

**Panels in
September 2020 call**

**The Research Council for Biosciences,
Health and the Environment**



ACADEMY OF FINLAND



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1. Overview

In the 2020 September Call, the Research Council of Biosciences, Health and the Environment of the Academy of Finland received 967 applications. The applications divided between four funding instruments, **Academy Projects, Academy Research Fellows, Post-Doctoral Researchers and Clinical Researchers**, and were reviewed by 233 experts in 22 different panels. The Research Council of Biosciences, Health and the Environment organised 20 of these expert panels in January – March of 2021. After each panel meeting, the panelists were given an opportunity to discuss the overall quality of the applications and the evaluation process to provide feedback for the applicants preparing for the 2021 September Call. This is a summary of the panels' comments and suggestions.


Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions, the panel meetings were organized online. Although most panels would have preferred meeting face-to-face, the panels agreed that the online meetings worked reasonably well, and the quality of evaluations was not compromised by the digital environment. All the panels thought that the thematic range of applications reviewed in the panels was broad and matched very well with the panels' expertise.

2. Scientific quality

The panels considered the quality of applications submitted to the 2020 September Call as very impressive, better than a year before, and comparable to high international standards. Most of the applications were very well-written and detailed enough to allow proper evaluation of all the aspects of the proposal. Especially the quality of Academy Project applications was considered excellent, representing internationally top level science.

The quality of Academy Research Fellow and Post-Doctoral Researcher applications was also generally very high but varied more between panels. Several panels reported large numbers of outstanding applications while few were concerned of the scarcity of excellent applications by early-career researchers within their field of expertise. Some panels worried whether younger applicants received enough mentoring and guidance from their supervisors and support from their home organisations in preparation of their applications. They thought that less experienced proposal writers should receive more feedback at the early stages of grant writing to improve the quality and success of their proposals. Some panels even proposed that the organisations should undertake an internal screening of applications before submission to provide constructive feedback to the applicants, especially in case of resubmissions.

Some panels also pointed out that a few innovative and ambitious applications were let down by inappropriate or insufficiently rigorous statistical



analysis plans and sample size calculations. The panels emphasized the importance of describing the research design, analyses and methods in enough detail and justifying the choice of empirical systems to allow quality assurance and assessment of feasibility – and noticed that this was performed very well in most applications.

In clinical research, the excellent quality of cohorts resources were seen as a special strength of Finland. In translational projects the panels were hoping to see applications with better patient and end-user involvement already in the writing phase of the proposal. This would improve the impact of the projects. The panels viewed inter- and multidisciplinary proposals positively and emphasized the importance of multi-PI proposals when the scope and research questions required multidisciplinary expertise.

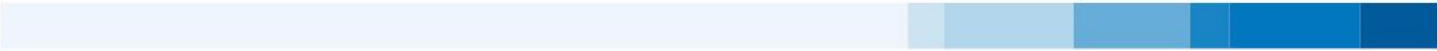
3. Competence, collaboration and mobility

Generally, panels considered the applicant's level of competence high among all funding instruments. Especially the group leaders in Academy Projects were seen to be at very high level of competence. This year, however, fewer Academy Project applications by younger scientists received excellent or outstanding scores than before. As already mentioned above, the panels pondered whether this indicated lack of support and mentoring and hoped that the applicants' home organisations would address this need.

The panels also pointed out that the assessment of independence of the younger researchers was sometimes difficult. In some cases, there were strong links between Postdoctoral Researcher or Academy Research Fellow projects to Academy Projects by more senior researchers. The senior researchers should become aware of this. In addition to constituting a problem of intersecting or competing interests, this left the role of the younger scientists elusive. To clarify the contribution and independence of the younger researchers, the panels encourage the applicants to state how the funding would promote their path to independence, to clearly indicate corresponding authorships, previous grants received as the principal investigator, and to describe their contribution in managing and driving the projects listed in the CV to demonstrate leadership experience.

The panels appreciated the high quality of research teams and collaboration networks of the applicants. Especially, many of the more experienced Academy Project applicants had excellent international and national collaborations already ongoing. To further widen the networks and to increase impact, the panels encourage applicants to seek industry interactions when appropriate to the research. In addition, research groups, laboratories and core facilities should invest in better information exchange to fully utilize the potential of available resources and facilities.

Most applications included good mobility plans that expanded the applicant's collaboration networks and improved the scientific quality of the



proposals. However, the panel saw the mobility requirement as somewhat problematic and as a putative burden to young families. The panels pointed out that mobility as such should be considered broadly, including online collaboration with international partners. The main emphasis should be in finding the best way to collaborate and promoting one's research, not in moving around the world.

4. Other feedback

The panels had several suggestions to further streamline the evaluation work by improving the structure and clarity of the applications. Panels that evaluated very interdisciplinary applications wanted to remind the applicants to avoid unnecessary, disciplinary jargon. In addition, the panels felt that it was not always easy to find the relevant, recent achievements in the CVs and hoped for a more stringent CV format. Many applicants had already included a link to their scientific profile, ORCID number, or similar in their CVs. The panels thought this was extremely useful and in compliance with Finland's DORA signature, and should therefore be promoted. The panels also appreciated that the applicants had resisted attaching too many additional documents to the applications.

Some scientifically strong applications could have been improved by clearer description of the roles of the team members and collaborators in the project, and the allocation of the tasks among them. The panels recommend including a Gantt chart or similar to the applications to clearly present the timelines and milestones of the proposed project. In addition, the panels hoped for realistic mitigation plans and plans for allocating human resources, including % time contributions. This would help in assessing feasibility.

Finally, the panels commented the absence or quality of invitation letters from collaborators that the applicants had included in their proposals. The panels felt that the letters strengthened the applications when they stated the plans for task allocation, data sharing and management, and the added value of the collaboration clearly, and emphasized their role especially when building networks through online collaboration.