

The Africa Research Excellence Fund **College of Experts** Being a College member: Briefing (Version 4 May 2016)

What is the College?

The College of Experts is, in the first instance, the group of signed-up peer-reviewers for the **Africa Research Excellence Fund (AREF)**. As AREF develops, we may ask members to extend their advisory role.

What is AREF?

The Africa Research Excellence Fund has been established by the UK Medical Research Foundation to nurture African health research at its most vulnerable points, by supporting and developing people, projects and infrastructure to deliver excellent research in Africa for the benefit of Africa.

AREF's initial focus is on early-career postdoctoral researchers who, typically, are at a critical period of their careers. We aim to enable Sub-Saharan Africa's most talented health scientists to remain in research in Africa, and to achieve their full scientific and leadership potential.

The UK Medical Research Foundation (MRF) is the Medical Research Council's independent charity (<http://www.medicalresearchfoundation.org.uk/>).

AREF has been established with the generous support of the MRF, the Wellcome Trust, the Vitol Foundation, the Farrar Foundation and several private donors. AREF was formally launched in September 2015.

AREF is directed by Professor Tumani Corrah CBE, MRG, Emeritus Director of the MRC Unit, The Gambia. His deputy, Dr Peter Dukes, was for many years at the MRC Head Office, UK. Dr Jane Kengeya-Kayondo is AREF's Regional Coordinator, focusing on Eastern and Southern Africa. Ms Gyasiwaa Amofa is the AREF Coordinator and Mr Sulayman Janneh is our Finance and Fellowships Manager.

We are governed by the AREF Board, chaired by Dr Charles Mgone, Executive Director of the European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP) and are establishing an international Advisory Committee. Learn more about us at <http://www.medicalresearchfoundation.org.uk/aref/about-us/>

What are the AREF Research Development Fellowships?

AREF has just one competitive awards programme at the moment, the AREF Developmental Fellowships.

The aim of the Fellowship Programme is to enable talented African postdocs to develop their own research ideas and funding proposals through 3 to 9-month placements in leading research organisations in South Africa, UK and continental Europe. Maximum: £40,000 for a 9 month placement. We also can provide up to

Africa Research Excellence Fund, c/o Medical Research Council Unit, Atlantic Blvd, Fajara, P.O. Box 273, Banjul, The Gambia

The Africa Research Excellence Fund is a charitable trust under the umbrella of the Medical Research Foundation (registration number 1138223). The Medical Research Foundation is a company limited by guarantee registered in England (Company Number: 7366816) and a charity registered in England by the Charity Commission for England and Wales (Number: 1138223) whose registered office is at MRC Headoffice (Swindon), Polaris House, North Star Avenue, Swindon SN2 1FL

£3k to assist re-integration into the home (employing) institution after the placement. So these are relative small awards – and the proposals are quite brief.

We launched our first round of Fellowships in May 2015. Our second call, launched on 4 April 2016, has a deadline of 6 July 2016 for receipt of applications.

More detailed information is available about the Fellowships Programme at

<http://www.medicalresearchfoundation.org.uk/aref/2016/04/04/aref-research-development-fellowship-2016/>

What is the scale of the Fellowship Programme?

We funded seven new awards in 2015. You can read about our Fellows at

<http://www.medicalresearchfoundation.org.uk/aref/about-us/our-fellows/>

This year, **we have funds for some eight to ten awards**, depending on their length and individual costs.

We do not know how many applications will arrive at the AREF office in The Gambia by the 6 July deadline: maybe more than last year.

What is AREF looking for in its College of Experts?

We aim to reach at least 50 College members to give us breadth and depth.

Typical College Member career profiles

Typically, to be selected, members will be **experienced mid-level/senior researchers**, who are **transitioning to “independence.”**

They will be working on research problems that focus as an outcome on **improving human health**.

Members are expected to have between **5 and 10 years of active research after gaining their PhD**. But we are flexible, recognising that career paths differ – not least between different disciplines and professions.

Applicants will have evidence of the following:

- **research productivity** (e.g. publishing challenging, original research outputs regularly and in formats that have significant impact in their field)
- **wining grant support** as an principal or co-applicant
- a distinctive and consistent **research niche**
- **growing leadership and impact** (leading research teams, supervising students and postdocs, engagement in international networks)
- other evidence of a growing independence and recognition (including acting as peer reviewer for a funder).

For a helpful description of “transitioning to independence” that is used by the UK medical Research Council, see <http://www.mrc.ac.uk/skills-careers/skills-needed-to-win-support/> .

We are NOT seeking this year to add to the College additional new researchers with many years of leading institutions or major international research programmes. If you are one such, you are very welcome to contact us to discuss other ways in which you can help AREF.

Nationality and location of College Members

We are recruiting **internationally**.

To build capacity in peer review in Sub-Saharan Africa, we are especially keen to recruit **African nationals** who meet the selection criteria who are based in centres of research excellence in Sub-Saharan Africa or working on Africa-relevant research elsewhere.

AREF is also actively recruiting from among global health scientists of **any nationality** holding a research fellowship (or equivalent) awarded through competition, such as a Wellcome Trust or UK Medical Research Council Research fellowship or equivalent: having worked in Africa is desirable but not essential if the expertise is directly relevant.

We aim for at least two-thirds of College of Expert members being in the first of the above two categories.

Scientific scope

Box 1: The scope of the current Fellowship competition – for which we need College of Expert members

We are seeking to recruit new CoE members across a broad scope, covering **human health and disease**, including **infectious diseases** and **non-communicable diseases** that are significant and/or identified as “neglected” in sub-Saharan Africa.

The scope of disciplines and their associated research methodologies and technologies that we should like expertise in are as follows:

- advanced medical statistics
- medical bioinformatics
- biomedical and computational modelling (applied to health)
- molecular biology and omics technologies
- other advanced, laboratory-based
- pharmacology and physiological systems
- epidemiology, demography and population health
- ecological sciences as applied to human health
- quantitative and qualitative behavioural and social sciences
- economics applied to health
- health systems and policy research

The research ideas that Fellowship applicants seek to develop through the Fellowship should have a strong **explanatory** or **evaluative** purpose, and potential for impact. Scoping studies, literature and systematic reviews and descriptive data collection are unlikely to be successful.

How are the members of the AREF College of Experts selected?

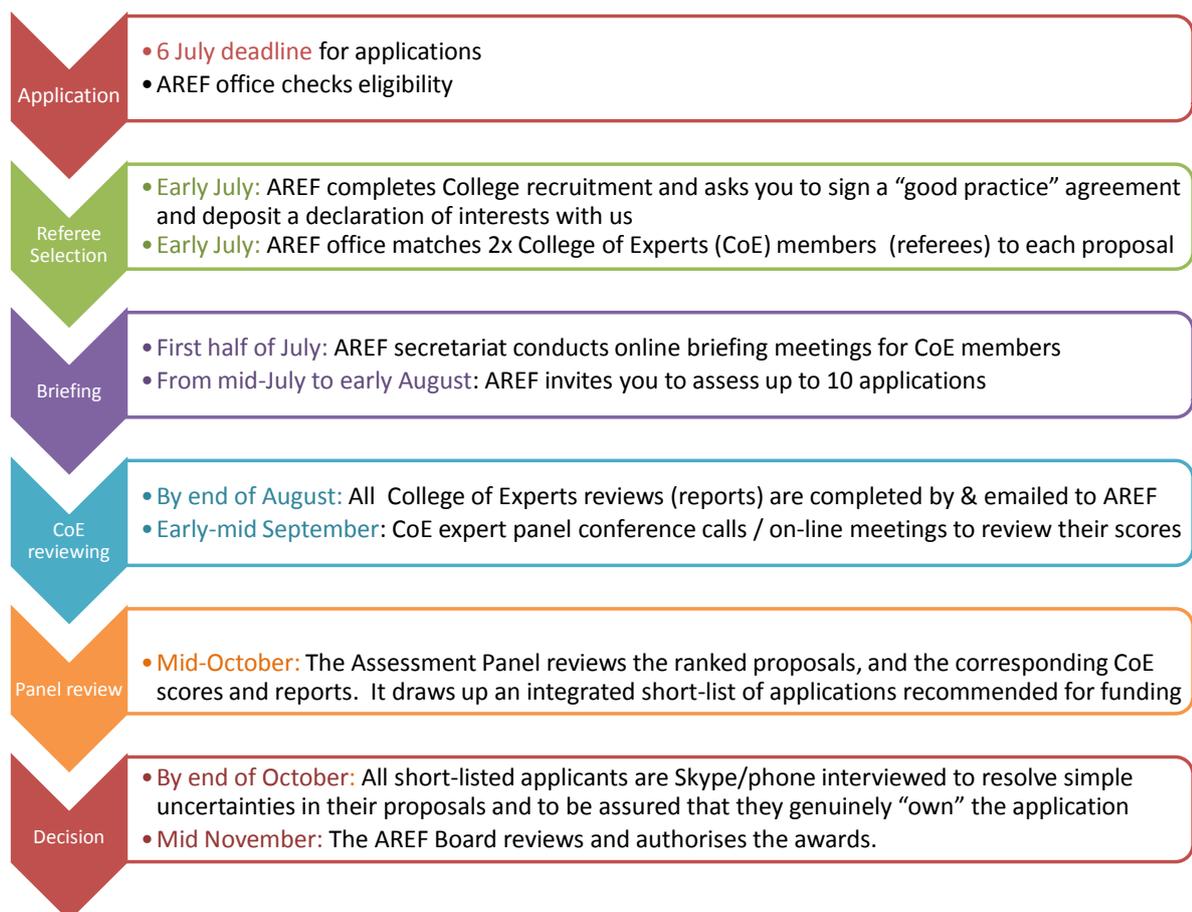
1. Application through the College of Expert application form on the **URL** by 17.00 on 17 June. (We shall continue to grow the College thereafter, to meet our requirements).

2. The AREF Awards Advisory Panel will review all the eligible applications to the College of Experts and recommend to the AREF Director whether each applicant meets the selection criteria (see preceding section “What is AREF looking for?”). We expect the selection to take place at the end of June 2016.
3. We hope that all applicants who meet the criteria will be selected. However, the AREF Awards Advisory Panel will take account of the following:
 - AREF needs for coverage and balance across disease/health areas, research disciplines, technologies and methods.
 - Balance between members from sub-Saharan Africa and from elsewhere.
 - Gender balance.

What would I be committing myself to – what is my role?

As a **College member**, you will be invited to assess **up to ten applications for Fellowship placements in a year**.

How does the assessment of Fellowship applications work?



1. We aim to send you a set of up to ten Fellowship applications on or soon after **13 July 2016**.
2. The on-line briefing in **early-to-mid July** will include discussion of a “mock” proposal and how it would be assessed. The idea is to standardise the assessments to ensure fairness.

3. As an assessor (i.e. a referee or reviewer) you will assess each proposal on your own against a set of criteria, identifying strengths and weaknesses. We ask you to give the proposal a preliminary and to draft a short report for the Awards Assessment Panel and as feedback for the applicant.
4. Your assessments will need to be completed by the end of August. This will give you four to six clear weeks to assess your set of proposals: this is in line with feedback last year from College members.
5. This year, we plan to hold a set of “expert panel” conference calls or on-line meetings of the assessors in early to mid September.
 - Expert panels comprising the CoE assessors will be organised by discipline / field once we have analysed the scope of the Fellowship applications received by the 6 July.
 - The expert panels will review the individual CoE scores and reports. Again this about standardisation and achieving fairness.
 - The panel members will score *all* the applications allocated to the panel; that includes re-scoring each member being able to re-score the proposals they were originally allocated.
 - Panel members will also have the opportunity to amend the reports on the applications they were allocated originally.
 - The proposals will then be placed in rank order with respect to the median score. The rank, median score, mean and range of the proposals will be reported by the AREF secretariat to the Awards Assessment Panel – which overviews the whole process.
6. The Awards Assessment Panel will consider the ranked lists from the expert panels in early-mid October and draw up a final integrated short-list, with recommendations for funding.
7. A further step is for the secretariat to conduct clarification and due diligence on-line interviews with the short-listed applicants and a representative of the two sponsoring institutions (their employer and their host).
8. Finally, the Award Assessment Panel recommendations are considered by the AREF Board, which makes the final funding decision, in mid November.

We will ask you later, in 2016, to help us **evaluate** whether the Fellowships that you assessed have achieved what they set out to do.

Integrity of the Fellowship application process

Being a peer reviewer involves trust. Reviewers have a duty to act with integrity. This includes the following:

- Treating all applicants and applications fairly and equitably – not favouring your own institution, country, research topic and so on.
- Doing a thorough, objective assessment against the criteria
- Keeping information, in particular applications and the outcomes of the reviews, confidential.

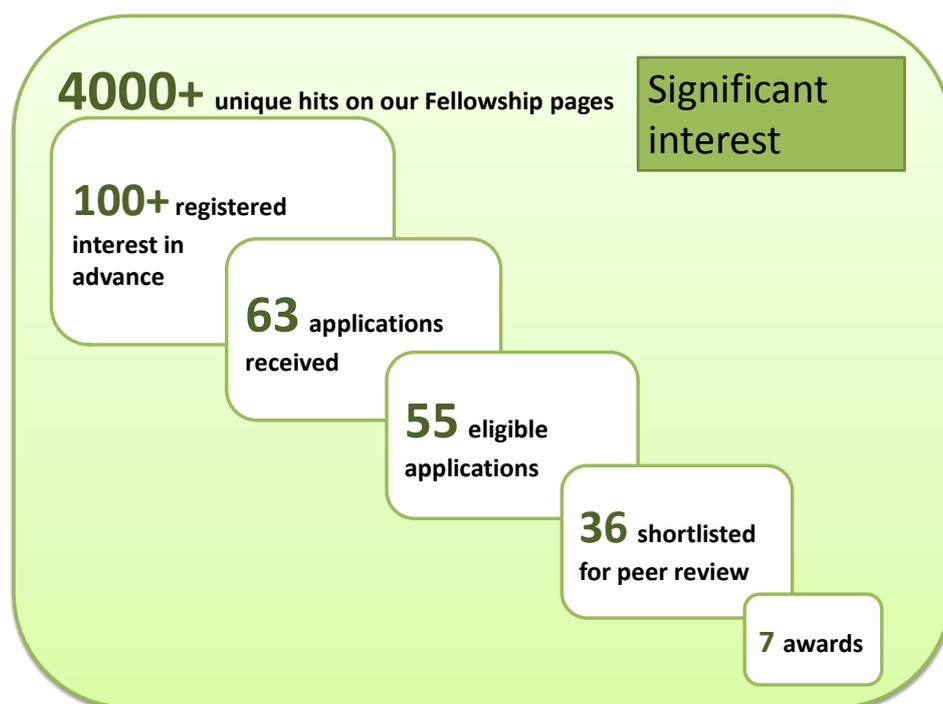
African nationals will not review applications from their own countries.

Nationals of other countries will not review applications involving their home institutions or institutions/programmes in Africa with which they are associated.

If you want to learn more about the ethics of peer review in general, visit the MRC website ([Guidance for Peer Reviewers](#)).

How many Fellowships applications did AREF receive last year – and how many awards did it make?

Last year's call produced several thousand unique-hits on the main announcement page. In the end there were 63 applications. We were very pleased to make seven Fellowship awards.



We are working hard to grow the Programme. Evidence of need and quality of fellowships from the first two rounds may help us raise additional funds. (If you know of potential donors or funders – do let us know!).

What strategic issues did you encounter last year?

We were pleased with the response to the call for applications last year (see above). But we encountered some issues, for instance:

Nationality

We received applications from 13 African countries, including Benin, Ghana, The Gambia, Nigeria, Senegal, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Tanzania, Uganda and Malawi. However we should like to do better in engaging francophone and lusophone countries.

Gender

27% of the eligible applications last year were from women, roughly the proportion of women reported to form part of the research sector in Africa. But only 13% of women were funded. This suggests that women did less well in last year's competition than did men. We are working to achieve greater equality of opportunity for women in this year's competition.

Diversity of health areas and disciplines

Feedback from the College members who assessed (reviewed) last year's proposals was that we needed to be better at matching the expertise of the reviewer to the topic and research methods represented of the individual applications. For that reason, we aim to double the size of the College to at least 50 people in 2016.

We also aim to grow the proportion of strong, fundable applications in **population sciences, in epidemiology and social and economic sciences, maths and statistics, health systems and policy, and "one-health" research – all as applied to human health challenges of Sub-Saharan Africa**. At the same time we seek grow College expertise in the same areas.

Will I be paid?

No, College of Experts will not be paid. AREF is working within the framework of "scientific citizenship" in which peer-reviewers give generously of their time and expertise, as a contribution to those who follow them. Many reviewers say that being part of the process broadens their own thinking.

Next steps

If you think you meet our criteria and are keen to contribute and learn, do please

- Send the form and a short CV (research) to us at aref@mrf.mrc.ac.uk
- If you have questions, write to us, using the same email address.

Contact details and links

Director: Professor Tumani Corrah

Deputy Director: Dr Peter Dukes

Fellowship Manager: Mr Sulayman Janneh

Contact us at: aref@mrf.mrc.ac.uk

AREF website: <http://www.medicalresearchfoundation.org.uk/aref/>

MRC Guidance for peer reviewers: This is a useful guide. It is these standards with which AREF aims to be consistent <http://www.mrc.ac.uk/funding/peer-review/guidance-for-peer-reviewers/>