



Vetenskapsrådet

A GENDER NEUTRAL PROCESS?

– A qualitative study of the evaluation
of research grant applications 2014

A GENDER NEUTRAL PROCESS? – A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE EVALUATION OF RESEARCH GRANT APPLICATIONS 2014

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FOREWORD

The Swedish Research Council's task to fund research of the highest quality is an important one and of significance for both the research community and the wider public. It is a part of our quality control to follow up on and identify how to improve our evaluation process. To this end it is important to have access to detailed information on how the review process works in our evaluation panels. The gender equality observations are a means of quality-assuring important aspects of the process and also to identify tools that help us achieve our gender equality objectives and to share good examples.

Last year the Swedish Research Council carried out its fourth round of gender equality observations. Each round of observations has resulted in a report that provides the basis for measures and recommendations for improving our evaluation process from a gender equality perspective. This, the most recent report, shows in general good examples of how gender equality aspects are taken into account by the evaluation panels but that there is still much that can be improved. One example highlighted in the report is the tendency for some reviewers to regard gender equality as a 'political device' that is contrary to the quality assessment that the Council makes through its evaluation panels. The Council's viewpoint is, however, that gender equality in a wider context is a quality enhancing factor; it will be an important task for the Council in the years to come to convey that to all involved in the evaluation process. Another challenge is to shift focus from discussing gender equality only in terms of outcome to a discussion concerning processes.

Although the report shows that we have made some progress, we can note that there is a need to continue in our efforts to develop the evaluation process from a gender equality perspective. Gender equality is not achieved through once-off measures but rather requires a long-term and continuous effort to ensure that all processes and decisions are characterized by a gender equality perspective. This is something that the Swedish Research Council actively works with.

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1 SUMMARY

These observations on gender equality aim to investigate the Swedish Research Council's evaluation process from a gender equality perspective and to identify particular points where improvements can be made. The authors shed light on the various elements of the process and follow up its development since the previous observation report.

The study shows that the Swedish Research Council has implemented a number of effective measures and has improved the evaluation process from a gender equality perspective. These measures include training initiatives which have to some extent led to a greater awareness of gender equality issues and a clearer role for the Council's staff. Concrete measures, such as pre-determined seating arrangements for meetings, have also improved the group dynamics in the evaluation panels from a gender equality perspective. Another positive change is new procedures in one of the scientific councils, whereby prioritisation and proposal for funding are no longer dealt with in the same forum.

At the same time, the observations point to the importance of the Swedish Research Council continuing its active work towards gender equality. To further ensure the quality of the evaluation process, there is a need to apply a gender equality perspective consistently throughout the process. Furthermore, the link between gender equality and quality should be conveyed more explicitly to the reviewers.

An overall conclusion from the observations is that when various informal structures or unstated assessment criteria have an influence on the evaluation process, this has an adverse effect on gender equality. To minimise the impact of these, the authors propose a greater formalisation of the process. The proposals are specified in the form of 14 recommendations grouped under three main headings:

- 1) Formalise and clarify roles
- 2) Formalise criteria and instructions
- 3) Formalise and structure discussions

2 SAMMANFATTNING

Jämställdhetsobservationerna syftar till att undersöka hur Vetenskapsrådets beredningsprocess fortlöper ur ett jämställdhetsperspektiv och att identifiera särskilda förbättringspunkter. I den här rapporten belyser författarna processens olika moment och följer upp hur processen har utvecklats sedan föregående observationsrapport.

Studien visar att Vetenskapsrådet har implementerat några åtgärder som har haft effekt och förbättrat beredningsprocessen ur ett jämställdhetsperspektiv. Bland annat kan nämnas utbildningsinsatser som i viss utsträckning har lett till en ökad medvetenhet om jämställdhetsfrågor och en tydligare roll för myndighetens personal. Konkreta åtgärder såsom bordsplacering i samband med möten har också lett till en förbättring av bedömningspanelernas gruppdynamik ur ett jämställdhetsperspektiv. Ytterligare en positiv förändring är nya rutiner inom ett av ämnesråden, där prioritering och förslag till finansiering inte längre sker i samma instans.

Observationerna pekar samtidigt på vikten av att Vetenskapsrådet fortsätter med ett aktivt jämställdhetsarbete. För att ytterligare säkerställa kvaliteten i beredningsprocessen finns det ett behov av att ett jämställdhetsperspektiv konsekvent tillämpas under hela processen. Vidare bör kopplingen mellan jämställdhet och kvalitet förmedlas tydligare till granskarna.

En övergripande slutsats från observationerna är att när olika informella strukturer eller outtalade bedömningskriterier får inverkan på bedömningsprocessen så påverkas jämställdheten negativt. För att minimera påverkan av dessa föreslår författarna en ökad formalisering av processen. Förslagen preciseras i form av 14 rekommendationer som grupperas under tre huvudrubriker:

- 1) Formalisera och förtydliga roller
- 2) Formalisera kriterier och instruktioner
- 3) Formalisera och strukturera diskussionerna

3 INTRODUCTION

3.1 Background

The Swedish Research Council is a central government agency tasked with funding basic research of the highest scientific quality. Its remit also includes advising the Government on research policy issues and working actively with research communication. Supporting research of the highest quality entails that the Council must guarantee that applications for research grants are assessed so that all applicants have the same conditions and opportunities. For this reason, quality assurance is important. Part of this involves scrutinising the evaluation process from a gender equality perspective.

In order to assure the quality of the evaluation processes with respect to gender equality, an observation study was selected as the most suitable method. As stated in a previously published report, *Observations on gender equality in a selection of the Swedish Research Council's evaluation panels 2012*, the project group (see below) was able to use this method to bring to light potential pitfalls in the evaluation process and to arouse discussion regarding the allocation of research funds from a gender equality perspective. In addition to this, the purpose of this report is to develop and generally describe how a conscious and gender-equal approach can and should permeate the evaluation process, with a focus on possible improvements. One hope is that this report can be of use to other research-funding bodies and the broader scientific community in general: peer review is a widely used selection tool within academia. It is, for example, used when recruiting researchers to universities, for promotions and in the universities' internal allocation of research funds.

The Swedish Research Council's work with observations on gender equality was launched in 2008 at the initiative of an evaluation panel chair. Since then, the work has undergone methodological development, and the number of observed evaluation panels has increased. The project group has noted a demand from reviewers wishing to obtain further knowledge and concrete advice on how to apply a gender equality and gender perspective in the evaluation process. This has in part been seen in the members showing an interest in the work and welcoming the presence of observers in the panel.

The Swedish Research Council is one of 18 pilot agencies that received support from the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research to work with gender mainstreaming in 2014. For several of the pilot agencies, providing grants is an important part of operations, and these have formed an informal network. This network has identified a generic process map of the different stages of the funding process where a gender equality perspective should be applied. The work to evaluate grant applications is one of these stages.

The project group had four members: Veronica Ahlqvist, Johanna Andersson, Lisbeth Söderqvist and John Tumpane. The group has had fruitful discussions with Fredrik Bondestam and Louise Grip of the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research regarding the structure of the report and its relationship to the Secretariat's commission, Gender Mainstreaming in Government Agencies (JiM).¹

¹ <http://www.jamstall.nu/jim/>

3.2 Starting points

Gender equality within academia is a pressing issue – for the Government, for citizens and not least for the researchers themselves. The topic has been the subject of many investigations and much debate articles. The issues are both well described in the literature and well known to the majority in the sector.² A gender-equal academia is about how we harness human resources, abilities and ideas regardless of gender.³ The Swedish Research Council's Strategy for Gender Equality “assumes that research capacity exists to the same extent in both sexes. Moreover, the Swedish Research Council assumes that research is benefited when both genders participate and apply their expertise and experience.”⁴

For a government agency, the objectives of Swedish gender equality policy also constitute an important starting point:

Sweden's overarching objective of gender equality policy is for **women and men to have the same power to shape society and their own lives.**

The first two of the four subgoals relate to:

- Equal distribution of power and influence. Women and men shall have the same rights and opportunities to be active citizens and to shape the conditions for decision-making.
- Economic equality between the sexes. Women and men shall have the same opportunities and conditions with regard to education and paid work that provide them with the means to achieve lifelong economic independence.

These two subgoals are highly relevant to the allocation of research funds as the evaluation work involves both decision-making and the allocation of economic resources. An exercise of power is involved in participating in processes to decide who will have the opportunity to conduct research and which questions are researched. Researchers awarded a grant by the Swedish Research Council gain the economic conditions to pursue their ideas and, in some cases, this also means that researchers are able secure their employment and advance in their research careers. As there is a high symbolic value in being granted research money from a government funding body, this can also result in a certain reputational credit and, ultimately, an influence on the research field.

On gender equality and equality

The specific focus of this report is gender equality. It intends to investigate whether men and women have the same conditions and opportunities to obtain research grants. However, the question is not disconnected from the broader concept of equality. It is important to stress that it is not only gender, or perceived gender, that can influence an evaluation process. There are other power structures⁵ that can influence evaluation. These might, for example, be the other legal grounds for discrimination, that is: ethnicity, transgender identity or expression, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation and age.⁶ But it can also involve other factors, such as academic rank, membership of a particular research discipline or school of thought, university affiliation,

² Jämställdhet i akademien – en forskningsöversikt, Drude Dahlerup.

³ “[gender equality] is also a question of quality and how we in today's knowledge-intensive society manage our human resources. The collective resources and potential of the population must be utilised to create conditions for research of a high international standard, for a growing Swedish industry, for outstanding artistic and cultural creation and for an effective public sector.” *Svart på vitt – om jämställdhet i akademien* (2011) p.19. Final report of the Delegation for Gender Equality in Higher Education

⁴ The Swedish Research Council's Strategy for Gender Equality 2014.

⁵ By power structure is meant a hierarchical structure that gives different groups different amounts of power in society.

⁶ Swedish Discrimination Act 2008:567. Read more on the Equality Ombudsman (DO) website: www.do.se

geographical origin or language. All these factors interact with one another, and it is rarely possible to examine one power structure without consideration of others. The project group has been aware of this and has in its work sought to take into account how categories other than gender can also lead to an evaluation bias or create status hierarchies that interact with the gender power structure.

One insight generated by our observations is that all, regardless of gender or other affiliation, benefit from a greater formalisation of the evaluation process. The recommendations that follow in Chapter 6 are thus not only measures to promote gender equality in the Council's activities but also equality in a broad sense. It is also important to emphasise that all members, regardless of gender, have preconceptions of gender and other power structures, and that men and women applying for research grants, and who do not belong to the academic norm (or the stereotype of a researcher), could be disadvantaged if such perceptions come to expression and have an influence on the process. This means that all have a responsibility to contribute to a properly functioning process by adopting a reflective and critical approach to their task.

Gender equality in the academic sphere

The norms, stereotypes and prejudices that exist in society are reflected and reproduced in all social contexts. They occur in all types of meetings and can be expressed either explicitly or in more subtle forms. Some norms and preconceptions can be more or less specific to the academic culture and/or the Swedish context.⁷ The academic culture may, for example, be coloured by historically male-codified forms of knowledge, language use, subject hierarchies and so on. At the same time, shedding light on possible gender inequalities in the academic sphere might challenge academia's self-image of objectivity and meritocracy. The presence of such a tension in academic contexts has been previously described by others.⁸

“Research on academia's culture and norms primarily moves on the macro level and analyses the dominant/superior academic culture and norms from a critical gender perspective. The tension between academia's hierarchical and male-dominated culture and the notion of academia as a gender-neutral sphere – or a culture without culture – where objectivity and meritocracy prevail, has been studied both nationally and internationally. In Sweden, Jordansson and Thörnqvist, in their empirical study of the introduction of the Tham Professorships, have been among those to describe how academia resists political attempts to increase gender equality in their own organisation. By comparing this reform of “alternating women” in politics, Thörnqvist sheds light on one of the foundations of academia's self-perception – meritocracy is seen as an objective system that does not favour or disfavour people on account of their group affiliation, but rewards actual knowledge, skills and intelligence. Besides this, the results of science – knowledge, explanation, understanding – are also independent of the researcher, and there is thus no need for the representativeness of academic staff. Attempts to problematise this assumption meet with resistance, regardless of whether this comes from academia itself, from the supposedly uncomprehending academic bureaucracy or from politics.”⁹

The same tension can exist when demands for gender equality are placed on evaluation processes that are based on peer review and where there is a notion that objectivity and impartiality already exist. According to the Swedish Research Council's Strategy for Gender Equality, the “primary objective of the Swedish Research Council is to allocate funding to research of the highest scientific quality and that best promotes renewal. Achieving this objective requires impartial assessment of grant applications. Impartial assessment includes gender neutrality; that the Swedish Research Council supports the best researchers, regardless of gender.”¹⁰ Here, there may be a conflict between what those involved perceive to be impartial and gender neutral and how

⁷ Dold könsdiskriminering på akademiska arenor – osynligt, synligt, subtilt, Liisa Husu, Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2005:41 R

⁸ “The notion that Sweden is gender equal, together with confidence in academia's meritocratic system, means that women and men do not notice that their conditions in academia are power structured” – p. 13, Kokbok för en jämställd akademi, Anna Gatti, SULF:s skriftserie XXXIX

⁹ [from Svart på vitt – om jämställdhet i akademien \(2011\) s.98](#) – Final report of the Delegation for Gender Equality in Higher Education

¹⁰ The Swedish Research Council's Strategy for Gender Equality 2014.

norms and preconceptions are actually produced and reproduced in the peer evaluation process. We therefore maintain that the entire evaluation process should be characterised by a critical approach and a gender equality perspective.

Peer review

Peer review is the foremost quality assurance mechanism within academia. It is a method that is well rooted in the research community and that is considered to improve quality. The criticism sometimes levelled against this method is that it can be conservative and that reviewers are not completely neutral – that is, that there is a factor of bias. In the scientific literature various ways to categorise and problematise the bias that can arise in peer evaluation processes are noted. A detailed review of the research in this area can be found in Lena Gemzöe's report *Kollegial bedömning av vetenskaplig kvalitet*.¹¹

According to Gemzöe, bias has previously been discussed in terms of social and institutional factors, i.e. “that personal, social or institutional characteristics of the applicant have influenced the assessment so that it has not been conducted in conformity with the existing definition of scientific quality”.¹² That a bias of this kind is not desired in an evaluation process is clear from the definition. Gemzöe goes on to describe how the research field today sometimes speaks of something called cognitive bias – i.e. that a preference for the research in which reviewers are themselves engaged and recognise themselves in results in it not being possible to characterise the evaluation as completely impartial. However, there are those who argue that cognitive bias is not problematic. A reviewer in a peer-review process is selected on the very basis of representing a certain discipline and has knowledge of certain methods, theories, etc. and is intended to contribute that very perspective to the assessment of scientific quality.¹³ Therefore, Liv Langfeldt's research instead refers to *academic/professional bias* and *personal/non-professional bias*.¹⁴ A process based on peer evaluation should strive to minimise personal bias and have clear and tight rules and guidelines for managing academic bias (for example, through a strict conflict-of-interest policy). This assumption has been the starting point for our recommendations in Chapter 6. Regardless of the categorisation of bias used, it is important for the process that everyone involved is aware of the problem and strives to minimise its influence.

¹¹ Kollegial bedömning av vetenskaplig kvalitet – en forskningsöversikt. Lena Gemzöe, Swedish Research Council (4, 2010) p.6

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Researchers as evaluators: tasks, tensions and politics, Liv Langfeldt and Svein Kyvik, High. Educ. (2011) 62:199-212

¹⁴ Judging quality – Expert panels evaluating research: decision-making and sources of bias. Liv Langfeldt, Research Evaluation (2004) 13 (1) p. 58

4 METHOD

In this study, we have made use of a more simple observation method inspired by the *participant observation* method, which is used in some fields of research. It is a method suited to capturing the discrepancy between what we *say* that we do and what we *de facto* do (and say).

The method has several advantages. For example, it enables the observer to carefully capture language, conversation culture, and the panel's social interaction. At the same time, there are challenges in using the method; memory is selective, as is our perception, and there is always the risk of making subjective interpretations or misinterpretations. Seeing patterns in what we are accustomed to and familiar with is another difficulty. In order to problematise their own subjectivity, the observers have held meetings where this has been discussed.

From an ethical perspective, the problem is that the subjects (members of the evaluation panels) will be in the hands of the observer's interpretation, which leads to an asymmetric relationship. There is also the risk that the very presence of the observer affects interaction in the room. The observers have been aware of the problem and, to minimise the risk of affecting interaction, have assumed a passive role at the meetings and have also provided no direct feedback to the members.

The purpose of using this method is not, however, to ascertain a causal relationship between what is said at the meetings and the final outcome regarding the approval rate.

4.1 Integrity aspects

An important prerequisite for this observer study has been for the members of the evaluation panel not to feel surveilled or in some way inhibited by an observer's presence in the room. The observer's presence should be passive and not affect the outcome of the discussions. The study has not been devised to evaluate the panel members and their behaviour as individuals, but to evaluate the process from a gender equality perspective. The observers informed the members about the purpose of the study at the beginning of each meeting.

4.2 Material

Observations have been conducted in eight evaluation panels from four different scientific councils and committees during their work to assess applications within the Swedish Research Council's general call for applications. We have chosen to observe two evaluation panels in Natural and Engineering Sciences (NT), one in Humanities and Social Sciences (HS), one in Educational Sciences (U) and four in Medicine and Health (MH). These eight evaluation panels together dealt with 465 applications for Project Research Grants (corresponding to 12 per cent of the applications received for that form of grant), and 177 applications for Project Research Grants for young researchers (equivalent to 17 per cent of the applications received for that form of grant).

The observers have had access to the same materials as the ordinary members of the evaluation panels, both to documents in the Swedish Research Council's web-based reviewing tool, VR Review, and to documents distributed at meetings.

The material upon which the analysis has been based consists of the observers' notes and measurements. The observers have listened to the evaluation panels' discussions, noted seating arrangements in the room, made notes on grades and measured speaker times. The notes have been made according to a semi-structured template to increase comparability between different panels and observers. The observers have participated in all meetings that the panel has had, that is, the physical meetings and telephone conferences that have been

held. The primary basis for our observations was obtained during the autumn's two-day evaluation meetings; for some of the Swedish Research Council's scientific councils and committees, this is the only occasion when all the evaluation panel's members physically meet to discuss applications.

5 OBSERVATIONS

The core activity of the Swedish Research Council is the evaluation of research grant applications. This is based on a peer evaluation process, that is, the applications are reviewed by other active researchers in the field. The entire funding chain is a complicated process involving many stages – call for applications, application, evaluation, decision, funding and follow-up. The observer study has examined the evaluation stage, which in turn consists of several different elements: (1) recruitment and instructions to reviewers, (2) individual review, (3) screening, (4) evaluation panel meetings and (5) prioritisation. The observations are presented here in this order.

For each section, we discuss the relevance of a gender equality perspective, present the overall observations illustrated with concrete examples (positive as well as negative) and summarise our conclusions. We would like to point out that the observation study is not intended to give a comprehensive picture of the evaluation process, but is a critical examination focusing on areas that have the potential for improvement.

5.1 Recruitment and instructions to reviewers

Panel composition

From a gender equality perspective, the recruitment of reviewers and the constellations in which they are grouped is an important aspect of the evaluation process – who has been selected, which information have they been given about their task and what instructions have they received on how the task is to be carried out? The selection of members determines the composition of the evaluation panel, not only with regard to gender distribution, but also other factors, which in turn affects the (formal and informal) information, the perspectives and the prior understanding these members bring to the evaluation panel meeting.

We have noted a number of factors that we determine play a frequent role in how the conversation is conducted; which persons have the chance to speak and which do not, those whose opinions carry weight and those whose do not. These include gender, professional rank, academic rank, subject-related status (research areas with high or low status) and geographical origin.¹⁵ For example, it became clear in one evaluation panel that the status structure created an informal centre of power. The chair of the observed panel responded to this by often giving the floor to a certain reviewer, apparently having the highest status, and stressing the concordance between the chair's own assessment and that which the reviewer had made. This may have resulted in those whose opinions about an application might have differed from that advocated by the chair and the reviewer refraining from expressing these. If this were the case, there is a risk that the quality of the discussion was lower than it would have been in a different context.

Social groupings can also arise within the evaluation panels, for example, through members of the same gender or from the same country joking or whispering among themselves, which may appear exclusionary to others in the panel and have an adverse influence on the discussion climate. For example, in one panel, where men were the underrepresented gender, we observed the members joking openly about the skewed gender distribution. Seemingly harmless jokes alluding to gender can result in the perceived or actual exclusion of certain people. We believe that this risk is greater when there is an uneven gender distribution in the evaluation panel. In other panels, we have noted that Scandinavian members spoke frequently, while the members that were heard least

¹⁵ E.g. Swedish/Nordic collegiality, different status for international persons depending on linguistic and cultural distance and the status of the research in their home country or within their respective fields of research.

came from countries in other parts of Europe. We have also seen examples of how members can express themselves on applications in a bantering or off-handed manner, and members occupying discussions by speaking about applications they have neither read nor been tasked to review. In many cases, other members confirm and reinforce this behaviour through their body language or assent.

Informal groupings

We have noted that panel composition affects which information is contributed to discussions and how it is received and valued. This in turn can affect the outcome of the evaluation. In a previous report¹⁶, we problematised the occurrence of “namedropping” (mentioning one or more persons or institutions in passing, often with the aim of influencing the evaluation), informal information (introducing information to the discussion that is not in the application) and speculation about the applicants.

In one of the observed panels, we noted that both namedropping and informal information were common among the researchers who were active in Sweden. An international member reacted to this and pointed out that this could have a conservative effect on the process. On another occasion, a member expressed frustration that everyone else around the table appeared to be in possession of informal knowledge about a particular research team but that no one wanted to convey this in the discussion (in accordance with the Swedish Research Council's guidelines). Later, during a coffee break, and after the application had finished being discussed, this information was, however, conveyed to her. Both examples clearly show how informal information can create an exclusion of those who, on account of a different nationality, research specialisation or otherwise different background, do not have the same prior knowledge of applicants as the other panel members.

It can be noted here that when the Swedish Research Council chooses to assign almost only Swedish reviewers to evaluation panels, especially within a small area of research, this may increase the risk of informal information and namedropping during the discussions. Researchers who have access to informal networks represented in the room can receive attention through namedropping or be favoured/disfavoured by the contribution of informal information. These informal networks cannot be considered gender neutral as there is gender inequality in many areas of research, both horizontally (different disciplines having a different status within the same evaluation panel) and vertically (the gender balance becoming more skewed higher up in the academic hierarchy).

Pre-determined seating arrangements

Seating arrangements in the room can affect group dynamics and how various informal structures and status hierarchies are reproduced during the meeting. Since the observer study in 2012, several scientific councils have introduced pre-determined seating arrangements at their evaluation meetings, based on a principle of alternating men and women. This was applied at all the evaluation panel meetings we participated in. As far as we can assess, this measure has had a positive effect, with better group dynamics and increased participation. We argue that the initiative for pre-determined seating arrangements is a positive change, but there is also scope for broadening this approach so that it not only takes gender into account but also other factors, such as subject affiliation, geographical origin, experience of evaluation work and so on. See further under the recommendations in Chapter 6.

¹⁶ Observations on gender equality in a selection of the Swedish Research Council's evaluation panels 2012

Roles and rules

Rolls during the evaluation meetings:

Every year more than 6 000 research grant applications are made to the Swedish Research Council. The evaluation system of the Council is based on peer-review, that is to say that the active researchers review other researchers' applications. In order to process the large number of applications the Council has 90 evaluation panels, covering well-defined subject areas.

Chair

Each evaluation panel meeting is led by a chair. The chair is responsible for upholding SRC policy during the meeting and for the evaluation panels' written feedback to the applicant. For each application the chair appoints a panel member as 'main evaluator' and at least two other panel members to review the application.

Reviewer

A reviewer is a panel member tasked with reviewing an application, grading it and providing the panel with an individual assessment of the application before the panel meeting.

Main evaluator

The main evaluator is the reviewer who composes the panel's collective written evaluation after the panel meeting.

Scientific council member

In certain research areas members of the decision-making body – (the scientific council, council or committee) participate as observers during the panel meetings. These do not participate in the evaluation of the application but rather monitor if the Swedish Research Council's and scientific council's policies and guidelines are upheld. There are currently 9 scientific councils, councils and committees at the SRC.

Research administrator

The research administrator is a member of the Council staff, the role of which varies between the research areas. The research administrator is responsible for the meeting protocol, monitors that the Council's guidelines are upheld and aids the chair in their contact with the evaluation panel members.

Research officer

The research officer is also a member of the Council staff, the role of which varies between the research areas. The person usually holds a PhD. They assist the chair in leading the meeting and monitoring that the Council's guidelines are upheld during the meeting. They also review the panel's written evaluations.

The evaluation panel's opportunity to carry out its work as impartially and consistently as possible is, of course, influenced by the attitude of those involved to the regulations that apply. In discussions during the meetings and during meeting breaks, we noted that the Swedish Research Council's regulations were sometimes

discussed critically. Reviewers commented that they do not accept rules on deductible time for parental leave, nor the Government's gender equality objectives, to take two examples. The research officers who tried to interrupt reviewers who were breaking or protesting against the Swedish Research Council's regulations were in some cases supported by their respective chairs, but we could also note that there were examples of chairs choosing to undermine the research officer's authority by showing solidarity with the reviewers who were breaking the regulations.

The role of the chair

The chair's role is important to the functioning of a meeting, also with regard to gender equality. It is the chair who has the power to steer meetings so that everyone has the chance to speak and that the wills and competencies of all members are expressed in the discussion. It is also the chair's role to ensure that incorrect or inappropriate comments do not occur and to interrupt, for example, informal discussions. How successful chairs are in these tasks depends on how members act but also on how chairs perceive their role and choose to handle situations that arise.

One panel had a chair who was very attentive and thereby created a favourable climate for discussion during the meeting. When applications were being discussed, she consistently asked reviewers who did not themselves request to speak, thus ensuring that everyone's opinions were heard. She also checked carefully that proposed compromises had the support of the panel. In another panel, the chair had to make a distinct effort several times to curb inappropriate tendencies in the discussions. One example concerns a male panel member with a dominant mode of expression who was not in agreement with several female members on the evaluation of an application and ridiculed their assessment. This necessitated the chair to interrupt him with a cutting counterquestion to keep him to a more impartial tone of discussion.

The Swedish Research Council's staff

As a rule, it is the Swedish Research Council's staff who have the greatest knowledge of formal regulations and whose task it is to ensure compliance with these. If the research officer objects to anything in a discussion and, where warranted, states what rules apply, it is desirable that the chair and any scientific council observer gives their support.

The Swedish Research Council's staff have undergone training since the previous report was presented in 2012. Among the topics raised in this training was how to act if discussions arise that risk lowering the quality of the evaluation (for example, if members apply different assessment criteria for different genders). The staff have also been tasked with providing information on the Swedish Research Council's work on gender equality at the beginning of meetings. Here, we believe we have seen that the staff's roles have become somewhat clearer and that the staff, to a certain extent, have been equipped to take action and have gained a greater awareness of gender equality issues. However, in some panels, the division of responsibility between the chair and the staff is still unclear, which means that their cooperation is not functioning optimally.

In one panel, the research officer was active and intervened several times, drawing attention to instances when informal information was brought into the evaluation, when age was discussed and when the panel risked running out of time. The representative of the scientific council also took an active role, pointing out, for example, when independence was problematised for a female applicant. In this case, the chair and the members listened to both the research officer and the scientific council member, and the discussions could be quickly and easily returned to the formal framework. One research officer in another evaluation panel was also quick to point out when members discussed age, spoke about an application they had not read or speculated about aspects that were not in the application. However, the chair rarely showed solidarity with the research officer, but demonstrated in various ways that she disagreed. It was probably unclear to the members which rules actually applied – those asserted by the research officer or those communicated by the chair. It is naturally

problematic that those involved in the evaluation process, whether it be reviewers, chairs or staff from the Swedish Research Council, are not always aware of or know how to relate to the applicable regulations.

Instructions to and training of reviewers

In order to avoid uncertainty regarding the roles and tasks of the various parties in the evaluation work, we see a need for greater clarity in the Swedish Research Council's instructions and guidelines. For example, there are often questions about how the criteria are to be applied and about what applies for the different forms of grant. This makes it difficult for the panel to agree on how they are to assess applications consistently. For example, the reviewers interpreted the assessment criterion *merits of the applicant* differently; whether coapplicants should be included or not, if the merits should be assessed according to an absolute scale, if they should be assessed in relation to the proposed project or relative to what can be expected of the applicant's career phase. The Instructions for Reviewers are clear on this point, but the reviewers still find it difficult sometimes to relate to this and together find a common application of the assessment criterion. It is not necessarily the case that the instructions are unclear but it may mean that instructions and guidelines are communicated incorrectly or at the wrong time. We draw the conclusion that an inconsistent application of the criteria or application of unstated criteria has an adverse effect on gender equality.

The Swedish Research Council's Strategy for Gender Equality is described in the Instructions for Reviewers, and information about this is given at the beginning of meetings. The vast majority of reviewers subscribe to the principle that gender equality is important, but we have noted that representatives of the Swedish Research Council have slightly different ways of conveying the message of gender equality. In some cases, there is an unintentional reinforcement of the notion held by some reviewers that gender equality is an antithesis to quality, rather than a tool for quality. The uncertainty of members concerning the purpose of the gender equality objectives comes to expression during meetings when they in various ways state that they find it difficult to relate to the Swedish Research Council's strategy and its application. Therefore, when recruiting reviewers, the Swedish Research Council should emphasise the quality aspect of gender equality work and the fact that reviewers are expected to embrace and follow the Council's Strategy for Gender Equality.

When the Swedish Research Council's gender equality work is presented to the members, there is sometimes an emphasis on the quantitative operational objectives of the strategy for gender equality and the need to achieve a numerical gender balance. This is an issue that the panel is only to take a position on at the end of the meeting. We believe that the process would benefit from the message being reformulated. For example, it could be emphasised that the entire process should be characterised by a critical approach to the objectivity of one's own evaluation and that the entire panel must constantly reflect on how consistent the panel is in its application of the various criteria. This should then be followed up at the end of the meeting by checking whether the operational gender equality objectives have been achieved.

5.2 Individual review

Reading and making an initial assessment of applications takes a lot of time and energy and is an important part of the evaluation process. This is done individually and is a preliminary evaluation that the reviewer brings to the meeting to discuss with colleagues. It is the conversation during the evaluation panel meeting that leads to a joint assessment of the application, which the entire panel is able to endorse. We can note that in the panels we observed, the vast majority of members were sensitive to their colleagues' arguments and expertise and appreciate the collegial conversation at evaluation meetings. It should be pointed out here that the individual evaluation is preliminary, and that it might be coloured by any existing bias (which the panel discussion during the evaluation meeting is intended to eliminate), personal disposition (the reviewer uses the grading scale generously or less generously), etc. In addition, the reviewers might have different ways to operationalise the concept of quality and different approaches to the criteria. Therefore, it may be problematic from a gender

equality and quality perspective if these preliminary figures are assigned great weight, particularly in cases where the reviewers disagree, or if no proper calibration takes place.

The variation in individual grades may be due to reviewers having applied the grading scale differently and due to genuine differences of opinion about the application's quality. In most of the panels we observed in 2014, the research officer began by showing a picture of how reviewers had applied the grading scale in order to remind members of the need for calibration and the added value of collegial discussion. This was done less frequently in the previous observer study in 2012, and this desire for systematisation is a clear improvement of the process. However, there is still a tendency in some panels to attach crucial importance to the numerical grades or the preliminary ranking noted by reviewers prior to the meeting.

The grades are regarded in many cases as solid, objective measures that can be handled mechanically to calculate median values and create preliminary rankings. The figures are used as if they were definitive, rather than one of many tools in the process. We argue that it would be more reasonable if the individual judgments, the grades, were regarded as a tool to facilitate the process towards an overall assessment that the entire evaluation panel is able to endorse. A review of the grades for two of the panels indicates that the preliminary assessments of applications showed a more uneven gender distribution than the overall assessment finally arrived at by the evaluation panel. This is something that should be investigated more systematically in all of the Swedish Research Council's evaluation panels, but it indicates the importance of calibration to gender equality.

5.3 Screening

All the scientific councils and committees at the Swedish Research Council have high application rates. To reduce the workload on the members, some scientific councils and committees apply various forms of screening to applications that are not viewed as sufficiently competitive to be considered for funding. This gives more time to discuss the applications that are of high quality, which is intended to promote a fair and high-quality evaluation. The Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (HS) screens two thirds of its applications at its spring meeting; a physical meeting where all applications are discussed in detail. These meetings are conducted in the same manner as the usual evaluation panel meetings, and the observations of these are therefore included in the next section on the evaluation panel meeting.

The Scientific Council for Medicine and Health (MH) and the Scientific Council for Natural and Engineering Sciences (NT) instead apply what they call a triage procedure and a screening procedure, respectively. Based on all the members' preliminary judgments and ranking of applications, a first stage screens up to half of the applications. MH and NT hold their screening meetings by telephone, which does not allow any greater scope for extended discussion. One problem is that the gender equality perspective is not always applied, and there are instances of screening laying the foundation for a skewed gender distribution that persists throughout the evaluation process.

The Swedish Research Council's staff informed several panels about the Council's gender equality policy at the beginning of the screening meeting, sometimes with the support of the chair, but not all panels received this information. Gender equality was therefore an issue that was discussed in several panels, but already at this stage it became clear in some panels that gender equality was regarded as something that was primarily about the proportion of women. The discussions highlighted the gender of the main applicant only for female main applicants, and the gender of men was not highlighted. The systematic linking of the gender equality issue only to women ultimately leads to women being made the "problem" to be "solved".

Some of the chairs were careful to inform panels that if the reviewers had given vastly different preliminary grades for the same application, a reviewer could apply to have the application discussed at the autumn evaluation meeting. The reviewers were not equally active in conversations, and the members differed in their

inclination to insist or give way. In order to ensure a more equivalent treatment of applications, scientific councils and committees can apply the principle of automatically including an application if there are widely differing opinions on its quality, instead of requiring the performance of an action by the individual evaluators.

In medicine and health, applicants with ongoing Project Research Grants from the Swedish Research Council cannot be screened, but progress automatically (in order not to risk being without a written evaluation, something that screened applications do not receive). This is a well-intentioned principle, but in practice it may pose a threat to the gender-equal distribution of grants since the gender distribution among the applicants with an ongoing grant can be uneven. It also means that regardless of the application's quality, these applicants receive a more concrete feedback from the evaluation panel regarding the proposed project's strengths and weaknesses, which can be an advantage for those applying for grants in the following year.

5.4 Evaluation panel meetings

Discussion structure

At some meetings, it could be noted that the meeting discussions were not always consistent. The members were free to spontaneously raise various aspects of an application, which sometimes resulted in the applications receiving different treatment, so different that it might have had a negative effect for some applicants and a positive one for others. This can be illustrated by an example from a panel in which it was noted that an application receiving the highest points, if all the individual grades were totalled, was mainly discussed in negative terms, without anyone reacting to the discrepancy between the written material submitted and what was expressed at the meeting. The rapporteur for this application had namely claimed that the application was “weak”, causing the chair to start talking about the generally low quality of applications for the form of grant in question. In this way, the chair contributed to the discussion of this application becoming problem-oriented and negatively loaded, which was unexpected given that its grades were high. The chair did not comment that four reviewers had rated the project highly compared with two who had given lower grades. The main applicant was in this case a woman.

The next application to be treated had received relatively low grades from all members, with the exception of the rapporteur, who had awarded consistently high grades for the various parts of the application. The reviewer in question spoke a lot, and on the whole, the positive judgments gained a prominent position. The panel finally agreed that the applicant had potential, but he would not be recommended for funding. The main applicant was in this case a man.

One impression from the observations is that a negative or positive attitude from a reviewer can spread; in the first example, there was a focus on weaknesses, in the second, the tendency was the opposite. The discussions of these applications were not consistent.

Assessment criteria

In the observations, we could see that the conversations of several panels at their respective meetings place great emphasis on the researchers' merits. This is especially true in the evaluation panels for medicine and health. It is obviously the case that an emphasis on merits favours older researchers, at the expense of younger. Where the research field is traditionally dominated by men, it also favours men ahead of women. In evaluation panels within other subject areas, the conversations more often assigned importance to the scientific quality of the research plan.

Previous years' observations of the work of evaluation panels have demonstrated that in the conversation about the researcher's merits, the issue of “independence” often becomes a matter of women's alleged lack of independence. This is confirmed in the material from the current observations. In one evaluation panel, the

issue of independence was raised when treating one third of the applications that had a woman as the main applicant (in 9 of 28 cases), but only when treating one twentieth of the applications that had a man as the main applicant (2 of 37 cases). In another panel, we saw that the reviewers did not question men's independence, but women's, where they belonged to a strong research team. We have noted that discussions on independence can in some cases lead to a decrease in grades or a lower position in the order of priority. Men's (lack of) independence is rarely discussed and when it does occur, it does not have the same effects for the applicant, according to the observations. Independence is often discussed by members assessing applications in the area of medicine and health. However, the Instructions for Reviewers has no information on how to measure the applicant's independence. They contain the very short section *Assessment criteria and grading scale, Merits of the applicant*: "Does the applicant have sufficient research experience, expertise, level of independence and scientific network for implementation of the proposed project?"

The Instructions for Reviewers for natural and engineering sciences contains a special instruction concerning Project Research Grants targeted at young researchers. This reads: "Has the applicant demonstrated the capacity for independent work? Has the applicant demonstrated the capacity to operate in new (international) research environments, such as during postdoctoral periods?" (page 14). However, one of the observed panels discussed independence rather than independent work. Furthermore, the panel's discussions were not consistent. The impression was that the reviewers found it difficult to measure how independence should be assessed and how the term should be defined.

Others have previously stated that gender carries greater weight in the evaluation of predoctoral and postdoctoral applications than in the evaluation of research applications, because the reviewers know more about applicants when they have had time to gain more formal merits.¹⁷ In the case of young applicants who have fewer merits, gender can lead to a result that favours young men. This might have possibly occurred in one of the panels. The panel noted that all the top-ranked candidates were of the same gender, but felt that they had no opportunity to influence this as the grades were perceived as absolute. No explicit calibration of the members' grades was made by the evaluation panel in question. Neither were the definitions of scientific quality used in practice by the evaluators subject to analysis. Here, the panel would have been well served by tools to problematise its own evaluations from a gender equality perspective.

In some cases, we have also seen that it is not only the criteria that are unclear, but that it may also be a case of the regulations and guidelines being unclear to the reviewers. "In our field, no researcher is on parental leave," asserts one of the reviewers in an evaluation panel, frustrated because that experience stands in contrast to the Swedish Research Council's rules on deductible time for parental leave. The difference between the reality perceived by the reviewers and the Swedish Research Council's provisions created such strong irritation that one of the reviewers exclaimed "nonsense!" about this rule which was, as he perceived it, divorced from reality.

Although the deviations from the Swedish Research Council's instructions are rarely expressed as explicitly as in this case, we can still identify a common thread running through our observations, namely that unclear guidelines or unclear and unstated assessment criteria can have an adverse effect on discussions.

Informal information

In this year's observations, it was obvious, as in previous studies, that many evaluation panels convey a great deal of informal information at their meetings. Information about the applicant's personal qualities, private and working circumstances could often be used to explain why, for example, someone had few publications or lacked international networks, since a reviewer happened to have access to information that was not present in

¹⁷ Lena Gemzöe 2010 page 19

the application. This form of information exchange led to the panels introducing a kind of derogation from the requirements set by the Swedish Research Council via the formal assessment criteria and the grading scale. We see a tendency that such informal information favours men and disfavors women. For example, an applicant does not have as good merits as other applicants, but this is defended by saying “he's had a tough time”; and someone else “is a bit of a loner”, which is intended to explain what is lacking by way of international networks and so on. In one panel, there was a member who, in the discussion of an applicant's merits, bundled the applicant together with one of her family members, who was also a researcher but not mentioned in the application. In this case, the statement was rejected by the others in the panel as irrelevant, but recurring comments of this type may still be assumed to be capable of influencing the degree of impartiality in the evaluation.

5.5 Prioritisation

In previous reports, we have particularly problematised the final stage of the evaluation meeting – we have, among other things, seen that the tasks of evaluating, prioritising and funding projects are sometimes confused, which increases the risk of tactical considerations colouring the assessment of quality. This risks reducing gender equality to a question of numbers, and the discussions to a question of “raising” certain applications. The Scientific Council for Medicine and Health has since changed its procedures so that the evaluation panel no longer disposes over a budget, but only evaluates and prioritises applications. Based on our observations, we argue that this is a good initiative that streamlines the evaluation panel's task to focus on evaluating and discussing the quality of applications. We believe this is a change that should be considered by other scientific councils that do not already practise this procedure.

In the evaluation panel's final phase, where the panel has to agree on which applications it will propose to be awarded grants (or prioritised highest), there sometimes arises a, what we would call false, conflict between gender equality and quality. It is most often in these discussions that it becomes most evident that some members perceive gender equality as an issue that is about women and proportions – gender thus becomes a property that women have, but not men.

In other panels that we have observed, there have been members, men and women alike, who have applied a broader gender equality perspective. Some, for example, have referred to studies about research on subconscious bias, which has then led the panel to reflect on their previous discussions and how consistent they have been in applying the assessment criteria.

In an evaluation panel where gender equality is discussed only as sex and in terms of the proportion of women, there is a risk of reproducing and cementing preconceptions of women as subordinate/weak or of giving a certain group special treatment. There is a great risk of omitting critical discussion of how the panel has operationalised the criteria and how consistently it has applied the rules. In panels that view the gender equality strategy as quota allocation or political meddling, there is a greater risk of a sort of double bind. In the room, a situation can arise where female members are forced to choose strategy – to get involved in the discussion on gender equality and risk becoming a representative for their gender, or to say that “quality prevails and nothing else”. Male members who problematise the gender equality aspect do not risk having their position and their merits questioned. Here, it is important that all evaluation panel members understand their responsibility to ensure the high quality of the evaluation process and the inclusion of the gender equality perspective as part of this.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The observer group had four members who all also participated in the study in 2012. We believe we have seen clear improvements in the process, but there is also potential for improvement. Our observations indicate the need for the gender equality perspective to permeate the entire process in a more explicit manner, rather than gender equality being treated as a subsequent issue.

One conclusion of the observations is that a gender equality perspective on the issue of quality is often lacking in the discussions at the evaluation panels' meetings and that the emphasis is on gender equality in relation to outcome and not in relation to the process. We also see that gender equality is often discussed as something negative/reprimanding. Most participants in the evaluation are aware that the outcome is not always gender equal, that it should be gender equal and that the Swedish Research Council has been tasked with ensuring that it is gender equal. However, discussions in the evaluation panels often end up focusing on gender balance and not on why gender equality is important or what gender equality entails. This can contribute both to an experience of guilt or frustration and a feeling that the gender balance is something that should be "corrected". There is also a tendency in many of the discussions to consider gender equality as an additional political constraint which stands in contrast to the quality assessment made by the Swedish Research Council through its evaluation panels. In the worst case, gender equality is reduced to a numbers game that risks cementing preconceptions of differences between men and women. We believe that gender equality is a quality perspective that should permeate the evaluation process – and it is a communicative challenge for the Swedish Research Council to formulate this in a way that can be accepted by all involved.¹⁸

Furthermore, there is a need to continue developing the evaluation work to ensure that gender, or other social or institutional properties, do not have an influence on the assessment of research grant applications. It is inevitable that the peer evaluation process is coloured by the reality in which we live, and that structures and power structures are produced and reproduced in the evaluation process. It is therefore necessary to work continuously to assure the quality of the process from a gender equality perspective.

A common thread running through our observations is that when various informal structures or unstated assessment criteria have an influence on the evaluation process, this has an adverse effect on gender equality. To minimise the risks described, the project group would like to propose that the Swedish Research Council as far as possible strives for a greater formalisation of the process. This is a strategy to eliminate the occurrence of personal bias and to minimise the consequences of professional bias (see Chapter 3). A high degree of formalisation gives the evaluation high quality by ensuring that those aspects of an application which the Swedish Research Council wants the reviewers to study are also those focused on by the evaluation panels.

In this context, formalisation refers not only to establishing rules and guidelines, but also to ensuring that these are communicated to all participants and are embraced and respected by them. A conflict exists if individual reviewers consider the regulations not to be in line with the experience and the culture that they as individuals or a group have, or are bearers of. However, as a central government agency, the Swedish Research Council does not give scope for unstated assessment criteria or informal structures to affect the evaluation process.¹⁹

¹⁸ This is a familiar problem – “For those who work practically with gender equality, this poses a challenge. On the one hand, the objective of gender equality work is for gender not to be of any account. On the other hand, that very work contributes to the reproduction of gender as a category. The emphasis on gender differences also means that other differences risk being toned down.” *Svart på vitt – om jämställdhet i akademin* (2011) p.87.

¹⁹ “Equal cases shall be treated equally. Fairness and consistency shall characterise activities. Decisions shall be based on positive arguments and not on subjective approval or disapproval.” *Den gemensamma värdegrunden för de statsanställda*, 2013.

Formalisation as a strategy can risk being perceived as blunt and bureaucratic, but we see that it would reduce the risk of informal and non-defined criteria becoming significant to the outcome. Instead, the probability of the Swedish Research Council funding the best research would increase.

Here, we present some concrete recommendations within three main areas, all aimed at increasing formalisation.

Main recommendation 1: Formalise and clarify roles

Recommendation 1: The Swedish Research Council should strive for diversity in the recruitment of evaluation panels with regard to factors such as nationality, gender and age.

- We recommend that the Swedish Research Council in all its evaluation panels strives for an even gender distribution (the 40/60 rule) in every evaluation panel, and for international representation (a suggested minimum of 20%). We believe that formalising the recruitment process and increasing the exchange of experience between the different scientific councils can facilitate the recruitment process. For areas where the gender distribution in the recruitment base is highly skewed, it should be a priority to achieve balance among the key positions (such as chair) and there should in that case be explicit criteria to determine when it may be justified to deviate from the 40/60 rule.

Recommendation 2: The Swedish Research Council should develop procedures for the use of pre-determined seating arrangements to promote a good discussion climate. Here, the procedures should encompass a perspective that not only takes gender into account but also other power structures.

- Most of the evaluation panels that we observed applied pre-determined seating arrangements, and our assessment is that this procedure has had a good outcome. One recommendation is to further refine this tool and to work for a distribution in the room based on multiple criteria.

Examples:

- Gender: alternating women/men
- Professional role: Swedish Research Council staff closest to the chair, scientific council observers far away from the chair
- Experience: experienced members sit far away from the evaluation panel chair, beginners close to the chair
- Geographical origin: The longer the distance travelled, the closer to the chair (e.g. Scandinavians furthest way, Britons in the middle, southern Europeans closest to the chair). Avoid grouping nationalities (alternate Swedes with other nationalities)
- Linguistic and cultural distance: e.g. English-speakers might have an advantage in a panel where the discussion is conducted in English and are therefore placed further away from the chair

Recommendation 3: The Swedish Research Council should draw up more explicit guidelines for the structure of evaluation meetings.

- A basic meeting structure common to all subject areas should be developed, containing some fixed meeting points (including a presentation round, calibration of evaluations, and checking with all members before submitting proposals for a decision). On a more concrete level, this could involve structuring the conversation order as follows:
 - Each proposer shall begin with a presentation of no more than three minutes (can be adapted depending on the number of applications and the length of meeting). The presentation should describe the application's foremost strengths and weaknesses. The applicant's gender or age or other irrelevant information should not be mentioned. It will suffice to refer to “the applicant” or possibly the applicant's name (and then, consistent use of first name and/or surname). Thereafter, the chair gives the floor, preferably in turn to each person who has read the application, so that all are given the opportunity to express their opinion.

Recommendation 4: The Swedish Research Council should clarify the roles and responsibilities of the chair and produce clear instructions for how the meeting should be conducted.

These instructions should cover meeting technique, information about the Swedish Research Council's mission, policies and guidelines as well as concrete tools for gender-equal meetings. Furthermore, the Swedish Research Council can develop a role description clarifying and problematising the chair's responsibilities.

These clarifications concern formalities such as:

- the chair's task to ensure that all who have read an application are given the opportunity to comment when this is discussed.
- the chair always checking that the panel's evaluation of an application is summarised in a way that all participants are able to accept.
- the chair's responsibility for ensuring that the reviewers have used the grading scale in an equivalent manner, and if not, to give instructions to the panel on how to deal with divergences.
- the chair ensuring that the applications are treated in an equivalent manner.
- the chair's cooperation with the Swedish Research Council's staff and use of their knowledge of the evaluation process and the Council's guidelines.

The Swedish Research Council can also choose to *problematise* the chair's role by highlighting some situations that may arise, and ask the chair to be mindful of and have preparedness for these. Preferably, some form of dialogue or workshop could be arranged, where the chair goes through this together with the research officer who will participate in the meeting. Below are a few suggestions for discussion points that chairs and staff can start from.

How should the chair and staff deal with the situation when:

- There are strong contrasts between the individual evaluations made before the meeting and those subsequently expressed at the meeting.
- Few or no researchers from the underrepresented gender are among the researchers receiving the highest grade/ranking (from the reviewers in the individual evaluations that reviewers make before the screening meeting and at the evaluation panel meeting).
- Discussions on applications are not equivalent: different aspects are assigned different meanings on different occasions; for example, if many women are not considered to be independent, while the independence of men is rarely questioned.
- The panel refers to previous applications from the same applicant/applicant group and let these play a decisive role in the treatment of the application that is on the table.
- Hierarchies and informal centres of power arise in the evaluation panel, possibly in combination with a lack of respect from some members for other members.
- The evaluation panel's members express disapproval of the Swedish Research Council's guidelines.
- The members relate the quality of an application's evaluation to the reviewer's gender.
- The members introduce informal information.

Main recommendation 2: Formalise criteria and instructions

Recommendation 5: The Swedish Research Council should review the instructions and the information provided to the reviewers during recruitment from a gender equality perspective.

- The person invited to participate in the evaluation should, already at the recruitment stage, be informed of the basic legal principles of central government administration and of the Swedish Research Council's Strategy for Gender Equality.
- The Swedish Research Council should check that instructions and guidelines are accepted by members before they begin work on their individual evaluations.
- The opportunity to implement the above-mentioned measures in the form of e-learning tools should be investigated.

Recommendation 6: The Swedish Research Council should develop training on gender equality issues that is mandatory for all who participate in the evaluation.

- Training for reviewers can usefully be coordinated with other research-funding bodies to avoid duplication (a kind of “national gender equality certification for peer review”).

Recommendation 7: The Swedish Research Council should revise its Instructions for Reviewers from a gender equality perspective.

Recommendation 8: The Swedish Research Council should review the instructions and procedures for screening meetings from a gender equality perspective.

- The Swedish Research Council should investigate why the process for screening in the evaluation process varies among the different subject areas, as well as the consequences of different procedures for the legal certainty of the process and for the gender equality of the outcome.
- In order to ensure a more equivalent treatment of applications, the scientific councils should employ a principle of not screening an application if there are widely differing opinions on its quality.

Recommendation 9: The Swedish Research Council should clarify what is to be assessed under the criterion "applicant's merits" and ensure that the reviewers understand what this entails.

Recommendation 10: The Swedish Research Council should clarify if and when independence should be assessed, and create a clear definition of what the term covers.

Main recommendation 3: Formalise and structure discussions

Recommendation 11: The Swedish Research Council should develop guidelines for the use and calibration of the grades.

- In order to facilitate calibration of the evaluations made by the reviewers during their initial individual evaluation of the applications, the Swedish Research Council should investigate the opportunities of using the existing reviewing system, or develop a specially adapted interactive tool that can make the requisite comparisons of reviewer grades.
- Every meeting should start with a discussion of how the reviewers have used the grading scale and the criteria.
- The Swedish Research Council should have a policy on whether to use median and average values, mathematically align grades for the various parts of an application, create rankings and so on.

Recommendation 12: The Swedish Research Council should consider various active measures during the course of the meeting to ensure that the gender equality perspective is taken into account.

- For example, a gender equality/equal treatment observer can be appointed among the members of the evaluation panel, or formalised occasions can be introduced to check/reflect on the assessment work during the evaluation process.

Recommendation 13: The Swedish Research Council should discuss the pros and cons of testing anonymised applications for the form of grant for young researchers.

Recommendation 14: The Swedish Research Council should discuss the possibility, if relevant to the form of grant, of instructing reviewers that it is the research plan that should be at the core of the evaluation, and furthermore that the merits of the applicant should match the application, not stand above its scientific quality.

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The Swedish Research Council's gender equality observations aim to investigate the Council's evaluation process from a gender equality perspective and to identify particular points where improvements can be made. In this report the authors shed light on the various elements of the process and follow up its development since the previous observation study. An overall conclusion from the observations is that when various informal structures or unstated assessment criteria influence the process, this has an adverse effect on gender equality. To minimise the impact of these, the authors propose a greater formalisation of the process.

