



The
Palaeontological
Association
Registered Charity No. 1168330

PalAss URB Grading Policy

Summary

This document describes the URB grading procedure and policy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Proposals will be assessed as to whether they meet expected standards for the following criteria:

1. Fit to the charitable aims of the Association
2. Completeness of the application and adherence to the specific terms and conditions
3. Quality of the proposed training and personal development opportunities offered by the project and the supervisor(s)
4. Scientific quality of the project
5. Feasibility of the project
6. Time that the principal supervisor is personally prepared to devote to the project

Projects that do not meet the expected standards for each of these criteria will not be considered further.

After this initial sift, up to 50% of bursaries will be awarded according to our prioritisation scheme (see 'Details of prioritisation scheme and lottery'). The remaining bursaries will be awarded using an anonymised lottery system that selects from all remaining applications (including those eligible for the prioritisation scheme but not selected).

1. FIT TO CHARITABLE AIMS

This will be assessed on a pass or fail basis. Projects that are considered to fall outside the charitable aims of the Association will not be considered further.

2. COMPLETENESS AND ADHERENCE TO THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS

This will be assessed on a pass or fail basis. Applications that are deemed to fail any of the stated terms and conditions, e.g. regarding the eligibility of the students or supervisors, or number of permitted applications, will not be considered further.

3. QUALITY OF THE PROPOSED TRAINING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY THE PROJECT AND THE SUPERVISOR(S)

This should take into account the background and career ambitions of the student, as stated in their personal statement, as well as the ability of the supervisor(s) to supervise a project in the field of study. Ideally, the project should offer opportunities for the student to be trained in techniques that are new to them, in a field that is relevant to their ambitions, by researcher(s) who have appropriate skills and expertise in that field. A **minimum score of 6** is required in this category in order for the project to be eligible for funding.

| Score | Quality of research project |
|-------|---|
| 10 | Highly relevant and new training opportunities, delivered by researchers with highly relevant skills |
| 8 | Relevant training opportunities, delivered by researchers with highly relevant skills |
| 6 | Relevant training opportunities, delivered by researchers with relevant skills |
| 4 | Somewhat relevant training opportunities, delivered by researchers with no or limited relevant skills |
| 2 | Limited training in new techniques, and/or of limited relevance to student's career ambitions |
| 0 | No opportunities to be trained in new techniques, or no relevance to student's career ambitions |

4. SCIENTIFIC QUALITY

This should take into account the merit and quality of the project, and whether it is likely to result in new, useful scientific knowledge. A **minimum score of 4** is required in this category in order for the project to be eligible for funding.

| Score | Quality of research project |
|-------|--|
| 10 | Exceptional scientific merit and originality; almost certainly publishable. |
| 8 | Novel and timely project; will advance understanding; should be publishable. |
| 6 | Original, competitive science; potentially publishable |
| 4 | A scientifically sound project with modest ambitions that will add new, useful knowledge |
| 2 | A generally sound but limited project that may provide new, useful knowledge |
| 0 | A poorly conceived project that is significantly flawed in some aspect |

5. FEASIBILITY

This depends upon a number of potential factors, such as the time available for the project; potential problems with sample collection/availability; the nature of the available facilities; the need for additional, unsecured, funding etc. All aspects related to feasibility should be considered. This category will be scored out of 10 using the following indicative scores. A **minimum score of 8** is required in this category in order for the project to be eligible for funding.

| Score | Feasibility of the overall project |
|-------|---|
| 10 | No obvious deficiencies and definitely achievable in the time indicated |
| 8 | Likely to be achievable in the time indicated, and no more than one minor concern |

| | |
|---|---|
| 6 | Should be achievable but potential problems in more than one aspect of the research |
| 4 | A number of potential problems mean that this project may not be feasible |
| 2 | Unlikely to be feasible and/or achievable in the time indicated |
| 0 | An unfeasible project that is fundamentally flawed |

6. TIME THAT THE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR IS PERSONALLY PREPARED TO DEVOTE TO THE PROJECT

More important than the absolute number of hours is the quality of the time and when it occurs during the project. This category will be scored out of 10 using the following indicative scores. A **minimum score of 8** is required in this category in order for the project to be eligible for funding.

| Score | Description |
|-------|--|
| 10 | The principal supervisor will be available throughout the entire project, with frequent opportunities for engagement |
| 8 | The principal supervisor will be available for most of the duration of the project, with some opportunities for engagement |
| 6 | The principal supervisor will be present for no more than half the project, with rare opportunities for engagement |
| 4 | The principal supervisor is able to commit to the minimum only |
| 2 | The principal supervisor is unable to commit to the minimum amount of time |
| 0 | No details are provided or the principal supervisor is unable to commit any time |

3. DETAILS OF PRIORITISATION SCHEME AND LOTTERY SYSTEM

We receive more fundable applications for than it is possible to fund, and recognise that the existing scoring and ranking process in grant funding allocation introduces a number of biases and inconsistencies that are difficult to account for.

From the 2022 Undergraduate Bursary Round, we are trialling an alternative process for the awarding of URBs. Projects will initially be assessed using existing criteria to ensure that they meet a high threshold for each of scientific quality, training opportunities, feasibility, and supervisor availability. Funding will be allocated to projects that meet all these high thresholds via a stratified lottery system: an initial allocation on the basis of the prioritisation scheme weighting (up to 50% of bursaries awarded this way); followed by a general lottery to select remaining awards from all remaining eligible applications. This approach is in line with other funding bodies such as the Swiss National Funding Council and Health Research Council of New Zealand.

The details of this are given below.

1. All projects will be entered into a spreadsheet and given a number.
2. All projects will be assessed individually by members of the URB committee to ensure they are a fit to the charitable aims of the Association (criterion 1) and are complete and adhere to the specific terms and conditions (criterion 2). They will also be individually scored by members of the URB committee against criteria 3–6.
3. These scores will be discussed in a washup meeting between the URB committee. Projects that do not pass criteria 1 and 2, as well as those that do not meet the minimum score for criteria 3–6 will be removed from the spreadsheet and not be considered further. All remaining projects are considered equally fundable, and funding will be allocated using a stratified lottery system (details below).
4. A member of the URB committee (who will also be a member of the Diversity Group) will identify applicants who have self-declared their protected characteristics and are eligible for the prioritisation scheme, which has been developed using data from our 2017 Diversity Study and annual HESA data

benchmarked against UK Census population data (for a detailed explanation, please see the Newsletter).

- a. Applications that are identified as eligible for the prioritisation scheme will be moved into a separate spreadsheet and ranked according to the order in the prioritisation scheme: Black applicants, who are especially underrepresented in both palaeontology and the geosciences, receive the highest prioritisation; followed by applicants from Asian and other ethnic minority backgrounds; followed by women and non-binary applicants; followed by disabled applicants. To recognise the additional challenges associated with intersectionality, applicants who self-declare as belonging to more than one underrepresented group will be ranked higher accordingly.
 - b. Up to 50% of the bursaries will be allocated according to this ordering. If the number of applicants with the same relative ranking is higher than the number of bursaries available, a lottery will be used to allocate bursaries between them. This will be achieved by entering the spreadsheet number of each equally ranked project into a random number selector, with numbers being chosen at random until all funding is allocated.
 - c. Any project that is eligible for funding under the prioritisation scheme but was not selected will be returned to the initial spreadsheet and entered into the general lottery (see details below).
 - d. Specific information about protected characteristics will be kept confidential and is only visible to the committee member responsible for determining the bursaries awarded under the prioritization scheme. Other members of the URB committee will know the names of the people selected under this scheme, but not the details related to specific protected characteristics.
5. All remaining applications, including those not funded through the prioritisation scheme, will be considered for funding under a lottery.
- a. The spreadsheet number of each project will be entered into a random number selector, with numbers being chosen at random until all funding is allocated.
6. Feedback can still be provided, and applicants can be told whether their proposal was scored highly enough to be considered for funding but not selected in the lottery.

6. DOCUMENT REVIEW AND OWNERSHIP

This document will be reviewed and updated as required by Council or a group or individual nominated by Council (e.g. the URB sub-committee).

This contents of this document and the adoption of the recommendations was ratified by Council on:

2021-12-13

This document was last reviewed on:

2021-12-13 by Council