

Dissecting Research Proposal under a Microscope Lens

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I once submitted a research proposal in a highly prestigious funding competition. While the main thrust of the program is to give an experienced researcher a boost in career, a comment by an evaluator noting my supposed-to-be “well-established” career made me reflect on how a panel evaluates research productivity. As an applicant, I see my application as an opportunity to further my professional development while the evaluator saw it differently. This experience is just one of the many instances where a research proposal is judged based on the opinion of the panel of evaluators. But who can truly say if a research project is worthy of funding? Can an expert evaluator from developed countries accurately judge the scientific merit of a project proposed by or for a researcher in a developing world? These are the similar questions that prompted funders Jean Lebel, Robert McLean and others at Canada’s International Development Research Center to develop a tool that will evaluate the quality of research that is grounded in, and applicable to, the local experiences. This practical tool, dubbed as the Research Quality Plus (RQ+), recognizes scientific merit as an important criterion but place values on its use from the perspectives of the stakeholders and end-users. It directs attention on how well scientists can highlight their research for its use. RQ+ also centers on the following views:

- Evaluators should see the research proposal from the eyes of the submitting scientist, understanding the local context from which the researcher proposed the project.
- Evaluators should weigh on how the researcher has clearly stated the values and objectives of the endeavor.
- Evaluators must use systematic and comparable evaluation rubric, not based on their personal opinion and experiences, but on an assessment tool that is borne of the interaction between the evaluators and the intended users, field experts, and other non-scientific beneficiaries.

RQ+ has been so far used to re-evaluate 170 previously funded IDRC projects. It has showed that research proposals from the global south are of high-quality and well-positioned to be of use at the local setting. This also means that researchers in the region are well-suited to prepare projects that can address problems specific to their region. Proposals should also include capacity training as scientific excellence is very much tied to research capability. Thorough research can also be equally useful, and this can clearly address the main issue policymakers often see when approving budgets for research programs. However, RQ+ can still be improved. It is important that RQ+ as a tool is aligned or comparable with global measures of research quality. It need not consume so much time as it is now. Nevertheless, the article is very explicit in its message to create an appropriate tool for evaluating competitive research proposals.