EDICa

Good Practice Guide on the Research Funding Process

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This guide is a living document that seeks to highlight barriers to equitable funding outcomes and various approaches of good practices to overcome these. Research funding is allocated in many different ways and this guide suggests a range of practices which are based on EDICa's evidence-based research. These practices are drawn together into a single resource and not all of the practices presented here will be relevant to, or feasible in, every circumstance. We would be delighted to hear examples of initiatives that you have in place and which tackle the barriers discussed in this guide.

The recommendations for good practice outlined in this guide stem from two EDICa studies in which we interviewed 35 researchers who served on assessment panels for six major UK funding organisations, 15 research managers from both modern and research-intensive universities. We also held three focus groups with research managers and applicants who had gone through internal selection processes and submitted bids to funders as well as speaking regularly with the funding consortium who supported the EDI Caucus.

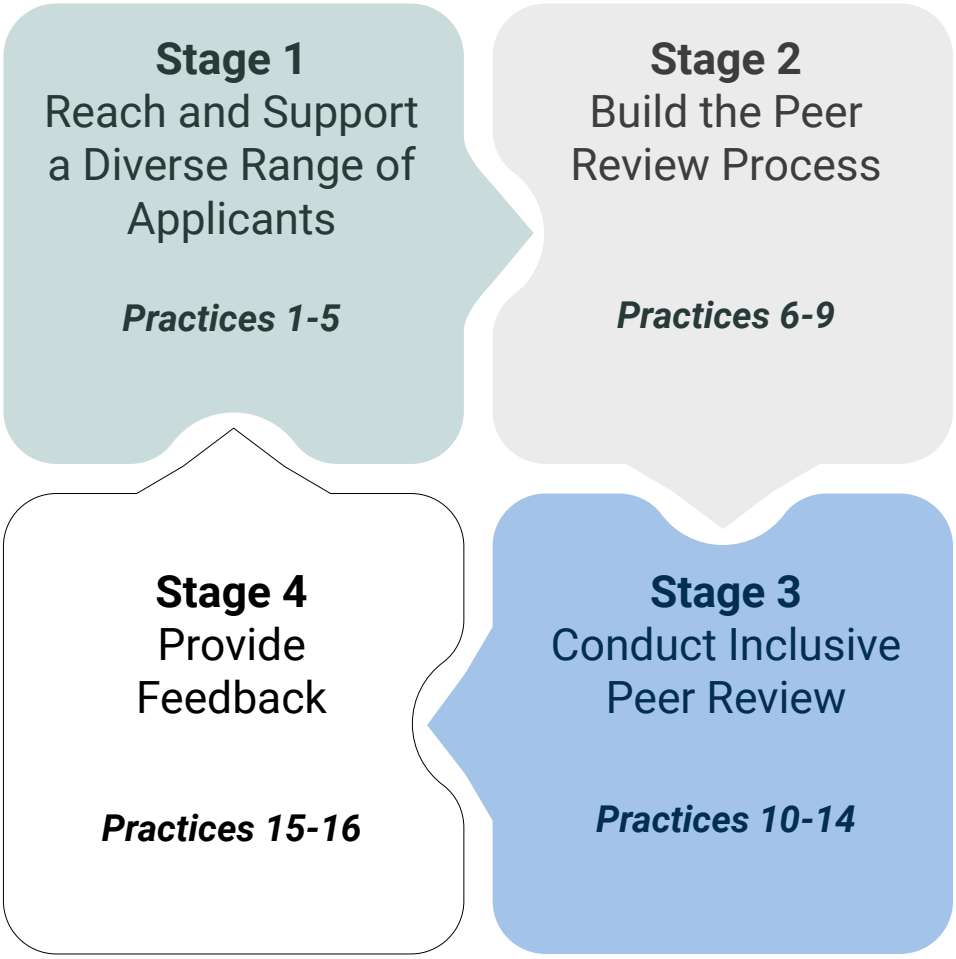
The assessment processes for grant funding varies across disciplines and across different types of call. In some settings assessment panellists also acted as reviewers whilst in others reviewing and panel membership were separate roles.

We use the following terms to distinguish between these different formats:

Reviewers refers to those who evaluate applications, but do not serve on a panel.

Panellists refers to those who serve on panels, noting that they may also act as reviewers or may have been given the task of accepting reviewers' comments and scores before making a final decision.

Assessors is an umbrella-term that refers to all.



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Stage 1

Reach and Support a Diverse Range of Applicants

Practice 1:
Review historic application profiles

Purpose:

Many of the most significant barriers to equitable funding occur early in the funding pipeline. Systemic issues at institutional level and the nature of the call itself can influence who applies. Interventions to reach potential applicants from under-represented groups therefore need to start early. Being data-led in terms of who has historically applied and noticing who hasn't applied helps inform targeted, proactive and inclusive outreach as well as shaping the call design.

Practice:

Aim to routinely gather the fullest picture of applicants that you interact with to really understand who you need to target, how to reach them and what barriers they may face in applying. Such information should be collected in ways which protect anonymity since applicants are known to be hesitant about sharing data in relation to their application(s). Going beyond the set of legally defined protected characteristics like gender, ethnicity and disability, means useful insights can be gathered from:

- Contract type (full-time, part-time, fixed-term, permanent)
- Career stage
- Long-term health conditions
- Institution type (research intensive, modern, specialised, etc.)
- Geography
- Subject / Discipline
- Methodological preferences
- Neurodiversity
- First language
- Nationality
- Caring responsibilities
- Socio-economic background
- Application history

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Practice 2:
Target pre-application engagement

Purpose:

Academics who hear about funding opportunities early tend to gather insights about which approaches and ideas are most likely to succeed. Those with access to networks, institutional expertise and peer support are more likely to access early news of new opportunities. In contrast, researchers in less research-intensive settings are at a higher risk of missing suitable calls or hearing about them closer to the application deadline. They may also lack access to experienced colleagues who might help refine their application.

Practice:

- Reach out to under-represented groups via intermediary organisations (such as learned societies) and networks (many employers and professional or learned societies support groups of colleagues who share particular protected characteristics)
- Provide the longest lead time possible and, where feasible, avoid scheduling call announcements / closing dates during periods of reduced availability (e.g. teaching-intensive periods, holiday seasons, etc.)
- Communicate clearly what, if any, opportunities applicants will have regarding extensions

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Practice 3:
Host information webinars

Purpose:

Hearing directly from those running a funding call can make tacit information more explicit and therefore helps ensure everyone has access to the same information. Researchers from under-represented groups are less likely to learn how to frame their ideas, build budgets, position collaborations, etc from existing or historic grant holders. Opportunities for dialogue with potential applicants can also help surface issues, ambiguities and questions that funders may not have considered.

> ***"I have colleagues who I talk to in my own department and I'm there, yes, to do the work for the [funder], but also to help my local colleagues. If it were the case that all the documentation on the website and all the webinars that are there were really conveying all the information to everybody equally, then they wouldn't need to come to me for clarifying questions, but they do."***

Practice:

- Host and record a webinar, ideally in accessible format and use this to share information about the call as well as to answer questions
- Make the recording available to enable maximum access to this pre-application information
- Evaluate how well potential applicants and/or research support teams understand the eligibility criteria and assessment process
- Share the assessment criteria that will be used openly and consider sharing anonymised examples of successful applications from different types of research organisation to show how they met or exceeded the assessment criteria.

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Practice 4:
Set clear expectations for leadership roles

Purpose:

UKRI diversity data show that project leadership roles miss benchmarks across gender, ethnicity and disability. Perhaps understandably, established applicants with track records of successful awards may be perceived as lower risk by both funders and research organisations. Clear guidelines from funders can encourage research organisations to nominate a more diverse group of applicants for project leadership roles.

> ***"It's very difficult for a university to take decisions that could reduce their success…You tend to get that with senior leaders: if there's something that they know works – this particular group, this particular individual is really successful, they get loads of grants – then why would we take a decision to put something else forward that's untested?"***

Practice:

- Create overt incentives for applicants from under-represented groups to be placed into project leadership roles, perhaps supported by more experienced researchers, and consider making this an assessment criterion
- Consider the pathway to specific funding opportunities such as Fellowships and the role that prior funding experience might play in excluding under-represented groups
- Include dedicated project time to train researchers from under-represented groups to become leaders in future applications
- For larger calls, consider the role that Flexible Funds can play in growing research capacity, particularly in under-represented groups

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Practice 5:
Introduce an Expression of Interest (EoI) stage

Purpose:

An EoI stage creates an early dialogue with potential applicants. This can be highly effective for two reasons: first, early effective feedback can nurture interest and engagement from groups who might otherwise not produce viable applications. Second, it can save resources and time for both assessors and applicants by filtering applications which do not fit with the call reducing the assessment burden associated with full applications. This can be resource-intensive and requires both long-term planning and careful management of any feedback provided.

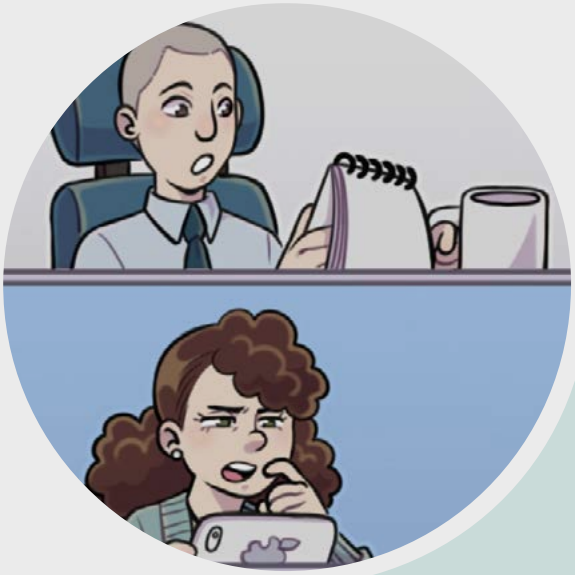
Practice:

- Require potential applicants to submit a short, non-binding and high-level summary of the potential bid they might develop
- Offer feedback either on individual EoIs or based on common themes identified
- Consider whether EoI process should be demand-managed to avoid increasing volumes of submissions.

Recommended for call size: may be more practical for larger calls

Stage 2

Build the Peer Review Process



Practice 6:
Anticipate and manage reviewer behaviour under time pressure

Purpose:

The work of reviewing research proposals is often distributed, time-pressured and may well be done on a voluntary basis. Well intended guidance to address EDI issues may not be digested and enacted as intended in those circumstances.

> ***"I do find the narrative CV difficult... I won't get the information I want out of it, I'll just look up their website... Just because you want to have all the basic information that you want to see."***
>
> ***"Panel members approach it in different ways... some people will read the proposal and all of the associated papers... some people will just read the debates between the reviewers and the proposers. So, there's a different depth of knowledge of the proposals around the panel, and that makes for a bit of an uneven discussion."***

Practice:

- Gather feedback from assessors regarding their experience of both evaluating proposals and enacting any EDI guidance
- Ensure that changes to the format in which applications are presented are clearly mapped to the assessment criteria and reflect any EDI guidance issued.

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Funders should seek a dialogue with assessors on their experience with implementing EDI interventions, and whether desired outcomes of interventions are clearly understood.

Practice 7:
Recruit a diverse range of reviewers

Purpose:

There is a tendency for the pool of reviewers to correlate with the pool of researchers who have previously held funding. Opening up opportunities to those at a range of career stages, with a particular emphasis on those from under-represented groups of researchers serves two purposes. First, it brings in fresh perspectives and may provoke greater discussion of less established approaches, methods or partnerships in funding bids. Second, it creates a channel via which insights based on lived experience of how assessment and panel discussions operate might flow to under-represented groups to help prepare competitive bids for future calls.

> ***"I wouldn't say there's any overt discrimination, but I think it's more about a sort of fixed mindset, in terms of, 'This is the way we do science.' If anybody comes in with a different way of doing things, rather than seeing it as potentially innovative, which is what I might think, they might think, 'That's just not the way we do it."***
>
> ***"Being able to read somebody else's application and how they've structured it and what goes on in it, that actually is one of the most beneficial parts of being on the panel, as you learn how to write the application so much, which is why having so few early career researchers on the panels, even as observers, is a deficit."***

Reviewer training is key and without effective feedback to reviewers problematic reviewing styles persist unchecked. Poor reviews are often too short, may be scored in ways which do not fully reflect the assessment criteria and can be influenced by misunderstandings of the method or topic. Even where panellists recognise that a score is not fully justified it may serve an anchoring role, positively or negatively which impacts the affected application (see Practice 10).

Practice:

- Recruit reviewers openly and encourage participation from under-represented groups of researchers, including those with limited or no experience of holding research awards
- Consider asking senior assessors to mentor first-time assessors
- Offer training and calibration exercises before reviewing begins to ensure reviewers interpret assessment criteria consistently
- Create minimum quality criteria for reviews to be included in the assessment such that any review falling below this quality threshold (e.g. too short, mismatched scores and narrative, not evaluated in relation to the criteria) is discarded ahead of a panel discussion to minimise its impact
- Give feedback to reviewers.

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Practice 8:
Train to address a wide range of biases

Purpose:

Research organisations often offer EDI training to their employees for a range of different reasons. However, there are particular issues which arise in peer-review settings and generic EDI training is unlikely to address the specific issues arising from institutional setting, subject or methodological approach, etc. If such issues are not even considered as a source of potential bias by funders or assessors, their impact, and their intersectional consequences, in the review process will not be addressed.

> ***"There's also immense amounts of snobbery between disciplines and sub-disciplines, and people don't like this approach or that approach, or they know about a certain approach…"***
>
> ***"There's also some geographical bias as well. So particularly in terms of why would we send this money up to Scotland?"***
>
> ***"It's money going after money already spent. We all know that when you look at the distribution of research funding across the country, it is very disproportionate and goes to particular institutions. Those institutions are also not necessarily equitable around their agenda or ethnic minority ratios."***

Practice:

- Develop standardised applied EDI training materials (e.g. short modules, case studies, checklists) which go beyond protected characteristics and address the additional barriers encountered by under-represented groups of researchers
- Ensure that examples are used to illustrate how bias can be recognised and appropriately challenged.

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Practice 9:
Adopt a broad definition of conflict of interest

Purpose:

Conflict of interest policies tend to focus on direct personal and professional connections, such as current or former colleagues or co-authoring relationships. However, within specialist research areas issues relating to particular methods or institutions are rarely framed as conflicts of interest. Familiarity with individuals, research groups or research organisations can shape how generously applications are interpreted even where there is no direct collaboration or working relationship and, in specialist areas, it may not be possible to anonymise applications effectively. Conflict of interest policies should therefore be expanded to encourage reviewer reflexivity.

> ***"The most important bias I see in panel is about people fighting for their domain. The reviewers, it's not about gender or anything, it's something they find close to their heart. They relate to it and they fight for it. That's where you see more impact on the most senior people because they're pushing for it."***

Practice:

- Guidelines: expand conflict of interest declarations beyond those created by pre-existing personal, professional or organisational relationships with applicants
- Explicitly acknowledge the issues arising from strong opinions about a proposal's host institution, subject area or method
- Ensure reviewer training offers examples of how to surface and challenge conflicts of interest
- Use designate roles in review panels, such as process observers, to monitor compliance with the broader definition of conflict being utilised.

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Stage 3

Conduct Inclusive Peer Review

Practice 10:
Address outlier scores

Purpose

It is not uncommon for assessment panels to receive review scores in the form of an initial ranking. It is important to set out how such initial review scoring is handled, using an approach which addresses anchoring (i.e. comparing a proposal to its predecessors) and timing (e.g. before or after a break, proposals falling early, mid or late in sequence, or where there is time pressure relating to a fixed finish time).

Outlier scores, whether negative or positive, can reflect inconsistent application of assessment criteria but they can also reflect diverse perspectives on the suitability or experience of approaches/applicants. It is important to put processes in place that don't automatically result in a disadvantage for the applicant in such cases:

"There is some interesting unrelated research on jury decision-making, when the jury has been advised they should disregard evidence that's been put to them; it's impossible, you know, because it's there. By reminding people that they should disregard it, it's even stronger in people's minds. So, if you then have equally scored applications, well, which one are you going to go with? The one that had a divergence or the one that has three straight As?"

"This one person who gave a low score, it was the case where there was one really low reviewer, which we thought should be discarded. They thought it shouldn't be and they just said, "I agree with the reviews so it shouldn't be funded." One person then completely decides what's happening which I don't think should be the case."

Practice

- Set clear thresholds for what constitutes an outlier score, systematically identify these and set a protocol for how they will be treated
- Consider introducing proposals in a randomised order, in thematic groups or by bands based on initial scoring
- Support chairs to actively manage fatigue and sequencing effects, for example by including these in training, by appointing responsibility beyond the chair for monitoring the process (e.g. by noticing whether the time spent per proposal remains consistent) or by revisiting initial cases once a series of applications have been reviewed
- Collect and provide reviewer self-assessment information (e.g. expertise in the topic, disciplinary background, career stage) to match the expertise which panel members can bring to any assessment of outlier scores.

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Practice 11:
Assess for excellence, risk and EDI

Purpose

Whilst academic excellence is treated as purely objective, perceptions of risk can lead to outcomes where track record operates as a dominant logic in the assessment process. Individuals and research organisations with resource and expertise generated by prior funding can be viewed as lower risk. Writing and presentation styles that emulate previously successful applications may be seen as a proxy for competence and excellence without acknowledging the differential benefits available with access to peers and advice in more research-intensive settings. Researchers from under-represented groups, perhaps advocating work with/for under researched communities and/or deploying novel approaches are more likely to be evaluated as risky unless the assessment criteria delineate between ideas and presentational finesse.

"Yeah, the track record is a really tricky one because we do want to find some reassurance somewhere that this high-risk project is going to be successful, right? So, where do we find that reassurance?"

"I have a log book of phrases from successful grants that either I've written or other people have let me have. I cut them out, paste them into this log book, and then I cut and paste them into future proposals. If you don't have a supervisor like me that tells you this or gives you that log book, I don't know how you could ever compete, especially in multidisciplinary science, right?"

Practice

- Problematise the terms "risk" and "excellence" and create definitions by using guidelines that call out these potential sources of bias in the review process
- Offer explicit guidance on the role that issues such as linguistic fluency and the presentation of project details (e.g. planning, mitigation, data management, etc.) will play in assessing written proposals and/or in interview processes that inform final funding decisions.

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Practice 12:
Create psychologically safe spaces

Purpose

Panel chairs play a key role in creating a safe space where all assessors have a voice and where constructive, respectful debate is the norm. However, panel chairing carries a heavy cognitive and emotional load: managing conflict, adherence to assessment criteria, monitoring unconscious bias and dealing with power dynamics all whilst operating under significant time pressure.

Introducing a specific role with responsibility for process, inclusion and fairness and allocating this to someone other than the chair can lighten the load. Process observer roles can facilitate learning within and between rounds of assessment ensuring that practice improves over time.

> ***"It is such a rich learning environment to be on a panel. It teaches everybody on the panel so much. I use it as an EDI/accessibility advisor to teach the entire panel. I go in there not just to teach the applicants. The most important people I'm teaching there are the panellists."***

Practice

- Use panel co-chairing arrangements where feasible with shared responsibility for keeping to assessment criteria, managing time, and safeguarding inclusive discussion.
- Designate one or more non-funder panel member as responsible for specific issues e.g. adherence to assessment criteria, unconscious bias or what is not being said in discussions
- Consider the use of under-represented groups of researchers as a source of panel co-chairs with an expectation that insights about the review process can be shared with funders and future applicants
- Equip chairs, co-chairs and process advisers with practical tools such as checklists to use live in the meeting

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

Practice 13:
Curate a balanced portfolio of funded projects

Purpose

The evidence suggests that funding decisions follow patterns which favour established researchers, research groups and research organisations. Introducing a clear expectation that the diversity of the portfolio of funded projects will be reviewed ensures that review panels engage in active reflection before final decisions are made. Panels should be encouraged to consider methods, subject areas and research organisations which are not yet established.

Practice

- Review final awards for diversity of institution, geography, methodology and topic
- Strike an appropriate balance between the quality of individual proposals, thematic coverage, and the diversity of experiences, methods and places receiving support.

Recommended for call size: applies only to calls where a range of proposals will recieve funding

Practice 14:
Consider the role of interviews in assessment

Purpose

Interviews are often used in the latter stage of larger funding calls and offer an indication of how applicants perform in a specific set of circumstances. Linguistic fluency and confidence in interview settings does not necessarily correlate directly with the capacity to deliver thoughtful, rigorous research over an extended period.

Neurodivergent applicants, non-native English speakers, under-represented groups of researchers unfamiliar with tacit communication norms and those who are less eloquent or charismatic may face significant, unspoken disadvantages. Conversely, applicants who can draw on insights, participate in mock interviews in advance and receive coaching from colleagues who have already succeeded in equivalent interview processes gain significant unseen advantages.

> ***"If you're neurodivergent, if English is not your first language, then you are inherently at a disadvantage. If you are just not very eloquent, if you're not very confident, if you're not very charismatic, your impact is substantially reduced. […] We want people that can do thoughtful evidence-based considered research that is of high impact. None of those characteristics are assessed by interview."***

Practice

- Consider alternative formats such as requesting written or recorded responses to the questions which would be asked at interview
- Where interviews are deemed essential, conduct an equalities impact assessment and consult widely about the proposed format
- Ensure accessibility adjustments are proactively advertised as standard e.g. advance notice of questions, extended preparation time, access to sign language or other enabling resources as required, the option to have a support person present, etc.
- Provide appropriate guidance to the interview panel to mitigate the risk of awarding high scores for linguistic confidence and to focus instead on response content in relation to agreed criteria.

Recommended for call size: calls which involve an interview stage

Stage 4

Provide feedback

Practice 15:
Provide formative feedback

Purpose

Feeback is critical to enable unsuccessful applicants from under-represented groups of researchers to learn, improve and reapply to a future funding call with a greater likelihood of success. However, feedback provided to unsuccessful applicants is often minimal, vague or entirely absent.

Time and resource pressures represent a practical but not insurmountable constraint. There may also be concerns if there are high volumes of applications or relating to the disclosure of case specific reasons for funding decisions. However, actionable, constructive solutions which offer applicants insights into how their proposal was assessed, where it fell short against the criteria, and what they can do differently next time are important enablers of future diversity. Indeed, feedback is disproportionately useful to those researchers who lack access to professional networks where they might source such insights.

Practice

- Commit to providing written feedback to all applicants
- Consider the efficiencies which can be gained from
  - a thematic analysis of the characteristics of proposals that scored well/less well
  - sharing anonymised comments from individual reviewers where this has been set as a clear expectation in advance
  - offering specific suggestions to individual applicants where the volume permits this
  - introducing “award subject to” conditions for borderline applications from under-represented groups of researchers
- Require panel chairs and/or assessors to host a debrief webinar where insights about what scored well/less well are shared publicly with opportunities for Q&A.

Recommended for call size: suitable for all call sizes, subject to careful process design and clear expectation setting at the outset

Practice 16:
Report diversity data on applicants and outcomes

Purpose

Creating transparency about the funding outcomes being achieved both from individual calls and across calls from the same funder sends a powerful signal of commitment to under-represented groups of researchers. Doing so in relation to a broad set of applicant characteristics is particularly important in the case of research funding and these characteristics could include:

- Contract type (full-time, part-time, fixed-term, permanent)
- Career stage
- Institution type (research intensive, modern, specialised, etc.)
- Geography
- Subject / Discipline
- Methodological preferences
- Neurodiversity
- First language
- Nationality
- Caring responsibilities
- Socio-economic background
- Application history

New interventions aimed at enhancing the diversity of award holders (e.g. narrative CVs) can be most meaningfully evaluated by reviewing such outcomes relative to a broad range of characteristics and by considering intersectional issues.

Practice

- Request demographic information early in the process (*see Practice 1*) and report outcomes against such data
- Build confidence in relation to confidentiality by explaining clearly why data are collected, how they will be used and who will benefit
- Publish disaggregated outcome data against as many demographic factors as possible, in accessible formats, to show applicant and award distributions within and across characteristics
- Provide feedback to assessors from each panel about the cases that they reviewed and provide aggregate feedback to prospective assessors before they begin to evaluate applications to raise awareness of patterns, concerns and the effectiveness of current interventions
- Feed demographic findings forward into future calls (*see Practice 1*) creating a continuous improvement cycle.

Recommended for call size: applies to all call sizes

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