

BEST PRACTICES FOR PEER REVIEW COMMITTEES

May 2020

The University of Toronto is committed to fostering a diverse, equitable, and inclusive intellectual community that allows all researchers to reach their potential for excellence. Drawing on best practices cited in the literature, the Research Services Office has developed this document to support internal peer review committees in carrying out equitable and transparent adjudication processes.

Committee Membership

- Assemble diverse committees that engage members of under-represented groups.
- When seeking out committee members, demonstrate respect for faculty members' privacy, avoid suggestions of tokenism, and be mindful of the disproportionate service burdens often faced by faculty members from under-represented groups.
- Emphasize that, although the committee seeks to include diverse perspectives, all committee members will be responsible for a commitment to the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI).
- Identify an equity officer or designated equity champion who will attend in-person deliberations and support the committee in implementing equitable and consistent practices. The equity officer can be a faculty or staff member with demonstrated knowledge of EDI, particularly best practices in peer review.

Unconscious Bias Education

- Ask all committee members, at minimum, to complete the Tri-Agency/Canada Research Chairs [unconscious bias training module](#). Committee members can also make use of additional EDI resources available at the University, including the [unconscious bias education resources](#) developed by the Office of the Vice-Provost, Faculty & Academic Life.
- Emphasize that the purpose of such training is not merely to create awareness of bias, but rather to aid reviewers in taking steps to mitigate the impact of unconscious bias on the peer review process.

Evaluation Criteria

Peer review committees are expected to take the following steps when considering and applying the evaluation criteria:

- Determine and prioritize evaluation and selection criteria before opening any applications. (In the interest of transparency, the call for applications should include a list of criteria, as well as any secondary criteria that will be used to prioritize the distribution of funding or awards.)
- Develop clear and inclusive definitions of excellence/quality for each criterion.

- As applicable, determine the short-listing process in advance of reviewing any applications.
- Guard against reliance on holistic or intangible qualities like “fit” or perceived personal attributes. Evaluate applicants only based on qualifications explicitly listed in the application guidelines and in the selection criteria.

Review of Application Materials

When reviewing and assessing individual applications, committee members are expected to take the following actions:

- Review all of the required materials submitted by each qualified applicant, but do not consider any extraneous information (such as personal knowledge or a web/social media search of the applicant).
- Spend sufficient time reviewing each qualified applicant, and minimize distractions or interruptions while reading applications—implicit biases tend to be most pronounced when we are rushed or distracted. As much as possible, spend approximately the same amount of time considering each application.
- Do not review any application for which you have a conflict of interest that would prevent you from assessing the application in an objective manner, and notify the committee chair as soon as possible of any such conflicts.
- Record assessments of applicants using an evaluation criteria grid or rubric, consistently applying the abovementioned criteria of excellence to all applicants. Keep notes on each candidate and the reasons for your assessment, rather than relying on memory.
- Avoid discussing the applications or your assessments (with other committee members or with anyone else) until you have finalized your scores (for remote reviews) or until you are discussing the particular application (for in-person meetings).
- If the committee is considering a large number of applications, it may not be possible for all members to review all applications. If this is the case, each member should review the same agreed-upon number of applications, and all applications should be reviewed by at least two committee members.
- Avoid assessing applicants based on their perceived “pedigree” in terms of their current or previous institutions, their supervisors or advisors, and/or their research collaborators.
- Take steps to avoid reliance on first impressions and to avoid basing decisions on one element of the application package.
- Consider career interruptions for family leave, medical needs, or other reasons, as well as special circumstances that involve slow-downs in research productivity. Take into account the effects of these interruptions on the applicant’s research record, keeping in mind that the applicant with the highest number of publications, for example, may not automatically be the “best” candidate.
- Do not undervalue applications based on a short publication record, noting that some types of research may not lead to significant first-author refereed publications or may focus on conference proceedings.

- Take into consideration the challenges that may come with interdisciplinary, partnered, or collaborative research, including potential effects on research timelines. Be aware that some emerging sub-disciplines or fields of study may present fewer opportunities to publish in traditional top-tier venues or to attract significant research funding.
- As applicable to the applications received, committee members should demonstrate awareness of Indigenous ways of knowing, Indigenous research methodologies, and/or community-engaged research. Consult SSHRC's [Guidelines for the Merit Review of Indigenous Research](#) for more information.

In-Person Meeting and Deliberations

- The committee chair should include in their opening remarks a statement emphasizing the University's/department's commitment to the principles of equity, diversity, and excellence.
- The committee chair or the equity officer should confirm that all members have completed the unconscious bias training module (or equivalent training) and that members do not have any conflicts of interest that would prevent them from assessing candidates in an objective manner.
- The equity officer should explain their role in the review process and provide a brief overview of the ways in which unconscious bias can affect peer review.
- The committee chair should ensure that all members have the opportunity to contribute to conversations and have their opinions considered.
- With the support of the equity officer, the committee should conduct periodic check-ins during the review process to ensure that criteria are applied consistently to all applicants and that the committee is taking the appropriate steps to minimize the impact of unconscious bias.
- The chair or equity officer should encourage all committee members to raise any concerns related to equitable processes during the meeting or, if they feel more comfortable, in conversation with the chair or the equity officer.