

Research funding in the South-Eastern Health Region – overview of the application and assessment process

Applications for research funding are assessed against criteria relating to scientific quality and expected utility for patient treatment and the specialist health services. The assessment criteria have been developed by the four regional health authorities to reflect the needs for research in the specialist health service. The final decision concerning allocation of research funds is decided by the board of Helse Sør-East RHF in December and is based on the recommendations from the review committees.

1 ADMINISTRATIVE HANDLING OF APPLICATIONS

After the application deadline for research funding in the health region has expired, the research administration in Helse Sør-Øst RHF examines all applications according to the call guidelines and formal requirements. Any applications that do not meet formal requirements (missing attachments, applying outside budget limits etc.) are rejected.

2 REVIEW COMMITTEES

The applications are assessed by review committees recruited from national and international medical research groups with a significant track-record and high scientific output. As a general rule, members should have an academic competence, and the committees are recruited in order to reflect the research profile and specific subject areas for the applications in the relevant committees.

Only members outside of the health region are recruited for assessment of applications, and the committees have a high proportion of international committee members (>80 %). When possible, the committees are set up with gender balance. The committee members are rotated every three to five years, and the members also receive a compensation for their work on the applications and participation in committee meetings.

APPLICATION ASSESSMENT

Applications are assessed against criteria corresponding to scientific quality and expected impact clinical utility:

Scientific quality and potential

Project design and originality:

- Scientific background, overview of the research front, state-of-the-art, relevant references to literature
- Clarity of hypotheses, objectives and milestones
- Scientific novelty /originality relative to the research front of the subject area. Does the project challenge current practices (clinical and research)?

Feasibility:

- Realistic, well-reasoned and appropriate project plans (experimental and analytical methods, data collection procedures, sample size and statistical strength etc.)
- Realistic budgets
- Description of roles and positions (particularly important if including a PhD position)
- Identified risks, alternative strategies for conducting the project
- Support from pilot projects or other preliminary data where relevant
- User involvement where relevant

Quality of the applicant (relative to career stage) and the research environment:

- Expertise, productivity and qualifications
- Skills related to project management and supervision; relative to career stage
- Educational environment, capacity and ability to supervise (relevant for PhD)
- Access to sufficient infrastructure, equipment and resources, relevant scientific networks
- Relevant collaborators creating a research environment of capacity (cross-disciplinarily if relevant)

Impact/clinical utility

Needs justification:

- Target group(s), i.e. patient group(s), carers, other identified users
- Needs in the specialist health services
- filling knowledge gaps
- meeting other needs of society

Potential for implementation:

- Realistic plans for implementation/translation of research into improved practice
- Realistic time-line for implementation (short/long term)
- Identified dependencies on development in other areas, alternative strategies
- Plans for dissemination and visibility, communication of the project activities to different target audiences

Importance of generating new knowledge and competence building:

- Realistic importance for the health services, possible improvements of existing offers/practices
- Importance of new knowledge / filling knowledge gaps, academic impact
- Potential for generalisation / broad use of new knowledge/methods/procedures

Assessment criteria are graded using a scale from 1-7.

Score	Specification	Funding priority
7	Exceptional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high international quality/ importance • highly innovative and original • important scientific question/high health impact • novel methodology/design • excellent project organisation • excellent value for money • very high likelihood of successful delivery 	Highest priority for funding
6	Very high quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • internationally competitive in parts • innovative and original • important scientific question/high health impact • good choice of methods/robust design • excellent project organisation • good value for money • very high likelihood of successful delivery 	High priority for funding
5	High quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not yet internationally competitive • innovative and original in parts • key scientific questions or significant health impact • good choice of methods/robust design • strong project organisation • good value for money • high likelihood of successful delivery 	Fundable
4	Good quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • choice of methods/design not optimal • worthwhile scientific question and/or health impact • project organisation could be strengthened • adequate value for money • good likelihood of successful delivery 	Fundable
3	Potentially useful – significant weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • approach/design requires significant revision • not likely to significantly contribute to new knowledge generation/health impact • project management not strong • potentially useful ideas • moderate likelihood of successful delivery 	Not fundable
2	Potentially useful – major weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hypotheses/research questions poorly defined • methodologically weak • weak project management • potentially useful ideas • low likelihood of successful delivery, unlikely to contribute to new knowledge generation 	Not fundable
1	Poor, unacceptable scientific quality, serious concerns	Not fundable

4 EXPECTED IMPACT/CLINICAL UTILITY

Expected impact for the project relates to the expected significance/clinical utility for patient treatment in the short or long term and/or disease prevention and/or the organization and quality of the health service.

This is of particular importance for projects funded by Helse Sør-Øst RHF, as allocations of funding are made from the specialist health services own budgets, split between earmarked research funding from the Ministry of Health and Care Services and similar funds from the regional health authority. Thus, projects should have clear relevance for the needs of the specialist health care services justifying investments.

5 REALISTIC BUDGET

While applications within the categories PhD and postdoctoral fellowships are granted lump sums if successful, applications within the category Open project support are funded according to the submitted budget forms accompanying the research project. It is imperative that the review committee members also assess these budgets and budget justifications in the project description. The reviewer should determine whether the requested budget is realistic for the conduct of the project proposed. If not, the overall project feasibility is affected and this should be considered when ranking the application.

6 COMMITTEE MEETINGS

After the individual application assessment has been completed, a meeting is held in which the reviewers are given the opportunity to discuss the applications openly. The purpose of the discussion is to prepare an agreed ranked list of applications. All applications within top 50% (average score) after the individual assessment are brought forward for discussion in the committee meeting. Additionally, any application with a significant score discrepancy is also discussed. This means that around 60% of the submitted applications will be processed in plenary.

All applications in discussion receive a written response from the committee, while applications that have not reached the stage for further discussion in the committees receive a simplified response.

7 RESULTS

The final rankings from each committee are collected in a single list of recommendations forwarded to the Board of Helse Sør-Øst RHF. A ranked waiting list is also set up, which is used if, for various reasons, funding is released after the board meeting (the project manager can withdraw the application, it can receive funding from other sources etc.).