

**Feedback by review panels  
in the September 2022 call**  
**Research Council for Culture and Society**



**ACADEMY OF FINLAND**

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## 1. Overview

In the September 2022 call the Academy of Finland's Research Council for Culture and Society received 707 applications in two funding instruments: Academy Project and Academy Research Fellow funding.

The applications received were reviewed by 186 experts in 18 international review panels. This round the Research Council for Culture and Society organized 16 panels between January-March 2023 to evaluate the applications in its fields. Two review panels were organized together with other research councils: HWS23 (Health, Welfare & Society) with the Research Council for Biosciences, Health and the Environment and LTKY22HFTD (Human Factors and Technology Design) with the Research Council for Natural Sciences and Engineering. The gender balance of the 186 reviewers in the 18 panels was 43,5% men and 56,5% women.

The development of the Academy's review process is ongoing, and the feedback raised from the review panels provides important support to this work. Also, each panel gave feedback for example about the scientific quality of the applications in international comparison. In the following the feedback is presented for the benefit of the applicants in the future calls. In the final review report, the applicants can find the name of the panel their application was reviewed in.

## 2. Feedback by review panels

### 2.1. SSH-23\_01

The scientific quality of the applications was in general very satisfying. In international comparison, the applications were very strong. The projects were overall good and contained inspiring ideas. The applications were often interdisciplinary in their approach and the review panel was impressed by these projects' interdisciplinary approach. The chair would like to mention that several of the members in the panel stressed that in this regard, the Nordic countries seem to be ahead comparing to other European countries. The panel would also like to stress that it is a great asset that the Academy of Finland has the tools for assessing interdisciplinarity and it is commendable for researchers to apply with such projects.

The general level of quality was very satisfying. The chair would however like to share one observation made by the panel and that is that several of the applications did not focus enough on implementation (why and how the different disciplines were going to be used). There was a gap in this regard and that can be noted for future revisions of the funding call.

### 2.2. SSH-23\_03

#### Academy Projects

The quality of the Academy Projects is good compared to international standards. The panel noticed quite a variability in the quality of presentations (some rather sloppy, others very manicured).

Something that stands out in the Finnish projects is the availability of existing large datasets and the access that researchers have to these longitudinal datasets.

### **Academy Research Fellowships**

There was quite a big variability in the Academy Research Fellow applications. Here the issue of the timeframe came up: a timeframe of 9 years (since PhD) is perhaps too long and that makes it difficult to compare fellowships and for young fellows to stand out in the competition against more experienced ones.

In general, there is quite a big budget for fewer projects, compared to other countries (e.g., Belgium or Spain). In Greece, it is more similar to Finland (proposals are however penalized there to resubmit in case they get a low score).

### **2.3. SSH-23\_04**

The panel was impressed by the overall scientific quality of the applications in both funding calls, with a large number of the applications being ranked as excellent by the panel. Very few applications were rated as being poor or fair.

In general, the review process and meeting for both funding calls was very smooth-running and fair and compares favourably to international best practice.

### **2.4. SSH-23\_05**

The range of applications considered by the panel was broad but fell within the general fields of archaeology and history up until the twentieth century. The number of Academy Projects seemed low compared to previous years. The substantial number of Academy Research Fellow applications reflects the amalgamation of the former Postdoctoral Researcher applications into this funding call.

The panel considered the quality of the applications to be generally good and in line with international comparisons.

The panel frequently noted that, while the scientific quality of a project may be excellent, its feasibility was often weaker.

### **Academy Projects**

The panel found the Academy Projects to be of a generally excellent standard which sometimes made it difficult to differentiate between those scored 5. It was noted that the thematic scope of the archaeology projects was somewhat limited with an emphasis on technical developments, while the historical projects were of a

generally high quality although some were quite narrow in focus. The panel were of the view that the systematic level of funding support provided in Finland for post-doctoral researchers was excellent but that this should potentially have resulted in a higher level of innovation.

### **Academy Research Fellowships**

The paucity of outstanding projects among the Academy Research Fellowship applications was thought to be a result of the amalgamation of the former Postdoctoral Research applications into the funding call. This now means that the competition is open to scholars ranging from two to nine years post-PhD and there was a view that the most junior scholars may be disadvantaged in this funding call. The panel felt there was a danger that the funding call was structured in a way that those with more experience would be more likely to have success which would mean that academically younger scholars would miss out on this opportunity. This could have a negative impact on the overall sustainability of the funding call if the ability of academically younger scholars to progress was limited.

It was observed that Academy Research Fellowship applications contained a great degree of novelty and pushing of boundaries which was to be commended. However, the panel was of the view that more guidance should be provided on completion of the application form for the benefit of less experienced applicants. The importance of the feasibility of the project and the nature of collaborations were two areas that could be emphasised in the guidance notes.

## **2.5. SSH-23\_06**

### **Academy Projects**

The applications for Academy Projects were diverse, with several very novel, value adding and impactful projects proposed. The scientific quality of many of these projects was high and was deemed competitive at the international level. Applications were well written, with clearly articulated aims, objectives and research questions, as well as detailed work packages. The feasibility aspects were also strong. In many cases, the applicant's competence and the make-up of the consortium/collaborators were extremely impressive.

### **Academy Research Fellowships**

The scientific quality of many of the Academy Research Fellowship applications was high, with several diverse, valuable and impactful research areas being proposed. The highly ranked applications were deemed competitive at the international level. Applications in this category were also well written, with clearly articulated aims, objectives and research questions, as well as detailed work packages. Feasibility aspects were strong. In many cases, the applicant's competence and the proposed collaboration was very impressive.

For both the Academy Project and Academy Research Fellowship applications, the feasibility aspects were mainly strong, but arrangements to access data were not always explained.

The panel also thanks the many applicants who took the time to prepare such robust, high quality and impactful applications.

## **2.6. SSH-23\_07**

The panel found the most highly ranked Academy Project applications absolutely stunning, the stretch of applications to lowest ranks being a bit longer than in international comparison. In terms of national comparison (comparing national calls to one another) the quality was high, but not as high when compared to international calls. However, the comparison might also depend on whether a two-stage application process is being used, where weaker proposals are sorted out in the first stage.

The Academy Research Fellowships similarly presented a wide range of quality from really outstanding with a long tail of weaker applications. The panel members reflected on whether the new funding instrument had affected the quality of applications, as people may not have had sufficient time to polish their applications for the new requirements.

Across the funding calls, as compared to international calls the panel found the applications rather complex, reflecting the problem that they might have not yet got to the point where the idea could be expressed in a simpler way. The panel raised the question of whether COVID-19 impacted the number and quality of applications this year.

The panel was pleased to see the common occurrence of care as a theme in the applications.

## **2.7. SSH-23\_08**

The panel felt that the applications for both the Academy Project and Academy Research Fellowship applications were exceptionally strong, reflecting a trend of increasingly high quality applications to the Academy of Finland over the past few years. Some panel members said that they thought the quality was in many cases of a higher quality than they had seen in other countries' funding processes.

A substantive point that was raised with respect to the Academy Fellow positions, which is also relevant to the Project proposals, is that there is an emerging sense in research circles of the need for more collaborative, rather than extractive, research. Where research assistants are used, they should not be just data collectors or translators but partners in the research, with their labour reflected in terms of coauthorship, involvement in analysis, and/or mentorship, degree supervision, etc.

## 2.8. SSH-23\_09

The panel considered that the applications were of good quality in international comparison. There were some very good ones, but also some that were thought to be “puzzlingly ill-conceived”, as one panel member put it. The differences in quality were particularly noteworthy for the Academy Research Fellowship applications, but to some extent also for the Academy Projects.

The panellists raised the issue whether there could be some kind of screening of applications at the site of research, or at other stage in the review process that would eliminate the uncompetitive applications. The panel furthermore suggested that the applicants receive more collegial guidance on their proposals before submitting. Among the necessary guidance mentioned was for instance help with writing ambitious yet realistic and achievable plans for research outputs. A point was made that the most competitive applications included strong international collaboration and significant mobility plans.

The panel also raised the concern over the fierceness of the funding competition and wondered if that leads to applicants promising overambitious aims for their projects, which then leads to questions about feasibility. In this connection, the panel again raised the hope that the applicants would receive guidance from their peers and superiors on what can be expected but also what is achievable and what is enough.

Additionally, a point was made that the applicants should make sure their CVs and lists of publications are translated into English, as they are otherwise not accessible to the reviewers.

The panel noted with satisfaction that the top ranked applications in both funding categories represent a diverse set of topics and approaches in linguistic research.

The panel had a thorough discussion on the significance of the societal impact of research as such, but also as part of topics evaluated in the research proposals. It was stressed that funding for fundamental research, which has less obvious societal impact, needs to be guaranteed. At the same time, the panel noted that the topics of many applications in the panel were considered to have clear and important societal impact.

On a few occasions, panellists who had previously sat on the panel recognised proposals that were resubmissions of earlier applications. There was then a discussion of how and why not to allow their knowledge of the previous evaluation of the proposal influence their current evaluation of it. Overall, there was a shared understanding that each proposal needed to be evaluated on its own terms and without reference to a previous application, nor to personal knowledge about, e.g., the merits and skills of a particular candidate.

## 2.9. SSH-23\_10

The panel was pleased to recognize that in general the quality of applications was very high. Overall, Academy Project applications were slightly better than Academy

Research Fellow applications. There were also some weaker applications, as is natural, some obviously due to lack of time. The panel noted some overlap between project and fellow applications in terms of project personnel and collaborators, and took this feature as a sign of an active but at the same time small research community in Finland. A couple of applications were not written as applications and could have benefitted a lot from Grant writing services. The panel also recognized that Academy's formal guidelines for writing applications are not in every respect fitting for philosophy projects.

## **2.10. SSH-23\_11**

The applications compare similarly well with other European countries.

Overall, many of the applications fail to explain the broader added value of the projects, beyond the cases and an often rather narrow literature. To be groundbreaking and innovative, the proposals need to explain how they add to the international literature and be clear on their not only empirical but also conceptual and theoretical insights. Few proposals engage in a literature review that explicitly show how the project adds to existing knowledge. Surprisingly few also develop clear analytical/theoretical frameworks and tools or engage in theoretical discussions.

Methods tend to be rather conventional. Few proposals suggest cutting edge and new, innovative methods. In particular, one would expect to see more innovative methods in research fellow applications. Many of the proposals discuss data collection in detail, but few discuss how they will be interpreted and analyzed against a theoretical or conceptual framework.

To help guide the applicants, some of these requirements could be spelled out more explicitly in the form (added value, sufficient literature review, analytical framework, data interpretation and analysis).

### **Regarding consortiums**

The panel finds that it is sometimes difficult to see the added value of a consortium compared to a regular academy project that contains national cooperation. The consortiums could be encouraged to explain how the project will contribute to building the research structure in Finland beyond research-cooperation between particular researchers.

### **Regarding Academy Research Fellowship funding**

The proposals clearly show how funding will help the applicant in their career. The panel would however also like to see some more reflections on how the project will help the applicant develop explicit skills, not only in terms of management, supervision and the like, but also more substantially/scholarly skills (methods, become a specialist in a particular field, take this field forward etc).



### **2.11. SSH-23\_12**

In general, all panel members agreed that the quality of the applications, both for Academy Projects and Academy Research Fellowships, was very high in comparison with international standards. Some members of the panel who had taken part in previous evaluations thought that the quality was higher this year than in previous years and that some applicants had taken on board feedback from previous evaluations which had led to significantly improved quality proposals. The level of creativity and innovation of the proposals was also highlighted. Panel members considered that proposals are not just offering incremental research because applicants were prepared to take risks and justify these risks more than is the case in proposals from other countries. The importance of funding mobility is seen by the panel as very positive because it places research at an international level. The panel agreed that the proposals covered a broad range of topics and that this is very positive.

### **2.12. SSH-23\_13**

Overall, the panel considered the quality of the applications comparable to the ones submitted to the other national funding agencies in Europe. Some panel members felt that the Academy Research Fellowship applications could have been more innovative and develop their design and methodology. For Academy Projects, the range of substantive questions tackled and methodologies utilized were state of the art.

### **2.13. SSH-23\_14**

The quality of the applications was judged to be generally excellent in international comparison. The Academy is to be highly commended for its funding calls, which provides exceptional funding for small (individual) and large (team-based) research fellowships and projects. There was a wide range of applications. The expertise on the panel was very international and provided an excellent range of specialisms.

The quality of the applicants was generally judged to be higher for the Academy Research Fellowships than the Academy Projects. It was noted that applicants could have been encouraged to be more ambitious in their research fields and methodologies. The highest-ranking applications were conceptually willing to take risks.

There was some discussion about the rationale in merging Post-Doctoral Fellowships into the broader Academy Research Fellowship funding call. This move potentially disadvantages very early career applicants, who are completing with much more experienced (9 years post-PhD) scholars. The panel lamented the difficulties for early career scholars to find permanent university employment, thus forcing many to take a series of short-term posts on research projects run by more senior scholars.

The panel had a robust discussion about the language in which scholars published their research. The general consensus was that, while English-language publications were valuable, scholars should also publish in their own languages. The panel

observed that there have been fewer international collaborations with academics from Germany and Central Europe .

#### **2.14. SSH-23\_15**

By comparison with similar evaluation processes, overall, the panel observed an exceptionally high quality among the Academy Projects reviewed, and a very high quality among the Academy Research Fellowships.

Most of the applications reviewed were very well crafted, highlighting the strengths of researchers/teams and research ideas. The range of themes was very topical and diverse, and included several that were conceived in post-Covid and other shifting global contexts.

The panel noted how the majority of applications embraced interdisciplinary – and in some cases, trans-disciplinary - perspectives, while observing how this raised potential problems in a minority of cases. In this regard, the review process was strongly supported by the interdisciplinarity and diverse expertise represented among the panelists.

Across the applications reviewed, there was a high-level awareness of ethical science, and most applications gave good consideration to the potential impact of projects. A broad spectrum of applications from the Finnish universities was also noted.

With regard to reviewing researchers at different career stages, the panel considered the generous time span to be appropriate, with no major difference noted between 2 and 9 years experience post-PhD among the applications reviewed.

The panel discussed some potential problems raised through the adoption of interdisciplinary research themes, for both research design and researcher career (where a clear focus may be desired). While some researchers were ready to move into new interdisciplinary areas, others were not yet sufficiently prepared. The challenges of interdisciplinarity should not be overlooked. Thus, while interdisciplinarity might continue to be encouraged under the fellowship call, the emphasis should remain on excellent science, originality and research breakthroughs, whether pursued primarily through a sole discipline or whether interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary in orientation.

#### **2.15. SSH-23\_16**

The quality of the Academy projects was at a comparable or higher level to project applications made in other international competitive research contexts, and generally at a higher level regarding new areas of innovation. Panel members noted that this was in line with an international trend in which European funding agencies' calls for innovative research to address pressing societal challenges is having an impact on researchers' ambitions and efforts to come up with breakthrough proposals.

Innovatory and exploratory research concepts and methods were demonstrated across a range of projects, including in data analytics, robotics, artificial intelligence, media literacy, critical thinking, democratic engagement, sustainability, leadership, and governance. The inclusion of these and other original interdisciplinary research project proposals was well received.

It was noted, however, that, in a similar way to other international research contexts, some weaker applications did not ground their work effectively in strong literature reviews to build on prior research, nor in rigorous standards of research methodology.

The panel advises future applicants to pay close attention to the development of prior and current theoretical and empirical research in their field of study, especially to look beyond the Finnish context, and to ensure that an adequate range of authoritative prior literature is cited, within reasonable word limits, before claiming uniqueness of concepts or methodologies. It was noted that a need for improvement in referencing and conceptual grounding was more often noted in the research projects/consortia projects, while issues with methodology seemed more common with the fellowship applications.

The panel advised that careful consideration should be given to mobility plans to ensure they were fit for purpose, necessary, provided value for money, and were justifiable in relation to the development of research expertise.

The quality of the Academy research fellowships was at a comparable or higher level to applications made in other international competitive research contexts. The strong developmental promise and high quality of a number of research fellowship proposals was welcomed. In other cases, however, improvements were advised, notably in methodology.

## **2.16. SSH-23\_18**

The panel found the applications to be of a very high scientific quality in international comparison (particularly for Academy Projects). Panel members noted that the quality was exceptional this year compared to previous years. The many applications with an overall rating of 5 and 6 thus reflect how the panel found these to be of a remarkably high quality.

The panel noted some emerging research themes among high-quality applications, which could suggest strong areas in the Finnish research environments. Applications (across ratings) were planned for the employment of qualitative and ethnographic methods. A good share of applications incorporates elements of analysing data traces (from platforms), but overall, surprisingly few applications go for quantitative methods.

Applications rated lower (1-4) tended to have weaknesses related to lack of clarity of objectives and aims; lack of conceptual clarity and precision; incoherence between objectives and research designs; and insufficient details on methods and empirical data.

## **2.17. HWS23**

### **Academy Projects**

The panel viewed the applications for Academy Projects as broadly comparable with similar national and international panels. The panel thought there were some interesting and innovative applications and liked the amount of interdisciplinary and international collaboration – sharing expertise and addressing some difficult problems with complex and often novel methods - this was all viewed as very positive.

The panel did find it hard on some occasions to assess the methodology – perhaps in other application processes, there is more space for methods, allowing the applicants more scope to outline their approach in a little more detail.

### **Academy Research Fellowships**

The panel thought that the applications for Academy Fellowships were broadly comparable with other panels with which the panel is familiar. The range of quality was quite wide – some were weak, some really excellent – but this variation is to be expected, and some had very interesting and novel ideas.

The panel found it difficult to distinguish between the applications, particularly at the high end. The panel found the range of experience – two to nine years post-doctorate – very wide, and this made it challenging to compare competencies. Some applicants had prior experience outside academia which should be recognised more in the assessment process, particularly when is of clear relevance.

There were differences in the proposed international collaboration suggestions, and the panel thought that opportunities for mobility should be encouraged, while not mandating or over-weighting this in assessment to ensure fairness.

## **2.18. LTKY22HFTD**

Part of the applications were of high quality, some impressive especially given the population of Finland. However, some applications were of minor quality without chance of funding. Technology focused projects are dominating, SSH applications, unfortunately, less present.