

1. Purpose of this document

Thank you for agreeing to review applications submitted to the Croatian Science Foundation's (HRZZ) call DOK-2026 (Early-stage career development). According to the Croatian Science Foundation's terminology, reviews are carried out by Evaluation Committee members.

These guidelines explain:

- your role in the evaluation process,
- the documents you will receive,
- the two scoring domains and the 1–5 scoring scale,
- the relationship between numerical scores and written comments,
- how to handle confidentiality, conflicts of interest, ethics and research-integrity concerns

Please read this document before starting your reviews.

2. About the Call

The Call is divided into two sub-programmes:

- a) **Training of new doctoral researchers**, which focuses on the postgraduate level and on obtaining a doctoral degree, and
- b) **Professional development of doctoral researchers**, which focuses on the postdoctoral level

The Call enables scientifically experienced mentors to involve early-career researchers in their active research projects, with the aim of further developing the careers of these researchers. In addition to employment, the Call also promotes the strengthening of mentoring capacities and the transfer, adoption and application of new knowledge.

The Call provides funding of the full salary costs of an assistant (doctoral researcher) or senior assistant (postdoctoral researcher).

Objectives of the Call

- Training of new doctoral researchers and postdoctoral researchers
- Increasing the number of early-career researchers involved in scientific research
- Developing the research and knowledge-transfer competencies of assistants and senior assistants
- Strengthening mentoring capacities at research organisations
- Creating new and advancing existing knowledge in all fields of science
- Strengthening human resources.

Eligibility Requirements for Assistants and Senior Assistants

Assistants and senior assistants are employed based on a public recruitment procedure conducted by the Applicant whose application has been approved for funding. Under sub-programme (a) Training of new doctoral researchers, funding is not available for an assistant who has previously obtained a doctoral degree.

Senior assistants may be employed on a single project for a maximum period of two years.

Key Information

Call opening date: 21 September 2026

Application deadline: 27 October 2026, 1:00 p.m. (CET)

Funding duration: 5 years for assistants employed at research institutes; 6 years for assistants employed at higher education institutions; 2 years for senior assistants, regardless of their place of employment

Funding amount per position: The total salary cost of an assistant or senior assistant, calculated in accordance with the Regulation on Job Titles, Requirements for Job Classification, and Salary Calculation Coefficients in Public Services as well as all material benefits provided for under collective agreements applicable to employees of public research organisations

Planned number of assistant positions: 70

Planned number of senior assistant positions: 55

Expected date of publication of results: December 2026

3. Your role in the evaluation process

DOK-2026 is a one-stage evaluation process supporting the salary costs of researchers at an early stage of their career.

In both cases you are scoring a prospective mentor, his or her career track record and assessing their potential to successfully supervise another early-stage researcher. All applications will receive three reviews, and in cases of substantial discrepancies, all three Evaluation Committee members will be asked to discuss their evaluations and align scoring criteria. Evaluation Committee members remain individually responsible for their scores and are not required to reach consensus. Following the discussion, each Evaluation Committee member may independently confirm or revise their original score. The main process outcome is the finalized ranking lists which will serve as a recommendation for funding and will be presented to the Croatian Science Foundation's Management Board for official confirmation.

Expected workload: 10-15 proposals; 5 pages per proposal.

Call duration: 21 September - 27 October 2026

Review process: 28 October - 16 November 2026

Additional comments (optional; in case of substantial score discrepancies between reviews): 17 November - 30 November 2026
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Results public: early December 2026

4. General principles for work

4.1 Confidentiality

By accepting the review assignment, you agree to treat all materials, reviews and evaluation-related communications as strictly confidential:

- Do not share an application, in whole or in part, a review, or any related document with another person.
- Do not discuss the content of applications, or your assessment with third parties.
- Do not use ideas, methods, data or unpublished results from an application for your own work or for the benefit of another person.
- Do not upload application content, in whole or in part, to third-party generative-AI services or other external services.
- Delete or securely destroy all electronic and paper copies of applications and review forms once the evaluation process has concluded, in line with instructions from HRZZ, no later than 31 December 2026.

4.2 Conflict of interest (COI)

Before reviewing, you must declare whether you have a conflict of interest concerning the mentor, the applicant's institution or the application. You should consider declaring a COI if, for example:

- You have recently co-authored publications or shared grants with the applicant(s).
- You are in a close personal, family, or supervisory relationship with the applicant(s).
- You have a direct financial or professional interest in the outcome of the application.
- You feel unable to provide an impartial assessment for any reason.

If you believe a conflict exists, inform HRZZ immediately. You must not review applications where you have a conflict of interest.

4.3 Using the full scoring scale

Use the full 1–5 scale. Do not automatically cluster applications at 4 or 5. Reserve 5 (Outstanding) for applications that clearly match the relevant descriptor. Use 1 or 2 when the weaknesses described in those descriptors are present. The purpose of the scale is to distinguish clearly between stronger and weaker applications.

Assess each application on its own merits. Do not compare it with named applications, institutions or individuals and do not speculate about the likely funding threshold.

4.4 Formal eligibility and administrative issues

Formal eligibility and administrative compliance are checked by HRZZ. Do not lower a scientific score solely because you suspect that a formal eligibility condition may not be met. If you notice a possible formal, administrative, plagiarism, research-integrity or unverified-generative-AI issue, flag it clearly for HRZZ and continue the scientific assessment unless instructed otherwise.

5. Materials you will receive

For each proposal, you will receive:

- The mentor's CV (Section 1 of the application form),
- Detailed career development plan, (Section 2 of the application form).

6. How to approach each review (step-by-step)

1. Read the mentor's CV, focusing on research potential and possible previous records of early-stage career supervision.

For example: note whether the mentor has supervised PhD students or has led competitive grants.

2. Read the career development plan and assess:

- Does the career development plan provide a good account of a PhD or a post-doctoral career development?
- How meaningful it is - will it equip early-stage researchers with appropriate skill mix?
- How realistic it is?
- How ambitious the goals are, and are they achievable within the context

For example: ask yourself if the planned activities allow for a PhD to be completed within the prescribed time.

3. For each of the assessment domains:

- Compare what you see with the descriptor for scores 1-5,
- Decide which score best fits the application,
- Write 2-4 bullet points summarising strengths and weaknesses.

Your role is to provide independent, evidence-based assessment using the criteria and scales below.

7. Scoring domains and detailed scales

7.1 Mentors CV (section 1 of the application form)

Guidance. Consider four domains together: research outputs, competitive grants/research activity, mentorship experience, and other relevant achievements. Assess the overall track record relative to the mentor's career stage and the proposed mentoring role.

5 – Outstanding. Strong track record relative to career stage across all four domains:

- (a) several high-quality, competitive outputs with leading/senior roles;
- (b) clear evidence of competitive grant leadership or strong potential (for first-time mentors, previous research output can be used as a proxy);
- (c) previous experience in successful supervision of early-stage researchers (for first-time mentorships, previous research output can be used as a proxy);
- (d) substantial other academic achievements (keynotes, awards, industry/policy/public engagement) relevant to the application, with clear international visibility.

4 – Very good. Very good track record in most domains:

- (a) strong publication record at national or international level, with some leading/senior roles;
- (b) experience in managing competitive national or institutional grants;
- (c) some experience in PhD students or postdoctoral researchers' supervision or mentoring (for first-time mentorships, previous research output can be used as a proxy);
- (d) some other relevant academic achievements. Overall, an excellent track record at least at national level.

3 – Good. Solid and credible track record:

- (a) reasonable number of relevant outputs;
- (b) some experience in grant management (e.g. local PI or team member on larger projects; for first-time mentors, a strong output record may be used as a proxy);

- (c) some experience in mentoring, including a co-mentoring of MSc students;
- (d) limited but visible other achievements. Clear potential to lead the proposed work.

2 – Weak. The track record shows significant limitations:

- (a) limited publication record and/or weak relevance to the topic;
- (b) little or no experience in grant management;
- (c) modest experience in mentoring graduate students;
- (d) few other achievements. Potential is visible but the track record is modest for career stage.

1 – Poor. Very limited or no relevant research outputs, no evidence of grant management capacity, no evidence of mentoring and no relevant other achievements. Track record does not support a mentorship role potential.

7.2 Career development plan (Section 2)

Guidance. Evaluate the Career Development Plan according to the clarity and relevance of the activities, their adequacy and robustness, feasibility of the timeline and deliverables, contribution to the skills development and career advancement of the early-stage researcher and added value of the mentoring and research environment. Your focus is early-stage researcher career development, most notably skills that are required towards their independence.

Please consider whether the Career Development Plan and deliverables are realistically achievable, as they will later be used as contractual milestones for reporting and grading.

If you are evaluating a Career Development Plan for a PhD student, note that mandatory results are “Doctoral thesis topic submitted”, “Doctoral thesis topic approved”, and “Doctoral thesis defended”.

- 5 – Outstanding:** Career development plan presents clear, ambitious and highly relevant activities. The Career Development Plan is very well developed and appropriate, and the planned activities will provide the early-stage researcher with contemporary, versatile skills (both scientific and transferable). The plan includes advanced ideas that enhance the international competitiveness of both the early-stage researcher and the mentor. The timeline and deliverables are realistic and well-aligned; outcomes clearly match the activities and are highly likely to be achieved within the given timeframe. No major shortcomings; any minor issues are easily correctable.
- 4 – Very good:** Career development plan defines important and relevant activities. The activities are appropriate and the early-stage researcher will gain several useful and relevant skills. The timeline and deliverables are generally realistic, and outcomes are likely to have national or international impact in the field. Some weaknesses or gaps can be identified in the career development plan (e.g. limited detail in some steps, slightly optimistic timing), but they do not substantially increase the risk of failure.
- 3 – Good:** Career development plan addresses topics. The Career Development Plan is broadly adequate, but may lack detail, robustness, or alignment with all activities; the early-stage researcher will gain some skills, but the added value for career development is moderate. The plan and resources are broadly aligned but not optimised; the expected outcomes have moderate impact. Shortcomings (e.g. unclear steps, vague deliverables, or weak linkage to career development) require clarification or revision, but the career development plan remains viable overall.
- 2 – Weak:** Career development plan addresses topics of limited significance or presents them in a poorly articulated way. There are serious weaknesses or insufficient justification in the activities and/or skills development aspects. Planned outcomes and deliverables are vague, low-impact, or not clearly linked to the activities; chances for meaningful advancement of the early-stage researcher’s career are low. The plan would require substantial redesign and elaboration to be considered robust and competitive.
- 1 – Poor:** Activities are unclear, inconsistent, or misaligned with the purpose of the call or the PhD/career development context. The Career Development Plan is inappropriate, missing, or not credible, and there is no meaningful benefit for the early-stage researcher’s skills or career development. The career development plan is not feasible as presented.

8. Ethics, research integrity and data management

Please flag any ethical issues you believe are not adequately addressed (e.g. work with humans or animals, sensitive data, dual use, safety risks). Also, comment if you see serious concerns about research integrity (e.g. potential for questionable research practices, poor data handling, unverified use of generative AI, etc.). Do not adjust the score to this; HRZZ will perform formal check and decide on potential breach.

9. Writing good review comments

Written comments justify and explain the numerical score and provide feedback to the applicant. They do not constitute a separate scoring element. Please write specific, brief and evidence-based comments. Instead of: "Weak methodology", say: "The sample size justification is missing, and no power calculation is provided, making it unclear whether the study is adequately powered." Comment on both strengths and weaknesses (at least one bullet of each per domain, if possible). Align your comments with the score: a "4 – Very good" should not read like a "2 - Weak" or vice versa. Avoid personal remarks or value judgments about individuals, excessive jargon, or direct comparisons to other named proposals or people. Please avoid comments that are purely personal (e.g. about individuals or institutions), discriminatory or biased, or vague and unsupported by the content of the proposal. Your comments will be anonymized and sent to the applicant verbatim.

If you have questions about the process or the guidelines, please contact HRZZ using the contact details provided in your invitation letter.

Thank you very much for your contribution to the evaluation process.