

Experiences of peer review in an international context – the EUROCORES HumVIB programme

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This contribution reports from an academic rather than a research council viewpoint, and takes as its focus my experience in chairing the European Science Foundation review panel for the EUROCORES cross-national and multi-level Human Values, Institutions and Behaviour (HumVIB) programme. This programme was centred around the use of quantitative social science methods for exploring changes in views and attitudes, and my experience on the UK ESRC's Research Grants Board as a statistician was thought to be relevant. The HumVIB research programme had specific and unique elements – proposals were sought for both standard research programmes of work but also two “research and support” packages, one developing and providing support for data construction and archiving, and the second providing methodological support and development in the statistical technique of multi-level models.

The national context – peer review in ESRC

Before discussing the international aspect of peer review, it is worthwhile relating my personal views of the ESRC peer review process in the UK. The role of a member of the research grants board is to be able to fairly assess applications from a wide range of social science disciplines. Although my personal research is quantitative, there is the need to be fair in considering other paradigms and research methodologies. There is naturally a strong need to be informed by good referee comments, and the choice of referees by ESRC becomes an important part of the assessment process. Referee comments are then assessed by two board members, who can also add their own views and can come to a different conclusion from that of the referees. Finally, the application is discussed at a board meeting.

There are lots of good things to say about the peer review component. ESRC are now experienced in choosing peer reviewers who are knowledgeable about a specific application. It is becoming increasingly common for one or two international referees to be chosen, and this can lead to problems in terms of assessing value for money. The vast majority of referees are thoughtful and considered in their reports and can help assessors substantially in coming to a view as to the feasibility and fundability of a research proposal. However, the peer review process can go wrong. Probably the most annoying is the non- response; people who do not see peer review of research as part of their academic job. Of those who do respond, another frustrating response is the “excellent chap” peer review – which states simply in two or three lines that the applicant deserves funding as he or she has done good work in the past. Such responses will fail to engage with the scientific content of the research proposal..

However, most peer reviewers fail on two aspects of the process. The first is that reviewers often fail to determine how the current application builds upon the previous work of the applicant. How much of the work is innovative given the previous work of the applicant? Is the application simply a minor modification of earlier work? Secondly and more seriously, reviewers rarely detect fraudulent applications. Such proposals ask for funds for a programme of work which has been already carried out. Detection can be carried out through personal knowledge of the applicants work, or through searching for working papers posted on a web site, conference talks given or publications in press. I have come across two of these cases in three years. Admittedly, research councils do not specifically ask referees to

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look for fraud, and perhaps it might be argued that this is the responsibility of the research council rather than the referee.

The international context at ESF– the EUROCORES programme

The peer review process for the HumVIB EUROCORES initiative was in many ways similar to that of ESRC. Following a shortlisting phase, successful applicants were asked to submit full proposals. These were refereed by up to three peer reviewers, who provided comments via an on-line form. Panel members then discussed each applicant and the adequacy of the reviewer comments at a face to face meeting before ranking the proposals. The peer-review process was mostly positive. Peer reviewers were chosen well and came from a broad range of countries. Reviewers responded promptly and most engaged with the scientific content of the proposal with well balanced and detailed reviews.

Problems, although small, occurred in two main areas. Firstly, there were issues in relation to the different research cultures of different countries. Research culture in this context covers aspects funding and costing, of ways of carrying out research and methodological culture. Funding and costing issues related mainly to the peer reviewer imposing their own national view on costings made under an alternative system. Specifically, methods of costing overheads vary widely across the EU and reviewers failed to appreciate this. US and UK applications are costed under “full economic costing” leading to large overhead charges which are not understood. Negative comments were also made by reviewers on the staffing arrangements. Some countries are used to employing PhD students as researchers; in others it is normal to employ research assistants, who may or may not be post-doctoral. Finally, national biases in methodology also played a part in attracting critical reviews. Even for a research initiative as narrowly focused as HumVIB, there was a lack of understanding by some reviewers of the software and methodological choices made by some applicants from other countries.

More specific comments related to the nature of the initiative. The “research and support” elements of the initiative described in the introduction to this article were relatively badly reviewed as the reviewers failed to appreciate that research was not the primary focus of these proposals. More generally, the focus of the research initiative and specifically the need to compare a wide range of European countries using international surveys) was not appreciated by some peer reviewers.

Conclusions

In general, the peer review process runs remarkably smoothly both in a national and in an international context. However, international peer review presents specific problems over and above the usual problems encountered under national peer review. While these are not highly prevalent they can cause some applications to receive a lower grade than would be the case. One way forward would be to provide some kind of induction into international peer review, which would cover cultural differences in research funding and organisation between countries. However, the pool of peer reviewers required by organisations such as the European Science Foundation would probably make face to face training expensive and infeasible, and perhaps more detailed on-line training material is the way forward.

Finally, the increasing workload of academics needs to be understood. Care thus needs to be taken that increasing pressure on academics in universities does not lead to lower response rates to requests and poorer quality reports. A concordat between research councils and universities which specifically states that peer review is part of the responsibility of a university receiving funding is needed. Additionally, it should be the responsibility of an individual receiving funding to carry out peer review.