

Iceland
Liechtenstein
Norway grants



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
AND RESEARCH



Estonian
Research Council

EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021

Baltic Research Programme

Guidelines for the Final Evaluation

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Further information and guidelines are available on:

<https://www.etag.ee/en/cooperation/baltic-nordic/eea-financial-mechanism-2014-2021-baltic-research-programme/>

1. Introduction

1.1. EEA and Norway Grants

The EEA and Norway Grants are financial mechanisms through which Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway work closely with 15 beneficiary countries that joined the European Economic Area (EEA) after 2004.

In general, programmes funded by EEA and Norway Grants aim to reduce social and economic disparities and strengthen relations with all beneficiary countries. The programmes are funded and implemented based on beneficiary countries' national priorities, their needs, and the scope for bilateral/multilateral cooperation.

Main goal of the research programmes is to advance research-based knowledge development. The focus of the research programmes is on strengthening bilateral relations between the donor countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) and the beneficiary countries. Additionally, the bilateral relations are defined as cooperation, joint results, and increased mutual knowledge, which supports the focus of the program on the exchange of knowledge and expertise through long-term research collaborations, joint publications, and the mobility of personnel.

1.2. Baltic Research Programme (BRP)

The Baltic Research Programme (BRP) is a joint research programme of the three Baltic States, funded by the EEA and Norway Grants for the period 2014–2021. With a total budget of EUR 25 million, the programme supported three calls for proposals – one in each Baltic States. In total, 28 high-level projects were funded under the programme.

The Baltic Research Programme was established in response to common societal and scientific challenges faced by Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and is expected to improve the position of the Baltic countries in the Baltic Sea Region, in the Baltic-Nordic Research Area, as well as at European and international levels. Some of these common challenges in the field of research are characterised by limited investment in research, development, and innovation (RDI) at both the private and public levels, low returns on public RDI investments, insufficient international openness of research organizations, and insufficient collaboration between the business sector and academia.

The programme has been designed in cooperation with the Research Council of Norway (Donor Programme Partner) and is administered by Programme Operators and Implementing agencies in three Baltic states. The decision-making body of the BRP is Programme Committee (PC), which consists of 8 persons (2 representatives from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Norway). The PC coordinates implementation of calls, develops strategic decisions, sets requirements and supports POs.

All the projects defined within the framework of the BRP must be carried out in partnership with research institutions and have an eligible duration of 36-48 months. The amount of the grant ranges from EUR 300,000 to EUR 800,000. However, if the project involves partners from all the Baltic States, the consortium could apply for a grant of up to EUR 1,000,000.

1.3. BRP in Estonia

In Estonia, the programme is operated by the Ministry of Education and Research and implemented by the Estonian Research Council (ETAG). The Estonian call was the first in programme, launched in October 2018. Proposals could be submitted in all areas of fundamental and applied sciences. Priority was given to the following research topics, identified by the PC:

- Public health; translational medicine; health technologies
- Migration; social inclusion
- Regional cyber security; public security
- Environmentally friendly solutions
- Regional economic development; employment; labour market regulations and social policy
- More effective use of resources

A total of 130 applications were received, of which 7 were successful: 5 grants were awarded to the University of Tartu and 2 to TalTech. The smallest amount awarded was €710 504 and the largest €907 947. The total budget available for the Estonian call is €6 million.

The funded projects cover the following research fields: 2 projects - natural sciences, 2 projects - humanities and arts, 1 project - medical sciences and 2 projects - engineering and technology.

It was mandatory to include at least one partner from another Baltic State and at least one partner from a donor country. The 7 projects supported include partners from Latvia (6), Lithuania (7), Norway (7) and third countries (4).

A total of 267 remote reviewers were used to evaluate applications. Firstly, each application was assessed by at least two international external experts (holding a PhD or equivalent academic degree and living outside the Baltic and donor countries). Based on individual evaluation reports, one of the experts (the rapporteur) prepared a consensus report. The evaluation was carried out through the Estonian Research Information System (ETIS).

On the basis of the consensus report scores, ETAG compiled a ranking list and presented it to the PC. PC made a funding recommendation to the Ministry of Education and Research based on the ranking list and the relevance of the proposals in relation to the priorities of the call. The Minister of Education and Research made the funding decision on 26.09.2019.

All 7 projects started their activities in 2020 (3 started in January; 1 in February; 1 in June and 1 in September). The first project will end in July 2023, 4 in December 2023 and 2 in March 2024.

1.4. Project promoter and project partners

- The project promoter is a positively evaluated R&D institution, which is a legal entity registered in Estonia.
- Mandatory project partners are a research organisation registered in Latvia and/or in Lithuania and at least one research organisation registered in a donor country (Norway, Iceland and/or Liechtenstein).
- An additional optional project partner is a third-country research organisation registered outside the Baltic States and donor countries. The third country research organisation is not eligible for any funding under the programme, except for travel costs.
- External scientific experts may also be involved if their expertise and experience are necessary for the implementation of the project.

1.5. Outcome and output indicators for BRP Estonian call

The achievement of the intended outcome *“Enhanced performance of Baltic research internationally”* is measured through the following indicators:

- 1) number of joint scientific articles submitted to peer-reviewed publications
- 2) number of joint applications for further funding
- 3) number of jointly registered applications for Intellectual Property Protection.

The output *“Knowledge of Research Shared”* is measured based on the indicator “Number of researchers supported”.

As of 31 December 2022, the target values for the outcome and output indicators and the results achieved for the 7 projects funded under the BRP Estonian call were as follows:

INDICATOR	Target Value	Achieved cumulatively since the start of the programme (stand: 31.12.2022)
Number of joint peer-reviewed scientific publications submitted	50	30
Number of joint applications for further funding	10	2
Number of jointly registered applications for Intellectual Property Protection	3	2
Number of researchers supported (<i>PhD Students/Postdocs</i>)	25	127 (<i>33/14</i>)

2. Evaluation

2.1. Target of the evaluation

The aim of the final evaluation is to assess the achievement of the main objectives set out in the proposal, the scientific quality and scope of the project results and their relevance and impact on the Baltic States and the region (scientific, cultural, social and/or economic). It will also assess aspects related to the dissemination of the project results to the wider public and the progress of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between the partners.

2.2. Role of persons/institutions involved in the evaluation process

2.2.1. Role of experts

The remote evaluation of the scientific quality of project outcomes is carried out by independent external experts, based on the Estonian Research Information System (ETIS) expert database. The experts are selected by ETAG using a search based on the keywords and the project summary provided in the final project report. International experts must be resident and working outside the Baltic and donor countries.

As a priority, the invitation to the scientific evaluation of the project results will be sent to the experts who carried out the initial scientific quality assessment of the project proposal. If the expert concerned does not accept the invitation, the ETAG will invite a new expert who must also meet the following criteria:

- 1) the expert must have a PhD in science or an equivalent academic degree;
- 2) the expert's scientific qualification must be relevant to the scientific field or sub-sector of the research project concerned;
- 3) the expert must carry out the evaluation independently and there must be no circumstances that could give rise to a conflict of interest.

In the case of a multi- or interdisciplinary research project, experts will be selected who either have experience in such multi- or interdisciplinary research or who all represent their own scientific field covered by the relevant multi- or interdisciplinary research project. One expert may assess the scientific quality of the final results of several projects according to his/her research field.

Experts are invited:

- to carefully read this 'Guidelines for the Final Evaluation' and to find more information on the EEA Baltic Research programme on the [ETAG website](#), including the '[Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#)';
- to first sign the authorisation agreement, including declaration confirming confidentiality and the absence of any conflict of interest, to gain access to the final project report (*see p. 3.2*);

- to thoroughly read the assigned final project report;
- complete and submit the individual evaluation form by adding comments and the conclusion of the individual assessment to the final project report within the deadline set in the ETIS. The ETIS helpdesk can be contacted by email at etis@etag.ee or by phone +3727 300 373 (daily from 9 am to 4 pm (ET)). Exceptionally, in case of major problems, materials can also be sent by e-mail.
- Please note that, before accessing the final project report in ETIS, the expert must confirm, as part of the contracting procedure, that she/he has no conflict of interest with the implementer of the project, its partners, and the project under assessment (*see p. 3.2*). The authorisation agreement binds the expert to a code of conduct, establishes essential confidentiality provisions and specifies the job description and remuneration conditions.

2.2.2. Role of rapporteurs

At least two external experts will be invited to assess the scientific quality of the results of each project. One of them will be appointed as a rapporteur and will be responsible for drafting, agreeing, and approving the consolidated opinion with the other expert(s).

If a consensus cannot be reached, the report will present the opinion of the majority of the experts but will also record the dissenting opinion(s) of the expert(s).

The comments provided in the consensus report must be suitable for giving feedback to the project promoter. Where necessary, the reports will be sent back to the rapporteurs concerned for improvements to ensure the quality of the consensus reports, with particular attention to clarity, consistency, and appropriate level of detail.

2.2.3. Role of the Programme Committee (PC)

The Programme Committee, composed of 8 members (2 from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Norway), represents members of the research community and the main users of research activities in the Baltic States and the donor countries (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein).

The PC is to support the Programme Operator and Implementing Agency to monitor the implementation of the programme based on scientific progress and quality of results.

The PC members have taken on a number of strategic tasks related to the programme implementation cycle: at the proposal submission stage, they adopted the 'Guidelines for Applicants' and 'Guidelines for Evaluators' and made a recommendation to the Programme Operator (Ministry of Education and Research) on the proposals to be funded; at a later stage, they have reviewed progress made towards achieving the programme objectives, including the approval of the annual project and programme reports.

The PC is responsible for approving the final project report, based on the consensus report submitted by each project rapporteur. On the basis of the comments and/or assessments made in the report, the PC has the right to ask for further clarifications from the project promoter. Project promoters have 30 days to respond to the request.

PC members acting in the council or similar supervisory board (i.e. rector, dean, director of the institute and member of an institute's council) of the reporting institution (promoter and/or partner institution) are excluded from the evaluation of final project reports originating from this institution. In case of participation in other bodies, e.g. in scientific advisory committees of the research environment, a potential conflict of interest may arise, which must be assessed and declared.

In the event of a conflict of interest, the corresponding PC member:

- 1) will not provide an opinion on the evaluation of the final project report of the respective project(s) and the approval or rejection of the final project report of the respective project(s);
- 2) will be placed in the waiting room of the online meeting during the discussion of the final project report of the respective project(s);
- 3) will not participate in voting in the case of the approval of the final project report of the respective project(s).

2.2.4. Role of ETAG

ETAG, as the implementing agency of programme, identifies the individual international experts to be invited to assess the scientific quality of the project results, and appoints a rapporteur (one of the external experts) to prepare a consensus evaluation report.

ETAG will support the experts and rapporteurs involved in the evaluation process and will ensure that the rules and procedures of the programme, including the absence of conflict of interest, are respected.

ETAG will provide the PC members with the information necessary for the approval of the final project report - the final project reports together with the consensus reports received. If necessary, ETAG will mediate communication between project promoters and PC members in case the PC needs further clarification.

3. Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest

3.1. Confidentiality

External experts, members of the Programme Committee and observers shall not disclose any information concerning evaluation documents or evaluation reports to unauthorised persons, nor shall they use confidential information for their own benefit or for the benefit or detriment of any other party. Individuals involved in the evaluation process are invited to follow the principles of the '[Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#)'.

The data management requirements comply with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, <https://www.eugdpr.org/the-regulation.html>) and the Personal Data Protection Act of the Republic of Estonia. For more information on the processing of personal data at the Estonian Research Council, click [here](#).

3.2. Conflict of interest

All persons involved in the evaluation process shall avoid a conflict of interest with the project promoter, its partners and the project under assessment.

A conflict of interest is a situation in which the person is in a position to derive personal benefit from the actions taken or decisions made by them, or from the results they have the capacity to affect.

The following situations in particular, but not exclusively, classify as a conflict of interest:

1. The expert has been involved in the preparation of the final report or the implementation of the project;
2. The Principal Investigator or a member of the main research staff of the project promoter or partner is:
 - 2.1. the expert's blood relative (grandparent, parent or parent's descendant, incl. the expert's child and grandchild) or his/her marriage relative (spouse or partner or their parent). An adoptive parent, a spouse of the parent, and a foster parent are also regarded as parents, and an adopted child and a spouse's or partner's child are also regarded as the relatives in descending line;
 - 2.2. a person with whom the expert has a superior-subordinate relationship;
 - 2.3. a person with whom the expert has co-authored a research article within the last three years;
 - 2.4. a person with whom the expert has supervisory relationship (e.g. teacher-student relationship up to and including the postdoctoral phase) extending five years beyond the conclusion of the relationship;

- 2.5. a person with whom the expert is planning close scientific cooperation;
- 2.6. a person with whom the expert has an on-going scientific or inter-personal conflict;
- 2.7. a person who is related to the expert through a shared household, or whose position or activity otherwise significantly and directly affects the expert, or who is significantly or directly affected by the activity of the expert outside the work being carried out, or who acts in the interests of or on behalf of the expert.

Individuals involved in the evaluation process must assess a conflict of interest at any time during the process, and ETAG must be informed immediately if a conflict of interest is identified.

Persons acting in a council or similar supervisory board of the reporting institution (i.e. rector, dean, director of the institute and member of an institute's council) are excluded from participating in the evaluation and/or approval of final project reports originating from this institution. In case of participation in other bodies, e.g. in scientific advisory committees of the research environment, a potential conflict of interest may arise, which must be assessed and declared.

If, for any reason, the external experts are unable to fulfil their duties for a given work, ETAG must be informed immediately. The work cannot be delegated to another person without ETAG's prior written consent.

3.3. Evaluation procedure

(1) Before the final project report is sent to the external experts for evaluation, ETAG will carry out an administrative check to verify that it complies with the following administrative criteria:

- the submitted report must be completed in accordance with the instructions given in the reporting form and be accompanied by all the necessary annexes dedicated to outcome and output indicators and, where applicable, auditor's certificate.

(2) The evaluation of the scientific progress and quality of the results of the project will be performed in accordance with these guidelines. The expert shall be entitled to consult ETAG on any matter relating to the project or the evaluation procedure.

(3) The evaluation of the scientific progress and quality of the results of the project will be carried out remotely using the Estonian Research Information System www.etis.ee. In the framework of the project evaluation, ETAG will provide the expert with access to the documentation of the project to be evaluated, including the evaluation guidelines and the final project report.

(4) ETAG will invite identified experts to assess the scientific progress and quality of the results of specific projects. The invitation will include brief general information on the programme and the project concerned (project title and name of a Principal Investigator), as well as amount of the remuneration and the expected evaluation deadline.

When inviting an expert or rapporteur to provide an initial individual or consolidated assessment of the scientific quality of the results of a particular project, ETAG will take into account the scientific background and expertise of the expert and rapporteur.

Upon receiving the expert's or rapporteur's consent, ETAG will conclude a contract with the expert or rapporteur, including a declaration of no conflict of interest and non-disclosure of confidential information, and will grant her/him access to the documents of the project under assessment, including:

- these evaluation guidelines
- the final project report

(5) The evaluation of the scientific quality of the results consists of two stages:

- initial individual evaluation of each expert according to the evaluation criteria,
- the formation and approval of the consolidated opinion of the group of experts.

(6) When carrying out the initial individual evaluation, the expert provides a detailed justification for each evaluation criterion and gives an assessment 'Compliant/Not compliant' accordingly.

(7) After receiving all individual assessments, ETAG sends an invitation to one expert to act as rapporteur and prepare a consensus report. Upon consent, the rapporteur can access ETIS and all individual assessments related to the final report of the given project will be made available to her/him, as well as the names of other experts who evaluated the given report.

The consensus report must be approved by all experts. The reconciliation of the opinions may involve several stages. If consensus cannot be reached, the report will state the opinion of the majority of experts but will also indicate the dissenting opinion(s) of the expert(s). If the experts involved in evaluation do not give their agreement by the deadline set, after two reminders sent at one-week intervals, ETAG concludes that they have implicitly approved the consensus report according to the silent procedure.

The comments provided in the consensus report must be suitable for giving feedback to the project promoter. Where necessary, the reports will be sent back to the rapporteurs concerned for improvements to ensure the quality of the consensus reports, with particular attention to clarity, consistency, and appropriate level of detail.

(8) All final reports will be approved by the Programme Committee by giving assessment "Accepted" or "Not accepted". PC approval may be requested by written procedure. If necessary, ETAG will mediate communication between project promoters and PC members in case the PC needs further clarification.

(9) Finally, once the final project report has been approved by the PC, the consolidated evaluation report will be made available in ETIS to all project promoters. The consensus report will be presented anonymously without the names of external experts.

3.4. Expert evaluation form for project final report

Project code	
Project title	
Reviewer	

Criterion	Comments	Assessment
The main objectives of the project have been achieved		[Compliant/Non-compliant]
The project results are of high scientific quality and innovative, and the reported outcomes are sufficient compared to what was originally planned		[Compliant/Non-compliant]
The project results are important and have potential impact for the Baltic states and the region (research, culture, society, and/or economy)		[Compliant/Non-compliant]
The communication activities have been relevant and have contributed to introducing the research carried out within the project to the public		[Compliant/Non-compliant]
The development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between project participants has been in line with the objectives of the programme		[Compliant/Non-compliant]
Overall assessment		[Compliant/Non-compliant]

The expert characterises the compliance of the report with the assessment criteria with a rating that has the following meaning:

Compliant – the project has achieved its main objectives and results or achieved most of the objectives and results with relatively minor deviations.

Non-compliant – the project has failed to achieve critical objectives and results.