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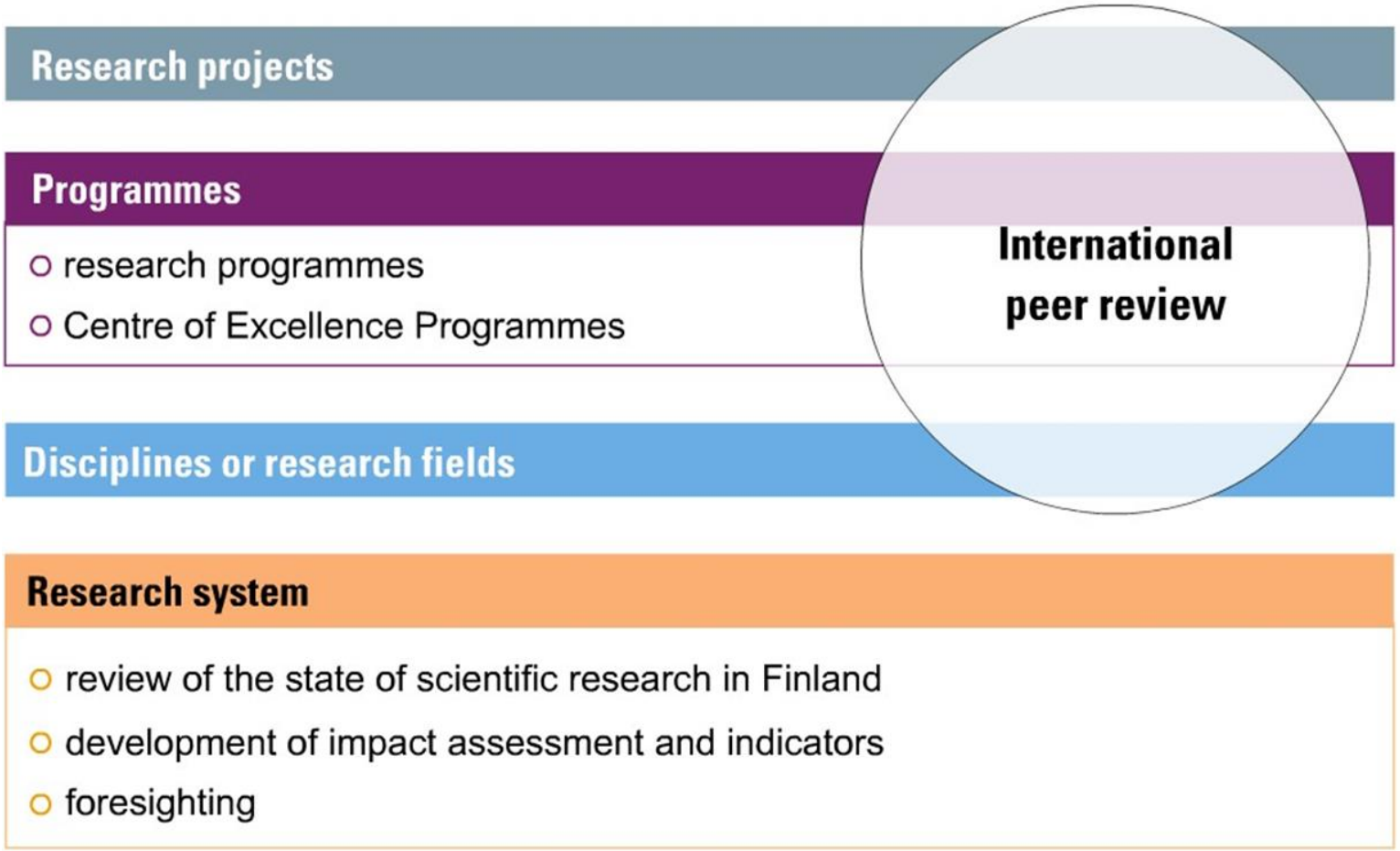
How applications are reviewed

1. The review process
2. What is reviewed?
3. Feedback from panels
4. Feedback from research councils

1. THE REVIEW PROCESS

Reviews and evaluations at the Academy



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Application processing – Who does what?

Presenting officials handle and process the applications.

Presenting official (science adviser)

International panels prepare scientific reviews (reports) on the applications.

Reviewers (panel)

The Academy's research councils make the funding decisions based on the application, the panels' reports and science policy lines.

Decision-maker (research council)

Processing of applications

1

Initial processing

- ✓ **Submission of applications**
- ✓ Pre-screening of applications and eligibility check
- ✓ Selection of reviewers

2

Scientific review

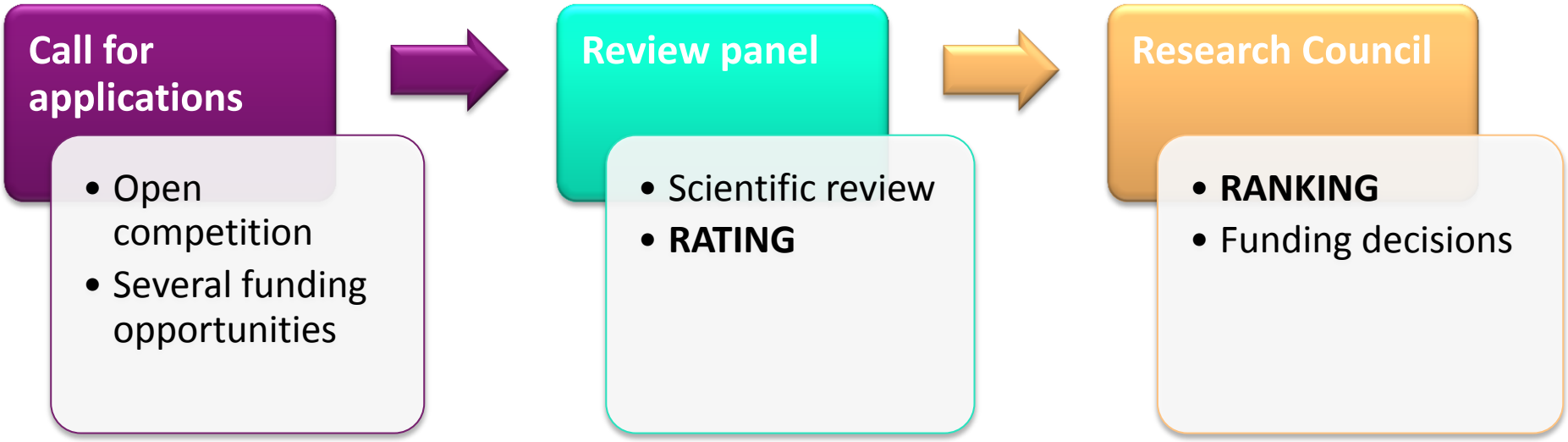
- ✓ Draft statements
- ✓ Review panel meeting
- ✓ Review panel statements

3

Research councils

- ✓ Preparatory meetings
- ✓ **Decisions**

The review process



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Conflict of interest and confidentiality

Conflict of interest (see previous slide)

- close collaboration with the applicant, e.g., joint publications during the past three years or joint articles in preparation
- close relation
- if you feel that you have a conflict of interest

Confidentiality

- research plans and review reports are confidential documents
- after the review, the reviewers must destroy all application documents

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The principles of the review process

Transparency

- All relevant documents are made available to all parties concerned
- The funding principles and review criteria are published in advance
- Applicants have the right to know the names of the reviewers (law)

Objectivity

- Conflicts of interest are carefully taken into account
- Review criteria are applied in a uniform way

Equal treatment

- No exceptions in review principles/criteria

Reviewers commend the Academy's review practices

- Each year, we collect feedback from reviewers
- The reviewers appreciate the panel meeting – consensus statements
- International review is an advantage for a small country
- Reviews and decisions are kept separate

2. WHAT IS REVIEWED?

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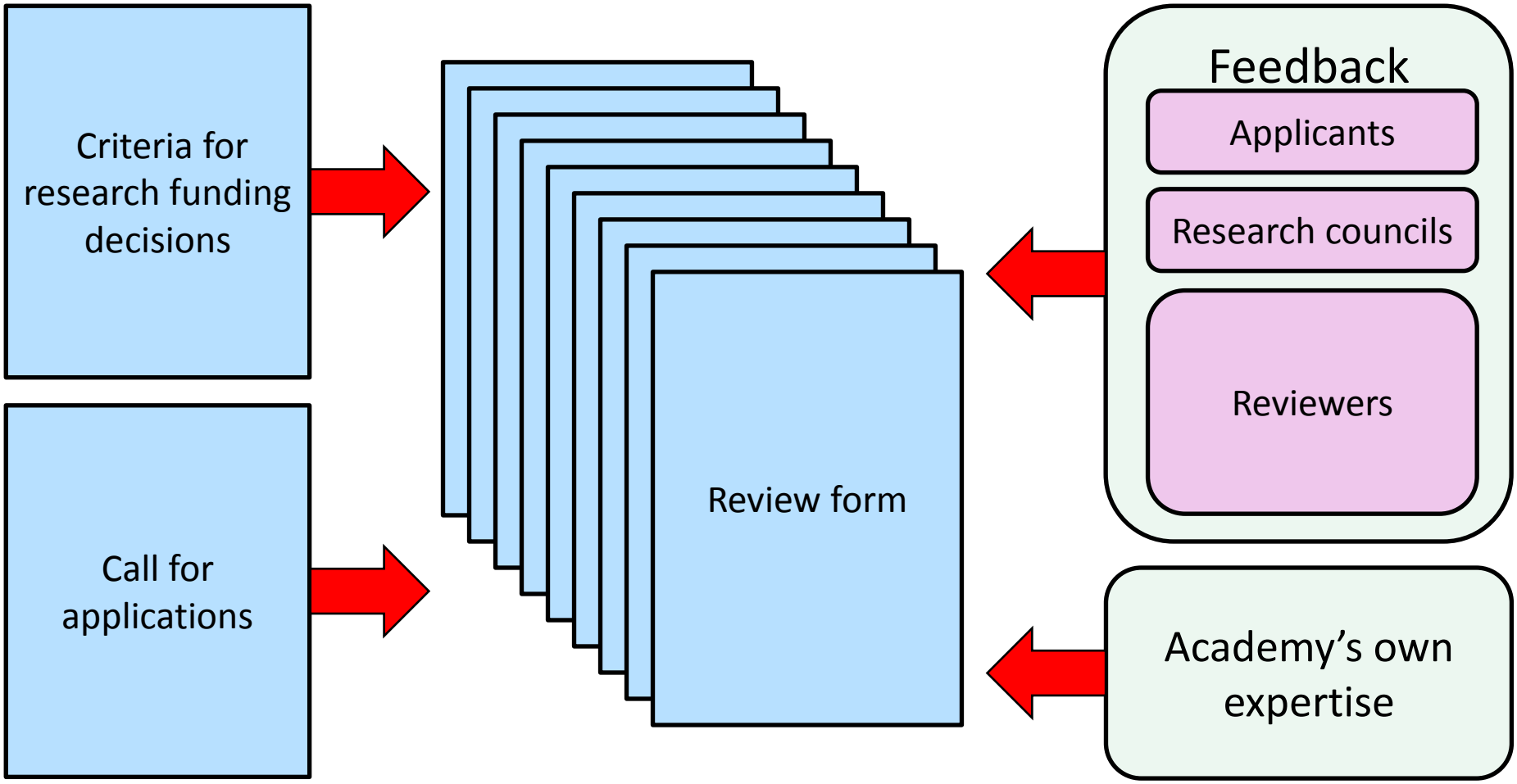
Our review criteria

- **scientific quality** and innovativeness of the research plan
- competence of the applicant/the research team
- feasibility of the research plan
- quality and strengthening of the research environment
- international and national collaborations and researcher mobility
- Each year we enlist some 1,000 reviewers; foreign reviewers account for approx. 95%

What goes in the review forms?



Academy Project funding

1 Research plan

Rating (1–6):

1.1 Scientific quality and innovativeness of research plan

Sub-rating (1–6):

Guiding questions: Is the project scientifically significant and innovative? Is the project ambitious and does it have potential for breakthroughs? Does it have potential for exceptionally significant outcomes? If the project is multi/inter/transdisciplinary, what is the added value of this?

1.2 Feasibility of research plan

Sub-rating (1–6):

Guiding questions: Are the objectives and hypotheses appropriately presented and is the research plan realistic? Are the research methods and materials appropriate? Does the applicant acknowledge potential scientific or methodological problem areas, and how are alternative approaches being considered? Is the management of the proposed plan appropriate and well planned? Does the research environment support this project, including appropriate research infrastructures?

1.3 Ethical issues

Guiding question: Are there any ethical issues involved and, if so, how are they taken into account?

2 Competence of applicant(s), quality of research collaborations Rating (1–6):

2.1 Competence and expertise of applicant(s) Sub-rating (1–6):

Guiding questions: What are the merits and scientific expertise of the applicant(s)? Are they appropriate and sufficient for the proposed project? What are the competences of the applicant(s) in terms of supervising PhD candidates / postdoctoral researchers?

2.2 Research team, significance of research collaborations Sub-rating (1–6):

Guiding questions: Does the research team bring complementary expertise to the project (if applicable)? Is the project involved in national and/or international research collaborations that can significantly contribute to the success of the project? Does the research project support researcher training?

2.3. Researcher mobility Sub-rating (1–6):

Guiding question: How does the mobility plan support the research plan?

2.4 Research consortium (if applicable)

Guiding question: If a consortium is involved, what is the significance and added value of the consortium for the attainment of the research objectives?

3 Overall assessment

Final rating (1–6):

3.1 Main strengths and weaknesses of project, additional comments and suggestions

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Comments:

Please note that the final rating should not be a mathematical average of the sub-ratings.

Small differences between different funding opportunities

- ***Academy Project funding***

  2.1 Competence and expertise of the applicant(s) Sub-rating (1–6):

  Guiding questions: What are the merits and scientific expertise of the applicant(s)? Are they appropriate and sufficient for the proposed project? What are the competences of the applicant(s) in terms of supervising PhD candidates / postdoctoral researchers?

- ***Research post as Academy Research Fellow***

  2.1 Competence and expertise of applicant Sub-rating (1–6):

  Guiding questions: What are the personal merits and scientific expertise of the applicant? Are they appropriate and sufficient for the proposed project? What are the personal competences of the applicant in terms of supervising PhD candidates / postdoctoral researchers? Does the research plan advance the applicant's professional competence and independence?

- ***Research post as Postdoctoral Researcher***

  2.1 Competence and expertise of the applicant Sub-rating (1–6):

  Guiding questions: What are the personal merits and scientific expertise of the applicant? Are they appropriate and sufficient for the proposed project? Does the research plan advance the applicant's professional competence and independence?

Rating scale used by reviewers

6 = ***outstanding*** proposal, which stands out with exceptional novelty, innovativeness and renewal of science at global level

5 = ***excellent*** proposal, which is extremely good in international comparison – no significant elements to be improved

4 = ***very good*** proposal, which contains some elements that could be improved

3 = ***good*** proposal, which contains elements that can be improved

2 = ***satisfactory*** proposal, in need of substantial modification or improvement

1 = ***weak*** proposal, with severe flaws that are intrinsic to the proposed project or the application

The review panel is asked to give the final rating and overall assessment of the proposal including **both strengths and weaknesses** as well as possible additional comments.

Role of Academy staff in review panels

- Putting together panels, organising panel meetings
- Obtaining external reviews or statements (if necessary)
- Participating in panel meetings
- Participating in editing panel reports (practices vary between different units)

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Success rates (%) in September 2011 and 2014 calls

Research council	Academy Projects		Academy Research Fellows		Postdoctoral Researchers	
	2011	2014	2011	2014	2011	2014
Biosciences and environment	21	16	19	11	17	10
Culture and society	16	13	16	13	20	9
Natural sciences and engineering	16	16	12	10	20	9
Health	19	20	15	13	19	11

3. FEEDBACK FROM PANELS

What reviewers think – the same feedback year after year

- Mobility – not always justified, should be research-driven
- Good idea, but lacking in implementation
- Too much background information, not enough actual implementation
- Lacks hypotheses
- Lacks preliminary data
- Lacks power calculations
- Lacks “plan B”

- International panel members may be unaware of the special characteristics of Finnish research. Please take this into account when drafting your application. You may need to explain things for an international audience.

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Feedback on applications for EU funding (1/3)

- The applicant has failed to convince the reviewers about the importance of the project; lacks sufficient evidence (**no preliminary data**)
- Imprecision: **too general description of methods**
- The projects are **not sufficiently innovative**
- Many different actors/goals, insufficiently described; how will they be integrated?
- Lack of end-users/beneficiaries, or their roles and engagement are insufficiently described
- The applicants does not answer all required questions

Feedback on applications for EU funding (2/3)

- No indications of how **impact** will be measured, or the indicators are inadequate
- Impacts not of international standard
- Unconvincing management of IPRs
- Vague plans on dissemination and/or utilisation of results

Feedback on applications for EU funding (3/3)

- Unclear description of roles of partners; descriptions lack interaction between partners
- Resources have been underestimated/calculated unconvincingly
- Vague plan on communication
- **No “plan B” or plan on risk management**

4. FEEDBACK FROM RESEARCH COUNCILS

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Factors influencing funding decisions

- The application
- The results of the review of scientific quality
- The Academy's science policy objectives:
  - advancing multi- and interdisciplinary research
  - implementing more comprehensive research components
  - supporting the internationalisation of research
  - promoting the careers of female and early-career researchers
  - promoting gender equality in research
  - promoting research that serves Strategic Centres for Science, Technology and Innovation
- Objectives for specific funding opportunities:
  - special objectives for research programmes
  - supporting the formation of Centres of Excellence
- Other factors
  - applicants' ability to head a research project and manage research funds
  - good scientific practice a must (incl. research ethics and IPRs)
  - open access

Research councils give similar feedback each year

Applicants should remember two things in particular:

1. The research plan must provide answers to the review questions easily and quickly; applicants must follow the structure presented in the research plan guidelines.

2. Figures, tables, images and **well-thought-out** accents make it easier to get an overall picture of the application

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Research councils and reviewers give similar feedback (1/2)

- In the background information, **briefly** describe the significance and objectives of the research topic
- Describe the methods in **sufficient** detail
- If required by the research design, present statistical analyses and **power calculations** in particular in sufficient detail for the peer review
- The proposed project must be a **clearly outlined** and uniform whole that can realistically be implemented within the set funding period (a project schedule can be useful)

Research councils and reviewers give similar feedback (2/2)

- International collaborations (incl. mobility) must be **research-driven** and well justified from the perspective of the research
- Any anticipated research-related problems must be identified; a **“plan B”** must be outlined in case the primary plan fails
- Presenting convincing **preliminary results** significantly increases the application’s plausibility
- Early-career researchers must present their forthcoming or current **independent** status and their own (desired) line of research
- Applicants must clearly describe the impact of the expected results

Impact

- The impact of the research must be described in the application
- Reviewers pay particular attention to impact
- Research councils, too, pay attention to impact
- The significance of impact further increases at the reporting stage

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Take good care of your application

- Start early – read the call text, contact the responsible science adviser (if necessary)
- Familiarise yourself with budget practices
- Have a colleague read your application; remember to spell-check
- Ask a colleague if you can read an application that received funding
- **Submit your application on time!**

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THANK YOU!

- If you need more information on your funding decision, please contact the science adviser responsible for your application (i.e. the person named in the decision)

- Email: firstname.lastname@aka.fi, phone: +358 295 335 XXX