Code of conduct for HRB reviewers

The HRB is Ireland's primary health and social care research funding agency. We invest approximately €60 million annually to support research to inform health and social care practice and policy, which in turn improves people's health and contributes to economic growth (www.hrb.ie)..

The HRB is committed to an open and competitive process underpinned by international peer review, which plays a vital role in setting standards and in benchmarking our scientific community to enable them to operate in a global context. The selection of applications for HRB funding is based on a robust review process encompassing different perspectives, for example relevant scientific field or methodological expertise, expertise in the nature of the grant such as clinical trials, career development, or infrastructures, and lived experience. Reviewers make recommendations to the HRB, which are an essential part of the funding selection process, the ultimate decision lies with the Board of the HRB.

Reviewers acting for the HRB are expected to adhere to the following code of conduct:

1. Reviewers are appointed as independent experts and are deemed to work in a personal capacity. In performing the work, they **do not represent any organisation**.
2. In line with **research integrity principles**, reviewers must perform their role to the highest standards of professionalism and rigour, ensuring the integrity of the funding selection process. They are required to operate in a confidential, fair, independent, and equitable manner according to the procedures described in this code of conduct, in any programme-related documentation, and by any other instruction(s) communicated by the HRB.
3. During the review process, the reviewer will access confidential information and must maintain this as strictly confidential. Reviewers **must agree to the HRB confidentiality agreement** prior to starting the assessment of any application; this includes requirements **not to share** login credentials or to assist other individuals or organisation/s in accessing applications; to only access application data for the purposes of reviewing; **not to disclose** information contained in the application or discussed during a panel meeting; to **destroy any copy/record of the application** after the review is completed; not to appropriate and use as their own, or disclose to any third party, ideas, concepts or data contained in the grant applications they review and to **respect the intellectual property** of applicants.
4. **Conflict of Interest** rules are applied rigorously. Prior to accessing full information of an application, reviewers must confirm that they have no conflict of interest with applications assigned for their review, either due to their relationship with a member of the applicant team, or due to collaboration or competition with the proposed work. All other potential conflicts of interest must be declared to HRB staff at the earliest possible opportunity, so they can be managed appropriately.

If a panel member has a conflict of interest with an application discussed at the meeting, they must declare this and leave the room during the assessment of that application.

5. The use of **generative Artificial Intelligence** (AI) platforms or tools to assist with the review or review outputs of a specific research proposal requires the input of the detail of that research proposal., in full or in part. Making such input to generative AI essentially discloses content of a research proposal with no guarantees of how data from the research proposal will be stored, transmitted, viewed or ultimately used going forward. This practice is therefore in breach of the requirement to maintain confidentiality in respect of research proposals. Accordingly, **reviewers are prohibited from using AI platforms or tools to assist with the review of research proposals.**
6. In line with the HRB commitment to the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment[1] and DORA[2], the HRB selection process is based on the **qualitative assessment of applications**. Reviewers should not use metrics such as Journal Impact Factors, h-index or host institution ranking as the basis of their assessment or as part of the consideration for an assessment criterion.
7. The HRB seeks to minimise the impact of **unconscious bias** related to gender, age, ethnicity, disability, or any other grounds prohibited by Irish law[3], as well as biases more specific to the health and research sectors, such as discipline, methodological choices, or research background. While a review process inherently relies on subjective assessment, the HRB aims to minimise the impact of various biases by (1) requiring all reviewers to watch a short video on unconscious bias before they access an application; (2) reminding panels at the start of their deliberations to be mindful of potential unconscious biases; and (3) ensuring that the assessment of each application is informed by experts with a diverse range of perspectives. Reviewers are encouraged to slow down and consider potential unconscious biases of their own and others that could influence how an application is assessed.
8. In most cases, reviewers are expected to provide a **written assessment**. This may be used verbatim and anonymised to allow applicants to respond, and is crucial in informing the panel discussion. It is also helpful for HRB staff when providing individual feedback to applicants (successful and unsuccessful). Reviewers are expected to provide their written input by the deadline set by HRB staff.
9. Subject to their consent and following approval of funding recommendations by the HRB Board, (1) all HRB reviewers are credited in their **ORCID profile** for their service to the HRB assessment process. This public aknowledgement will not compromise the anonymity and confidentiality of the assessment process. (2) HRB panel reviewers are are also listed on the HRB website.
10. Reviewers may **not communicate with applicants** at any stage unless they are required to do so as part of the assessment process (for example, if an interview forms part of the process).

[1] https://coara.eu/

[2] https://sfdora.org/

[3] The Equal Status Act, 2000 sets out the following protected grounds in Irish law: gender, civil status, family status, age, sexual orientation, religious belief, membership of the Travelling community, race, disability, https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2000/act/8/enacted/en/print.html

In cases where reviewers communicate with applicants as part of the assessement process, **communication must only happen in the presence of HRB staff members**.

11. The HRB may need to **process personal data** (including Special Categories of Data, such as information relating to a reviewers' health) in relation to reviewers. The HRB will process such data in accordance with applicable Data Protection Law. Further details in relation to what personal data is collected in relation to reviewers, and the purposes for which such data are used and may be disclosed by HRB, are set out in HRB's Privacy Notice.