



Review of the Projects Peer Review Panel and the Project Research and Development Scheme Summary Report

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Introduction

1. STFC management initiated a review of the Projects Peer Review Panel (PPRP) process and the Project Research and Development (PRD) scheme to develop recommendations for each. The reviews were initiated for a number of reasons:
 - There is a perception that the PPRP process no longer meets programme requirements and that the process is too long.
 - A lack of adherence to the current PPRP process leads to excessive demands being placed on the Panel and STFC staff.
 - There is a need to clarify the assessment of economic impact in the PPRP and PRD schemes.
 - There is a need to determine if PRD is the most appropriate mechanism to enable the UK to maintain a lead in technology development in support of the strategic priorities in the science programme.

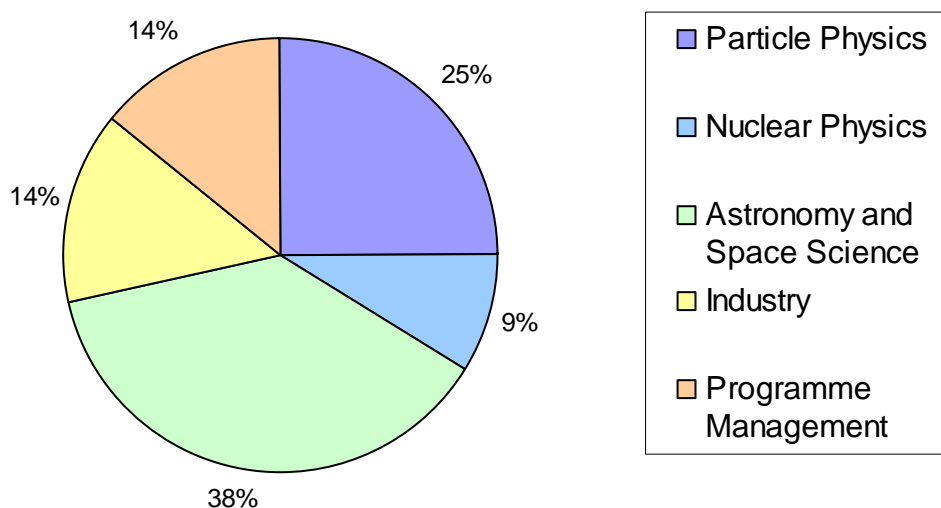
2. A project team was convened to consider whether the PPRP process is optimal and whether the PRD mechanism is fit-for-purpose. The project team consisted of:
 - Victoria Wright (STFC Head of Science Strategy, Chair)
 - Jenny Hall (STFC Science Strategy Programme Manager)
 - Mark Smith (Independent Consultant)
 - Iain Bertram (Particle Physics, Astronomy and Nuclear Physics Science Committee Representative, Lancaster University)
 - Don Pollacco (Projects Peer Review Panel Representative, Queen's University Belfast)
 - Rosemary Young (STFC Astronomy Division Representative)
 - Rachel Boning (STFC Particle Physics and Nuclear Physics Division Representative)

3. The output of the review is a set of recommendations to STFC management that will improve the PPRP process and consider whether the PRD scheme is appropriate.

Methodology

4. The methodology was decided upon by the review project team and presented to STFC management. The overall process was split into 5 major parts:
 - 1) Data collection: questionnaires and interviews
 - 2) Initial analysis: identification of key issues
 - 3) Further investigation: follow-up key issues with community individuals
 - 4) Final analysis: summarising findings and making recommendations
 - 5) Reporting: Provision of reports to STFC, PPAN, PPRP and the community.
5. The total number of responses received (questionnaires plus interviews) was 56. The areas in which the respondents work is shown in Figure 1. The responses are roughly split fifty-fifty along particle and nuclear physics versus astronomy and space science. This breakdown is in line with the community size.

Figure 1 – Chart showing breakdown of respondents by area of work



Review Findings

6. Overall, the responses from both the user community and those running the programme support the view that the present PPRP process is fit for purpose. This is also true of the present PRD processes as originally conceived.
7. A number of clear general statements can be made from the responses:
 - Statements of Interest need to be science focused;
 - The PPRP process needs to be well-defined, rigorous, transparent and accessible;
 - Proposals need to be structured and limited in length;
 - The overall process from conception to funding can sometimes be too long with some delays occurring after the peer review process;
 - Proposals need to map into a well-defined STFC strategy and roadmap in each subject area.

8. The report notes that the PPRP and PRD processes could be improved. The recommendations of the project team are, in the most part, clarifications or tighter control of the current guidelines together with methods for increased clarity or communication.

PRD and PPRP Calls

9. The project team recommends that STFC should make use of themed calls in certain circumstances for example where there is going to be UK involvement in a large project or programme or perhaps a new area of research. Concerns were raised over the funding for the PRD scheme particularly during the current budget situation. The project team recommended that calls should only be released if funding is available and the approximate number of proposals to be funded in the call should be provided along with a target cost. Success rates should also be published for the PRD scheme.

Statements of Interest (SOI)

10. A number of recommendations were made regarding statements of interest including revising the SOI format to ask for more specific information; strictly limiting the length of SOIs; a greater role for programme managers in the submission of SOIs; and new processes to ensure that full proposals do not greatly exceed the scope of the original SOI. The project team also recommend that more detailed feedback should be given to proposers including whether or not they may re-submit if the SOI was turned down.

Proposals

11. The project team recommends that both PPRP and PRD proposals should be length limited with no appendices except those prescribed by STFC. Any proposals longer than this should be returned to the proposer. It was recommended that the cost tables should be compulsory and will be provided to proposers with guidance notes. STFC should investigate if these can be linked to the Je-S system. It was also recommended that more detailed feedback should be given to proposers about why the proposal was funded or rejected.

Economic Impact

12. Economic impact should be incorporated into the proposal and peer review process; and STFC should provide clear guidance on how this will be done.

Referees

13. It was recommended that more time is allowed to choose referees and that the referee questions and guidance be reviewed to ensure it is effective.

Length of Process

14. A number of comments were made about the length of the PPRP and PRD process. The project team did not think that the process was unnecessarily long however they recommend that detailed process flowcharts (including timescales) should be provided including post-PPRP and PRD processes. A web based tracking system should be investigated to enable proposers to identify where in the process their proposal is as well as the dates for meetings. The project team also recommends that in addition to the main project review process STFC consider how to speed up the process for proposals that are: a) low value, b) low risk, c) have no or little international commitment.

Transparency of Process

15. The project team recommends that STFC find ways of improving the transparency of the PPRP process, for example making presentations publicly available and being clear about the process. It was also suggested that PPRP should meet in easily accessible places around the country.

Project Research and Development Scheme

16. The project team considered the remit of the PRD scheme and how this has become blurred in recent years. It was recommended that the PRD scheme should focus on demonstration projects and seedcorn funding; and that STFC should investigate the possibility of developing a technology development scheme to bring together the R&D that is done through the grants lines and that which is done through PRD.

Industry Involvement

17. The ability of industry to apply for PPRP and PRD funding was welcomed by respondents and the project team recommended that this continue.

Evaluating the PRD Scheme

18. The project team noted that the PRD scheme is not currently evaluating its success. This could be important where PRD proposals may lead into full projects further down the line. The project team recommends that STFC should investigate the oversight of PRD projects through the lifetime of the funding period.

Summary and Implementation

19. Overall, the responses from both the user community and those running the programme support the view that the present PPRP process is fit for purpose. This is also true of the present PRD processes as originally conceived. This does not mean that both PPRP and PRD processes cannot be significantly improved. The recommendations of the project team are, in the most part, clarifications or tighter control of the current guidelines together with methods for increased clarity or communication.

20. Following approval of the recommendations by STFC management, an implementation plan will be drawn up. The recommendations will be reviewed after one year to ensure that there have been no unintended consequences of the review.