

**Research Council for
Culture and Society**

**Feedback by review panels
in the September 2020 call**



ACADEMY OF FINLAND

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1. Overview

In the September 2020 call the Academy of Finland's Research Council for Culture and Society received 893 applications in three funding instruments: Academy Project funding, Academy Research Fellow and Postdoctoral Researcher funding.

The applications received were reviewed by 265 experts in 25 different international review panels. This year the Research Council for Culture and Society organized 19 panels between January-March 2021 to evaluate the applications in its fields. In addition, two review panels were organized together with other research councils of the Academy of Finland. The gender balance of the reviewers in these 21 panels was 50,5 % women and 49,5 % men.

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 about the scientific quality of the applications. In the following the feedback is presented for the benefit of the applicants in the September 2020 call and future calls.

2. Scientific quality of the applications in international comparison


2.1. Review Panel SSH-21_1

The quality of the applications across the three funding strands that the panel looked at (Postdoctoral Researchers, Academy Research Fellows, and Academy Projects) was for the most part impressive and compares well with sector practice in other countries. The panel noted particular strength in interdisciplinary applications, notably in the Academy Projects funding stream (recognising that this is the most conducive environment for applications of this nature).

2.2. Review Panel SSH-21_2

Keeping in mind the different criteria for each scheme, as well as differences in the career stage of applicants or teams, the panel can confirm that the overall scientific quality ranged across the range of possible scores from 2 to 6, with the majority scoring 4.

Given the expertise of the panel and their engagement in internationally driven research, the panel considers the scientific quality to be strong and of comparable standing to applications submitted elsewhere.



However, the panel would offer the following observations, albeit these would require further analysis and consideration:

1. Regardless of the scheme – consortium, project, fellowship, postdoctoral – proposals could be strong in making the case for the topic demonstrating a depth in theory and concepts, but then lack detail in the research plan.
2. In contrast, other proposals provided a strong and clear research design but were overly complicated in the theory/concepts.

Thus, many proposals did not achieve the scores for excellent or outstanding as they were “unbalanced”. The most awarded was therefore an overall score of 4. Those scoring more highly achieved a better balance in making and interweaving the scientific case with the research design.

In summary, the panel awarded overall scores 5 or 6 on eight occasions and noted that in general the scientific quality of the postdoctoral researchers was slightly higher than proposals submitted under other schemes.

2.3. Review Panel SSH-21_3

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 ground-breaking scientific advances. Many applications were ranked excellent, meaning that they meet 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 lack of expertise in the applicant or team. A frequent problem was that studies seemed to be directed at collection of very large data sets without clear rationales and approaches to analyses. Often the weaker proposals had underspecified data analysis or data collection methods.

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, although very few proposals included pre-registration plans.

2.4. Review Panel SSH-21_4

The general quality of the applications this year was rather high as the overall grading of the proposals clearly shows (the average overall grade for all funding schemes was 4.1 while the median overall grade was 4). Only a few proposals were not able to present the main research ideas with sufficient clarity.

2.5. Review Panel SSH-21_5

The panel agreed that the quality of the applications was excellent in international comparison.

This year, the quality in many areas was particularly high. Finnish researchers in the humanities, at every stage of their careers, are doing research which bears comparison with the best anywhere in the western world.

2.6. Review Panel SSH-21_6


The overriding view of the panel was that the general quality of applications was rather disappointing. There were, of course, some very strong proposals, but only one or two that we could agree were outstanding in international comparison. Many of the applications were clearly put together by very competent researchers or research teams, often with a strong track record of publication and with strong international connections. But while these applications were often quite ambitious in terms of the number of outputs they intended to generate (usually in terms of journal articles) they were much less ambitious in terms of engaging with big ideas. The panel would have welcomed more intellectual novelty, and less focus on the academic treadmill of journal article publication.

Some of the proposals appear to have been written quite quickly and were surprisingly weak given the experience and expertise of the applicants. Some panel members wondered whether colleagues were facing incentives simply to submit applications, even if they had little likelihood of success.

A common weakness was the rather vague framing of research questions, e.g. to shed light on a particular topic, or to understand more about how a process works. Many proposals were not very specific, or analytical, in developing their research questions. There were also a number of proposals where the empirical data did not seem to be very well suited to addressing the research questions.

2.7. Review Panel SSH-21_7

The applications were generally of a high quality, as indicated by the clustering of initial rankings in the 4-6 category. One panellist commented that the very best applications were of equivalent quality to the best Marie Curie fellowship applications they had recently been involved with; 'globally very high' was the view of another panellist.



The chair of the panel agrees with these observations – not only were the 5s and 6s of the highest comparable standard, but it should be noted that applications which ended up graded 4 very often contained elements of the highest international standards as well, but fell down in presentation/execution in some elements.

The applications succeeded in locating the ‘Finnish-ness’ of the case study/empirical focus in wider contexts, and this was more than simply meeting the requirements for ‘mobility’: through effective comparative projects; effective interdisciplinary collaborations; and by engaging with leading edge theoretical debates.

2.8. Review Panel SSH-21_8

The panel members all agreed that the top-ranked applications would have been competitive in their respective countries’ funding councils, as well as in other international funding schemes. The overall level of quality was comparable to grant applications in other countries.

2.9. Review Panel SSH-21_9

The panel were impressed with the exceptionally high quality of applications received, especially in the category of Academy Project applications. In international comparison, the strongest applications of this year were easily at the level of outstanding applications.

2.10. Review Panel SSH-21_10

Overall, the panel was impressed by the quality of the applications. The panel noted that the applications for Academy Projects and Academy Research Fellowships were strong in comparison with countries of comparable size, but not as strong as in the UK. The applications for Postdoctoral Researcher funding were not particularly strong, but the great majority were at least solid by international comparison, and six out of fourteen were graded 4 (‘very good’) or above, with some excellent applications. In general, the panel was pleased with the range of the applications but observed that there was a clear orientation towards Anglo Saxon philosophy and, although there were two applications focusing on gender issues, feminist philosophy was not represented. The panel noted the low proportion of female applicants and discussed potential explanations.

2.11. Review Panel SSH-21_11

In general, the panel found that the scientific quality of the applications typically corresponds to international standards. Nevertheless, the panel notes that it only felt that a proposal should be retained for funding when it meets three key criteria:

- A “big idea” with genuine potential for innovation (as opposed to merely incremental proposals, particularly those which simply continue existing research)
- A genuine effort to propose a strong analytical framework and acknowledge the place of the proposal within existing knowledge
- A rigorous effort to describe the research design in clear details (as opposed to making broad and imprecise statements).


On balance, a surprising proportion of applications miss on at least one of those three “prerequisites” and the panel felt that it is important that applicants realise that all of those things are expected from them.

2.12. Review Panel SSH-21_12

All panel members agreed that the quality of applications was generally high, especially as far as the Academy Projects were concerned. The rationale and social relevance of most projects were of good or very good quality, although in some projects more details would have been appreciated. The novelty of the projects was evident in some but not in all projects. The weakest projects were basically just exploratory and descriptive. The panel noted that many applications claimed to use mixed methods designs and interdisciplinary approaches. This is extremely ambitious and valuable. However, in some cases it was difficult to understand which methods were actually going to be used and overall, how the multiple methods or disciplines were to be combined. The major open questions then are: why do you decide to use the various methods and how do they help you to reach the desired outcomes? The panel also raised some criticisms concerning national and especially international collaborations, which were cited in most projects. In some applications it was not clear what was the role of the collaborators. A simple letter of intent does not seem sufficient to guarantee that these experts will really work on the project. Moreover, as they are not allocated funds, it is difficult to expect their serious involvement.

2.13. Review Panel SSH-21_13

Overall, the panel considered the quality of the applications comparable to the ones submitted to the other national funding agencies in Europe. There was however some discrepancy in quality among the categories of applicants.



Compared to others, the consortium applications were less developed and less international. It is possible that Finnish researchers who have stronger international ties are involved in consortia through European level (e.g. ERC) funding. At the post-doctoral level, the applications were a mix-batch. The panel felt that those applicants who are located in institutions with a strong research infrastructure submitted excellent, highly polished projects.

Two further comments on international research links:

Overall, the international cooperation and mobility arrangements seemed to be rather sporadic. Although, clearly some institutions are in highly established and productive relationships with international collaborators.

Some of the applications (across the applicant categories) seemed to be theoretically narrow and lacked reference to the broader, international literature, even when they were addressing cutting-edge and highly current topics.

2.14. Review Panel SSH-21_14

The panel considered the quality of the applications to be generally excellent in international comparison.


Applications focusing on Finland and its international position raised some especially intriguing questions and scope for interesting further reflection on broader imagined divisions such as ‘West-East’ and ‘North-South’. The same was true of the applications dealing with the Nordic region, although the ‘Nordic’ label was often used quite narrowly to denote Finland and Sweden rather than the whole grouping of countries.

It was suggested that more explicit guidance could be given in the case of applicants whose proposals are resubmissions or based on a continuation of previous research – i.e. the need to demonstrate novelty and innovation (consistent with the evaluation criteria) should be underlined.

It was also suggested that some of the applicants (especially earlier career) could have been encouraged to be more ambitious in their choice of publication outlets (e.g. by targeting more internationally visible journals) and also – in some cases - bolder in flagging up the originality and international significance of their proposed research.

2.15. Review Panel SSH-21_15

There were some truly outstanding and excellent applications and some really good ones even when the panel found some small flaws – of course there were less good ones, too, but that is normal. The panel often commented on how wonderful an idea was even if the application had some flaws. There is clear evidence of a very lively research context in Finland, with extremely



productive collaborations among Finnish universities and with international ones. The international orientation of the research is highly commendable. When applications included a Consortium, this really brought significant added value. On the whole, those members of the panel that had previous experience of Academy of Finland funding rounds commented on how the best applications show a significant improvement overall.

The Panel noted that the Academic Projects were particularly strong. This is to be expected as they bring together a team of very dynamic and often very experienced scholars. While some of the Postdoctoral applications were very highly rated, there were some much weaker ones. This is also to be expected, but the panel wondered whether universities offer training to early career scholars to develop applications. The least strong field, on average, was in the individual Academic Research Fellow applications. The panel wondered whether this might be an inevitable feature of the instrument (many applicants may be mid-career scholars who have not yet developed the experience to devise a novel outstanding application and are beyond their early-career enthusiasm, having completed the doctoral and postdoctoral projects), and whether some more targeted support should be given by universities to mid-career scholars.

Panel members were very scrupulous about ensuring both fairness and rigour, and at certain points during discussions asked to be reassured that the scores awarded were broadly in line, on average, with previous years (within the normal fluctuations) or other panels.


The panel noted that the number of practice-based application is increasing; some are excellent, but some outstanding practitioners find it more difficult to conceptualise or theorize their research, and this may put them at a disadvantage when compared to other applications.

2.16. Review Panel SSH-21_16

There was general consensus in the panel that the proposals could be regarded as having a good level in international comparison. However, relatively few of the applications were considered ground-breaking or high gain, high risk' projects.

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 critical reflection on methodological choices than one might expect, e.g., situating mixed methods approaches in relation to philosophical traditions and the educational sciences. At the same time, the panel observed an overall high level of methodological innovation, with a diversity of perspectives.

Further, the panel noted an emphasis on mixed methods or qualitative methods in the applications. Interventionist approaches were prominent, which



require clarity about how the impact of interventions will be studied, – this was not always the case. In many applications, the rationale for the selection of cases and sites for the studies was not always clear or well justified, particularly a problem in several projects based on comparative studies.

2.17. Review Panel SSH-21_17

The panel was impressed by the quality of the applications. Even though the criteria are strict, there were remarkably many outstanding proposals. Among the top applications quite a few dealt with LGBTQIA+ topics – the panel found it interesting that these topics are so prevalent. Overall, the research ideas were very good and rich. However, in several projects the implementation lacked concrete details, clarity or claims that could be sustained. Nevertheless, the panel found it heartening how seriously the applicants handled qualitative methods.

Interdisciplinarity is inherent in all the applications in gender studies. It sets the bar very high as the applicants have many fields to attend to. This is a challenge for the applicants: if you claim cross-disciplinary expertise, you need to demonstrate it. The outstanding applications did this very well.

2.18. Review Panel SSH-21_18


The scientific quality of the applications was rated very high. The panel members liked the proposals very much and found that they were excellent no matter of career stages or funding schemes.

The panel was particularly enthusiastic about the excellence of the academy projects which compare favourably to proposals of similar funding schemes on a European level.

2.19. Review Panel HWS21

The panel considered the applications to be similar to that which it sees in other countries. Publications outputs are perhaps less elaborated, but the proposals are very comparable.

Finnish applications often rely to a large extent on the register data, which is understandable given the rich and valuable source of information. The panel sees a lot of applications which capitalise on the big datasets, and in the past this has at times resulted in theory being less developed. The panel noticed progress this year – fewer applications focused solely on big data without theoretical development.



In other countries (UK, EU) the panel sees more ‘patient voice’ (outreach) in research applications, from patient and public involvement panels. Also, the panel is used to seeing more on research management and governance – particularly when projects are large, multicentre, and complex we think this might be useful. In the current applications, specific areas of expertise are included, but synthesis and management are perhaps under-specified.

Compared with similar research funders, e.g. in the UK (NIHR HS&DR) there is much less emphasis on detailed research methods in the applications – sampling frames, power calculations, detailed statistical analysis plans etc., which would help with quality assurance. Many of the projects are interesting, interdisciplinary, and important, but the panel can’t always assess quality.

The panel was particularly impressed with the quality of the postdoctoral fellowships – this scheme is producing very high ranked applications. Perhaps the level of detail may be better in the postdoc applications – they say what they are going to do and justify it more clearly than the more senior applications.

The level of ambition is good in terms of international collaboration and interdisciplinarity. But some of the applications are very difficult to read and interpret – again we found the structure of the postdoctoral applications easier to judge. Large scale international collaborative projects can be difficult to specify and to assess.