



**International peer review:
The EUROCORES HumVIB
programme**

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Background

- Two years national experience on UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Research Grants Board.
- Chaired the EUROCORES HumVIB panel.
- As “the tame statistician” at ESRC, my focus is on research methodology – wide range of proposals across the social sciences and wide range of methodologies
- Need to be “fair” and understanding of breadth of social science– not to downweight good qualitative work but focus on feasibility and originality.
- Reliance on referees for substantive component of research

Assessing referee comments for ESRC

- ESRC allows assessors (board members) to override referees
- In doing so, acknowledgement that referees are sometimes partisan, miss the point, miss detail and don't read the application fully.
- All members of board can comment on proposals
- Negative referees sometimes have heavy weight if making methodological points

BUT

- Right of reply to referees has been introduced for larger grants.
- All assessors comments fed back to applicants.

How do referees at ESRC perform?

- For a few...
 - Grades but no comments
 - Grades and two to three lines of comment (excellent track record - should be funded) – “good chap” syndrome.
 - Fail to understand that assessment is across many dimensions – “can this be done?” is important as “is this a good idea?”.
 - Fail to engage with methodology
 - Fail to understand initiative.
- For many...
 - Fail to check if work has been previously done (detection of fraud)
 - Fail to relate to previous work of applicant

National to international

What lessons can we take from the national context to the international context?



HumVIB and EUROCORES

Cross-national and multi-level analysis of human values, institutions and behaviour.

“Multi-level” – need to measure individuals, their families, their region, their country. Assess influences of each on behaviour or values.

Use European datasets such as European social survey.

- 19 funding organisations. Includes US.
- Applications needed to have investigators from three different countries.
- Integrative proposal, and also individual projects (IPs).

UK had associated status. Any IP from UK needed to be a self-contained project – rest of project should not depend on UK component. IP from UK separately assessed by ESRC.

Assessing HumVIB

- Shortlisting phase was carried out by panel members only on outline proposals at face to face meeting.
- 14 applicants then were invited to make full proposals.
- Referees provided comments via on-line form.
- Panel members then discussed each proposal and the adequacy of the referees comments at second face to face meeting
- Panel members ranked the applications and funding determined by availability of money from national research councils.

What was good?

- Most referees responded promptly
- Most referees engaged with the scientific content and wrote well-balanced and detailed reviews.
- Excellent support from ESF in organising meetings and guiding panel and chair through the complexities of the funding.

Peer review and HumVIB - problems

- Failure to understand **different ways of funding research** in different countries. (overheads, etc). Comments made on cost of proposals rather than whether the applicants have asked for too many or too few resources.
- Failure to understand **different ways of carrying out research** in different countries. e.g. Use of PG students in some countries is commonplace- in others research associates are used. Employment versus student bursaries.
- Different **research cultures** in different countries. Favourite statistical methods differ across countries – some variation in what is understood by multi-level models.

Peer review and HumVIB - problems

- **Balance of referees** across countries funding the initiative. Does providing funds give your country's academics a say in what should be funded?
- Failure to understand **focus of research programme** among referees (some).

Failure to understand **complexities of research programme**. Some programmes have components which are tightly specified.

Eg. Need for statistical support and research, and need for data archiving service were two special parts of HumVIB call but not picked up by referees.

Peer reviewers and journal refereeing

Journal editors find it increasingly difficult to find good referees who will:

- Take the time to understand the journal –what type of papers the journal takes.
- Write in detail about the merits and problems of a paper
- Respond promptly
- And who have the time to read the paper thoroughly.

Associate editors often need to write a review themselves.

The challenge of international peer review

- Selection of **panel members** – broadly based across range of disciplines and nations.
- **Panel members** need some national experience.
- Panel members and programme co-ordinators /administrators to select large pool of referees.
- Referees need to be specific to programme.
- Referee training would be ideal, but expensive to organise.
- Referee payment might help to stop the two-line referee comments
- Universities and research organisations need to make time for staff to undertake this work.