

Assessing the Applications

Our Head of Research, Dr Sarah Schonberger, is the main contact for applicants and research institutions to ensure they understand the process, eligibility criteria and guidelines. She checks every application, ensuring they are complete and the information provided will allow us to thoroughly assess the application.

The Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) assesses project, small project, and conference and training course applications. The SAC usually has between 8 and 12 members, selected from a pool of experts to ensure diversity. Anyone who is an applicant in a given round cannot be selected to serve on the SAC for that round. Each application is assigned a committee member with appropriate expertise who prepares a report on the quality and potential significance of the proposal. Projects and small projects are assessed on the suitability of the aims, design, methods, personnel, and budget, as well as any previous work on the topic by the applicants. External reviews of all project applications are obtained from international experts. Applications that are ranked the highest by external reviewers are discussed at the committee meeting.

At the SAC meeting each application is discussed in detail, beginning with the declaration of any conflicts of interest. The processes for identifying and managing conflicts of interest are described in the last section, below. The discussion of each application begins with the report prepared by the expert committee member. Once discussion is complete every committee member provides a confidential score to the Research Manager. The total scores are weighted to account for any committee members abstaining from scoring due to conflicts of interest, and applications are ranked according to their total weighted score.

There is a set amount of funding allocated to each round. The most highly ranked applications will be allocated funding, working down the list of ranked applications until all of the available funds for that round have been allocated or the committee agrees that all of the fundable applications have been funded. If there is an application that sits across the funding line, the committee will decide whether to recommend to Council that the funding budget be increased to include that project. This will take into account how similar the score is to the application ranked directly above it.

Fellowship, scholarship and summer studentship applications are reviewed by our Personal Awards Committee (PAC). Fellowship and scholarship applicants are interviewed via video conference and scored on their calibre, suitability, project quality, and the research environment they will be in. The total scores are weighted to account for any committee members abstaining from scoring due to conflicts of interest, and applications are ranked according to their total weighted score. There are a set number of fellowships, scholarships and summer studentships allocated to each round, however the committee can choose not to award the full number depending on scoring.

If the top scores are equal or very close, the committee may recommend funding an additional applicant in that category.

Approving and Awarding the Applications

The Chairs of the SAC and PAC present the committee recommendations to the Neurological Foundation Council for approval. The Council does not decide who receives funding, however they will decide whether to increase the budget if SAC recommends funding an application that is sitting across the funding line, or PAC recommends funding an additional applicant in a particular category. If a Council member is named on an application they will leave the meeting if there is any discussion regarding that application.

Conflicts of Interest

Any conflicts of interest are carefully managed by the co-chairs of the Committee. Where members of the committee pool are named on an application, they will not be involved in the committee assessing that grant type. The Chairs of the SAC have a non-voting role so they may be named on an application, however they will leave the meeting during the discussion for that particular application.

Committee members with the following conflicts of interest will not have access to information on the assessment of that particular application, and will leave the meeting during the discussion or voting for that application:

- Collaborated (or intending to) with a named investigator or mentor
- Previous student, supervisor or advisor to a named investigator
- Published with a named investigator in the last five years
- On a current grant with a named investigator
- In the same department or working in close proximity to a named investigator
- Scientific or personal differences, or close personal ties, that prevent objectivity