Project Proposal Evaluation Manual

The Board of the Croatian Science Foundation adopted the Project Proposal Evaluation Manual at its 136th session, held on 26 April 2019, Class: 120-02/19-02/11, File No.: 63-02/01-19-2.

Introduction

This document describes the procedure and defines the principles of evaluating project proposals submitted to calls published by the Croatian Science Foundation (hereinafter referred to as "the Foundation"). The evaluation procedure carried out by the Foundation is competitive and includes the evaluation of submitted project proposals while taking into account conditions of the Call and scientific quality of the proposals that have to be met, as well as the balanced development of scientific fields and disciplines in the Republic of Croatia.

Terms used throughout this text shall be used in the following meanings:

Applicant – person submitting a project proposal to a Call.

Project proposal – submission to a Call that is subject to evaluation.

Evaluation panel (*panel review*) – body nominated by the Board of the Foundation for implementing and monitoring the evaluation procedure and providing the Board with recommendations for funding.

Peer review – type of evaluation in which project proposals are evaluated by independent international experts.

Reviewers – independent international evaluation experts, who are, due to their scientific competence and/or wider relevant knowledge, qualified to evaluate project proposals.

Board of the Foundation – body responsible for managing the activities of the Foundation and adopting decisions on funding projects.

Foundation's Office – office responsible for organising the evaluation.

1. Basic evaluation principles

The project proposal evaluation procedure of the Foundation is based on the principles of quality, transparency, equality of treatment, confidentiality, impartiality and efficiency and promptness. In 2011, the Foundation, as a member of the Forum of European Science Foundation Member Organizations on peer review (*ESF MO Forum on "Peer review"*), actively participated in the development of fundamental evaluation principles (*Statement of Principles on Merit Review*), which were adopted at the Global Summit on Scientific

Evaluation, held in Washington in May 2012, and which ensure the standardisation of basic evaluation procedures at the global level.

The evaluation procedure implemented by the Foundation is based on the following principles[1]:

Expert assessment – Reviewers should possess relevant knowledge and expertise in order to evaluate project proposals in terms of the contribution of an individual project proposal to the broader scientific field it belongs to, as well as in relation to its specific objectives and methodology. Reviewers are selected based on clearly defined criteria.

Transparency – All decisions must be based on clearly described and publicly accessible rules, procedures and evaluation criteria. All applicants must receive adequate feedback on the evaluation of their project proposals.

Impartiality – Project proposals are evaluated in an impartial manner and on the basis of their quality. Conflicts of interest must be reported and processed according to established and public procedures.

Consistency – The evaluation procedure should be consistent with the type of call, adjusted to the characteristics of the scientific fields and proportional to the value of project proposals and work complexity.

Confidentiality – All persons and organisations involved in the evaluation procedure must respect the confidentiality of all information stated in the project proposals, including intellectual property, and confidentiality of all other documents.

Integrity and ethical issues – Ethics and integrity are the most important principles throughout the evaluation procedure and compliance with these principles is the responsibility of all persons involved in the evaluation.

All persons involved in the evaluation procedure are to apply the principle of equal treatment, regardless of the applicant's sex, age, ethnic affiliation, nationality or social background, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, language, disability, policial affiliation and social or economic conditions.

[1] Source: http://www.globalresearchcouncil.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/gs_principles-English.pdf.

2. Evaluation procedure participants

The parties participating in the evaluation procedure are the evaluation panels and independent international reviewers.

2.1. Evaluation panels

2.1.1. Establishment of evaluation panels

Evaluation panels (hereinafter referred to as: the Panels) are appointed by the Board of the Foundation.

They are established according to scientific fields: Natural Sciences, Technical Sciences, Biotechnical Sciences, Biomedicine and Health, Social Sciences and Humanities. Depending on the submissions to individual calls, a panel responsible for interdisciplinary projects may be established. The structure and the number of panels per fields and disciplines as well as the number of members in each panel shall be determined by the Board of the Foundation taking into account the average representation of project proposals for an individual call.

Panel members are nominated through a public call for the expression of interest.

2.1.2. Criteria for the selection of panel members

Panel members are selected according to the following criteria[2]:

- must hold a doctoral degree;
- published papers in the last 5 years in scientific journals indexed in the *Current Contents* database or journals indexed in other relevant bibliographic databases which are taken into account during the evaluation of papers for promotion and publications relevant for promotion in a specific scientific field;
- held opening lectures, invited lectures held at international conferences and/or internationally renowned scientific institutions;
- participated at international and/or national scientific projects;
- coordinated international or national scientific research or research group;

[2] Criteria for the nomination of panel members may differ from one programme to another and one type of evaluation to another.

- visited and underwent training at renowned research institutions abroad;
- holds patent applications;
- successfully mentored doctoral students/early-career researchers;
- has previous experience with project proposal evaluation.

2.1.3. Appointment of evaluation panel members

The decision on the appointment of the evaluation panel members is adopted by the Board of the Foundation based on the nominations received. If not enough applications for a specific scientific field have been submitted or if they do not meet all the criteria, the Board itself may appoint additional panel members. If the number of applications received is larger than the required number of evaluation panel members, candidates that have not been appointed but that meet all criteria will be registered in the database of the panel and may subsequently be included in the panel's work.

The evaluation panel members are appointed to a three-year term, with the possibility of one re-election. The identity of evaluation panel members is publicly available and is published on the Foundation's website.

During their terms, evaluation panel members may submit project proposals to the Foundation's calls, participate as team members in the projects funded by the Foundation and apply as candidates for mentors to young researchers.

- ✓ If an evaluation panel member is planning to submit a project proposal to a Call in the capacity of Principal Investigator or take part in a project as a team member, s/he should send a written notification to the Foundation beforehand. In such a case, the evaluation panel member will be excluded from the evaluation procedure for the specific call.
- ✓ If a member of the evaluation panel is planning to apply as a candidate for mentor, s/he should send a written notification to the Foundation beforehand. In such a case, the evaluation panel member will be excluded from the evaluation procedure for the specific call.

The Board of the Foundation will nominate a coordinator for each panel. The coordinator is responsible for managing the work of the panel and for the communication with the Foundation's Office. In case s/he is unable to attend, the coordinator may transfer his authority to another evaluation panel member.

2.1.4. Work of the evaluation panels

Main tasks and authorities of the evaluation panels are the following:

- Ensuring that the project proposal evaluation procedure is implemented in accordance with the rules and within the defined timeframe;
- Assessing whether a project proposal should be referred to the next evaluation round or not and providing an explanation in the latter case;
- Compiling a list of reviewers for project proposals that will be referred to peer review;
- Analysing received reviews and accepting or rejecting them, providing an explanation in the latter case;
- Evaluating and assessing the justifiability of financial plans, ethical issues and, if needed, other additional criteria;
- Ranking project proposal based on the reviews;
- Giving recommendations for funding to the Board;
- Ensuring that the process of evaluating candidates for mentors within the call "Young Researchers' Career Development Project – Training of New Doctoral Students" is implemented in accordance with the rules and within the defined timeframe, ranking the applications and giving recommendations for funding to the Board.

The panels adopt their decisions upon voting, by consensual vote. The panels conduct their work by electronic means, except for the introductory and final meetings, which are held in person (other meetings may be organized in person, if the need arises). The majority of panel members should be present at the panel meeting for the decision to be valid. The Foundation's Scientific Projects and Programmes Coordinator should be included in the communication within the panel (regular and during the meetings) as s/he writes the minutes of the panel's conclusions. If the need arises, other persons authorised by the Board may participate at the panel's meetings.

Evaluation panel members are not compensated for their work.

Upon the finalisation of the evaluation procedure, panels can deliver recommendations to the Board on the enhancement of the evaluation procedure for future calls.

2.2. Reviewers

2.2.1. Selection of reviewers

Reviewers are international experts who evaluate project proposals that have been sent to peer review by the evaluation panels. Croatian scientists may serve as reviewers, if the panel decides this is necessary.

Reviewers assess project proposals according to pre-defined criteria by means of the Evaluation Form. The list of reviewers that the Foundation's Office may contact for each project proposal is determined by the panel after consulting the Foundations' database of reviewers. The identity of reviewers is not publicly available. Reviewers are not compensated for their work.

Reviewers assessing applications of candidates for mentors within the call "Young Researchers' Career Development Project – Training of New Doctoral Students" are national experts who evaluate the candidates' project proposals. If the need arises, international reviewers may also be used.

2.2.2. Criteria for the selection of reviewers

The proposed reviewers must hold a doctoral degree and other scientific competencies in the scientific field and in the topic of the project proposal they would be evaluating.

The panel is obliged to determine whether the proposed reviewers meet all the necessary criteria.

3. Project proposal evaluation procedure

3.1. Call

The Foundation's grants are awarded solely on the basis of public calls.

The text of the calls for proposals and the related documentation is determined by the Board and includes the following information:

- ✓ Name of the programme within which the funding is awarded;
- ✓ Duration of the Call;

- ✓ Objectives of the programme;
- ✓ Terms and conditions for submitting project proposals;
- ✓ The total amount of funding available for the Call;
- ✓ The maximum amount of funding available per project;
- ✓ Eligible costs;
- ✓ Maximum duration of the funded project;
- ✓ List of necessary documentation;
- ✓ Explanation of the process of submitting a proposal;
- ✓ Deadline for submitting a proposal;
- ✓ Procedure and criteria of evaluation proposals;
- ✓ Expected duration of the evaluation procedure;
- ✓ Other data necessary for submitting a proposal.

Calls are published on the Foundation's website (www.hrzz.hr).

3.2. Application

Project proposals are submitted via the Foundation's electronic submission system (http://epp.hrzz.hr/) or in another manner described in the Call. The Foundation will not accept project proposals submitted in any other different manner. The electronic version of project proposals should contain all required signatures and certifications. It is not necessary to deliver printed copies of the project proposals.

3.3. Receiving project proposals

Project proposals may be submitted only after the Call has been published, on official forms provided by the Foundation and in the manner prescribed in the Call. When submitting the proposal, applicants are required to adhere to the Foundation's general acts and guidelines published with each Call, which they will prove by signing the documentation submitted.

When submitting the project proposals, applicants select the scientific field to which their project proposal belongs. In the case of interdisciplinary project proposals, the applicants should mark all scientific fields that their project proposal relates to and rank them accordingly.

3.4. Administrative check

Administrative check of the submitted project proposals begins after the Call deadline, and is carried out by the Foundation's Office.

The administrative check includes the review of the submitted documentation and completing the relevant administrative check protocol. The administrative check protocols are made available to all applicants simultaneously with the publication of the Call.

If, during the evaluation procedure, it is subsequently determined that a project proposal does not meet the terms and conditions of the Call or other rules prescribed by the general acts of the Foundation, a decision on the exclusion of the project proposal from the evaluation procedure may be adopted at any time. The decision on the exclusion of the project proposal from the evaluation procedure is adopted by the Board.

3.5. Next steps in the evaluation procedure

All project proposals that have been assessed as meeting the administrative requirements are referred to the evaluation procedure.

Project proposals are grouped according to the scientific fields within which they were submitted and distributed to the panels responsible for the scientific field concerned.

General information about all project proposals within a certain scientific field are forwarded by the Foundation's Office to the appropriate evaluation panel. Depending on the submissions to a particular call, interdisciplinary panels may be established or submission from interdisciplinary fields may be allocated to already existing panels.

In certain cases, evaluation panels may transfer a project proposal to a scientific field that the applicant did not choose for his/her project proposal. Such a decision must be explained in writing. The decision to transfer the project proposal to another scientific field, hence another evaluation panel, is brought by the panel coordinator with the approval of the coordinator of the panel into which the proposal is transferred.

3.6. Evaluation procedure

3.6.1. General provisions

3.6.1.1. Confidentiality of information

All persons involved in the evaluation procedure are obliged to abide by the principle of confidentiality of information they have been provided with for the purpose of implementing and/or monitoring the evaluation procedure, respecting the highest ethical and professional standards of their profession and not representing or supporting the interests of the institution where they are employed or any other organisation.

The persons involved in the evaluation procedure are not allowed to discuss the project proposals with third parties or with other participants in the evaluation process (except during the official discussion at panel meetings), to reveal information on the evaluation procedure to third parties or to communicate between panel members and applicants. During the evaluation procedure, the applicants are not allowed to contact the persons involved in the evaluation procedure regarding the submitted project proposals. Actions contrary to this provision may result in the exclusion of the project proposal from further evaluation procedure. In case a participant in the evaluation procedure is directly or indirectly connected to one or more project proposals or has any other interest in relation thereto which might undermine his/her neutrality during the evaluation, he is obliged to report such cases.

3.6.1.2. Interdisciplinarity

Considering the fact that the research whose content and methodology exceeds the boundaries of its basic scientific disciplines is growing in number, special attention during the evaluation procedure should be paid to intedisciplinary project proposals. In order to ensure that such project proposals are recognised and adequately evaluated, the applicants are given the option to mark their proposals as interdisciplinary. All participants in the evaluation procedure must ensure adequate treatment of interdisciplinary project proposals at each evaluation round (allocating project proposals to evaluation panels, the selection of peer reviewers etc.), taking into account their unique features.

3.6.1.3. Two-stage evaluation procedure

The Foundation's grants are awarded according to the prescribed procedure, which can be single-stage or two-stage procedure. The procedure and criteria for project proposal evaluation are described in the Call for Proposals.

Project proposals are grouped into evaluation panels, depending on the number and scientific fields of the submitted project proposals. Taking into consideration the terms and conditions of an individual call, a single-stage procedure can be specified, which shall be stated in the call.

Evaluation can be carried out by electronic means or at meetings in person. The procedure is implemented based on pre-defined criteria, which can be general (applicable for all calls) and specific (they apply to a specific programme that is being evaluated). Evaluation criteria for each programme are defined in the evaluation forms and are specified in each call.

Upon the finalisation of the evaluation procedure and the decision of the Board of the Foundation, the results of the evaluation of project proposals are delivered to the applicants.

3.6.2. First round of evaluation

In the first round, the evaluation panels evaluate project proposals that have been assigned to them and then adopt a decision on referring project proposals to the second evaluation round or make a reccommendation not to send it to the secound evaluation round (peer review). Proposal evaluation is carried out electronically, according to pre-defined criteria, by means of evaluation forms previously defined by the Board. Evaluation forms are available to applicants together with the Call.

If the evaluation panel members determine that a project proposal should be directed to the second round of evaluation (peer review), this project proposal is immediately sent to further procedure and the applicant is sent a notification about this.

If the evaluation panel members do not recommend that the project proposal should be sent to the second round of evaluation, they are obliged to justify their opinion in writing. The final decision is made by the Board, and it is sent to the applicant together with the panel's justification.

Applicants whose project proposals, in the panel's opinion, fail to meet basic criteria of quality, may, upon the panel members' recommendation, be restricted from applying to the next Call. The final decision on the restriction of application is made by the Board of the Foundation.

3.6.3. Second round of evaluation (peer review)

Reviewers base their evaluation solely on the submitted documents and they carry out the evaluation in accordance with the Foundation's procedures.

Project proposal evaluation is carried out according to pre-defined criteria, by means of forms for the second round of evaluation, which are determined by the Board. Forms for the second round of project proposal evaluation are made available to the applicants simultaneously with the publication of the Call.

For each project proposal that is referred to peer review, two reviews should be provided. Reviews are sent to the applicants upon completion of the entire evaluation procedure.

If the reviewer, having examined the project proposal, estimates that s/he does not possess the expertise necessary to evaluate the project proposal, s/he should inform the Foundation as soon as possible and, if possible, recommend another expert who would be able to evaluate this proposal. Reviewers are not allowed to communicate mutually and exchange information.

3.6.4. Final evaluation

During the final evaluation, the evaluation panels assess all project proposals. However, only those project proposals that have obtained two positive reviews may be recommended for funding.

During the final evaluation, the evaluation panel members read all reviews, assess the project proposals' financial plans, discuss ethical issues, support of the host institution, additional documentation and, if necessary, additional criteria determined by the Board for individual Calls. During the evaluation of the project's financial plan, evaluation panel members must assess whether all items are based on actual costs, necessary and justified in relation to the project needs.

Following the evaluation, the evaluation panels determine whether a project proposal complies with the defined criteria and decide whether to recommend it for funding. Project proposals that, in the panel's opinion, meet the criteria and receive a recommendation for funding will be ranked. The project proposals are ranked according to the scores of the reviews and the panel's judgment.

After each panel generates its own ranking list, all panel coordinators meet together to determine the final lists of project proposals recommended for funding, taking into consideration the evaluation results, the availability of financial resources and equal development of scientific fields, disciplines and branches.

3.6.5. Decisions on opening financial negotiations

Based on the evaluation results and the panel recommendations, the Board shall adopt a decision on opening financial negotiations (hereinafter: "negotiations").

During the negotiations, applicants are asked to update their financial and work plan according to the recommendations and comments of reviewers and evaluation panels. The updated financial and work plans are reviewed by the panel members, who then notify the Foundation's Office whether all recommendations and comments have been taken into account. The negotiations have to be finalised within two months from the day of the receipt of the notification on evaluation results. The deadline shall not include the time neccessary for the provision of documents issued by authorised bodies in accordance with the regulations in force. If the negotiations have not been finalised within the deadline, the Board may decide not to finance the project proposal. Upon successful completion of the negotiations, the Foundation's Office will submit the final versions of the work and financial plans to the Board. The Board will then adopt a decision on approving financing of the project. In case the negotiations have not been succesfully finalised, the Board will adopt a decision not to fund the project proposal.

4. Evaluation criteria

Project proposal evaluation criteria for a specific Call are determined by the Board. The evaluation criteria are adjusted individually to each Call in order to reflect the purpose and the goal of the programme.

All criteria that would be applied during evaluation must be made available to applicants simultaneously with the Call publication.

General criteria for evaluating project proposals are scientific quality, research relevance and feasibility, quality of the applicant and the research environment.

Scientific quality and research relevance:

- *scientific grounds of the project proposal and quality of the research plan;*
- *the importance of the proposed topic in relation to the whole research field;*
- *potential of the project proposal to improve the research field;*
- *competitiveness of the project proposal in relation to existing research on the same subject;*
- *suitability and competitiveness of the proposed methodology (in comparison to the most prominent one in the field).*

Project feasibility:

- *clear and realistic objectives and well-planned activities that lead to the achievement of objectives;*
- *realistic and attainable research (with regard to the planned time, objectives,planned results and available resources);*
- *importance and quality of the research group;*
- *identifying risks and finding appropriate solutions;*
- *assessment of the planned capacity for the implementation of the project (financial support, number and competencies of team members' and institutional support).*

Quality of the applicant and research environment:

- *scientific competencies of the applicant (estimated on the basis of previous accomplishments);*
- *applicant's competency for project management;*
- *previous research contributions of the applicant and team members in the proposed field;*
- *institutional support (providing appropriate infrastructure and other conditions necessary for the implementation of the project).*

The Foundation will not fund research that is contrary to the fundamental ethical principles, research ethics and the scientific research code of ethics. Therefore, the evaluation panel members are required to consider whether the proposal involves any ethical issues and whether they have been properly addressed (in accordance with legal provisions and international regulations). Evaluation panel members are required to establish the existence of ethical dilemmas and all other matters that may represent potential risk (e.g. safety issues, hazards, possible misuse of the results in relation to humans, animals or the environment).

In addition to the general criteria above, the Board may adopt additional criteria for project proposal evaluation. All criteria that will apply in the evaluation must be made available to applicants simultaneously with the Call publication.