often indicative of the main discipline / focus) of the applicant.

What happens with researchers who work inter-disciplinary and/or in more than one field? (back)

The NRF subscribes to Global Research Council’s Statement of Principles on Interdisciplinarity (see appendix 1). Applicants have to select a primary panel, but they may indicate up to three panels in order of priority if they are unsure; when their research straddle more than one discipline or if they have changed research focus in the period under review.
Although SCs are disciplinary based, applicants also have the opportunity to indicate whether their research was Interdisciplinary (IDR) in the period under review and to provide comments on their main focus/contribution in this period.

As internationally collaborative and interdisciplinary research are growing in importance, the ability to adapt existing peer review procedures and practices to accommodate it, are increasingly becoming a necessary condition for credibility. The rating system’s key mechanisms in dealing with IDR are:

a) More than one SC be involved with the selection of peer reviewers;

b) More than one SC be involved with the interpretation of the peer reviewer reports; and

c) More than six reviewers (with an emphasis on those nominated by the applicant as the applicant’s guidance could normally be very valuable in these cases) be requested to evaluate the applicant or parts of the applicant’s portfolio.

The above also applies in cases where an applicant have changed their research direction in the period under review or work in two research fields. The strongest field of research of the applicant will determine the final outcome (i.e. the rating outcome will not be a averaging out of the recommended ratings for the two fields).

Things to look out for:

- Have the applicant indicated and motivated (credibly) that he/she works IRD or has changed focus;
- Have the applicant been evaluated in another panel previously? (some applicants only change as they believe another panel will treat them better than the one they are currently / previously rated in).

What happens when the SC thinks that they are not the most appropriate primary panel for the applicant? (back)

The panel selected as the first choice will be the primary panel to handle the application. However, should the SC members be of the opinion that the application will be better served by another SC, the application will be sent by the PO to the convener of the SC of the suggested panel for an opinion. It is important that the referring convener provide a credible motivation (amongst others based on KRAB) why the applicant would be a better fit with the suggested SC.

If the Conveners of both SC’s agree that a panel other than the primary panel selected by the applicant will be more appropriate, the applicant and employing institution will be advised of this and given the opportunity to motivate if they disagree with the movement of the application to another panel only in cases where the applicant had not listed the referred panel as one of the three selected by the applicant. A well written motivation compiled by the SC/Convener is therefore important.
If SCs cannot reach an agreement on the most appropriate panel for an applicant, the Director (RE) will consult with the applicant via the relevant DA’s office. The primary SC selects the reviewers, but should consult with other SCs to select additional reviewers where this is deemed necessary. The full suite of reviewers’ reports, however, is handled by one (primary) SC.

Members of this Specialist Committee will consult with other relevant Specialist Committees if, and when, the need arises (in particular during the process of identification of reviewers).

**Screening for prematurity of rating applications (back)**

**Benchmarking methodology (back)**

1. The established researcher (C) rating criteria (sustained recent record; quality, conceptualisation; research methods, ongoing engagement) should be used as the reference point/benchmark against which researchers are assessed irrespective of age;
   a. The above criteria should form the basis to determine the potential to become established in five years’ time” (Y – emerging category);
   b. If the applicant complies fully with all these criteria but also has global impact (see CIR document), the B or A categories are applicable;
   c. The description of the P rating category does not refer to an applicant being either established or emerging as the emphasis is on a (chronologically) young researcher with the potential to become an international leader in the future (undefined) (see b. above).
2. The starting point for screening is the institutional recommended rating. Feedback from Specialist Committees (SC’s) to base a recommendation to withdraw (i.e. premature) on ensure that Universities feel that they have a “voice” or stake in the process and reinforce their relationship as a partner in the system and improve and inform their own future internal screening processes.
3. Although members of the SC’s are not reviewers, they need to read the application as part of the screening process. Conveners are encouraged to involve members of their SC’s in this task. SC’s are the key resources to determine what represents an acceptable track record for career stage in a specific discipline.

**Prematurity – Established category (back)**

The rating criteria (sustained recent record; quality, conceptualisation; research methods, ongoing engagement) could be assessed by asking the following questions:
a) How many peer-reviewed publications does the applicant have (in relation to the norm for the discipline)? However, the significance of numbers ("how many") should always be contextualised. Numbers are a signifier of sustainability, but should be assessed in conjunction with quality, publication outlets and the applicant’s contribution to outputs.

b) Is there a reasonably consistent and sustained flow of publications over time that shows independence and growth as a researcher? If the date of the doctorate is after 2011 (i.e. the application does not cover the full eight year period of 2011-2018), the applicant’s productivity should be reviewed together with his/her contribution to the research outputs. Reviewers find it difficult to assess an application with too short a track record to demonstrate trends and signs of growth or engagement with developments in the field. For the social sciences, humanities and law (SSH&L) disciplines, however, it is acknowledged that researchers often start publishing sole/senior authored publications during their pre-doctoral career phase and they often do not have a tradition of working in teams.

c) What proportion of these are they the lead-author on (some indicator of ability to conceive and execute research)? (see proviso for SSHL disciplines in b) above).

d) Are there large unexplained time gaps between publications? (sustainability)

e) The type and number of self-selected best five research outputs listed are important. If an established researcher selected output types not considered important by the Key Research Areas and Types of Research Outputs (KRAB) section for his/her selected primary panel, and/or fewer than five, this is a cause for concern.

f) Are there some clear coherent thematic areas in which the candidate has established her/himself or is the research unfocussed/opportunistic with no indication of future direction?

g) What is the standing of the journals / publishers of the publications? Are there some diversity in outlets? If not, this could indicate a lack of quality and/or a lack of ability to contribute new knowledge through ongoing engagement with the field.

Prematurity: Emerging researcher (Y) and P categories (back)

For 2020 applications:
- The age at application must be 40 yrs or younger (Y) and 35-36 (P); and
- The date of obtaining the doctorate should be no later than 2014.

Members of SC’s should screen the potential of applicants nominated for these categories (to either become established in the next five years (Y), or to become future international leaders (not time specific) (P)) by taking the following into consideration:

a) As doctoral work is normally done under supervision, independence from the supervisor could not be used as a criterion in isolation, but some evidence (e.g. publications with collaborators other than the supervisor and / or in a new/evolved niche area) of the applicant moving in this direction is necessary.
b) The above also means that an important factor in screening for the emerging researcher category is potential “based on performance and productivity of quality research outputs during their doctoral studies and/or early post-doctoral careers” (i.e. there must be some post-doctoral work). If the application is submitted too close to the date of the doctorate, the applicant often has not yet had time to publish in a post-doctoral niche area independent from the field of the doctorate. If all publications are related to the doctorate, reviewers find it difficult to assess potential to become independent and established (see proviso for SSHL disciplines in b) above). This is especially important for the P where applicants often still have a few remaining years left of being eligible for the P, but submit too early and then become either Y’s or more often Rating Unsuccessful (RU)’s.

c) The application form’s narrative sections on “self-assessment” and "ongoing and future research" should be used as sources of information to assess whether the applicant has some coherent vision for their research to supplement their research output track record.

a) It is recommended that members of SC’s screen out applications:
   a. where no recent research outputs or all of the research outputs relate to the doctorate have been produced;
   b. too short a period of research is covered in the application; and/or
   c. where an applicant show some potential for a P in their research outputs, but the narrative fields indicate that he/she might not yet be complying fully with the rigorous criteria for the P-rating (especially if the applicant will still be eligible for the P for a few years).

The PO’s will approach the appropriate DA at the applicant’s employing institution about applications which are deemed to be premature with reasons provided by the members of the SC as to why they consider an application to be “premature” or “weak” with the advice to withdraw the application in the best interest of the applicant.

18 Sept 2019
Appendix 1

Statement of Principles on Interdisciplinarity

Preamble

There is a wide spectrum of research activity globally – from basic to applied, and from traditional fields to points where disciplines converge. These are all undertaken to support the advancement of knowledge. While disciplinary excellence is essential, there is growing recognition of the value of fostering interdisciplinarity within a system of world-class knowledge networks that transcend disciplinary and geographical boundaries. To this end, research funding agencies have a critical role in creating the enabling environment necessary for investing in and supporting interdisciplinary research.

Accordingly, the participants in the Global Research Council 2016 Annual Meeting recognise the following key principles that underpin the funding, management and evaluation of interdisciplinary research.

Principles

Research excellence

Research excellence is the foundation for the financial support provided by GRC participants. Interdisciplinarity is not a goal in itself, nor is there an assumption that it is better or more valuable than disciplinary research. Rather, interdisciplinarity is a means to approach research and address complex problems in ways that create new knowledge, define new areas of activities, disciplines and approaches, and offer new solutions.

A diverse approach

A diversity of approaches – ranging from researcher-driven to large-scale coordinated programs – is necessary to support interdisciplinary research most effectively. If interdisciplinary funding is to align with government priorities, GRC participants should be actively involved in the articulation of research agendas as well as the provision of funding.

Research Infrastructures

GRC participants recognise the value of research infrastructure in facilitating interdisciplinary research. The planning and development of new research infrastructure, at all appropriate scales, should include consideration of the potential to support and enable interdisciplinary research.

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1 Interdisciplinary research may be identified as research where two or more disciplines work together to produce a common body of work.
2 The Statement should be read in conjunction with the recommendations in the report which was commissioned by the co-hosts of the 2016 Annual Meetings.