# Briefing for observers at HRB panel meetings (pilot phase)

## Background

International peer review is the cornerstone of the HRB’s decision making process for selection of applications for grant funding. Given the size of the country and the high degree of actual and perceived conflicts of interest, the HRB has long-used international panel members.

In a recent survey 300 out of 312 respondents were in favour of allowing observers to HRB review panels, and as a result we are introducing this pilot initiative. The HRB must balance the wish to be open and transparent with considerations such as the integrity of our selection process, confidentiality of applications and the wellbeing of interviewees.

**Our motivation** for allowing observers is to better inform the research community about our processes. It is not to provide feedback on the applications discussed.

We will review after 12 months if this is a positive development and whether it is providing value to the research community. We would like to hear your opinion about it after you have observed a panel. Being an observer is an opportunity, not a right. **Your behaviour before, during and after the panel meeting will feed into the decision to maintain this opportunity for others or not**.

## Which panels will have observers?

We will invite observers at our regular selection panel meetings where applications are discussed for selection and ranking for funding. In some schemes a panel shortlists pre-applications, and these meetings may also be open to observers.

We are not allowing observers at interview-based panels at this point – interview situations are inherently stressful, and we do not want to add to this. There may be other circumstances where it is not practical or not prudent to have observers present, and offering spaces is at the discretion of the HRB. We expect to have around four suitable panel meetings between September 2019 and September 2020.

To ensure that panels are not disrupted in their work, a limit of two observers per panel meeting will apply during the pilot initiative.

## What you can expect from us

* Having been invited to observe a specific panel meeting and having confirmed your attendance we will send you information to determine potential conflicts of interest (a list of the names and affiliation of applicants and the titles of their applications as well as the relevant rules to enable you to check).
* You will not have access to other meeting documents apart from the agenda and names of applicants/titles of applications (no applications or reviews). However the primary reviewer assigned to each application will give a short overview of each application which will enable you to follow the discussion.
* Typically panel meetings go over lunchtime and you are welcome to share the food and tea/coffee provided.
* We will ask you for feedback on the process after the panel meeting.

## What we expect from you

* Please talk freely about your experiences with the HRB processes; in fact we ask you to share your experience of the process with others. However we also require you not to talk about any specific applications, details of feedback given, or application-specific panel discussions. This information is confidential and you will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement before attending. Confidentiality includes agreeing not to share direct feedback with individual applicants.
* We will ask you before the meeting to declare conflicts of interest with applications discussed by the panel, and any that arise during the course of the meeting as you become aware of CoIs. Should you have a conflict we will ask you to inform the Chair immediately and leave the room for the discussion of this application.
* We will ask you to not use your mobile phones or laptops for the duration of the meeting. We don’t want social media commentary as the panel happens or recordings being posted etc. We also ask you not to take notes about individual applications in other formats and to leave behind any documentation provided to you.
* You must agree to remain silent throughout the panel discussion. You have no role in influencing panel proceedings in any form. Please avoid disturbing the panel by coming or going during the meeting. Use the breaks if you have to come or go at other times. If you behave in a way that the Chair and/or HRB staff considers to be inappropriate or disruptive you may be asked to leave.
* We suggest that you read the guidance notes to the scheme that you are going to observe ahead of the meeting. This will give you a better understanding of what the panel is looking for. However this is of course up to you.

## What should I do if I think the panel misunderstood context or was biased?

Explaining Irish context for international panel members is part of the applicants’ job. If this is missing or not sufficiently clear, the application is missing an important aspect and may be judged accordingly. On occasion HRB staff will make a high-level comment (e.g. that there’s a mix of public and private provision in our healthcare system), but we cannot and do not go into detail.

Spotting and challenging potential bias is the role of the Chair, all other panel members and of HRB staff. Again, you are an observer and have no role in influencing the panel.

## How we will select observers for the pilot

Almost all survey respondents (295) indicated that they would be interested in becoming an observer. We have therefore decided to focus this pilot on multipliers who can tell others in their institution and networks about HRB processes. In the first instance, research office staff from the universities and RCSI (who jointly hold over 90% of HRB awards) will be invited to attend. We will select one place per institution for the next four suitable panel meetings; an institution who has already taken up an observer opportunity will not be re-invited within this pilot.

Secondly, research office staff from other host institutions will be invited in the same manner.

Assuming we decide to continue with this initiative after the pilot phase we will ask host institutions to nominate a small number of staff that should fit certain criteria (e.g. be at post-doc and research fellow level or a coordinator of a large awards (including infrastructures), have not attended a selection panel meeting before and agree to share their experience with others. A randomised method will then be used to select observers, bearing in mind balance between institutions.

At any stage we may also invite future PPI panel members to observe a panel meeting as a training opportunity. PPI panel members fulfil a different and distinct role in comparison to observers.

## Conflict of interest

A good moral guide might be the consideration how you would feel if somebody with your level of conflict of interest would observe a panel meeting discussing your application. A disqualifying conflict of interest exists where the observer:

* Was involved in the preparation of an application to the scheme
* Stands to benefit directly should the proposal be accepted or rejected
* Is in some way related to the applicant, co-applicant, collaborator or sponsors (where applicable) at a personal or professional level
* Is a former supervisor of the applicant, co-applicant, collaborator or sponsor (up to 5 years previously)
* Is a collaborator of the applicant (up to 5 years previously). There may be exceptions in the case of joint publications from large collaborative teams/consortia where neither reviewer nor applicant, co-applicant or sponsor were the senior or corresponding author
* Is an employee in the same School of a university or equivalent
* For research office staff, where the application comes from the same institution

A potential conflict of interest may exist in some cases that are not covered by the disqualifying conflict of interest rules indicated above.

In these instances the observer will leave the room for the duration of the discussion of the application where the conflict of interest applies.

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