



Summary of reviewer feedback in winter call 2024



Research Council of Finland

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1. Overview

The Research Council of Finland's call for applications for Academy Project Funding, Academy Research Fellowships and Clinical Researcher Funding was reformed for the winter call 2024. The changes concerned the schedule and review process. The application period was moved from autumn to winter to ease the start of the academic year at universities. The applicants themselves chose the most relevant review panel as well as the scientific council for their application. These reforms were aimed at reducing the application processing times as well as improving the transparency of the reviewing process. The 2,876 applications submitted to the winter call were reviewed in 42 pre-defined international review panels.

The review of applications followed a two-stage process. In the first stage, at least two experts were asked to give individual reviews on the application. In some cases there was a need to request supplementary reviews from additional individual reviewers. Applications with an overall rating of 5 or 6 from at least one expert and applications that for unexpected reasons received only one expert review proceeded to the panel review stage.

In the second stage, the applications were discussed in the panel meeting. Based on the discussion, the panellists wrote summary assessments for each application and gave a numerical overall rating. In addition to the individual reviewers, typically there was a designated reader for the applications discussed in the panels.

This year the review report given to applications with an overall rating of 5 or 6 is a composition of both individual reviews and the panel's overall assessment and ratings. Applications with an overall rating of 1-4 from the first stage will receive only the individual reviews.

The panels' general feedback for the benefit of the applicants is presented in the following chapters.

2. Scientific quality

The overall quality of the research proposals was generally high. All review panels identified excellent or outstanding applications (i.e. overall rating 5 or 6), which were competitive in an international comparison. However, the quality of the applications varied significantly (from poor to internationally outstanding) within the panels and among the fields of research. In some panels it was noted that the variety in quality was greater in the Academy Research Fellowship applications.

To improve the quality of the applications, many panels highlighted the importance of including sufficient details in the research plan. This

is particularly important for receiving a high rating in the review form items 'scientific quality, novelty and innovativeness of research' and 'feasibility of research plan'. A clear description of the novelty and innovativeness of the proposed research was a prerequisite for receiving a high rating in the first item mentioned above. Notably, the description of the implementation of the work was often insufficiently detailed, and this was reflected in the rating. Furthermore, the aspect of societal impact was lacking in some proposals even if the aspect was relevant to the research topic or its applications.

In some cases the panel commented that the description of the state of the art was not at the expected level. The panels also encouraged applicants to aim beyond the current state of the art instead of sticking to familiar methods. Some panels hoped for a higher level of ambition in the proposals, and that researchers would have had the courage to present breakthrough ideas and challenge the current dogma.

3. Mobility and collaboration

Several panels were impressed by the many highly networked and internationally oriented applicants. However, there were also applicants with limited international experience and confined mobility plans. Some panels noted that there was limited mobility compared to other European countries, especially in the Academy Research Fellowship applications. For instance, one panel noted that a surprising number of applicants did not have international postdoctoral experience of one year or more.

Several panels emphasised the importance of mobility for career development of early-career researchers as well as overall academic research in Finland. For example, the mobility plans could often have included more frequent and longer stays abroad. However, some panels highlighted that the mobility plans should be carefully considered to ensure they are justifiable and sustainable.

The planned mobility and collaborations should always be described clearly and in sufficient detail. They should support the research plan and contribute to the scientific objectives.

Some panellists raised concerns about non-specific descriptions of collaborators and their roles in the proposed research work. Letters of collaboration were sometimes found to be too generic. The letters would give credibility and show genuine interest and commitment in the collaboration.

4. Other feedback

- Applicants should prepare the research plan, CV, publication list and other appendices according to the Research Council's guidelines so as to facilitate systematic panel review.
- Applicants should place emphasis on describing clearly and properly the state of the art, risk assessment (incl. mitigation plan), management and organisational aspects, research methods, research questions and/or hypotheses and objectives in the application. A Gantt chart, deliverables and project evaluation criteria would be helpful.
- The implementation of research should be described in sufficient detail. In patient and animal studies, this means including rigorous statistical analysis plans and sample size calculations that are required to properly assess the feasibility of the proposed research.
- Applicants should note that the panels are multidisciplinary, and so the novelty and scientific contribution need to be explained in a way that is comprehensible to the whole panel.
- Responsible science aspects were described very generically in many applications, and it seemed like little effort was put into elaborating any details on the subject.
- The 'Ethical aspects' part of the application was typically very generic. For example, if the research involves experiments with animals, patients or vulnerable groups, this should be well justified. Also, if the research results have potential dual use, the ethical aspects should be carefully considered. Increasing relevance with ethical consideration was pointed out especially if there were plans to use AI in research.
- The funding applied for (the project costs) and requested personnel must be carefully justified.
- Applicants should include only published and accepted papers - not submitted ones - in the publication list.
- In some cases, the lack of coordination between applications from the same research group was surprising - on occasion, there were several applications on similar or overlapping topics.
- Some applications were poorly prepared, and the applicants would have benefitted from more mentoring from their institutions. Applicants are encouraged to discuss the application with colleagues before submission. Receiving mentoring in preparing applications is particularly important for

early-career researchers with limited experience in applying for research funding.

- The applicants should note that researcher training is part of the scientific review, and as such it is important to include researcher training aspects in the application.
- Inter-, multi- and transdisciplinarity is encouraged.