CRANE AI triage of a UKRI-funded cybersecurity grant call

IMPLEMENTED 2026 · SCIENCE AND RESEARCH · UK · BAND F · REVERSED
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A research network funded by EPSRC, part of UK Research and Innovation, used AI models to triage 179 grant proposals; almost half were rejected without being read by humans, per Times Higher Education. After criticism from applicants and other academics, the network apologised, suspended offers and said it would re-review every screened-out proposal.

ABOUT THIS SYNOPSIS

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NOTICE WORDING LAST UPDATED 16 NOVEMBER 2026

AT A GLANCE

What went wrong: Weak oversight or controls.

AI used: Several AI models, described by CRANE as closed, ring-fenced read-only large language models, scoring grant proposals as an initial triage.

Implemented: 2026. Grade: band F, Failure, Reversed.

Headline result, as reported: AI triage turned away almost half of a grant call's 179 proposals before human review; the network apologised, suspended offers and said it would re-review them, October 2026

1 · The case

The facts, as reported by the 3 sources listed at the end. Where a source is silent, the field says "Not reported".

Organisation

CRANE (Cyber Security Research and Networking Environment) NetworkPlus, hosted at the University of Oxford and funded by EPSRC. CRANE is a NetworkPlus funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and hosted at the University of Oxford. It aims to strengthen UK cyber security research. Its

Business challenge

The challenge. Not reported: the sources do not give CRANE's reasons for using AI triage. For context, THE reports that UKRI has published proposals for handling rapid growth in grant applications, driven partly by AI, including more triage and exploring AI-assisted assessment with controls and safeguards. CRANE's call drew 179 proposals.

How it was addressed. According to the email sent to rejected applicants, as reported by THE, CRANE used several AI models to score proposals against seven criteria, including relevance, quality and novelty, feasibility and value for money. A second process with different models was run to guard against any one model's idiosyncrasies, and the scores were combined into a ranking. Only proposals in the top half went to human review. CRANE's call document had said it might use AI tools in initial assessment, with reviewers accountable and the award panel making final ranking decisions. [1] [2] [3]

Who implemented it

In-house (In-house): Ran the call and the AI triage.
Model and tool suppliers: Not reported.

Technology (SEAM pillar E)

SEAM types: not established; the sources do not say how the system works. Deployment: Not reported. Vendors and products: Not reported.

Where it was built in: Models scored proposals against seven criteria in two passes; the top half went to human review.

What changed

Before: how earlier CRANE calls were assessed is not reported. In this call: AI triage removed almost half of proposals before human review. After: CRANE apologised, suspended offers and said it would re-review all screened-out applications and reconvene the funding panel. Result of the re-review: Not reported. [1] [2] [3]

Cost of failure

Not reported in money. Offers issued were suspended, all screened-out applications are to be re-reviewed and the funding panel reconvened, and CRANE apologised to applicants.

What it saved

Not reported [1] [2] [3]

Governance and control

CRANE says it used closed, ring-fenced read-only models with no internet access, human sampling and statistical cross-checks, and that it was not transparent enough about the approach. UKRI told THE its policy does not allow generative AI to conduct application assessment and that it was following up with the network to ensure compliance with its assessment conditions. No finding by UKRI or EPSRC is reported.

S2 · Accountable owner · Claimed
The call document said reviewers would be accountable and the award panel would make final ranking decisions, per THE. [1]

A1 · Safe use · Claimed
CRANE says the models had no internet access, saw only the proposal elements needed and were not trained on proposal data. [2]

A2 · Human in the loop · Missing (independent source shows it was absent)
THE reports that almost half of applications were rejected by the AI and not looked at by humans; CRANE says it used human sampling and statistical cross-checking. [1] [2]

A3 · Monitoring and assurance · Claimed
CRANE says it used statistical cross-checking and a second set of models. [1] [2]

A4 · Vendor AI · Not reported
Not reported.

A5 · Agent controls · Not reported
Not reported.

A6 · Standards and regulation · Outside scrutiny (a regulator, court, auditor or similar body acted)
UKRI told THE its policy does not allow generative AI to conduct application assessment and that it was following up with CRANE to ensure compliance; CRANE agreed its re-review approach with EPSRC. No UKRI finding is reported. [1] [2]

What worked, what did not, what is unproven

WORKED

– CRANE says proposal data stayed confidential, with no public AI services used and no training on proposal data.

DID NOT

– Almost half of 179 applications were rejected by the AI and not looked at by humans, per THE.

– Rejected applicants were told of the AI-based triage in the rejection email; an academic quoted by THE called for transparency, accuracy, clarity and consideration in how outcomes are announced.

– CRANE says it was not transparent enough about the approach; it suspended offers and committed to a re-review.

UNPROVEN

– Whether the AI scores matched what human reviewers would have decided.

– What the re-review will change.

– Whether the process complied with UKRI's assessment conditions; UKRI said it was following up, and no outcome is reported.

Timeline

Nov 2024 Oxford announces the CRANE NetworkPlus, supported by a £6 million EPSRC investment [3]

Sept 2026 Rejected applicants are told by email that an AI-based review triaged the 179 proposals; only the top half went to human review [1]

Sept 2026 UKRI tells THE its policy does not allow generative AI to conduct application assessment and that it is following up with the CRANE network [1]

Oct 2026 CRANE apologises, suspends offers and says it will re-review all screened-out applications and reconvene the funding panel [2]

2 · Grade and SEAM assessment

MarLuc's opinion, made on the evidence above. How cases are graded: marluc.co.uk/case-studies/how-we-rate

Level of change and impact

Claimed: Not applicable. Grade: F, Failure. Proof: Reversed. Route: Process-led.

No level assessed: band F, a live assessment step was suspended, offers were suspended and a full re-review was promised.

Graded F. A live grant-assessment step was suspended after almost half of applicants' proposals were rejected before human reading; the network apologised, suspended offers and committed to a re-review it agreed with EPSRC. The re-review outcome is not yet reported, and no finding by UKRI or EPSRC is reported.

The SEAM view and lessons learnt

The sources point to a process decision more than a technical fault: models ranked the proposals and only the top half went to human review, and CRANE says it was not transparent enough about the approach. The AI's accuracy was not tested in public, so the technology and the process cannot be judged separately. Before copying any triage step, a leadership team should ask what its funder's or regulator's policy allows, and how applicants will be told and can challenge a decision.

1. Check your policy and funder rules before using AI on confidential assessments.
2. Tell applicants in advance when AI is used and how to challenge it.
3. Put a human read between an AI score and any rejection.

Evidence

Score 2 of 4. Press reporting that quotes CRANE's notice and UKRI's statement; no formal review published.

Evaluation method. Press reporting (Times Higher Education) quoting CRANE's own notice, UKRI's statement and academics; no formal review published.

Sources disagree. THE's first report says AI was used to reject half of proposals; its second says almost half were rejected without human review. CRANE says it used human sampling; THE reports the rejected applications were not looked at by humans.

Status. Reversed: in October 2026 CRANE said it would re-review all screened-out proposals; outcome not reported.

3 · Original sources

Read these in full. To challenge a fact or a grade, use the contact form at marluc.co.uk or the link on https://marluc.co.uk/case-studies/crane-ukri-ai-triage-grant-call

[1] Times Higher Education: AI-only research grant rejection in UKRI-funded call sparks alarm (25 September 2026)
https://www.timeshighereducation.com/node/745176

[2] Times Higher Education: Grant proposals rejected by AI triage to be reassessed (5 October 2026)
https://www.timeshighereducation.com/node/745326

[3] University of Oxford Department of Computer Science: New UKRI-funded network to bolster UK's cyber security research ecosystem
https://www.cs.ox.ac.uk/news/2385-full.html

CRANE (Cyber Security Research and Networking Environment) NetworkPlus, hosted at the University of Oxford and funded by EPSRC website: https://www.crane.ac.uk

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