



Review principles

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Research Council of Finland

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1. Introduction

The Research Council of Finland (RCF) is committed to fair, transparent and responsible assessment and funding practices. In all funding activities, we follow responsible procedures related to responsible researcher evaluation, research ethics, equality and nondiscrimination, open science, research security, sustainable development, conflicts of interest and confidentiality. These principles guide both the conduct of the review process and the assessment of applications.

2. Reviewer conduct and responsibilities

This section describes the principles and responsibilities that guide reviewers in the peer-review process. It focuses on confidentiality, impartiality, responsible researcher evaluation and the integrity of review.

Key points for reviewers

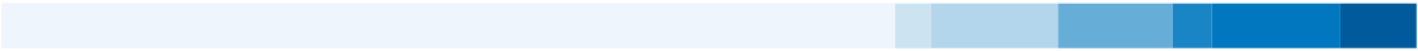
As a reviewer, you are expected to:

- assess applications fairly, independently and objectively
- focus on quality, significance and impact rather than publication metrics or institutional prestige
- recognise diverse outputs, career paths and disciplinary practices
- remain aware of possible unconscious bias in assessment
- treat all application materials and panel discussions confidentially
- recognise and declare any actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest without delay
- use application materials only for the purpose of the review
- follow the RCF's ethical principles and instructions throughout the review process
- ensure that AI-assisted tools or external services are not used in ways that compromise confidentiality, data protection or the integrity of the review.

2.1. Responsible assessment

The RCF is committed to promoting fair, transparent and responsible assessment. We strive to recognise the diversity of research contributions, career paths and disciplinary practices.

As part of this commitment, we endorse key international and national frameworks that guide our peer-review practices. We are a signatory of the [Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment \(PDF\)](#), and an



active member of [CoARA](#), the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment. The agreement outlines four core commitments that we apply in our evaluation processes.

Agreement on reforming research assessment – four core commitments by CoARA:

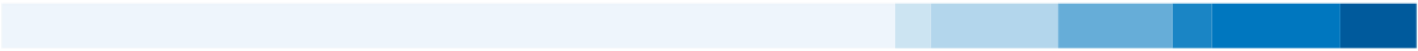
1. Recognise the diversity of contributions to, and careers in, research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research.
2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators.
3. Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and the h-index.
4. Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment.

In addition, we follow [Finland’s national recommendation on good practices in researcher evaluation \(PDF\)](#), are a signatory of the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment \(DORA\)](#), and draw on the principles outlined in the [OECD report Reforming Research Assessment for Better Science](#). These frameworks emphasise qualitative assessment, the responsible use of indicators and the recognition of diverse research contributions.

When reviewing the competence of applicants, reviewers are asked to focus on the content, quality and significance of research contributions rather than publication counts, publication venues or journal prestige. Journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, must not be used as proxies for the quality of individual research outputs.

Similarly, citation metrics such as the h-index, do not, on their own, provide a reliable measure of research quality or impact and may be misleading, particularly in multidisciplinary review contexts where citation practices may vary between fields. Applicants are therefore not allowed to include journal-based metrics or other citation metrics as indicators of quality in their applications. Reviewers should likewise not use journal-based or citation metrics in their assessment of applicants or research outputs.

Reviewers are encouraged to recognise the value of a broad range of research outputs and contributions, including datasets, software, leadership, societal interaction and open science practices. The review should also take into account disciplinary differences as well as legitimate factors that may have affected an applicant’s research records, such as career breaks, family leave, part-time work, disabilities or other personal circumstances.



Fair and equitable review also requires awareness of possible unconscious bias. Reviewers are encouraged to reflect on how assumptions related to discipline, institution, gender, career stage, nationality or other background factors may unintentionally influence assessment. Recognising possible bias – both in one’s own assessment and in panel discussions – supports a fairer and more equitable review.

Read more about [responsible researcher evaluation](#) on our website.

2.2. Secrecy, confidentiality and integrity in the review process

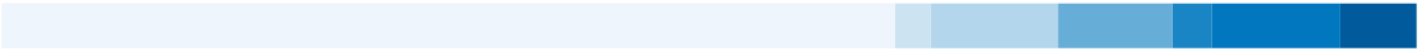
Our review process is based on confidentiality, impartiality, professional integrity and trust. According to the Finnish Act on the Openness of Government Activities, the application and its appendices are public documents, except for the research plan, plan of intent, abstract, interim report and review report.

All reviews must be conducted confidentially, competently and impartially, based on the criteria defined for the review process. Reviewers are expected to provide fair, balanced and evidence-based assessments. A review is not considered a research integrity issue solely based on its quality. However, reviews conducted carelessly or in a manner that suggests deliberate underrating or overrating of an applicant may constitute a breach of responsible review practices.

Application materials and review-related information must be handled, stored and discussed with due care and confidentiality. Reviewers must not disclose any information concerning application documents or reviews to third parties. Review materials may contain personal data. Reviewers must ensure that all materials are handled securely, accessed only as necessary for the review task, and destroyed appropriately after the review process. Reviewers must also take appropriate care to protect confidential materials and personal data from unauthorised access, disclosure, or retention. Reviewers must also comply with the RCF’s [terms and conditions for the processing of personal data in the application review process](#).

Reviewers may not reveal to third parties that they are assessing the application of a particular applicant. Likewise, contacting applicants personally without explicit agreement to do so is regarded as inappropriate conduct.

Confidential information obtained during the review process must not be used for personal benefit or for the benefit or disadvantage of any other person or organisation. Reviewers are guilty of research misconduct if they misappropriate research ideas, results, observations or data from applications. This also includes copying any part of an application.



The RCF follows [the Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and Procedures for Handling Alleged Violations of Research Integrity in Finland \(PDF\)](#). These principles also apply to the review of funding applications, research programmes and scientific disciplines. In addition, the Finnish Criminal Code provides for the punishability of breaches of the obligation to maintain the secrecy of a document under the Act on the Openness of Government Activities and breaches of the nondisclosure obligation and the prohibition of use.

The use of AI-assisted tools or external services must not compromise confidentiality, data protection or the integrity of the review process. Application materials or review-related content must not be uploaded to external systems (see also the [European research integrity guidelines \(PDF\)](#) on the use of AI tools in research or review). Reviewers may use AI tools to improve the language of their reviews or to search for general information, provided no proposal content or personal data is shared and no assessment is delegated.

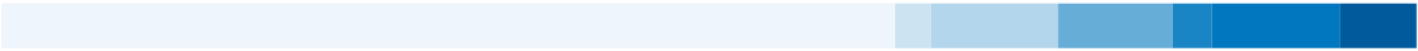
Once the review has been completed, reviewers are required to destroy all application documents and any copies (printed or digital) made of them.

As a government agency, the RCF is subject to the Finnish Act on the Openness of Government Activities. Under this legislation, applicants have the right to obtain information concerning their application, including the individual reviews and the names of the reviewers. If the application has been reviewed in a panel, the names of all panel members will also be disclosed in the review report.

In calls where draft reviews are part of the process, the draft reviews and the names of reviewers who have supplied the draft reviews will also be disclosed to the applicant if requested. The possible draft reviews are also secret documents unless otherwise stated in the applicable legislation or required by court order.

After the funding decisions have been made, the RCF will publish on its website a list of panels and (with permission) the names of the panel members including their institutions, as well as the names of all individual reviewers enlisted in the call. If requested, this information will be disclosed already after the panel meeting.

Application review involves secret documents. Although applicants will have access to the review reports on their applications after the funding decisions have been made, confidentiality obligations also apply to information concerning other persons. An applicant shall not disclose to third parties secret information obtained based on party status and concerning other persons than the party themselves. In practice, this means that although applicants may receive information related to the review of their application, they are not allowed to share confidential information concerning reviewers or other individuals that may be disclosed as part of the review process.



If reviewers are contacted by applicants or other parties regarding applications or reviews, they should direct all such enquiries to the RCF.

Confidentiality obligations continue after the review process has been completed.

2.3. Conflicts of interest

The review process must be impartial and credible. Reviewers must declare any actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest that could compromise, or appear to compromise, the objectivity of the review process.

Reviewers must disqualify themselves if they can benefit from approval or rejection of an application, or if their relationship to the applicant or application could undermine confidence in the impartiality of the review. Reviewers must notify the RCF immediately if a conflict of interest arises during the review process.

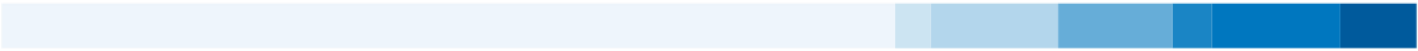
Prior notice must be given if a reviewer has economic or other affiliations, or any other circumstance (incl. a longstanding adversarial scientific relationship) that could compromise, or reasonably be perceived to compromise, the impartiality of the review. This helps ensure an impartial and balanced assessment and allows any potential sources of bias to be considered appropriately.

As a reviewer, you are expected to:

- declare any personal, professional or financial interests that could compromise or appear to compromise your impartiality
- disqualify yourself if you can in any way benefit from the approval or rejection of the application
- notify the RCF immediately if a conflict of interest arises.

You must also disqualify yourself in the following circumstances:

- You have collaborated or have plans to collaborate with the applicant (e.g. you have co-authored and published an article, prepared a manuscript with the applicant in the past three years, or been involved in the preparation of the application).
- You are a superior, subordinate or instructor of the applicant.
- You are applying for the same post as the applicant.
- You are applying for funding from the RCF from the same funding instrument.
- You feel you have a conflict of interest.
- The applicant is a close person to you. A close person is:

- 
- a) your spouse (also de facto), child, grandchild, sibling, parent, grandparent or a person otherwise close to you (e.g. fiancé/e or a close friend), as well as their spouses (also de facto)
 - b) a sibling of your parent or his/her spouse (also de facto), a child of your sibling, or your previous spouse (also de facto)
 - c) a child, grandchild, sibling, parent or grandparent of your spouse as well as their spouses (also de facto), or a child of a sibling of your spouse
 - d) a half-relative comparable to the above-mentioned persons.

Note: For some RCF funding instruments, particularly funding calls targeted at organisations, conflicts of interest are governed by call-specific instructions. In such cases, reviewers should follow the conflict-of-interest guidance provided for the call, which takes precedence over these general principles.

2.4. Reviewer's declaration

By accepting the task of a reviewer, the reviewers confirm that they will not divulge any confidential information concerning application documents or the review of such documents or use such information for personal benefit or the benefit or detriment of another. In addition, they agree not to reveal to third parties that they will review the application. By accepting the review assignment, reviewers also commit to handling all application materials and personal data confidentially, securely and solely for the purposes of the review process, in accordance with the RCF's instructions and applicable data protection requirements.

3. Responsible science in the assessment of applications

This section describes themes related to responsible science that may be relevant in the review of funding applications, depending on the funding scheme, research field and research context.

In the context of responsible science, we take into account research ethics, equality and nondiscrimination, open science, sustainable development goals and the principles of responsible researcher evaluation. By considering these, our aim is to strengthen the quality, responsibility, and impact of research and research environments.

Key points for reviewers

Responsible science is an integral part of high-quality research and research practice, not a separate or purely formal requirement. Reviewers are therefore asked to assess not only scientific excellence, but also how responsibly, credibly and transparently the proposed research is designed and implemented.

In the assessment, reviewers are encouraged to pay attention to:

- how ethical questions, research integrity and responsible research practices are identified and addressed throughout the planned activities
- whether equality, nondiscrimination and inclusiveness are meaningfully considered in the project design, implementation and potential impacts
- how open science practices support the transparency, reproducibility, accessibility and long-term usability of project outputs
- how sustainability considerations are reflected in the aims, implementation or broader societal relevance of the project.

3.1. Practical guidance for the review

When assessing responsible research practices, reviewers are encouraged to consider the clarity, credibility and implementation of the proposed practices. The examples below do not constitute a separate rating scale and should not be used as such. They are intended to help reviewers recognise different levels of integration of responsible science practices when forming their overall assessment.

Levels of responsible practices	Characteristics
Indicators of strong consideration	Clear and ambitious objectives that are relevant to the proposed project, credible implementation measures, appropriate monitoring practices and/or convincing previous track record demonstrating the ability to implement the proposed practices
Indicators of adequate consideration	Relevant objectives and actions described, but ambition, implementation or follow-up remain limited
Indicators of limited consideration	Responsible research practices are described only at a general level, with

	limited connection to the proposed project
Indicators of minimal consideration	Only some minimum aspects are acknowledged, the description is incomplete and has no meaningful integration into research practices

3.2. Good scientific practice and research ethics

The RCF requires compliance with the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity's [Finnish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and Procedures for Handling Alleged Violations of Research Integrity in Finland](#) (PDF) in all RCF-funded research and activities. We also require that researchers follow ALLEA's (All European Academies) [European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity \(PDF\)](#) when engaging in international collaboration. The same guidelines also oblige researchers in their work abroad.

Applicants must always describe in their applications how the proposed research or activity complies with good scientific practice and address any ethical aspects relevant to the research or activity.

If the project involves, for example, the processing of personal data, the use of laboratory animals, research involving minors or other vulnerable persons, health-related issues, sensitive behaviour, dual-use aspects or other ethically sensitive questions, applicants must explain how these aspects have been addressed.

Good scientific practice and research ethics are among the criteria used in the review of applications. Reviewers should assess the information provided by the applicant in the light of applicable legislation and relevant guidelines of the National Board on Research Integrity. For an overview of the RCF's approach to good scientific practice and research ethics, see [Good scientific practice and research ethics](#). More detailed information for applicants is available in the [Good scientific practice](#) and [Research ethics](#) application guidelines.

Applicants and reviewers are expected to recognise when research involves Indigenous peoples, communities, knowledge, cultural heritage or lands, and to take relevant ethical principles and field-specific guidance into account, including the [Ethical guidelines for research involving the Sámi people in Finland](#).

The RCF will not process a funding application if the applicant has been found guilty of research misconduct or another serious violation of research integrity in the three years preceding the call. Further information is available on our website at [Good scientific practice and research ethics](#).

3.3. Equality and nondiscrimination

The RCF promotes equality, nondiscrimination and diversity as part of responsible science, responsible researcher assessment and responsible decision-making. In line with our [Equality and Nondiscrimination Plan 2026-2028](#), review and decision-making processes must be transparent, fair and free from discrimination and inappropriate bias. We are committed to continuously developing our review practices in accordance with international responsible research assessment principles and recommendations.

Reviewers are expected to recognise and avoid conscious and unconscious biases related to gender, age, nationality, language, ethnic background, disability, health, family situation, career stage or other personal characteristics that are irrelevant to the scientific review. Particular attention must be paid to ensuring that career breaks and non-linear career paths are not evaluated negatively. Such circumstances may include parental, family or childcare leave, military or non-military service, long-term illness or other comparable reasons.

The RCF requires that all funded activities promote equality, nondiscrimination and inclusiveness where relevant to the research context. Reviewers are encouraged to assess whether these perspectives have been appropriately considered in the project design, implementation, research environment, team composition and the anticipated impacts of the project.

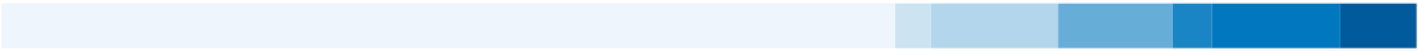
In addition, reviewers are expected to contribute to a respectful and inclusive review culture in accordance with the RCF's principles for safer spaces and responsible interaction.

3.4. Open science

The RCF is committed to promoting the principles and practices of open science to improve the quality, transparency, reproducibility and societal impact of science. The goal is to make all outputs (research publications, data, methods and metadata) as widely available for reuse as possible. The principles of open science must be pursued with due attention to good scientific practice and applicable legislation. The degrees of data openness may justifiably vary, ranging from fully open to strictly confidential. Read more about [our open science policies](#) on our website.

The RCF applies [the National Policy for Open Access to Scholarly Publications](#). Immediate open access to peer-reviewed publications is expected in RCF-funded projects. When assessing publication plans, reviewers are asked to consider whether the proposed open access practices are credible and appropriate.

When reviewing data management and data sharing plans, reviewers are encouraged to consider whether the proposed practices are



appropriate, realistic and justified in relation to the planned activities. It should be noted that only a short data management plan is required at the application stage. The funded projects submit a full research data management plan usually after a positive funding decision.

3.5. Research security

The RCF is committed to ensuring that research security and risks associated with it are appropriately addressed in all funded projects, collaborations and utilisation of research results. All applications must include a research security appendix (in English, Finnish, or Swedish). The research security appendix is not included in the scientific review material and will not be evaluated.

Applicants do not need to provide a comprehensive risk assessment. However, the appendix must identify and address potential risks, such as dual-use technologies, threats to academic freedom, or the management of data. Although the appendix is excluded from the formal review, reviewers are encouraged to report any research security concerns regarding the project or its potential outcomes directly to RCF staff.

3.6. Sustainable development

The RCF is committed to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to promoting sustainable development in research and research funding.

Applicants are encouraged to describe how their project contributes to sustainable development goals and how sustainability considerations are integrated into the implementation of the planned activities.

Although sustainable development is not a review criterion, it is one of the broader science policy objectives considered in funding decisions. Reviewers are therefore encouraged to comment on sustainability aspects where relevant.

Read more about [our commitment to sustainable development](#) on our website.