

Selection of Peer Reviewers - Guidelines for Specialist Committees (SC) and Applicants

1. Introduction

The selection of appropriate peers* constitutes the very essence of the peer-review system that supports the evaluation and rating of individuals. Members of the SCs and applicants applying for evaluation and rating are thus expected to show **great circumspection** in nominating reviewers.

*“A peer is a researcher or person with a research background who has the requisite knowledge and experience and the ability to exercise objective fair judgment of the applicant and to provide an appropriate assessment of the applicant’s research and research standing”.

Hallmarks of a peer:

- Should be sufficiently familiar with the field of study (field of specialisation(s)) of the applicant. The **specialisations** of the applicant appear in the invitation letter, and it is therefore imperative for the SC’s and Conveners to do due diligence when nominating a reviewer. The surest way to get a decline message from a reviewer is not to have alignment between the reviewer and the applicant’s research specialisations; and
- Should have a “standing” (as determined by some objective criterion (h-index, number of publications, other suitable determinant)) equivalent of or above those of the applicant.

Applicants are requested to supply names of **six active researchers** who are best able to assess the scope and impact of their recent research and other relevant scholastic outputs, activities and contributions. Applicants are also requested to indicate their relationship with the reviewer and to give reasons for each nomination in order to provide the SCs with additional information for the nomination of further reviewers. Applicants are also given the opportunity to indicate which reviewers should not be approached by the NRF (excluded reviewers).

The member of the SC to whom the applicant is assigned, are requested to nominate an **additional** six peer reviewers (so-called **independent reviewers**) for the applicant.

Persons who serve on the **SC’s** should have a sound knowledge of the broader context of their fields and be able to readily identify suitable reviewers nationally and internationally. There is no substitute for the wisdom of members of the SCs who are responsible for the selection of reviewers and whose **task** it is to select a **balanced reviewer profile** comprising of:

- Reviewers who are peers as described above;
- Reviewers **nominated** by both the applicant AND reviewers nominated by the members of the SC’s. This balance is important because using only peer reviewers nominated by the applicant might lead to an unfair advantage of the applicant (positive bias, prompted by the applicant etc.) whilst using none of the peer reviewers nominated by the applicant might also lead to an unfair disadvantage of the applicant (gatekeeping). Both these are grounds for procedural unfairness in an appeal. No review process can be completed without having at least two applicant nominated AND two so called independent reviewer reports in the profile. Only in cases where all six of the nominated reviewers had been invited and they declined the invitation, could the rule of two nominated reviewers be disregarded. This must be minuted.
- Reviewers based locally AND reviewers from outside the country (international) for ALL (even those nominated for the emerging category) rating categories. The mix should be determined by the discipline and expected outcome of the rating (e.g. for an A nomination there should

only be international reviewers while for a potential C candidate working on a problem of local relevance, the mix will look differently); and

- No more than two reviewers from the same institution.

2. Nomination of reviewers

2.1 General guidelines

- SC members should consult closely with one another, especially with the **Convener**, regarding the selection of reviewers.
- Where SC members have difficulties or uncertainties regarding reviewers for particular applicants or fields, they should consult **colleagues** (locally or abroad) and / or members of other SCs who would be able to make suggestions about suitable reviewers.
- Electronic publication and citation systems such as Clarivate Analytics (previously known as ISI WoS), Scopus and Google Scholar should be used to guide and motivate the selection of reviewers.

2.2 Specific guidelines

- Reviewers who are **collaborators** or **closely associated**¹ with the researcher being assessed should ordinarily be avoided. Reviewers from the **same department** as the **applicant** should normally **not** be nominated as reviewers but reviewers from the same institution as the applicant are not prohibited. For a fair review process, a **balance** of so-called nominated and independent reviewers is imperative. In cases where the applicant nominated **close collaborators** as reviewers, SCs should identify the reviewers nominated which collaborated the least closely with the applicant and invite their reviews. The motivation required from the SC about the peer status of the reviewer should be specific on this to guide the Convener when ratifying the nomination. If these reports from collaborators are obviously biased the usability screening tool should be used to lessen their impact on the outcome.
- The SC should affirm that reviewers nominated by applicants are **appropriate peers** and that they are experts in the field of specialisation of the applicant (either by reputation, citation, publications, etc.). Once it has been established that the persons nominated by the applicant are peers, three of those available should be **prioritised** by the SC to indicate whom the PO in RE should approach first. Note that the report format includes the **motivation** from the members of the **SC** on why this reviewer has been nominated a peer as described above.
- Six additional reviewers should be identified by the SC who are not on the applicant's list again prioritising three ensuring that they are peers and active in the field of research of the applicant.
- The **standing** of reviewers should be taken into account; to take two obvious examples,
 - Nobel Prize winners should not be approached for an applicant most likely to be placed in the Y category.
 - International leaders should be approached for applicants currently in the A category (or for applicants where Specialist Committee members feel there is a strong possibility that they may be placed in the A category).

An exception to this guideline may be made in the case of applicants nominated for the emerging (Y) rating category. Supervisors of these applicants are often in a very good position to assess potential and should therefore not be excluded per definition.

- v. In some cases an applicant's work may cover **several fields**. Reviewers should be chosen to ensure that the scope and impact of all the work is adequately covered (the publication record and narrative fields in the application often contain valuable information to guide this). The final rating outcome is determined by the field in which the applicant is the strongest. It is, however, important that the key criterion of coherence is not overlooked in the process. It may be necessary to consult with other SCs or to approach more than six reviewers in such cases especially if the fields are very divergent
- vi. Care must be taken not to approach the same reviewer too often. Where a particular person is suitable for several applicants he/she could be approached for some of them but could also be asked to suggest names of suitable reviewers for the other applicants. A reviewer should preferably not be approached to do more than three reports in one year.
- vii. Generally speaking the same reviewer should not be approached more than twice consecutively to review a particular applicant.
- viii. When approaching reviewers in **industry** it is important that the chosen reviewers are **peers** who are **active** in research.
- ix. Members of Specialist Committees should not be asked to act as reviewers for applicants linked to their panels. Members of the EEC and Appeals Committee should **not** be reviewers (as they might have to assess applications referred to them). Assessors should normally not be reviewers. The Conflict-of-Interest rules applies to guide decision making in this regard.

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