# Quality Criteria for the Assessment of Education Research in Different Contexts

Education research is assessed in a wide range of contexts and for a wide range of purposes, from funding to publication decisions. Each assessment is based on operational criteria that depend largely on its context, although a common core of generic concerns may be identified. When made explicit, these criteria are likely to influence the preparation of research proposals, research reports, and publication proposals. However, current knowledge of the criteria used by different organisations in their assessment of education research is patchy. The review reported here was an "audit" of the criteria used in the assessment of education research across the UK.

**Theoretical and methodological robustness, significance and contribution, and communication and engagement with different publics are general concerns that cut across, in different shapes, most contexts of assessment**

→ **Researchers need to reflect on the quality of their work at each stage of the research cycle**

**Operational criteria used in the assessment of education research may vary with the context, time, object, and purpose of assessment**

→ **Publishers, funders and buyers of education research need to ensure that their operational criteria are appropriate, explicit, inclusive, and jointly developed with researchers, and that appropriate and timely feedback loops are built into the process**

**Research assessment can be formative if it involves exchange, mutual learning and collaboration**

→ **The preparation of emerging researchers needs to consider the range of contexts in which their work will be judged**

**The actual review and assessment processes are based on individual and group interpretations of explicit criteria mediated by implicit standards of quality and worth**

→ **Further research is needed to clarify the complex relationship between explicit and implicit criteria and standards for research**

The review reported here focused on criteria (both generic and specific/operational) explicitly used in the assessment of research on educational topics based in UK education institutions (higher education, further education and schools). It thus excluded from the analysis criteria used in, for example, the assessment of in-house governmental, NGO, and private research. Although attempts have been made to include all countries of the UK, due to time and resource constraints the review has stronger coverage of UK-wide and English organisations.

There are many possible ways in which to distinguish between different contexts of assessment of education research (as defined above). The distinction used in this review was based mainly on the purpose of assessment: to inform publication, funding, or investment decisions. Criteria used in further contexts of assessment, including those for reviewing research, indexing, degree awarding, or monitoring purposes, will not be covered in this briefing, although some data has been gathered on several of these. The focus of this briefing is on criteria, but for each context a brief reference to the assessment process will be made.

## Criteria used in Different Contexts of Assessment

### Context 1: Peer review for publication

#### 1.1. Journal publishing

***Data:***
The first 30 UK-based education research journals listed in the ISI index were sent requests for information about their refereeing process and standards, for copies of the letters and forms that were sent to referees, and for editor's views on the topics studied in this project. The editors and editorial staff of 11 journals replied with information. The timescale of the project did not allow for the sending of reminders to a group of further five journals, which had stated an intention to send information at a later stage. Some of the 11 respondents sent substantial replies with details about the process and reflection on the issues involved; some forwarded the relevant forms with minimal comment; two made reference to the electronic submission system and the journal website, which included sufficient detail of the criteria used in the reviewing process. In addition, the websites and electronic submission systems of these journals were covered.

***Process of assessment:***
The generic assessment process for journal articles includes first screening by editor, refereeing by external reviewers, feedback and response by authors, further refereeing of resubmissions (if the case), and final decision by editor and editorial board. The journals analysed varied greatly in the actual procedures used, for example in terms of:
- *practices for selecting appropriate reviewers*, ranging from selection by editor among dedicated reviewer panels or extended editorial boards, to self-selection through bidding for papers to review. Criteria for selection included expertise, reviewing experience, prior engagement with the journal, and affiliation (UK and international);
- *support for reviewers and for authors*, ranging from minimal guidance notes to workshops and

support and mentoring programmes, and the balance between the two;
- *"incentives" offered to referees*: intrinsic, e.g. pointing out aspects such as esteem, networking, access to the latest research, professional development, and contribution to maintaining scientific standards; but also extrinsic, e.g. access to subscription services such as Scopus, or discounted prices of books from the same publisher;
- *engagement of reviewers in the development and refinement of criteria;*
- *explicitness of standards for "good" reviewer reports*, such as depth of commentary, firm recommendation, or authoritativeness (combining expertise, ability and conduct).

***Criteria:***
Some journals used generic criteria, broken down into questions and prompts that were sent to the reviewers, sometimes in the form of check-lists or score sheets with space for explanatory comments. Others did not offer formalised criteria; for example, they only asked for reviewers' "opinion" and recommendations on the "publishability", "strengths and weaknesses", or "overall quality" of potential articles.

Further variation in criteria and their use was related to the different stages in the publication process. While preparing papers for publication, prospective authors were generally advised to pay attention to a small number of issues, mainly style (e.g. use of tables and references, non-discriminatory writing), length (3k to 8k among the journals reviewed, although most guidelines advised reasonable brevity), originality (i.e. work not previously published, and also novel in its approach, perspective, and contribution), and audience (international). Of the 11 respondent journals, only four included further details of quality criteria in their author guidelines, including references to quality of abstract, good descriptive title, ethical guidelines, and focus on offering analysis and critique, rather than just description and information.

Before being sent to referees**,** potential articles were screened by editors for relevance to journal aims and scope, length, presentation, style, and language, and overall interest or contribution and scientific rigour. The criteria fed by journal editors and publishers into the actual peer-review process spanned a larger field (Box 1.1). Most common were the criteria of relevance; presentation; significance; accessibility and clarity; scholarship; technical quality; ethics; and structure and coverage of the different sections of the paper. Revised papers were sent back to the original referees (subject to their agreement); the main criterion in reviewing resubmissions was whether the changes operated were satisfactory in light of the original assessment. Proposals for special issues, opinion papers, and work in progress reports had slightly

different standards, which are only partially included in the list of commonly-used criteria in Box 1.1. In addition, proposals to publishers for new journals had different status and criteria, not included here.

Several of the detailed responses to the request for information acknowledged the important fact that the criteria and standards stipulated by editors and publishers were not necessarily the same as those used in practice by reviewers. This does not mean that reviewers' criteria were seen as entirely idiosyncratic, but that their use of any guidelines was mediated through their implicit standards. A further study could build on the results of this audit to explore the role of implicit standards and criteria in the peer review process.

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**Box 1.1. Criteria for journal publication**

1. **Relevance:**
   o relevance to the aims and scope of journal
   o topicality/ timeliness in relation to the field of research and to practice
2. **Significant and original contribution :**
   o subject matter worthy of investigation and appropriately covered
   o novelty of substantive ideas, information, problems, interpretation
   o originality in relation to existent related research (approach/paradigm, techniques, theoretical or conceptual framework, use of evidence: "scientific originality")
   o promise (ideas that are likely to stimulate further research and development)
   o contribution to research and to practice (education, training, staff development, policy)
3. **Accessibility and clarity:**
   o "acceptable and sensible level of accessibility given the nature of the material under discussion" and the readership of the journal readership
   o clear presentation throughout
4. **High standards of scholarship in argument and interpretation:**
   o good underlying theoretical framework
   o satisfactory structure and logical organisation
   o clear statement of purpose, conceptual rationale, research questions and hypotheses
   o literature review engaging with an adequately rich background of theory and research
   o adequate analysis, discussion and critical review of the work, its results and findings, their implications and significance, any limitations, and potential for future research
   o alternative interpretations taken into account;
   o conclusions and claims supported by data
5. **Sound methodological basis:**
   o quality of research design, appropriateness of methodology, and technical quality
   o awareness of work that is methodologically related
   o clear description of data, including accurate tables and figures
   o quality and appropriateness of analyses (statistical and qualitative)
   o sufficient investment in evaluating the consequences of interventions
   o careful evaluation of strengths and limitations
6. **Ethics:**
   o following appropriate ethical guidelines
   o honesty in reporting (e.g. work in progress, unsuccessful research, opinion/speculative pieces)
7. **Adequate presentation, style, and language:**
   o standard of English, readability
   o style (compliance with guidelines; non-discriminatory writing; good use of tables and figures)
   o paratext: honest, descriptive, helpful, and tempting title; concise, clear and helpful abstract
   o reasonable length

### 1.2. Monograph proposals

*Data:*

Data consisted of proposal guidelines, review request forms, frequently asked questions pages, review pages, and proposal forms from seven major publishing houses that were based, or strongly represented, in the UK, and that included education research in their portfolio (13 documents). The analysis concentrated on new monograph proposals, rather than textbooks, edited collections, or revised editions. Examples of additional criteria for the latter cases included pedagogical features and accompanying material (for textbooks); coherence/ cohesion and collaboration arrangements (for edited collections); or extent and significance of new material (for revised editions).

*Process of assessment:*

The assessment process for monograph proposals included canvassing the opinion of the market and eliciting the opinion of specialist reviewers (academic and professional). Commissioning editors screened the proposals, considered the external reviews and data, and made publication recommendations. Editorial Boards made publication decisions.

*Criteria:*

The specific criteria and their use varied from publisher to publisher, but most proposal forms analysed consisted of prompts and questions, while most review requests consisted of generic prompts such as "content", quality", "potential market", and "author" (Box 1.2).

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### Box 1.2. Criteria fed into the assessment of monograph proposals

1. **Balance of contents and coverage**
2. **Convincing rationale and originality:** worthwhile aims, novel/ innovative approach, topicality and relevance, importance (unique features, gap in information, better approach than the competition, pushing forward the boundaries of a discipline)
3. **Logical structure, thematic coherence, and effective organisation**
4. **Overall academic standard**
5. **Quality of writing** of sample chapters, including accessibility to intended audience
6. **Evidence of appropriate readership and market need**: potential market (main subsidiary, including educational market and international), discipline and level of intended readers, advantages to intended readers (above what is currently available), size of markets, ease of reaching markets, reasons for buying the book, anticipated sales
7. **Advantages over competition**: comparative strengths and weaknesses of competing titles, how the proposed book will improve upon existing books and resources on the market
8. **Suitability of author**: publication record, evidence of esteem, translated works, other writing projects of prospective author(s)
9. **Peer endorsements:** commendations (included in the proposal) by other scholars
10. **Realistic timetable and feasibility**: appropriate length, realistic writing arrangements and proposed completion date, sustainable proposed print run, adequate plans for graphics, compatibility of software intended for use, plans for updates (if appropriate)
11. **Financial soundness**: likely production costs, adequate proposed price, overall financial soundness of project
12. **Concision and clarity of proposal**

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### 1.3. Review of conference abstracts for inclusion in programme

*Data:*

Conferences organised by four learned societies in education were included in the study. Information about their criteria was obtained either from their websites, from generic mailings and newsletters of the societies, or by contacting them directly.

*Process:*

The abstracts submitted to these conferences were subject to either screening by the members of the conferences committees, or, as the trend for the future seems to be, to external single- or double-blind peer-review. Feedback was sent to authors to support the preparation of full papers.

*Criteria:*

Where explicit review forms were used, reviewers were asked to comment and/or grade each abstract according to a small number of generic criteria. Box 1.3 summarises the types of criteria used in the selection processes of the conferences analysed.

**Box 1.3. Criteria used in the assessment of learned society conference abstracts**
1. **Scope**: relevant to the field of education research
2. **Relevance** to the members of the society and to appropriate sub-groups and networks
3. **Robustness** of analytical/ theoretical framework and coherence between theoretical framework, research questions and objectives, approach, and outcomes
4. **Clarity** of research questions and focus of enquiry; clear organisation and expression
5. **Likely significance of presentation:** contribution to practice, policy, or theory; awareness of the contexts for research
6. **Appropriateness of research methods and/or literature**: evidence of systematic enquiry
7. **Reporting sufficiently advanced research** so that the presentation is likely to have substance
8. **Accessibility to wider audiences** (international, practitioner, policy, students); clear and understandable language; enabling dialogue among countries, constituencies, intellectual and educational traditions
9. **Informative:** sufficiently detailed abstract to help participants choose sessions to attend
10. **Style, including adequate use of references and key words**

## Context 2. Assessment of proposals for funding

This section of the review focused on criteria for the assessment of proposals for research projects, early career grants, and developmental research (where distinguished from other types of research in the funding body's funding schemes). Criteria for international programmes, visiting fellowships, conference and seminar series proposals, travel grants, research groups, technology and infrastructure projects, and networks were not covered.

### *Process of assessment:*
The generic process of assessment was similar across the different types of funding opportunities reviewed. Most funders reviewed operated a system of assessment involving a combination of the following phases:
I. pre-submission: references from author-selected referees
II. upon receipt of proposal: initial screening for completeness of proposals, eligibility, and referee grades
III. post-screening: peer-review by external evaluators
IV. review by specialist assessors, with access to references and external reports
V. panel/ committee/ board overall judgement and recommendation
VI. decision.

If outline proposals were solicited, some of these phases were repeated in simplified form. At the time of carrying out this audit, the tendency was to move towards electronic application systems, although some funders still required several copies of paper-based applications.

In many cases detailed feedback (e.g. reviewer comments) was not provided to applicants before the decision stage and they had no opportunity to respond. Often no feedback at all was built into the process. The proposal submission process thus seemed to have less formative potential than the

publication process described above. This problem was only partly compensated for through the publication by funders of generic guides for applicants.

Application and assessment procedures for developmental and practice-based/practitioner research were often simplified – for example, through in-house assessment (e.g. by dedicated panels or steering groups), or by appointing an external evaluation panel to assess all applications.

Funders used a combination of generic and scheme-specific criteria. The most common generic criteria revolved around issues of academic merit; ability of proponents; impact; relevance; and value for money. Specific criteria and standards varied with the aim of the scheme, the level of funding, and the mission and strategic plan of the funder. In most cases, although not always, criteria were made explicit in the call specification, on referee forms, review and assessment requests, checklists and score cards.

### 2.1. Project proposals
*Data:*
The documentation accompanying nine calls for project applications was analysed, as well as the peer review policies from six funders of research. In addition, material was collected from the websites of a further five organisations (although the latter searches yielded scarce information on criteria).
*Criteria:*
With some exceptions, the different types of funders were quite similar in terms of the procedures and criteria used. Exceptions included simplified assessment procedures in the case of calls with narrow focus and/or based on memorial funds or special bequests; and higher emphasis among some of the charities on practical outcomes and external benefits, compared to, for example, the BA's emphasis on academic merit and contribution to the scholarly community. The ESRC had a mixed set of "impact" and "scholarship" criteria

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**Box 2.1. Criteria used in the assessment of proposals for funding research projects**

1. **Relevance**: relevance of idea to funder's mission, strategy or priorities, to the target users/ audience, and to the funding scheme specification
2. **Originality, innovation and topicality**: reasonably ambitious; fresh, groundbreaking idea; innovative approach; dealing with an emerging issue worth pursuing; no previous funding for the same project (unless follow-up funding explicitly sought from appropriate schemes); challenging taken-for-granted assumptions
3. **Scholarly importance**: focus on an important issue; significant potential contribution of the research proposed to the advancement of knowledge about its theme and focus; contribution to the development of the wider research area/ field of the proposal, including contribution to theory; contribution to methodological development; contribution to interdisciplinary and international cross-fertilisation of ideas
4. **Specificity:** clearly specified, with sufficient information about all key aspects (background, aims, methods, process, data collection, sample, data recording, analytical framework, proposer's knowledge and skills, timescales, resources, impact, outputs)
5. **Adequate background**: relationship to, and the volume of, research already in the field; evidence of fully understanding the issue or problem to be addressed; clear formulation of the problem; awareness of wider environment and context for the research proposed
6. **Clear, concise and appropriate objectives, aims and rationale** for the project
7. **Explicit and appropriate theoretical and conceptual framework**
8. **Promised scientific quality of approach,** in relation to the specific research objective proposed: suitability of the methodology; clear and feasible design; robustness/good match between objectives, approach (design and methods), and plans for interpretation of results; clear, convincing and systematic analytical framework, technical quality and appropriateness of proposed methods and techniques for all stages of the project; quality of data resources to be used
9. **Potential for positive user, society and economic importance and impact**: potential to influence policy and/or practice; potential to achieve impact beyond immediate beneficiaries; trans-local or regional interest; proposed outcomes which are timely and likely to be of interest and use to practitioners and policy makers for the benefit of the learners; awareness of issues important to potential users
10. **User engagement**: evidence that relevant users and beneficiaries were identified and were engaged where possible from the early stages of the project; quality of engagement
11. **Dissemination**: appropriate proposed outputs that can be derived from material collected; good dissemination plans to academic community, immediate users and beneficiaries, and wider publics
12. **Contribution to capacity building** and benefits for the wider scholarly community; educational value of project activities
13. **International competitiveness**
14. **Ethical conduct and awareness of wider ethical implications:** awareness of relevant ethical issues, such as independence, integrity, full information, free participation, confidentiality and anonymity, avoidance of harm; compliance with ethical procedures and guidelines
15. **Principled scientific practice**: honesty, good leadership and cooperation, professional standards, ethical conduct, opportunities for staff development
16. **Ability** of the applicant(s) to undertake the proposed research and deliver the outcomes proposed, taking into account the applicant(s)' research and publication track record and stage of career; quality of proposed collaborations and partnerships; quality of proposed management and organisation
17. **Feasibility/ achievability:** attainable objectives; realistic scale, timescale and scheduling, and direct costs; sufficient and essential staff time and level of appointment; good justification of resources; not over ambitious; proposed use of resources complies with relevant regulations; justified risks and good risk management plans
18. **Evaluation** plans to assess the success or otherwise of the project/research, how effectively results were disseminated, and whether the desired impact was achieved
19. **Value for money:** potential contribution justifies anticipated costs; partner funding (if appropriate)
20. **Presentation** of the application
21. **Compliance** with eligibility criteria and terms and conditions of the funding scheme

**2.2. Early career grants**

*Data:*
The nature of the dedicated early career grants on offer at the time of the review ranged from small-scale postdoctoral fellowships aimed at establishing a publication track-record, to first grants that enabled the holder to develop a coherent medium-scale research project while undertaking further training. Six calls for application and associated documentation (guidance notes, application forms, referee forms), issued by major funders and covering the entire range of dedicated early career funding opportunities, were analysed.

*Criteria:*
The "early career" focus of these grants was reflected in the higher emphasis in the criteria on opportunities for learning and development, potential of the applicant to make substantial contribution to their field in the future, and suitability of the host institution. Box 2.2. summarises the criteria that were specified or could be inferred from the documents analysed. Of the six schemes analysed, only three made their criteria explicit in an identifiable section of the call for proposals or guidance notes.

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**Box 2.2. Criteria used in the assessment of applications to early career funding schemes**

1. **Outstanding academic merit of proposed project:** pertinence, significance and ambition of the topic; originality; potential contribution (adding to knowledge in the field; innovating methodology); appropriate methodology for the aims stated; appropriate anticipated outcomes
2. **Merit and promise of applicant:** academic excellence of the candidate, assessed on the basis of previous academic achievements; capacity and/or potential of applicant to make a significant contribution to research, as evidenced by their proven record of research; commitment to building an academic career in the UK
3. **Additionality:** contribution to the development of applicant's knowledge and skills and to the advancement of their career that could not have been achieved through other means of funding
4. **Viability/ feasibility of the project:** realistic timescale and workload; reasonable costs; access to resources
5. **Suitability of the host institution:** evidence of institutional commitment; international scope; mobility opportunities; availability of matched financial support; quality of the conditions offered to the applicant; quality and genuineness of proposed partnerships and mentoring arrangements
6. **Quality of plans for dissemination and engagement** with academic and non-academic communities; appropriateness, standard and deliverability of proposed outputs
7. **Potential impact**
8. **Value for money**
9. **Conformity** to eligibility criteria and award specifications
10. **Quality of writing of the proposal:** specificity, clarity, concision, standard of English

## 2.3. Developmental and practice-based research

*Data:*
Sixteen calls for proposals, guidance notes, and application forms from nine organisations were analysed. The funding organisations included charities and chartered bodies, executive governmental agencies, and organisations with local and sectoral remit. Examples of the funding schemes analysed included development and research projects and short-term research grants with relevance for the professional development of the applicants.

*Criteria:*
Although academic robustness remained a key criterion, the assessment of developmental and practice-based research also placed great emphasis on the contribution of research to improving practice, policy, and ultimately learner experience and outcomes. Professional development, institutional support, and local and sectoral relevance were also important (Box 2.3).

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### Box 2.3. Criteria used in the assessment of proposals for the funding of developmental and practice-based research

1. **Academic robustness**: awareness of relevant literature (academic, policy, professional); quality in relation to the specific research objective of the proposal (including suitability and rigour of the methodology, coherence between aims/objectives, questions, and approach); worthwhile and measurable anticipated outcomes; compliance with ethical guidelines
2. **Timeliness and potential to achieve positive short or medium-term impact** in relation to evidenced needs
3. **Educational usefulness**: providing benefits to students during and after the project; designed around the needs of practitioners
4. **Resonance:** widely applicable, and the outcomes and outputs transportable to other organisations, sectors, and levels; plans for the production of digestible, accessible outputs to be disseminated interactively;
5. **Engagement** of partners from different sites of education practice and policy in the research process, including design and planning; modelling strategies for sharing and transferring knowledge into practice; commitment to joint practice development and collaborative action research
6. **Relevance to the remit of the funder** (priorities and activities)
7. **Locality:** direct relevance to local and regional needs
8. **Sustainability** of developmental work undertaken once funding has ended; horizon scanning/ "futurizing"
9. **Distinctiveness**: innovative, original (not duplicating existent work); anticipated contribution to the improvement of practice and policy, to relevant subject areas and to capacity building in the wider scholarly community
10. **Ability/ expertise** of the applicant(s) to undertake the proposed research; their practical experience; capacity to maintain and deliver the proposed research within the time scale
11. **Professional development benefits** for the applicant: rationale for development need; strength of case (e.g. for research leave)
12. **Institutional support**: senior management support for the project and for applicant's commitment of the required time and resources
13. **Feasibility**: realistic approach to achieving demonstrable improvements in practice and learner outcomes, including realistic objectives and timescale and practical, realistic activities
14. **Evaluation:** evidence that applicants have thought carefully about how to monitor progress and evaluate outcomes and impact; built-in peer review processes that are broad-based (academic, professional, policy etc.) (e.g., for the larger projects, advisory groups, scrutiny meetings of external research experts, validation workshops of stakeholder representatives)
15. **Value for money**: appropriate level of resources and cost estimates; transparency of costing; availability of partner or institution-matched funding
16. **Presentation** of the application: specific, readable, brief, clear, complete

## Context 3. Investment decisions

### 3.1. End-of-project evaluation

***Data:***
Seven documents were analysed, including: rapporteur evaluation forms, end-of-award report forms, and rapporteur guidelines, from five organisations.

***Process:***
For review purposes, end-of-project assessments have been included under "investment" in light of their focus on accountability and the possibility of feeding into decisions on future allocation of funds beyond the lifespan of a given project (e.g. into evaluations of particular funding schemes). Project evaluation is normally based on a project report, which is sent to peer-review or is assessed internally. In the case of complex programmes or centres, evaluation may be commissioned to external teams and independent consultants.

***Criteria***:
The ex-post character of such assessments translated into criteria that focused on effectiveness, accountability, and achievements to date, in relation to the original aims and objectives.

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### Box 3.1. Criteria used in project and report evaluation

1. **Accountability**: whether funds were spent as agreed
2. **Effectiveness** in organisation and conduct of research in relation to meeting the objectives and delivering the expected outputs
3. **Quality**: theory/conceptual understanding; design; methodology (appropriateness, rigour, transparency, validity); conduct; quality of analysis; collection/organisation of data; issues concerning ethics and confidentiality
4. **Innovation**: substantive and methodological
5. **Contribution to knowledge**
6. **Contribution to policy and practice** so far and likelihood of further impact and use
7. **Contribution to research training and professional development**
8. **Contribution to institutional development**
9. **Development of network** of research contacts
10. **Development of research products** (datasets, software)
11. **Quality of output and effectiveness of dissemination** so far; adequate plans for further dissemination; further audiences likely to benefit
12. **Opening avenues for further research**
11. **Peer appreciation and user satisfaction**

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### 3.2. Procurement

***Data:***
Criteria were extracted from 17 invitations to tender and their associated documentation (project specifications, contracts, calls for expressions of interest – totalling 27 documents).

***Process:***
The assessment of tenders is subject to specific regulations and legal requirements governing procurement practice in general. Criteria, and often their weighting, are specified in the documentation accompanying the Invitation to Tender. The selection of bids is based on consideration of tenders against the specified criteria; consultation of referees; assessment of price; financial, legal, and track-record checks; and, if required, performance of short-listed bidders at interviews and presentations.

***Criteria:***
The criteria used and their weighting varied greatly in the sample with the nature of the topic and of the work being commissioned; the commissioning body; and the tightness of the specification documents. Box 3.1 pulls together some of the most commonly used criteria in the documents analysed. The order of presentation is not an indication of their weight.

## Box 3.2. Criteria used in the procurement of research

1. **Conformance** to the issued specification and the associated Terms and Conditions, including timely submission
2. **Completeness** of tender, including satisfactory references, as required
3. **Demonstrated understanding of the research brief** and the project aims and objectives; clear statement of aims; sound and convincing rationale; contextual understanding of the commissioning body's policies and operational framework
4. **Quality and credibility** of the proposed solution to the specification requirements; sound methodology; detailed explanation of the development and piloting of instruments, and of the approach to data analysis; adequate understanding of constraints and limitations to the approach
5. **Added value:** development of the brief; fresh and challenging perspective; innovation; added value of approach
6. **Quality assurance** processes: ensuring continuity of quality throughout different parts of the study; overall quality control (including consideration of any subcontracting arrangements
7. **Relevant leading edge research expertise** in the required discipline and the substantive topic; strong methodological and technical expertise; strong track record in the required quantitative and qualitative research and analysis skills; experience of work on similar projects
8. **Relevant substantive understanding and experience**: understanding of, and sensitivity to, the issues being address and the relevant local, regional and national contexts; understanding of the types of outcome measures of interest, and how they can be measured effectively
9. **Relevant development experience**
10. **Relevant strategic experience**: experience of providing advice for relevant stakeholders; evidence of developing and delivering strategic recommendations on relevant issues
11. **Communication and reporting**: demonstrated capacity for effective communication of evidence; proven ability to write engagingly and concisely for the relevant audiences; adequate report production plans (e.g. scope and scale, format of publication); experience of compiling reports in accessible language and format on complex topics
12. **Liaison and flexibility**: capacity to liaise effectively with the commissioning body and other stakeholders; evidence of ability to work in partnership with the contractor and deliver high-quality customer service; experience of previous work contracted by the commissioning body and its equivalents/ competitors; flexibility of the contractor to accommodate potential changes in requirements
13. **Organisational model** (single institution/partnership/consortium), including details of the lead organisation and evidence of partner support; experience of collaborative working
14. **Feasibility**: workable methodology that can be delivered within timescale and budget; evidence of ability to effectively deliver outputs to agreed quality standards within budget and on time; sufficient resources for requirement; realistic timescales; appropriate staffing levels and distribution of key roles and responsibilities; realistic capacity building
15. **Consideration of the burden** of the approach: the methods proposed ensure minimal burden on participants
16. **Consideration and adherence to ethical and legal issues** (e.g. Data Protection Act requirements, equal opportunities); evidence of relevant policies in place in the tendering institution
17. **Quality of management arrangements**: evidence of management capability, including the project/contract manager's expertise, proposed management procedures, the project plan and the risk management plan; the risk analysis includes identification of appropriate risks and their likelihood, assessment of impact and appropriate contingency measures; evidence of business continuity plan/disaster recovery process
18. **Value for money and soundness** of budget and financial planning; economical use of resources; satisfactory credit checks
19. **Price of contract** and its implications for the commissioning body

## 4. Further contexts of assessment

Further important contexts for research assessment, not covered in this briefing, include:
- the awarding of degrees (MSc, PhD, EdD)
- the screening of existent research for review purposes (e.g. for systematic reviews)
- the inclusion of different forms of output in indexes
- progress assessments/ research monitoring
- the evaluation of programmes
- the setting up of new journals or book series
- the setting up of consultancy agreements.

Further research could address the qualitative aspects of how the explicit criteria summarised in this briefing are interpreted and used in the process of research assessment, and in relation to different contexts. It would also be useful to compare these explicit and implicit criteria to "aspirational" criteria proposed by research handbooks and in academic and policy/practice-based reviews of education research quality.

## Warrant

The review consisted of collecting and analysing over 130 documents from 11 major education journals, 7 relevant publishing houses, and 22 UK-based organisations with a funding or commissioning portfolio for education research. The latter organisations included most major public funders of research with England and UK-wide remit, from government departments, non-departmental public bodies, executive agencies, and chartered public bodies, to charities, NGOs, and learned societies and professional networks.

Many of the documents reviewed were publicly available, such as the calls for proposals, expressions of interest, and tenders that were active in England and UK-wide during the period of the review. In other situations, like in the case of journal editors, of funders with large and complex funding/investment portfolios that often straddled several of the above "contexts of assessment", or, to the contrary, of very small and specific funding portfolios, information was requested in writing (via email) from the relevant organisations and individuals. Thus the success of this project depended, perhaps more than in the case of other projects, on the goodwill and transparency of a wide range of constituencies involved, in some way or another, with and in education research. Their prompt and helpful response is gratefully acknowledged.

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