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The Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research's early-career fellowships aim to boost international collaboration, and are even open to social sciences and humanities researchers, executive director Jenny Baeseman tells Gretchen Ransow.

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Early-career researchers with an interest in international collaboration and working in other countries to carry out Antarctic research in many different fields are eligible for the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research's Fellowships.

They can apply to pursue their work in any lab or facility in, or run by, any of SCAR's 43 member countries, as long as it is not their country of origin or residence. Visiting somewhere new, rather than revisiting somewhere you have worked before, is looked on favourably as it drives fresh collaboration across nations.

Six SCAR Fellowships, of up to \$15,000 (£11,600), are available this year and the deadline for applications is 1 July.

What is SCAR's mission?

We coordinate science and research that happens in Antarctica or relates to the Antarctic's role within the global ecosystem. This includes expeditions, but also research in astronomy that takes place near the South Pole. We also support capacity building through schemes such as our visiting professorships, where experienced researchers spend a few weeks in a member country with a smaller Antarctic programme to help boost research capability. We're celebrating our 60th anniversary in 2018.

Does SCAR have an ethos that cuts across its programmes?

Yes, we operate with a bottom-up approach, so we try to support scientists working together to come up with ideas, and help coordinate working groups to work on new questions in science.

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By Gretchen Ransow

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How do the SCAR fellowships fit into your mission?

The scheme supports exchanges for early-career researchers. They can spend several months at a lab in another country to work on their research. This should either complement their PhD or postdoc or help them learn a new skill, with the hope that they will bring that information back to their home country and share it.

How popular is this programme?

The fellowships are well subscribed—we usually get between 55 and 75 applicants, and normally we only have funds to give out five. But this year we received some funding from one of our member countries, India, for an additional early-career fellowship, bringing the total available to six.

Should applicants come from countries with smaller programmes?

The fellowship programme is more about building a person's research capacity rather than a country's, so we support applicants from countries with well-established research infrastructure like the UK as well as those with smaller programmes.

How long should fellowships last?

They should be completed within a year. However, there's no minimum duration, and they can last for a month or a couple of months only. Usually, people do plan to stay for several months.

Do applicants often request the full \$15,000?

Yes, they do. However, there is a budget justification that's required too, so applicants need to show that the money is necessary for the project they are proposing. The host institution is expected to make a contribution, but the funds can be used for diverse things such as lodging, equipment, expendables for experiments, as well as travel costs or food.

What other eligibility requirements are there?

The proposal must fit within the objectives of SCAR's science groups or research programmes. SCAR has more than 30 different groups, which can all be found under the [science section of our website](#). We hope applicants will see that there's a group within SCAR working on similar topics to those that interest them. This might encourage young researchers to get involved and open up a longer-term mentoring opportunity for them. We're looking to encourage engagement with the international research community beyond the duration of the fellowship.

How broad are SCAR's research interests?

There's usually a group that most researchers' proposals would fit into. Applicants can also have a look at what previous fellows have done, which serves as a useful guide. There is information on our website about where previous fellows are from, where they went, as well as their reports if they've submitted them. We've supported everything from biology and glaciology to physics.

What about the humanities and social sciences?

Yes, that's an area that's really growing within Antarctic science. We've always supported it, but this year we've stated more explicitly that we're behind it because social scientists told us that it wasn't particularly clear.

What kind of humanities or social sciences research is eligible?

It's true that we don't automatically think about people when we think about Antarctica, because people don't live there. But there is

some really interesting research happening. For example, consider tourism. There are questions around its impact, as well as why people are willing to pay so much money to visit the Antarctic. Geopolitical research is another possibility; how the conservation agenda is affecting national policies. And of course the history of Antarctica and the explorers who've travelled there is a perennial topic of interest.

Are there any common mistakes that applicants make?

Sometimes, oddly enough, people just don't read the eligibility criteria. So the applicant might not be within five years of completing their PhD, or they might not yet be at the PhD stage.

Another big one that people don't understand is that you need to go to a lab or research centre in a different country, preferably one you're not already connected to. We often receive applications where someone will have gained their PhD in country X and are now doing a postdoc in country Y and they want to use the fellowship to go back to country X. These proposals rarely win.

What makes an application stand out?

Well, the research questions are always the most important. But when applicants detail how this experience will help them in the future, that always goes down well. For example, if they are going to a different lab to learn a new technique, explaining how that will help them bridge into another field of science will help their application. Also, we look kindly upon applicants who have a plan to do some outreach or wider science communication, either in the host country or back home.

Does the applicant need an established relationship with the lab they want to visit?

No, but they need to show commitment from the lab to host them. Beyond that we don't require evidence of anything deeper. To start things it can be as simple as an applicant has interacted with some scientists at a conference, or even just read their papers and proposed to go stay with them.

What happens once they submit the application?

There's quite a bit of activity once the submit button is hit. Each application is reviewed by three scientists from around the world—members of our scientific community. The applications are scored based on the following five criteria.

- The quality of the proposal (the score awarded counts for 35 per cent of the total mark).
- The relevance to SCAR's activities (25 per cent).
- Whether the proposal helps build capacity in the country that would most benefit (20 per cent).
- Whether the proposal is self-contained and well thought-out (10 per cent).
- Whether the study is feasible and will lead to publication (10 per cent).

In addition, reviewers will check certain criteria, like is the applicant going to a new country. Once the reviews are back, the scores are tallied, and usually the result is a clear separation between the top ranked folks and those that need a little more help.

You award marks for proposed studies that are self-contained. Do you accept applications where SCAR's funding would be used as an add-on to a larger project?

Yes, to an extent. Most of the time there is already some research going on in the lab or institution where the fellow is applying to go, so the funds from the fellowship help the fellow contribute something additional to that project. The desire for it to be self-contained is so

that if something happens that is out of the fellow's control, they would still be able to finish the project to the best of their ability. What's really important is that the use of funds is justified and will benefit the fellow.

Do you provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants?

We changed our policy on this recently. From now on we will give feedback if an application was let down by one or two weaknesses. We want to tell these applicants why they lost marks to encourage them to submit again the following year with an improved application. We don't want applicants who've submitted otherwise good proposals to be left wondering why and what they could have done differently.

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