

Research Council for Culture and Society

**Feedback by review panels
in Academy of Finland's September 2019 call**



ACADEMY OF FINLAND

Research Council for Culture and Society

Feedback by review panels in Academy of Finland's September 2019 call

The Academy of Finland's Research Council for Culture and Society received 892 applications in the September 2019 call. These were all reviewed by 236 experts in 19 different panels. The Research Council organised 17 of these expert panels in January–March 2020 and received comments and suggestions from the panel members. The gender balance in the panels was 45% women and 55% men. In addition, two review panels were organised jointly with other research councils of the Academy.

The Research Council received applications in five different instruments; Academy Professor (letters of intent), Academy Project, Academy Research Fellow, Postdoctoral Researcher and Clinical Researcher.

The panels were organised based on disciplines. Some of the panels, however, consisted of proposals representing a few nearby disciplines with a small number of applications, in order to have about an equal number (around 50) of applications in each panel. There were 7–14 expert members in each panel. Most of the reviewers were invited after the applications were at hand in order to ensure that the expertise of the panel sufficiently covered the fields of the applications to be reviewed.

Each panel gave feedback about the scientific quality of the applications and, in addition, to the Research Council and Academy administration also about the review process, application and reviews forms, online services, etc. The development of the Academy's review process is a continuing process, and feedback from review panels provides important support to this work.

Scientific quality of the applications in international comparison

Review Panel on History and Archaeology

The panel agreed that the scientific quality of the applications was well in line with the quality of applications to equivalent grant-giving bodies around Europe and in North America. This is particularly impressive given that Finland has a relatively small university system, and attests that even younger Finnish scholars are well networked with scholars in their disciplines internationally. The panel noted that a significant number of applications (at every level of seniority) had a very strong research question or hypothesis, but a weaker sense of how the project would be implemented. It emphasised that, to be successful, applications need to give as much attention to the implementation plan as to the scientific concept. In a related point, the panel wondered whether all Finnish universities have a system for scrutinising applications before they are submitted. This now happens

routinely in many universities in other countries, and panel members agreed that it always strengthens applications.

Review Panel on Arts and Literature

The best of the applications presented in the panel were wide ranging and, in international comparison, academically very strong, well considered and important pieces of research. However, the emphasis on social relevance and interdisciplinarity in method, while in many cases significant, should not be allowed to disadvantage more traditionally focused arts projects (in relation to historical topics, for example). In direct comparison with those of last year, the overall standard of postdoctoral applications was lower (there were a higher number of weak ones and less competition among the very best). The weakest postdoctoral applications were, in the opinion of the panel, too closely related to the applicants' previous PhD research and would have benefitted from closer mentoring and a willingness to be a little more adventurous in methodology, scope and ambition.

Review Panel on Business

The topics were seen as generally relevant/interesting/innovative. The integration of methods and theory was often lacking. The panel noted few combined, genuinely novel and important research questions with methodological rigour. There was too much cramming together of various methods/techniques without thinking about the logic of these. Also, very few mixed methods studies were likely to get published. Quite many proposals included a multidisciplinary approach, which while commendable from an applied perspective makes deep insights (from a science perspective) difficult to attain. Sometimes it comes across as being an excuse for not being sufficiently familiar with deep disciplinary work. A majority of the studies were exploratory (e.g., too many "how to solve a problem" types of questions) without sufficient theoretical backing. As such, most of the aims were quite applied without theoretical justification/framing or hypotheses development. This makes for a weak academic positioning and contribution (and little chance of getting published in good journal outlets). The Panel expected to see stronger proposals, especially when compared to other European panels. Would be useful with better screening of proposals by the respective universities? At many European universities one cannot submit a proposal without extensive internal screening. It was not always clear what the roles were of suggested external collaborators.

Review Panel on Education 2

As a general comment across the applications, the panel found the level of discussion and review in problem descriptions appropriate but observed that there was less detail on methods than one might expect. There were mixed views in the panel on whether the proposals could generally be regarded as having a high level of international significance, although there were several proposals that raised novel questions with high risk payoffs. The focus on innovation was also generally strong, but several proposals were flawed methodologically, for example the rationale for multi-sited

case studies was often not made explicit. Further, there was a strong emphasis on interventionist approaches, which require clarity about how the impact of interventions will be studied – this was not always the case. There were a number of high quality proposals with a focus on HE. References to international research were evident in the proposals, as well as in the mobility plans. Several panel members observed that a large number of the proposals used qualitative methods. Overall, there was a high level of societal relevance in the proposals, but this could be more explicitly highlighted, perhaps through an ‘impact’ section. Links to sustainable development were addressed both superficially and more genuinely, and this was seen as a challenge. Lastly, applicants could be encouraged to specifically address (potential) conflicts of interest (i.e. applicants benefitting economically from positive research results emerging from products or tools used in a project).

Review Panel on Education and Development Psychology

The quality of the postdoctoral applications was not high and suggested the need for more mentoring and support from senior colleagues at the stage of preparation and later at the point of interpreting the feedback comments received (a question of capacity-building). The range was appropriate, if somewhat narrow. The variety of themes or the imagination shown in the topics presented was not wide. Perhaps the system does not encourage higher risk-taking. That said, there was evidence of wide consideration of the impact on society through contribution to understanding of policy to practice, for instance, in education, higher education, wellbeing and climate change.

Review Panel on Environment – Society

The scientific quality of the proposals was generally good to excellent, also compared to international standards. Although some proposals were weak, the quality of most proposals this year was probably better than last year. Some proposal that were resubmitted this year had not adequately addressed earlier criticisms. Many proposals consisted of innovative ideas that potentially pushed the boundaries of state-of-the-art scientific understanding and knowledge, but their methodological approaches were sometimes poorly elaborated or integrated, and therefore less convincing. The theoretical basis or imbedding of the proposals, which generally focused on more applied or societally relevant topics, was often not well explained. This sometimes reduced their feasibility and limited the evaluation of the potential scientific impact. The panel was generally impressed by the quality of the Postdoctoral Researcher applicants. Several were evaluated by the reviewers with a very good, excellent or outstanding rating. Their CVs and publication records were internationally competitive. Although some were inexperienced in writing scientific proposals, most of their research ideas were innovative and addressed relevant research gaps. The panel has sometimes added some recommendations to the reviews of Postdoctoral Researcher applicants to enhance their proposal writing. These desired improvements, however, did not affect the evaluations. A few proposals were

hastily written and poorly elaborated. The panel experienced this as a contempt of its time. As only excellent and outstanding proposals can be funded, such sloppy proposals should not be allowed into the panel review.

Review Panel on History 2

All panel members agreed that the standard of applications in international comparison was generally high.

Review Panel on Human Factors and Technology Design

The quality of the applications varied, although many proposals were innovative. In some fields, the applications were poor in international comparison. In other fields, however, the applications were of high quality and comparable to the international level. The panel considered surprising the lack of collaboration with North American researchers in the field of HCI. Moreover, the panel considered it a pity that few addressed big challenges such social justice, sustainability or migration. The panellists noted the lack of non-academic impact (e.g. collaboration with policymakers). Further, more focus could be put on gender and intersectionality issues.

Review Panel on Law

The panel considered that the overall level of the proposed projects was comparable to its experience in other commissions. The panel would like to stress that Finnish scholars appear more innovative and pay particular attention to interdisciplinarity. It supports a deeper critical view and renders the projects really ambitious. There was a high number of projects that clearly were not limited to analysis of detail and that tried to focus the research on broader and more structural questions. Furthermore, the panel considered the number of proposed projects as impressive, given the size of the country. The panel noticed some common recurrent topics, probably due to the particular attention devoted by researchers to what society is demanding or worried about, something that the panel deems as a very positive characteristic.

Review Panel on Linguistics

This year, the cohort of Academy Project applications was exceptionally strong with an impressive array of topics within typological, applied, interactional linguistics and psycholinguistics and a wide range of fields being represented. It was pleasing to see several applicants integrating into their research design experimental and digital and corpus-based methods alongside more traditional modes of inquiry. It was also pleasing to see some applications focusing on contemporary challenges and producing applications with great potential for impact, for instance by studying neurodivergent, ageing and mobile populations. This is testament to the fact that linguistics is increasingly well placed to contribute significant insights to key societal issues of policy. The panel may want to consider some sort of mechanism to reward projects that show considerable impact, where applicable. The panel discussed the issue of the Academy Research Fellow applications not being particularly strong this year by international

comparison, but refrained from drawing conclusions on the basis of what could have been an out-of-the-ordinary year. Robust mentoring processes in place within academia could ensure and enhance quality of applications, especially from junior researchers. Overall, the range of applications within the fields of applied, descriptive and psycholinguistics was appropriate. Sociocultural linguistic and discourse analytic applications were somewhat under-represented in this year's cohort. So was research in languages other than English (and certain European languages).

Review Panel on Philosophy

Overall, the panel was impressed by the quality of the applications. The panel noted that the applications for Academy Projects and Academy Professorships were strong by international comparison. Academy Research Fellow applications were generally strong. Although there were some weak applications for Postdoctoral Researcher funding, the great majority were at least solid by international comparison.

Review Panel on Politics, Human Geography and Development

The overall scientific quality of the applications definitely complied with international standards. Applications for Postdoctoral Researcher funding were particularly strong and consistent. Consortium proposals were strong too; highly interdisciplinary in a successful way. Applications for Academy Professor funding stood out for high quality. Overall, the quality of applications was varying (as expected) given the total number of applications. Less emphasis was put on international cooperation than expected.

Review Panel on Social Sciences 1 (incl. Social Psychology)

The panel reviewed a number of outstanding proposals across all categories. A notable number of applications were strong in terms of standard science but far less so on innovation and creativity. Strengths in skilful usage of data sources and design of projects were noted. A number were also novel in topic areas/problem to research, with an appropriate theoretical framework. Many proposals demonstrated potential implications for knowledge outside Finland and a number for research on issues vital for Finnish society. However, we noted that some applications lacked focus and detail, and the scientific quality raised some concern. Specifically, the panel felt that there were projects that proposed to explore too many research questions and too many hypotheses. Applicants should also be encouraged to evidence how the current proposal develops or differs from previous work. There were a number of claims about the substantive value of projects but very few projects dealt with the specific 'how?' question. Research designs would benefit from more detail on methodological choices, recruitment, data collection and analysis. The panel noted limited engagement on societal impact. At times, assertions were made that were not linked to potential research findings. Some concern was expressed on several projects that were researching highly sensitive topics with vulnerable groups and yet gave little or no detail on ethical aspects.

Review Panel on Social Sciences 2 (incl. Cultural Studies)

The scientific quality was generally high. The applications included strong international networks. As the panel saw it, the projects had potential to be internationally competitive and the standard of (international) publications by the applicants was impressive. However, the panel had the impression that publications in the Finnish language was referred to a lesser extent, which can give an impression of under-estimating publishing in Finnish compared to international (English) publications. The panel represented five countries and the general consensus was that, on the whole, applications stood up well in comparison to what they would expect in similar evaluations in Europe (EU Funding) and North America.

Review Panel on Health and Society

The panel was impressed by the overall high quality of the applications. Only a small minority of applications was not up to international standards.

Review Panel on Politics, Communication and Gender

The quality was excellent in general although it probably had more tail at the low end. The range of interdisciplinarity was exceptional. The publication records of postdoctoral applicants were impressive in international comparison. The topics were timely and interesting, although at the same time lacking a historical dimension. Methodologies and theories had in places been put to serve buzzwords that were not necessarily integrated into the whole. There was a surprisingly heavy stress on social media. Regarding that, the panel would remind of the ethical guidelines concerning social media data, of which there was some positive examples among the applications. The panel would like to note that research methodologies in general have to be described carefully. Especially, methods of analysis should be justified in detail. Applications in all funding instruments would benefit from institutional filtering and mentoring, especially regarding the appropriate timing to put in the application. For example, there were internationally comparable Academy Project applications with structural problems that could be refined with coaching. The panel acknowledged that most of the applicants write in other than their native language, which should not affect assessment as such.

Review Panel on Politics and Economics

The general quality of the applications was considered to be quite high. The best applications were very impressive, but it could be argued that the weaker applications would have benefitted for some pre-screening (which should have been done at the applicants' own institutions). Some proposals were not able to present the main research ideas with sufficiently clarity. The publication records of the applicants seemed in general to lack publications in international top journals (in economics: the top five general journals).

Review Panel on Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience

The scientific quality of the applications was generally very good and on par with international standards. A few projects were outstanding, and the panel

was very impressed by their sophistication, competence and potential for producing groundbreaking scientific advances. About one-third of applications were ranked excellent, meaning they met international standards. The rest of the applications had weaknesses that were identified by the panel, and these weaknesses typically centred on weak theoretical basis, unclear motivation, methodological flaws, flaws in statistical approach and sometimes a lack of expertise in the applicant or team. A frequent problem was that studies were underpowered (statistically) and that the data analysis methods and data collection methods were underspecified. The applications proposed a wide range of methods including neurosciences and behavioural methods as well as some qualitative methods. Awareness and practice of open science was also evident.

Review Panel on Theology and Religion Studies

On the whole, the scientific quality of the application was quite high. Still, the methodological consciousness could have been better developed. Each category included outstanding proposals but also proposals that we ranked between 2 and 3, that is, relatively low. This would be normal in comparison to other countries, but the exceptionality and innovation was not so frequent, and the lowest marks were not on the postdoctoral side but on the side of the Academy Projects. Biblical studies, sociology of religion, ecumenical studies were strongly represented, but there were less good applications in systematic theology, historical theology or ethics. This is slightly unusual in international comparison. We wondered what causes that people from these fields do not apply.