BLUE SKIES RESEARCH
FULL PROPOSAL

KNOWLEDGE FIELDS DEVELOPMENT
Framework Document
MARCH 2016
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1  **FUNDING INSTRUMENT TITLE AND DESCRIPTION**
   1.1 Name
   1.2 Description of funding instrument

2  **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

3  **STRATEGIC CONTEXT**
   3.1 Environmental scan
   3.2 Objectives
   3.3 NRF Perspective
   3.4 Institutional structure
   3.5 Financing support
   3.6 Key stakeholders
   3.7 Information sources

4  **MODUS OPERANDI**
   4.1 Call for proposals
   4.2 Eligibility
   4.3 Application assessment
   4.3 Rules of participation
   4.4 Timelines
   4.5 Management of funding instrument
   4.6 Lines of authority

5  **FINANCIALS**
   5.1 Funding model
   5.2 Funding ranges
   5.3 Funding support
   5.4 Funding instrument budget
   5.5 Financial control and reporting

6  **MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF THE FUNDING INSTRUMENT**
   6.1 Reporting
   6.2. Timeframes for funding instrument review
   6.3 Broad terms of reference for the review of the funding instrument
   6.4 Utilisation of the results of the review

7  **CONTACT DETAILS**

8  **LIST OF ACRONYMS**
1 FUNDING INSTRUMENT AND DESCRIPTION

1.1 Name
BLUE SKIES RESEARCH FUNDING INSTRUMENT

1.2 Description of funding instrument
Blue skies research should be considered as a multidimensional concept that can be defined from different perspectives viz. that of the researcher, the funding agency, the object of the research, the research approach, and/or the contribution to the knowledge base.

Defined from the perspective of the researcher, it refers to self-initiated, curiosity-driven research (i.e. seeking to explore knowledge beyond the horizon). Defined from the perspective of a funding agency, blue skies research funding implies a willingness to take calculated investment risks. Defined in terms of the object of research, it focuses on exploring important and/or new phenomena - rather than run-of-the-mill themes - as defined by peers in the specific research community. Defined from the perspective of the research approach, it is novel1 in terms of one or more of the following components: theoretical framework, methodological approach or research context (for example, shifting paradigms or research technology innovation). Defined in terms of the contribution to the knowledge base, blue skies research is expected to push the frontiers of knowledge and possibly become a point of gravity for subsequent research.

Furthermore the funding instrument recognises that the epistemological, methodological and other differences between the respective science cultures (e.g. economic, medical, social, engineering and natural sciences) must be acknowledged and therefore the assessment process should take cognisance of this differentiation. However care should be taken to ensure that multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary blue skies research is not be stifled through this differentiation.

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument can be described as multi-dimensional self-initiated, curiosity-driven inquiry that necessitates high investment risks, addresses new phenomena, as well as push the frontiers of knowledge. Blue Skies-type of research is associated with fundamental and basic research programmes.

The objectives of the Blue Skies Funding Instrument are:

- To provide space and time for research to push the frontiers of knowledge and to encourage imagination through scientific and scholarly endeavours;

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1 Novel research is about leveraging existing ideas in new ways however the paradigms/boundaries/directions must shift (either completely or partially).
• To support and sustain communities of critical and free thinkers;
• To promote and encourage diversity\(^2\) in research for re-imagining\(^3\) disciplines or academies;
• To bring about new and unpredictable scientific / technological / scholarly discoveries / interpretations / understandings / knowledges.

The NRF is cognisant of the complexities of dealing with this multi-dimensional concept and has structured the instrument as follows:

• Call for Concept Notes;
• Fund successful Concept Notes for one year only to a maximum of R 200,000 each;
• Invite successful Concept Note applicants to submit **full proposals**.
  • A closed call for full proposals will be open to current concept note applicants only, and will be accessible on the NRF Submissions System from 7 March 2016 to 25 April 2016;
• Fund successful full proposals for a three-year period (2017 – 2019)
  • Applicants will be informed of the outcome of the adjudication process before 1 December 2016.

**Full proposals must address all of the following:**

• New phenomena
• Push frontiers of knowledge
• Exhibit multi-dimensionality, and
• Show proof of concept – clear evidence of progress made and milestones achieved during the Concept Note funding phase.

### 3 STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The National Research Foundation’s (NRF) mandate is to support and promote research through funding, human resource development and the provision of the necessary research facilities in order to facilitate the creation of knowledge, and innovation and development in all fields of science and technology, including indigenous knowledge and thereby to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of all the people of the Republic (NRF Act, 1998).

In support of its purpose, the NRF recently launched the **NRF Strategy 2020** that aims at two strategic outcomes, namely *a vibrant and globally connected national system of innovation*, and *a representative research and technical workforce* targeting the following four strategic goals:

\(^2\) Diversity in research in this context refers to theoretical frameworks, approaches and methodologies.

A scientifically literate and engaged society;
World-class benchmarking and grant making systems;
An internationally competitive and transformed research system; and
Leading-edge research and infrastructure platforms

3.1 Environmental scan

A review of the Focus Area Programme was conducted in 2007. This review recognized that the rationale behind Focus Area Programme and model underpinning it remained valid. The review also acknowledged that the Focus Area Programme came at the right time, had been partially successful and that a focused research programme should be continued, even if in an amended form. The review recommended the provision of a funding instrument dedicated to promoting discipline-oriented, self-initiated research. Hence, the Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument was initiated in 2008 to provide space for novel fundamental enquiry, curiosity-driven and basic research.

The launch of the NRF’s Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument in 2008 had challenges which included:

• Insufficient time for broader consultation on the definition of novelty within the ambit of different knowledge fields and on the parameters of blue skies research;

• The adjudication process which unfortunately was amended midstream due to unforeseen circumstances;

• The phasing out of the Focus Area Programme reduced opportunities for researchers to apply for NRF funding. The confusion and anxiety resulted in a misconstrued understanding of the intended purpose and nature of the Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument;

The NRF acknowledged that it was important to further engage the research community on the refinement of this instrument. A two-staged process was followed which included:

• an open invitation to researchers in South Africa to input into the refinement of the instrument via an online questionnaire, and

• a workshop of researchers from various disciplines held on 16 March 2010 in Pretoria (taking into account the comments received from the above step) for invited participants to finalise the refined shape of the instrument.

The Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument has been refined based on the outcomes of the above process- which are reflected in this call for research funding.
3.2 **Objectives**

The objectives of the funding instrument are:

- To provide space and time for research to push the frontiers of knowledge and to encourage imagination through scientific and scholarly endeavours;
- To support and sustain communities of critical and free thinkers;
- To promote and encourage diversity\(^4\) in research for re-imagining\(^5\) disciplines or academies;
- To bring about new and unpredictable scientific / technological / scholarly discoveries / interpretations / understandings / knowledges.

3.3 **NRF Perspective**

The Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument creates space to push frontiers of knowledge, enable unpredictable discoveries as well as promote high impact research within disciplines. The Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument directly, and in part, addresses the following objectives of the NRF Strategy 2020:

- Promote globally competitive research and innovation;
- Enhance strategic international engagement; and
- Entrench science engagement.

3.4 **Institutional structure**

The strategic direction and outcomes of the funding instrument are managed by the Knowledge Fields Development (KFD) Directorate. The Reviews and Evaluation (RE) Directorate is responsible for the review processes up to the recommendations of grant awards. The Grants Management and Systems Administration (GMSA) Directorate’s responsibilities include posting of the research call, disbursement of grant funds and ensuring adherence to the conditions of the grant.

3.5 **Financing support**

The Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument is made possible through the NRF’s Parliamentary Core Funding. This is a demand driven funding instrument, and as such there is no limit to the amount an applicant can request. Having said this, the financial requests need to be in line with requirements and accurately reflect the financial needs of the proposed work. Excessive budget requests are not well received by the review panels. Applications will be scored according to a scorecard (see *Annexure 1*), and the top scoring applications will be supported until the available

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\(^4\) Diversity in research in this context refers to theoretical frameworks, approaches and methodologies.

\(^5\) To imagine again or anew especially: to form a new conception of ([Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reimagining). 2010. Merriam-Webster Online. 28 May 2010.)
resources are exhausted. The financial requirements of the top scoring applications will determine the final number of applications supported. This is one of the reasons why not all full proposals will be successful.

3.6 Key stakeholders

The key stakeholders involved in the Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument are persons with current (2015) concept note support based at public research institutions that are recognised by directive of the Minister of Science and Technology. These include mainly, Public Universities, Museums, Institutes and Science Councils.

3.7 Information sources

National Research Foundation 2015. *NRF Strategy 2020*

The Department of Science and Technology, 2013. *The ministerial guidelines for improving equity in the distribution of DST/NRF bursaries and fellowships.*

4 MODUS OPERANDI

4.1 Call for proposals

Full proposals must be submitted electronically via the NRF’s Submission System at [https://nrfsubmission.nrf.ac.za](https://nrfsubmission.nrf.ac.za)

The NRF closing date for endorsed Blue Skies Research full proposals is **25 April 2016**. All applications must be endorsed by the research office of the principal applicant before submission to the NRF. It is the responsibility of each applicant to familiarise themselves with the internal closing dates set by their institution in order to meet the NRF closing date.

Incomplete OR late submissions will not be accepted.

Call opens: 7 March 2016
Call closes: 25 April 2016
Eligibility

Only current (2015 ONLY) Blue Skies Research Concept Note grant holders who have been funded for pilot / proof of concept projects are eligible to submit full proposals in this call.

4.3 Assessment

The assessment of applications will be guided by a Panel Assessment Scorecard (see Annexure 1), and scored according to the Proposal Grading (see Annexure 2). Application assessment will occur by way of a two-tiered process:

(1) Remote [Postal]-peer review

The remote peer reviewers will be specialists in the ambit of the respective proposals. Requests for written reviews will be solicited electronically, or through appropriate media / means from peers located at remote locations from the NRF. Applicants will be requested to provide between 6 to 10 possible reviewers. It is in the applicant’s best interest to ensure that the selected reviewers are aware of the submission and are likely to respond. It is also in the applicant’s best interest to ensure that selected reviewers have no possible conflict of interest in submitting a review, as such review reports are dismissed without consideration. On average, a 30% response rate is achieved by the NRF in requesting postal peer reviews.

(2) Panel-peer review

The adjudication panel will be broadly constituted to include senior academics, who will be selected based both on their respective knowledge fields and their research standing. The panel meeting will be held at central location or by way of tele- or video-conferencing. Panel members will deliberate on submitted written reviews and will be expected to offer their own expert opinions.

NB: Applicants must ensure that their Curriculum Vitae are updated on the NRF Submission system at https://nrfsubmission.nrf.ac.za.

These Curriculum Vitae are used in the assessment processes, and incomplete or outdated inputs will jeopardise the application.

4.4 Rules of participation

a) Principal Investigator

Only researchers based at public research institutions that are recognised by directive of the Minister of Science and Technology are eligible to apply as a principal investigator.
The principal investigator (i.e. the applicant) must be an active researcher who takes intellectual responsibility for the project, its conception, any strategic decisions required in its pursuit, and the communication of results. The principal investigator must have the capacity to make a serious commitment to the project and cannot assume the role of a supplier of resources for work that will largely be placed in the hands of others. S/he will take responsibility for the management and administration of resources allocated to the grant award, and for the meeting of reporting requirements.

In addition, the research team may also include:

b) Co-investigators

A co-investigator is an active researcher who provides significant commitment, intellectual input and relevant expertise into the design and implementation of the research application. The co-investigator will be involved in all or at least some well-defined research activities within the scope of the application. Only South Africa-based co-investigators will be eligible for funding in successful grant applications.

Post-doctoral fellows, students, technical and support staff should NOT be listed as co-investigators.

c) Research Associates / Collaborators

These are individuals or groups who are anticipated to make a relatively small, but meaningful contribution to the research endeavours outlined in the application, but who have not actively participated in the research design. They are not considered a part of the core research team, and are not eligible to receive NRF funds from the grant if the team’s application is successful.

4.5 Timelines

Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument grants will be awarded for a period of three years (2017-2019). Successful applicants who wish to apply for further funding upon completion of a three-year funding cycle must submit new applications. All applications will be assessed on a competitive basis. The Blue Skies Research funding cannot be automatically renewed. Preferential treatment will not be given to those who have previously received NRF funding.

4.6 Management of funding instrument

The KFD Directorate of the NRF – Research and Innovation Support and Advancement (RISA) manages the Blue Skies Funding Instrument and is primarily responsible for:

- Strategic oversight and management of the funding instrument;
• Conceptualizing and developing the funding instrument;
• Coordinating and facilitating activities of the funding instrument;
• Compiling funding instrument research and evaluation reports;
• Stakeholder engagement;
• Ensuring that the funding instruments delivers on its intended goal(s).

The **RE Directorate** is responsible for managing the adjudication process including:

• sourcing of reviewers both for remote reviews and panels;
• managing the peer review process;
• organizing and managing the review panels as and where appropriate;
• providing feedback as appropriate and
• awarding of grants

The **GMSA Directorate** is responsible for

• Managing the call process, that is,
  o Posting the call;
  o Receiving and assessing applications eligibility;
• Coordinating and facilitating the granting processes
• Managing the granting including the administration of awards;
• Administering grant payments; and
• Ensuring adherence to conditions of grants

### 4.7 Lines of authority

The funding instrument Director in the KFD Directorate generally manages the Blue Skies Funding Instrument. The Director responsible for this instrument reports to the Executive Director of the KFD Directorate.

### 5 FINANCIALS

#### 5.1 Funding model

The Blue Skies Funding Instrument is made possible through the Core Funding model of the National Research Foundation. The grants of this funding instrument are to be primarily used for **research purposes** and for the development of associated human resources under the auspices of the NRF standard grant and finance policies. The money is released upon acceptance of the conditions of grant, both by the applicant and his/her employing institution. These grants will fall under the NRF audit requirements of beneficiary institutions.
5.2 Funding ranges

Full Proposals will provide a detailed, high-level operational expense budget with motivations. Successful Full Proposals will receive funding that accommodates the following budget items:

a. Grant holder-linked student support
b. Staff development grants
c. Research-related operating costs
   o Sabbaticals
   o Materials and Supplies
   o Travel and subsistence
   o Research / Technical / Ad hoc Assistants
   o Research Equipment

The application assessment process will consider proposed budget items in terms of cost, risk and reward ratios. Decisions relating to budget items will also be governed by the overall funding instrument funds available for the period. Awards will be made in line with the NRF funding rules and guidelines as outlined in Section 5.3.

5.3 Funding support

The NRF funds the Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument on an ongoing basis. Science councils, universities, museums and other NRF-recognized institutions are the primary beneficiaries of this funding instrument.

a) Grant holder-linked student support

Grant holder-linked student support will be awarded in accordance with eligibility criteria as detailed in the Ministerial Guidelines for Improving Equity in the Distribution of DST/NRF Bursaries and Fellowships (January 2013). The distribution for these bursaries is targeted at the ratios:

- Final year Undergraduate and Honours/BTech student assistantships: 100% SA citizens with a minimum ratio\(^6\) of 1:1 for Black\(^7\) and White participants;
- Masters bursaries: 90% to South Africans and 10% to candidates from other African countries;
- Doctoral bursaries: 80:15:5, SA: Other African: Rest of the World; and
- Postdoctoral bursaries: Open to all who undertake research in South Africa.

Values of Student Assistantships

- Final year Undergraduate (Full-time) R 8 000 pa for one year
- Honours / BTech (Full-time) R 20 000 pa for one year

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\(^6\) With the emphasis on Black students
\(^7\) Inclusive of Africans, Indians and Coloureds
Values of Bursaries & Fellowships

- Masters degree (Full-time) R40 000 pa for two years
- Doctoral degree (Full-time) R60 000 pa for three years
- Postdoctoral (pro rata per month) R150 000 pa for two years

b) Staff development grants

Applicants may apply for Staff Development grants for South African staff members at their own and other institutions, and who are not NRF grant-holders in their own right. These staff members must be registered for either a Masters or Doctoral degree, supervised by the applicant or a co-investigator of the application and must be directly involved in the NRF approved project. These grants can be used to contribute towards the operating costs for research undertaken at the supervisor's facility, as well as the cost of travel and accommodation to enable staff members to meet with (co)supervisors. Grants usually range between R 15,000 and R 30,000 depending on the nature of the research and the proximity of the student in relation to the supervisor. Applicants themselves are not eligible for Staff Development Grants. The maximum period of support is three years for a Masters degree and five years for a Doctoral degree.

c) Research-related operating costs

These costs include materials and supplies, travel (including conferences) and subsistence, equipment and research/technical/ad hoc assistance and sabbaticals to other research organisations and institutions of higher learning may be included within the context of the project applications. These costs should be justified and commensurate with the planned outputs, as they will be assessed on this basis. The amount awarded within this framework can be used at the discretion of the applicant.

General guidelines

Sabbaticals

Sabbaticals will be considered for a period from two to six months. The maximum sabbatical amount requested should not exceed R 80,000 for six months. Funding for sabbaticals of less than six months will be reduced pro-rata. Only principal investigators and co-investigators are eligible to apply for sabbatical funding.

Materials and Supplies

Generally, the NRF does not provide financial support for:

- Basic office equipment including computers and consumables unless the computer is required for the research itself.
- Basic office stationery, photocopying costs, printing costs unless these items form part of the research tools.
- Journal publication costs, journal subscription costs and book costs.
- Telephone, fax and internet costs.

**Travel and subsistence**

- International conference attendance: Generally the NRF restricts this amount to R 25,000 per person to a maximum of R 50,000 per application per year for a team application i.e. for principal investigators and co-investigators (local only) and local post-graduate students.
- International visits: These will be considered on a case by case basis. Such visits must be integral to the research plan and strong motivations should accompany these requests. Realistic funding allocations will be based on the requested activities. Only outgoing visits will be considered depending on the availability of funding.
- Local conference attendance: Generally the NRF restricts expenditure against this item to R 5,000 per person (all costs). Support for local conference attendance could be requested for all listed co-investigators and post-graduate students. The applicant should clearly motivate for the benefit to attend more than one local conference per annum, and for the number of people attending each local conference.
- Local travel: The NRF does not stipulate any rate for mileage as this will depend on the rate which varies per institution/organisation. Applicants are requested to provide details of this rate as well as the estimated distance to be travelled within the given year.
- Local accommodation costs should not exceed a 3* establishment

**Research / Technical / Ad hoc Assistants**

- This instrument does not provide funding for the salaries of the core team members if they are based at organisations/institutions where the salaries are state funded. In cases where the salaries are not state funded, the total salary amount for all core team members will be limited to up to 20% of the overall grant amount. A strong motivation for the salary component must accompany the request.
- Requests for research/technical/ad hoc assistance should be treated with caution. Generally the NRF would encourage applicants to engage students to undertake the research rather than employing research consultants. This guideline however does not apply when specific and/or highly specialised research/technical expertise is required. This should be **CLEARLY** motivated for in the application.

*Administrative assistance does not qualify as technical assistance.*

**Research Equipment**

Funding for equipment will be limited to R 50,000 per year. Requisitions for large equipment items (> R 200,000) should be submitted through the NRF’s Equipment Programme.
d) Funding to cater for disabilities

Additional funding support to cater for disability will be allocated to people with disabilities as specified in the Code of Good Practice on Employment of People with Disabilities as in the Employment Equity Act No 55 of 1998.

5.4 Funding Instrument budget

The budget for this instrument originates from the NRF’s Core Funding.

5.5 Financial control and reporting

Upon receipt of the signed Conditions of Grant letter, the NRF will release the awarded amount for the year. Grant holders will then be required to comply with the standard NRF financial management procedures, including the submission of an Annual Progress Report. These are to be submitted before the end of March of the following year, and are a prerequisite for the release of the subsequent year’s funding. Failure to submit an Annual Progress Report will result in the cancellation of the grant award.

6. MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAMME

The NRF is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument.

6.1 Reporting

The KFD Director is responsible for reporting quarterly on the contribution of the Blue Skies Funding Instrument to the KFD Directorate’s Key Performance Indicators. In addition, the Director is responsible for reviewing and reporting on the progress of the funding instrument.

6.2. Timeframes for evaluation

The Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument will be evaluated every seven years by a team of external reviewers appointed by the RE Directorate. In consultation with this directorate, KFD will agree to and set timeframes for the review in line with the existing guidelines. The Blue Skies Research Funding Instrument was last reviewed in 2010.

6.3 Broad terms of reference for evaluation

The broad terms of reference for the evaluation of the Blue Skies Funding Instrument will be determined by the KFD Directorate prior to the evaluation taking place and in accordance with the tenets set in the NRF’s RE Directorate’s Guidelines.
8.4 Utilisation of the results of the evaluation

The results of the evaluation will be used in line with the purpose set in the Terms of Reference for the evaluation as well as for instrument improvement and development.

QUERIES

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<th>REFER ALL QUERIES TO:</th>
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<tr>
<td>TRACY KLARENBEEK</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACTING DIRECTOR: KNOWLEDGE FIELDS DEVELOPMENT</td>
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<tr>
<td>(T) 012 481 4177</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:Tracy@nrf.ac.za">Tracy@nrf.ac.za</a></td>
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

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<th>DST</th>
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<td>GMSA-</td>
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<td>Scientific merit and feasibility</td>
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<td>Data management and use</td>
<td>Digital storage</td>
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<td>Totals</td>
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8 A minimum score of 2 is required for the proposal to be considered for funding
9 Ethical considerations and clearances for grant proposals are the responsibility of the research institute and/or institution of the applicant. Where such ethical considerations and clearances are required, grant applicants will be expected to submit to the NRF signed statements and/or copies of clearance certificates before any grant funds are released.
### ANNEXURE 2: Proposal Grading

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<th>Score</th>
<th>Meaning of score</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Application demonstrates evidence of <strong>outstanding</strong> performance across all the stated criteria, as determined by the panel and relative to the knowledge field under consideration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Above average</td>
<td>Application demonstrates evidence of <strong>above average</strong> performance across all the stated criteria, as determined by the panel and relative to the knowledge field under consideration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Application demonstrates evidence of <strong>average</strong> performance across all the stated criteria, as determined by the panel and relative to the knowledge field under consideration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>Application demonstrates evidence of <strong>below average</strong> performance across all the stated criteria, as determined by panel and relative to knowledge field under consideration</td>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>There are <strong>major shortcomings or flaws</strong> as relates to the scientific / scholarly merit and feasibility of the proposed work, as determined by the panel.</td>
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**Context:**

Proposal grading is done with sensitivity to the context within which each application is submitted. The score of each criterion for each application will be contextualised to accommodate variability in such things as knowledge fields, institutional capacity, etc. Should a criterion not be applicable to a specific application (e.g. plans for digital data storage; collaborations; etc.), the weighting of that specific criteria will be made to equal zero, and the overall score normalised.