

Evaluation and Rating Feedback Policy Guidelines

All applicants who have requested feedback should receive feedback. The length and nature of the feedback may, however, differ as the needs of the applicant and information available from the reports are not the same and needs to be taken into account by the members of the Specialist Committee who compile the feedback. The **feedback** process should ensure that applicants receive adequate information on how their rating outcome was decided. The following **types** of feedback should be provided:

- A **reviewer profile**¹ comprising of the following:
 - Number of reviewers approached.
 - Number of reports received.
 - Number of reports used².
 - Number of reports from reviewers based in South Africa³.
 - Number of reports from reviewers based outside of South Africa³.
 - Number of reports from reviewers nominated by the applicant³.
 - Number of reports from reviewers selected by Specialist Committee³.
- A **narrative justification** referring to the comments of the reviewers to explain the reasons for the rating outcome decision, as well as **developmental guidance** on how to improve the applicant's future research or interesting comments on their current research, crafted by the assigned feedback writer. The convener of the Specialist Committee is accountable for quality control of the content of the feedback. This feedback should:
 - Be aligned to and consistent with the rating awarded.
 - Relate to the rating category descriptions and definitions but should not just cite ("copy and paste") phrases from them. It is important that this qualitative feedback section support and enhance the reviewer profile information.
 - Comprise of "crisp" and clear sentences that focus on explaining the reasons why a specific rating was awarded.
 - Use the developmental recommendations to strengthen the narrative justification section.

It is important to keep the following in mind:

- The most important feedback from the evaluation process is the rating itself. It represents the overall opinion of reviewers regarding the standing of the applicant as a researcher, based on the research outputs over the last eight years.
- Developmental feedback is selected because of its potential value to researchers in their future work, but the comments provided might be something applicants wish to disregard completely.

¹ **Although the aim is to procure six reviewer reports, four reports of acceptable quality expressing a consistent opinion is usually the NRF benchmark.**

² See Annexure 1: "Assessment of reviewer's reports" for an outline of how the usability of reports is determined.

³ See Annexure 2: "Selection of reviewers – Guidelines to Specialist Committees" for an outline of how reviewers are selected.

While the NRF may engage in discussion about aspects of the evaluation and rating process it will not enter into any discussion (apart from official appeals) on the contents of feedback supplied as it emanates from the collective views of a number of reviewers.

Annexure 1

Assessment of reviewers' reports

Specialist Committee members must play an interpretative role when they assess reviewers' reports. For example, if a reviewer states that the applicant is publishing in top journals, yet the journals are in the bottom tier of journals in the field, then the validity of the reviewer's report must be called into question. Similarly, Specialist Committee members should recognise the weakness of reviewers' reports which overly praise the importance of the applicant's work and where the work concerned is clearly not of the calibre suggested in the report.

Reports by reviewers are **assessed** by **Specialist Committees** and **rated** as follows:

1 Excellent report. Reviewer gives a critical analysis of the recent research outputs and comments critically on the quality of the research outputs of the last eight years as well as the international/national standing of the applicant. Reviewer has read the most important outputs of the last eight years.
Note: An excellent rating should only be awarded to reviewers who make it clear that they have actually read or have a sound knowledge of the applicant's research outputs.

1/2 Good report. Reviewer gives an analysis of recent research outputs and comments on the quality of the research outputs of the last eight years as well as the international/national standing of the applicant. Reviewer is familiar or has familiarised him/herself with some of the outputs of the last eight years, e.g., by having acquainted him/herself with most of the recent research outputs.

2 Satisfactory report. Reviewer gives an analysis of recent research outputs and comments on the international/national standing of the applicant. Reviewer is familiar or has familiarised him/herself with some of the outputs of the last eight years, e.g., by having acquainted him/herself with at least two or three recent research outputs.

2/3 Partially usable report. Some aspects of the report are usable while other aspects are unsatisfactory. Reviewer mentions recent research outputs but no analysis of the outputs is provided. Reviewer is only familiar or has familiarised him/herself with a small number of the outputs of the last eight years, e.g., by having acquainted him/herself with only one or two recent research outputs.

These reports state, for example:

- It appears that the applicant's work is...
- I believe...
- I have heard from one of my colleagues...
- I am told...
- It seems that his/her recent research outputs are...

3 Unsatisfactory report (including inappropriate reviewers). Reviewer has not read any of the most important outputs of the last eight years. Report by reviewer is a testimonial, or superficial, or contains sweeping and/or unsubstantiated statements, or over-generalises, or provides irrelevant information, or fails to focus on last eight years.

These reports state, for example:

- I have not read any of the publications.
- My research is not in the field of Prof X but I will nevertheless try to address your questions...

Inappropriate reviewer: Reviewers in this group include:

- a. a reviewer who is not a peer.
- b. a reviewer who is no longer active in the research field.
- c. a reviewer whose reports are biased or hostile.

Note: Unsatisfactory reports should not be taken into account when deciding on a rating. For **audit purposes** a **reason** should be provided why the report was discarded.

Non-reports by reviewers are categorized by staff in Monitoring and Evaluation/reviewer as follows:

Time constraints: The reviewer has replied but cannot oblige with the present request for various reasons, e.g., ill, going abroad, going on sabbatical for a lengthy period, time constraints, etc.

Not in field: Report is inappropriate for a particular applicant as the reviewer is not active in the applicant's field of research.

Conflict of interest: The reviewer feel compromised to do an objective review (e.g. Head of Department; close collaborator) etc.

Selection of reviewers - Guidelines to Specialist Committees

Introduction

The selection of appropriate reviewers constitutes the very essence of the peer-review system that supports the evaluation and rating of individuals. Members of the Specialist Committees and applicants applying for evaluation and rating are thus expected to show **great circumspection** in nominating reviewers.

Applicants are requested to supply names of not more than six active researchers who *are best able to assess the scope and impact of their recent research and other scholastic outputs, activities and contributions*. Applicants are also requested to indicate their relationship with the reviewer and to give reasons for each nomination in order to provide the Specialist Committee with additional information for the selection of reviewers. Applicants are also given the opportunity to indicate which reviewers should not be approached by the NRF. Although the NRF would normally not approach such reviewers, it does reserve the right to do so if this is regarded as necessary. Those reports will be clearly flagged in the documentation.

The Specialist Committees are requested to nominate six reviewers of whom **three** should be selected from those **listed** by the **applicant** and another **three** provided, **independently**, by the Specialist Committee.

Reviewers who are intimately or closely associated with the researcher being assessed should ordinarily be avoided.

Persons who serve on the **Specialist Committees** should have a sound knowledge of the broader context of their fields and be able to assist the NRF to readily identify suitable reviewers nationally and internationally. Identified reviewers should be active researchers and be capable of fair evaluation. There is no substitute for the wisdom of members of the Specialist Committees who are ultimately responsible for the selection of reviewers and whose **task** it is to select an **appropriate mix of national and international reviewers** from whose reports the impact of applicants' research in their fields and in broader fields can be gleaned.

Nomination of reviewers

General guidelines

- Specialist Committee members should consult closely with one another, especially with the **Convener** of the Specialist Committee, regarding the selection of reviewers.
- Where Specialist Committee members have difficulties or uncertainties regarding reviewers for particular applicants or fields, they should consult **colleagues** (locally or abroad) who would be able to make suggestions about suitable reviewers.
- Electronic publication and citation systems such as Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus can also be used to guide reviewer selection.

Specific guidelines

- The Specialist Committee should affirm that reviewers nominated by applicants are **appropriate peers** and that they are experts in the field of the applicant (either by reputation, citation, publications, members of editorial boards of journals in which applicants publish the majority of their work, etc). It should be noted that some applicants do, in fact, nominate inappropriate reviewers. Once it has been established that the persons listed are real peers, three reviewers from the applicant's list should be selected, finding a balance between those who work closely in the field and those who are somewhat removed from the applicant's work.
- Three independent reviewers should be chosen who are not on the applicant's list, again ensuring that they are true peers and active in the field of research of the applicant. **Care** should be exercised when approaching reviewers from the **same department or institution** as the **applicant**.
- An appropriate mix of **national and international reviewers** should be selected for **ALL** rating applicants (even those nominated for the emerging category).
- The **standing** of reviewers should be taken into account; to take two obvious examples,
 - Nobel Prize winners should not be approached for an applicant most likely to be placed in the Y category.
 - International leaders should be approached for applicants currently in the A category (or for applicants where Specialist Committee members feel there is a strong possibility that they may be placed in the A category).

- In some cases an applicant's work may cover **several fields**. Reviewers should therefore be chosen to ensure that the scope and impact of all the work is adequately covered. It may be necessary to consult with other Specialist Committees or to approach more than six reviewers in such cases especially if the fields are very divergent.
- Although applicants are requested to include South African reviewers it is not essential to nominate such reviewers. The main criteria of proper acquaintance and expertise in the field of the applicant and being a true peer must take precedence.
- In some cases where the applicant works in a **narrow specialised field**, it can be difficult to find appropriate additional reviewers over and above those listed by the applicant. In such instances, and provided the given reviewers are sufficiently independent of the applicant, the use of more than three of the reviewers as supplied by the applicant may be justified (and the so-called 'independent' reviewers decreased accordingly). The use of the electronic publication and citation systems such as Web of Science (WoS) ISI and Scopus to identify additional reviewers should also be explored.
- Reviewers who are **generalists** and those who are aware of the 'broader picture' are essential in the evaluation of researchers who do descriptive research because they can place the research into a wider context.
- Care must be taken not to approach the same reviewer too often. Where a particular person is suitable for several applicants he/she could be approached for some of them but could also be asked to suggest names of suitable reviewers for the other applicants. **A reviewer should preferably not be approached to do more than three reports in one year.**
- Generally speaking the same reviewer should not be approached more than twice consecutively to review a particular applicant.
- When approaching reviewers in **industry** it is important that the chosen reviewers are persons who are active in research.
- Members of Specialist Committees should not be asked to act as reviewers for applicants linked to their panels. Members of the EEC, Appeals Committee and Assessors should normally not be reviewers.
- In cases where an applicant's research straddles more than one Specialist Committee, the evaluation should be handled by the most applicable Specialist Committee as identified by the applicant, the NRF or the members of Specialist Committees. Members of this Specialist Committee will consult with other relevant Specialist Committees if and when the need arises (in particular during the process of identification of reviewers). Applicants should be informed if a change in the primary panel takes place.

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ⁱ Aug 2012