UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
INTERNAL PEER REVIEW POLICY FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

This document is the overarching University of Aberdeen framework for internal peer review for research grant applications to external funding bodies.

UNIVERSITY POSITION ON PEER REVIEW

The University of Aberdeen recognises internal peer review as essential for best practice, for enhancing the quality and success rates of research grant applications, and for facilitating the early career development of research staff. Internal peer review will be carried out across the University where practicable.

The University has internal peer review procedures in place by College, which vary according to specific conditions, including:

- The values of research grant, fellowship, studentship or equipment applications. Each College has a threshold after which peer review must take place;
- The experience of applicants: all first time applicants will be peer reviewed across the University, with variations after that applied by College.

KEY PRINCIPLES

The key principles which underpin the University position on internal peer review are as follows:

- **Opportunity for peer review for all staff**: internal support must be available to all funding applicants in order to aid personal improvement and the improvement of success rates of applications. In some cases, such as where applicants are relatively inexperienced, peer review will be a requirement.
- **Support for Unsuccessful Applicants**: in order to improve application success rates and to enhance the early career development of research staff, there should be support mechanisms in place for unsuccessful applicants, geared towards improvement and consideration of other possible funders.
  The University expects the risk of rejection to be reduced by the development of support mechanisms and a cultural shift towards sharing feedback, which will make easier the provision of additional support where appropriate.
- **Light Touch Peer Review Processes**: peer review processes should be administratively "light touch" in order to best facilitate implementation as a norm as part of the relevant application processes. An appropriate level of stringency must be maintained in order for the peer review process to be suitably effective.
- **Transparency and Sharing of Best Practice:** peer review processes should be open and transparent, though should remain confidential where appropriate. A transparent process is expected to facilitate the sharing of best practice.

PEER REVIEW PROCEDURES - KEY ELEMENTS SUMMARISED

The College procedures each lay out criteria and processes for internal peer review for research grant and fellowship applications to external funding bodies. The key elements of these procedures are summarised below:

- **Grant Categories**: within each of the Colleges all grant applications will have peer review if they fall within broadly defined categories. Categories are based on: application values, the background / status of the Principal Investigator (in terms of experience), and according to which funding bodies applications are submitted.
- **Peer Review Processes**: the three Colleges have each developed processes which involve reviews of applications at various stages, prior to eventual submission. These processes are set against pre-determined timelines, and each application will require internal "sign-off" prior to submission, normally by the relevant Head of School or the Institute Director of Research. (Separate consideration is to be given to revising the processes for the internal sign-off of cover sheets). The Colleges will also work closely with Research and Innovation (R&I) and Research Financial Services (RFS) as part of their peer review processes.
- **Training and Guidance:** each College will develop best practice guidelines for applicants and reviewers, which will be incorporated in training sessions and made available to all colleagues.

MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT

The implementation and success of the Peer Review Policy Framework will initially be assessed every 6 months. This monitoring process will be overseen by the University Committee on Research, Income Generation, and Commercialisation.

COLLEGE INTERNAL PEER REVIEW DOCUMENTS

The College internal peer review documents are provided as Appendices to this document:

- **Appendix A**: College of Arts and Social Sciences: Peer Review of Funding Applications
- **Appendix B**: College of Life Sciences and Medicine: Mentoring and Peer Review Process and Conditions (currently under revision)
- **Appendix C**: College of Physical Sciences: Procedure for Internal Peer Review for Grant Proposals

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

PEER REVIEW POLICY

Background

The College's current Peer Review Policy was introduced in 2010 in response to the University's "Research Excellence Agenda" which identified the need to improve consistency in achieving a high level of performance in research and improving success rates when making applications to external funding organisations.

To address these issues, the Agenda promotes enhanced training and mentoring opportunities for research colleagues across the University. And the College Peer Review Policy incorporates these issues.

The College of Arts and Social Sciences recognises the importance of success rates for external funding applications as an indicator for the Research Excellence Framework; in the determination of standings in published league tables; and also in recognition of the amount of time and effort spent by colleagues across the institution in the development of applications.

Following the success of the initial Peer Review Policy, the College Research Committee have agreed it should now be reviewed and reinforced to ensure it continues to support academics and helps with the development of high quality applications.

At the time of the development of the previous policy, a number of UK Research Councils had indicated an expectation that institutions will monitor all applications in order to reduce the effort in peer review and the Councils' resources. Since then, most Research Councils have begun introducing methods to reduce the number of applications received, with the ESRC recently following the example of the EPSRC by expressing its commitment to introduce a Demand Management Strategy.

A consultation process has been undertaken by the ESRC which suggests several possible options of managing application numbers including: Sanctions applied to individuals and/or institutions, banning applications (for a set time) when agreed quality threshold has not been met on a repeated basis; institutional quotas for the number of applications allowed; and, the possibility of charging institutions for applications made. It is expected that all Research Councils will seek to implement a strategy to manage demand and further details will be released as they become available.

In an attempt to control the number of applications received by Research Councils, it is clear that even greater emphasis is to be placed on self regulation by institutions. It is therefore prudent for the College to revise its Peer Review Policy and procedures to address the emerging expectations of the funding bodies' and provide colleagues with support and guidance when developing funding proposals.

Further to upcoming requirements, it is an historical trend that institutions with robust, compulsory peer review policies achieve higher success rates in their applications.

In response to the developments of Research Councils, the University Committee on Research, Income Generation and Commercialisation recently considered a paper proposing additional support for researchers to address the success rates of applications. Among other things, the paper considered ways of utilising the feedback received by unsuccessful applicants as a way of addressing development needs, and the introduction of mentoring interviews for colleagues submitting unsuccessful applications to funding bodies.

The College Research Committee has agreed that a formalisation of the peer review process and development opportunities would be a helpful way of enhancing the existing policy. It was further suggested that processes be formalised to ensure colleagues fully consider feedback from reviewers and allow Heads of School to be informed of reviewer comments, and consider whether these have been addressed in advance of approving an application.

This revised Peer Review Policy for the College of Arts and Social Sciences applies to all colleagues and to applications to all external funding organisations. The process is designed to provide guidance and support to applicants throughout their career.

It is acknowledged and appreciated that academic colleagues take a considerable amount of time to complete applications and the purpose of internal peer review is to deliver practical and constructive feedback and guidance with the expectation that, if followed, it will improve the likelihood that submissions will be successful.

Peer Review

- Compulsory[2] peer review will only apply to applications where the University of Aberdeen is leading the bid. Where researchers from the University are part of a consortium it is presumed that the bid will be peer reviewed by other members. In addition, where Aberdeen researchers are co-investigators or partners it is expected that peer review will take place as part of the process of developing the proposal.
- Peer review is compulsory for all fellowship applications and all research project grant applications with a total value greater than £15,000.
- Peer review is compulsory for all applications where the lead applicant has not previously made a successful application for external funding (regardless of the value of the current application). Colleagues who have little experience of writing funding applications are encouraged to undertake voluntary peer review until they become familiar with the application process[3].
- Peer review is compulsory for all applications where the applicant has not received an award within the previous 12 months, or where, over a 24 month period, they have had three consecutive bids that have not received an award.
- All researchers developing bids to external funding bodies will be offered the opportunity for voluntary peer review in advance of submission (for any value of award).
- Colleagues will be offered peer review at all stages during the development of proposals, from initial ideas through to the presentation of the final application.
- The Business Development Officer in Research and Innovation will continue to notify the appropriate Head of School and School Director of Research as soon as they become aware of an applicant commencing work on a proposal for external funding. The School Director of Research will contact the applicant to advise them of the requirement or opportunity (as appropriate) for peer review throughout the development of the application.
- Where colleagues wish for their final application to be reviewed (and where bids are subject to compulsory peer review), a robust version of the application must be submitted to the School Director of Research (or the nominated peer reviewer) four weeks in advance of the funding application deadline. This timescale will allow appropriate time for feedback to be provided and considered by applicants in advance of being submitted to Research and Innovation. In exceptional cases (e.g. when funding is announced at short notice), agreement should be reached with the School Director of Research in advance to allow for a shorter lead in time for the peer review process.
- School Directors of Research will identify and approach colleagues with experience of securing external funding from a range of organisations and across discipline areas to act as reviewers. In addition, lists of reserve peer reviewers who would be well placed to respond to requests received at short notice should be drawn up and held

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[2] As determined within this policy

[3] It should be understood by colleagues that procedures vary between funding bodies and it may therefore be helpful to seek peer review for all first applications to any funding body regardless of previous success with other funders.

within School administrative offices to allow last minute reviews to be carried out as appropriate and necessary.

- The School Director of Research will ensure that confirmation is provided when peer review has been undertaken. School Directors will provide the relevant Head of School with copies of comments for reference when reviewing and authorising applications for submission. Colleagues in Research and Innovation will be notified of an application having been peer reviewed by notification included on the internal cover sheets.
- Colleagues in Research and Innovation and Research Financial Services will not submit any application for funding without the signed approval of the Head of School or designated deputy.
- The College seeks the support of Heads of Schools in ensuring that the work carried out by reviewers throughout the process is recognised and considered in terms of the Workload Allocation Model. In addition, School Directors of Research will monitor reviewer lists to ensure that the workload of peer review (and, where appropriate, mentoring) is spread appropriately.

Training and Development

The University is committed to providing development opportunities to colleagues throughout their career. Since the first iteration of the College Policy, we have liaised with colleagues in Staff Development who have introduced a new grant writing workshop series to address training needs previously identified by researchers.

- Specific feedback from peer review will remain confidential between reviewer; applicant and Head of School. Peer reviewers will provide general feedback to School Directors of Research on a regular basis with the aim of identifying common areas where training would be beneficial. School Directors of Research will report back to the College Research Committee where areas of development will be agreed and the provision of appropriate training will be progressed thereafter with colleagues in Research and Innovation and the Staff Development Team in HR.
- School Directors of Research will encourage all colleagues (especially those who have not received funding as lead applicant within the past 24 months) to take advantage of the Grant Writing workshop series.
- Where a colleague has had two applications for external funding turned down in a rolling 12 month period, the School Director of Research will carry out applicant interviews following the receipt of the second application outcome[4]. These interviews will be supportive with the intention of assuring success in future applications. To prepare for these interviews, Directors of Research should liaise with colleagues in R&I to gain background information on the specific funding calls applied to, and with the initial peer reviewer for general feedback on the submissions.
- All colleagues are requested to provide copies of any comments received from funding organisations' to the School Director of Research, College Director of Research and the Business Development Officer in Research and Innovation. This applies to both successful and unsuccessful applications and all information will be treated confidentially, used only to help identify general training needs.
- School Directors of Research are to identify potential mentors from within their School. Mentoring and training opportunities will be available to all colleagues on request[5] and where a colleague has had three consecutive funding applications that have not been awarded in a rolling 24 month period, their peer reviewer and/or School Director of research will present this option to the researcher. All mentoring provision should be tailored specifically to the needs of the individual researcher.

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[4] Where an application outcome is unknown 9 months following the application deadline, it will be assumed that is was unsuccessful and the applicant will be approached for interview.
[5] Subject to resource availability

- Schools will maintain records of all Peer Reviews that have been undertaken. Notes should include details of the name of applicant; mane of reviewer; value of award; funding body/award applied for; title of application and date of review.

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

COLLEGE OF LIFE SCIENCES AND MEDICINE

PEER REVIEW AND MENTORING PROCESS

Mentoring & Peer Review Process and Conditions

The University's "Research Excellence Agenda" has identified a need for the University to improve its consistency in achieving a high level of research performance, including improving our success rates in winning external research grant funding.

To address this point, it has been agreed that there is a need for the University to move towards a system of internal peer review for certain proposals being submitted to external funding bodies. This is in line with several of our competitor institutions, who already have similar processes in place. There are indications that internal peer review will become an essential eligibility criterion for submissions to Research Councils in the near future. Therefore, we have a window of opportunity to introduce a system of peer review that suits our needs and preferences before this becomes a compulsory eligibility activity for all submissions to research councils.

In the College of Life Science and Medicine, the College Executive and Research Directors have decided that, in the first instance, there will be two broad categories of grants for which there will be a compulsory, formal mentoring or peer review process that must be completed before submission to the external funding body*. These categories are:

- Junior/mid range fellowships, new investigator applications and all grants from research staff who have not yet had a successful grant awarded as a lead applicant
- All grant proposals with a possibility of being over £250,000 if applying to a funder with full economic costing (fEC) **OR** over £150,000 if applying to Chief Scientist Office (CSO) or a funder without fEC (Note that for the School of Psychology the threshold for peer review has been set at £50,000 for all proposals)

*Contract research for industry is excluded from this process many of our most successful colleagues already undertake. This process is intended to be supportive and constructive, and it is hoped that we will quickly benefit through an increase in the numbers of successful grants. This process is not intended to take the place of any informal peer reviewing process that is undertaken with colleagues, but should add value to current processes.

Definitions Fellowships and New Investigator awards will be defined as those grants that are termed "fellowships" or "new investigator awards", or similar wording by the external funding body, or any grant where a postdoctoral fellow will be the principal applicant and be expected to work independently to deliver the research project. This category will include career development awards. This category does not include Senior Fellowships or Personal Research Fellowships (those fellowships awarded at professorial level). **First grant as lead applicant** will be defined as any applicant's first project grant application as lead applicant, where the value of the grant is expected to exceed £20K, and will hold meaning until the first successful application to any external funding body.

Procedures

1)   Fellowship/New Investigator applications and first grant as lead applicant

Potential applicants falling into the above categories will be asked to provide an abstract and a statement of the competitiveness of their application at an early stage, and in any case **at least 8 weeks** before any funding body deadline. This abstract and statement should be submitted to Research & Innovation (R&I), who will forward these documents to the relevant

Head of School (and Head of Division if School of Medicine & Dentistry) and Institute Research Director, copying in the College Director of Research for information. The applicant will be given the opportunity to discuss the application with the Head of School/Division and/or Institute Research Director (or delegated deputy if appropriate).

This group will make the decision as to the suitability of the applicant and proposed research to the funding opportunity, and if satisfied that the applicant and the proposed research are appropriate, then at least one Mentor will be allocated to the applicant.

Discussions with the Mentor(s) should not replace discussions with colleagues, and these discussions should continue throughout preparation of the proposal. The applicant is encouraged to seek the further advice of colleagues and peers, but only the allocated Mentor(s) will ultimately advise the Head of School/Division on the suitability of the application for submission. The Mentor(s) should act as an advisor/support only, and should not be expected to draft, revise or mark up any proposal. However, the Mentor(s) should give the applicant sufficient advice and support, written when appropriate, on the general content, format, research plan, competitiveness and suitability of the research proposal to inform the development of the application. In addition to the advice and support directly from the Mentor(s), the Mentor(s) should ensure that the applicant seeks appropriate additional peer review of the final proposal prior to submission.

Each Mentor must sign the internal cover sheet before submission (or in exceptional circumstances signal approval in another way such as by email). By giving approval, the Mentor is confirming that the application is, in their opinion, of sufficient quality and competitiveness for submission. The Head of School/Division will only sign the internal cover sheet following approval from the Mentor(s). If a Mentor does not see the final application or does not believe that the application has a reasonable chance of success, he/she will advise the Head of School/Division accordingly so that the Head of School/Division can decide whether or not to sign off the application. In the absence of the Head of School/Division or designated deputy, then the Head of College or College Director of Research will substitute.

R&I will not be permitted to authorise submission of the application without Head of School/Division or designated deputy's signature on the internal cover sheet.

2)   All grants over £250K (FEC) or £150K (CSO or non-FEC funder) with the UoA academic as lead applicant (Note that this threshold is set at £50,000 for the School of Psychology).

All applicants whose grants fall into this category and where the lead investigator is based in the College of Life Sciences and Medicine will be required to show evidence of peer review by at least two colleagues before submission. At least one of the reviewers should not be directly involved in the application (for example as a co-applicant). All potential applicants in this category should disseminate their proposal to two academic colleagues to request their review of early as possible to maximise the value of this process, and to give the reviewers sufficient time to review. It would be appropriate to arrange peer review for at least 2 weeks before the submission deadline in order to address any concerns of the peer reviewers. If any applicant is in doubt as to who could be a suitable peer reviewer for their proposal, then the advice of their Institute Research Director, Head of School/Division or Research Programme Leader should be sought.

The reviewers will review the draft submission, and offer advice to the applicant on the general content, format, presentation, research plan, competitiveness and suitability of the research proposal.

Both reviewers will be required to sign the internal cover sheet (or in exceptional circumstances indicate in another way such as by email) to confirm that they have reviewed the submission. They will be asked to summarise their opinion of the quality of the (latest) version of the proposal that they reviewed by assigning the application into one of four categories:

1) No changes suggested
2) Minor changes suggested
3) Substantive changes recommended
4) Major concerns, submission not advised There are tick boxes on the cover sheet for this purpose. There is no obligation on the peer reviewer to review multiple drafts of the proposal.

If a reviewer's assessment falls in the "substantive changes recommended" or "major concerns, submission not advised" category, a full copy of the peer reviewer's comments together with a written description of how the reviewer's comments have been addressed by the applicants should be attached to the coversheet. These should then be sent to the Head of School/Division well in advance of the deadline to allow due consideration.

The Head of School/Division (or designated deputy) will only sign off the application if peer review has been undertaken and appropriately responded to and all other required signatures are in place.

It is expected that all eligible applications will follow these procedures; in the absence of any comments/signature from peer reviewers, it will be at the submission of the proposal.

R&I will not be permitted to authorise submission of the application without Head of School or a designated deputy's signature on the internal cover sheet.

Other Considerations

Fellowships:

- The Head of School/Division and Institute Research Director will be sympathetic to requests to change the allocated mentor, for example for competitive or conflict of - interest issues.

- Accurate costing will not be required for the abstracts of eligible applications, but a description of the likely resource required should be detailed in the abstract. Research Financial Services (RFS) should be approached for accurate costing when the full application is started and should be kept informed by the applicant of any changes to the proposal that will have a knock on effect on the project costing.

All Applications:

- All applicants are encouraged to liaise with the points of contact at the funding body to optimise the fit of their proposal within the call and remit of the funding body.
- The College understands that absences due to prior commitments/unforeseen circumstances are inevitable, and may result in the levels of notice described here not always being possible. If an applicant is aware that that he/she will be absent in the weeks before a deadline and that this could impact on interactions with the reviewers/mentor or on getting the final draft to the reviewers/mentor, it will be imperative for the applicant to inform the reviewers/mentor as soon as possible such that a contingency plan can be formulated. Only under exceptional circumstances, will the Head of School, Head of College or Senior Vice Principal (depending on the financial value of the proposal) decide to permit submission in the absence of mentoring/peer review.
- R&I will be tracking which members of the College have been peer reviewers/mentors on applications, and this will be periodically
- Mentoring/peer review is spread appropriately.
- The College will expect successful applicants who have been through these processes to act as internal peer reviewers where appropriate for future applications.
- A process chart for the scheme is in the Appendix to this paper.
- It is recognised that there are likely to be ways in which these processes can be improved. With this in mind, periodically, feedback will be sought from applicants who

have been through the mentoring or peer review process.

CLSM Mentoring and Peer Review Process

Please use this process chart to determine what procedure you should follow before submission of your grant application. Please refer to the "College of Life Sciences and Medicine Mentoring & Peer Review Process and Conditions" for detailed explanation of the relevant processes.
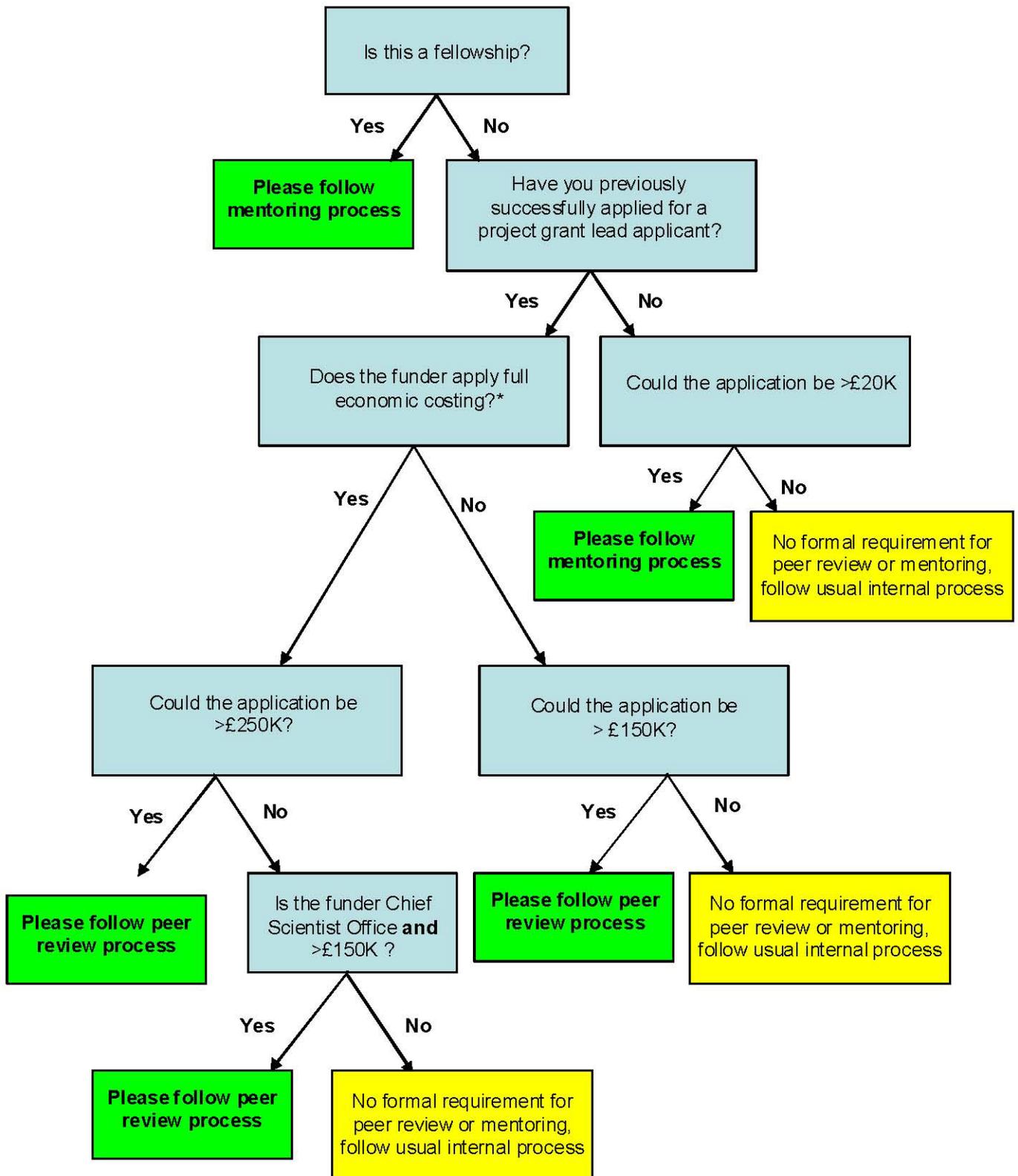
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

COLLEGE OF PHYSICAL SCIENCES

PROCEEDURE FOR INTERNAL PEER REVIEW FOR GRANT PROPOSALS

Background

The Research Excellence Agenda paper, discussed at CRIGC and UMG, proposes that each College consider and establish an internal peer review system in response to poor success rates with RCUK, particularly AHRC, ESRC and EPSRC. Also, it appears likely that RCUK will make evidence of a robust internal peer review process an eligibility criterion for submission of applications.

Peer review of Research Applications

The requirements of the Research Excellence Agenda were discussed at the College Executive (15/10/09), and the Director of Research and Commercialisation and the Heads of School were asked to develop a system of peer review for CoPS.

It has been agreed that the peer review process should operate as follows:

- Peer review will apply to all research grant, fellowship, studentship and equipment applications above £15k (excluding KTPs, travel grants and other small grants where success rates are already high).

- The additional administrative burden will be kept as light as possible, and Heads of School will retain discretion over matters relating to peer review e.g. there may be occasional circumstances where it is not appropriate.

- Near final or final proposals should be submitted to the Head of School 4 weeks before any published deadline or before intended submission. The Head of School will forward the proposal to an appropriate reviewer, who will comment on the scientific case and, where appropriate, letters of support. This feedback will be returned to the Head of School within 10 days. The PI will then have an opportunity to respond to and revise the proposal in the light of these comments. Once the Head of School is satisfied that the application has been reviewed and amended as appropriate, the application will be signed off and forwarded to R&I [within their deadlines for submission]. The standard cover sheet for applications should be amended to allow the Head of School to confirm that peer review has taken place.

- Guidance on what will be expected of applicants and reviewers, and the role of R&I in the application process will be developed and disseminated through the School and College committees and websites and incorporated into College Principal Investigators' training events.

The internal peer review procedure is not intended to replace any informal procedures that are currently in place for early discussion of proposals within research groups.

It is recommended that this paper be circulated for information/comment to College Research & Commercialisation Committee prior to formal implementation.

25/11/09