

The following is a translation from Estonian. In case of disputes, the Estonian text shall prevail.

Guidelines for Evaluating Centres of Excellence Applications

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This directive establishes the evaluation criteria and the principles for evaluating and compiling the ranking lists of the applications submitted according to the Education and Research Minister's regulation "Conditions and Procedure for naming and evaluating Centres of Excellence" from 11.05.2023.
- 1.2. The Estonian Research Council (hereinafter Council) is entitled to make well-considered decisions and consult experts where necessary in relation to matters not covered by this directive.

2. Technical Review

- 2.1. The Council is responsible for checking the technical details of the applications.
- 2.2. When checking the technical details of the applications, it will be determined if the application, applicant, partners, and research groups meet the requirements.
- 2.3. The content of the applications will not be evaluated.
- 2.4. In case of formal inaccuracies which can be corrected without changing the content of the application, the Council will set a deadline of up to five working days for correcting the inaccuracies.
- 2.5. The Council will reject the application without processing it if:
 - 2.5.1. the application, applicant, partners or research group(s) do not meet the requirements, and it is not possible to correct the inaccuracies as stipulated in 2.4.;
 - 2.5.2. the applicant does not correct the inaccuracies within the time limit established by the Council, or;
 - 2.5.3. the applicant makes changes to the application concerning things outside of what the Council has specified during Technical Review.

3. Evaluation Procedure

- 3.1. The evaluation of the applications takes place in the Estonian Research Information System (hereinafter ETIS).
- 3.2. All applications are to be evaluated according to the same criteria and procedures to ensure equal treatment of all applications.
- 3.3. During evaluation and compiling the final ranking list of the applications, all relevant information will be considered; and the applications will be compared in the context of the final ranking.
- 3.4. The evaluation procedure is as follows:
 - 3.4.1. Processing the applications in the Expert Panel of Foreign Experts
 - 3.4.1.1. The Expert Panel evaluates selection criterion 1 "Scientific innovativeness, ambition, and added value" and selection criterion 2 "Implementation and cooperation".
 - 3.4.1.2. Each application will be evaluated by three independent experts, one of whom shall act as the rapporteur. At least two experts (incl. the rapporteur) are members of the Expert Panel. Based on the expert evaluations, the rapporteur will prepare a preliminary final evaluation for selection criteria 1 and 2.

- 3.4.1.3. During the panel meeting, the Expert Panel will confirm evaluations for selection criteria 1 and 2.
- 3.4.1.4. In their evaluation, the Expert Panel can outline additional conditions which the applicant must meet should the application qualify for funding. These conditions are forwarded to the Selection Committee.
- 3.4.2. Processing the application in the Expert Panel of Local Experts.
 - 3.4.2.1. The Expert Panel evaluates selection criterion 3 “Impact on the Estonian research system, society, and economy”.
 - 3.4.2.2. Each application will be evaluated by three independent experts, one of whom shall act as the rapporteur. At least two experts (incl. the rapporteur) are members of the Expert Panel. Based on the expert evaluations, the rapporteur will prepare a preliminary final evaluation for selection criterion 3.
 - 3.4.2.3. During the panel meeting, the Expert Panel will confirm evaluations for selection criterion 3.
 - 3.4.2.4. In their evaluation, the Expert Panel can outline additional conditions which the applicant must meet should the application qualify for funding. These conditions are forwarded to the Selection Committee.
- 3.4.3. The applicant and the institution are entitled to submit a written joint opinion and make objections regarding the preliminary final evaluations of the Expert Panels within the time limit established by the Council (hearing).
- 3.4.4. During the hearing, the experts’ evaluations are not reassessed. If, during the hearing, procedural errors or factual mistakes are discovered which could hinder the project’s chances of getting funded, the application will be re-assigned to relevant experts as needed.

4. Formation of the final ranking list

- 4.1. Based on the evaluations of the two Expert Panels, the Council will calculate a final score for each application. The final score is a result of summing up each selection criterion’s point scores which have been multiplied by the relevant coefficients. The first and second selection criterion points are multiplied by 0,35, and the third selection criterion’s points will be multiplied by 0,3. The final score can be up to 5 points. The scores will be rounded to one decimal place.
- 4.2. The Council will form the final ranking list based on the final scores of the applications.
- 4.3. Only applications which have a score of 4,0 (before applying the coefficient) in each selection criterion will be placed in the ranking list. Other applications will be denied funding.
- 4.4. Applications with an equal final score will be ranked according to the following criteria:
 - 4.4.1. applications will be ranked by prioritising applications in underrepresented (sub-)fields of research among the applications which rank above the applications of equal standing;
 - 4.4.2. applications which remain in equal standing after the procedure described in 4.4.1 will be ranked according to the scores received during evaluation in the following order of selection criteria: 1, 2, 3;
 - 4.4.3. applications which remain in equal standing after the procedure described in 4.4.2 will be ranked by prioritising applications where the PI is of the underrepresented gender among the applications which rank above the applications of equal standing;
 - 4.4.4. the ranking of applications which sustain equal standing after the procedure described in 4.4.3 will be decided by lot in accordance with the conditions established by the Council.

5. Processing the application in the Ethics and Data Management Panel

- 5.1. Based on the final ranking list, up to double the total funding amount worth of applications (98 million euros) is forwarded to the Ethics and Data Management Panel. Other applications will be denied funding.
- 5.2. The Ethics and Data Management Panel will evaluate aspects of research ethics, including potential risks which accompany the activities planned in the Centre of Excellence, and data management.
- 5.3. In their evaluation, the panel can outline suggestions (grade: “appropriate”) or set additional conditions relating to research ethics or data management which the applicant must meet should the application qualify for funding (grade “conditionally appropriate”). These conditions are forwarded to the Selection Committee.

6. Processing the applications in the Selection Committee and granting funding

- 6.1. All applications which have been processed by the Ethics and Data Management Panel are forwarded to the Selection Committee.
- 6.2. PI-s of the applying Centres of Excellence will introduce the centre’s planned activities at the Selection Committee meeting.
- 6.3. In making the final selection, the Selection Committee will consider the final scores of the applications and the introduction made by the PI. The Selection Committee will consider that the approved Centres of Excellence should cover the development needs of Estonia’s long-term development strategy “Estonia 2035”, and, if relevant, the focus areas of the RDIE Strategy as widely as possible. The final ranking of the applications is not binding to the Selection Committee.
- 6.4. The Selection Committee will make decisions by consensus. If a consensus is not reached, the decision will be made by majority vote. Decisions made during the Selection Committee meeting will be protocolled.
- 6.5. The Selection Committee will make a justified proposal to the Minister of Education and Research:
 - 6.5.1.to fund the proposal;
 - 6.5.2.to fund the proposal if additional conditions are met;
 - 6.5.3.to fund the proposal in a reduced volume if additional conditions are met;
 - 6.5.4.to not fund the proposal.

7. Selection criteria and evaluation scales

7.1. Selection criteria

In evaluating the applications, the following selection criteria must be followed, and all scores must be justified. The justification must be based on the sub-criteria. Additional remarks can be made about each individual criterion.

Selection criterion	Sub-criteria	Evaluation scale
1. Scientific innovativeness, ambitions, and value added (35%).	In this criterion, the scientific justification for the research project, the originality and relevance of the idea, and the clarity of the objectives are to be evaluated, based on the following questions: 1.1 To what extent are the CoE’s goals and research questions ambitious, innovative, and interdisciplinary (e.g. developing	1 to 5

<p><i>This selection criterion is evaluated by the Expert Panel of Foreign Experts</i></p>	<p>cooperation and employing innovative approaches within one research field, and across fields)?</p> <p>1.2 To what extent are the research and development activities of the CoE high-risk, high-reward, i.e. with a high potential for breakthrough research results?</p> <p>1.3 To what extent does the CoE create additional value which cannot be achieved by any single research group?</p> <p>1.4 How specifically and appropriately are the scientific importance and potential scientific impact of the CoE described, considering the research topic and field?</p> <p>1.5 What are the CoE's expected results (incl. peer-reviewed publications, joint publications, intellectual property, held plenaries at international conferences, doctoral defences, inclusion of additional funding)?</p>	
<p>2. Implementation and cooperation (35%).</p> <p><i>This selection criterion is evaluated by the Expert Panel of Foreign Experts.</i></p>	<p>In this criterion, the CoE's feasibility will be evaluated. This includes the expertise of the PI and the research groups along with their suitability to achieve CoE's goals, the CoE's action plan, methods, and budget, risk analysis and plans for risk management, based on the following questions:</p> <p>2.1. How original, suitable, and relevant are the research methods?</p> <p>2.2. How specifically and appropriately is the feasibility of the planned actions explained; how appropriately are the necessary resources described incl. research infrastructure?</p> <p>2.3. To what extent are the action plan and budget well thought-out and purposeful?</p> <p>2.4. How well are the potential scientific or methodological risks analysed and managed (incl. a backup plan)?</p> <p>2.5. How well-suited is the PI-s scientific competence and prior experience incl. their experience in leading scientific consortia, and involvement in local as well as international research projects?</p> <p>2.6. How well-suited is the CoE's composition and distribution of tasks to achieve the CoE's goals (accordance of the research groups' and their staff's competence to the tasks and goals of the CoE)?</p> <p>2.7. How well is the cooperation of the research groups during the CoE's activities planned?</p>	<p>1 to 5</p>
<p>3. Impact on the development of the Estonian research</p>	<p>In this criterion, the expected academic and public impact of the CoE in Estonia, the potential impact on the international competitiveness of Estonia's research and development activities,</p>	<p>1 to 5</p>

<p>system, society, and economy (30%).</p> <p><i>This criterion is evaluated by the Expert Panel of Local Experts.</i></p>	<p>and the CoE's involvement in current challenges in Estonian society, are evaluated.</p> <p>3.1 To what extent are the CoE's activities aligned with the applicant's and the partners' fields of activity and strategic goals?</p> <p>3.2 How well is the potential academic and public impact in Estonia, and the potential impact on the international competitiveness of Estonia's research and development activities described?</p> <p>3.3 To what extent do the research and planned activities of the CoE contribute to solving the development needs of the long-term development strategy of the Estonian state "Estonia 2035" and, if relevant, to the development of the focus areas of the RDIE strategy?</p> <p>3.4 To what extent does the CoE contribute to ensuring the sustainability of research and development activities and research-based higher education?</p> <p>3.5 How well thought out is the local and international dissemination of the results of the CoE?</p> <p>3.6 To what extent is the relevant and existing scientific competence in Estonia included in the CoE?</p>	
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7.2. Rating scales and the formation of evaluation scores

7.2.1. A nine-point differentiated rating scale is used for selection criteria 1, 2, and 3:

- Outstanding (5);
- Very good-Outstanding (4.5);
- Very good (4);
- Good-Very good (3.5);
- Good (3);
- Satisfactory-Good (2.5);
- Satisfactory (2);
- Unsatisfactory-Satisfactory (1.5);
- Unsatisfactory (1).

Interpretation of ratings for criteria 1, 2, and 3:

- Unsatisfactory (1) – the application addresses many of the aspects of the evaluation criteria inadequately and/or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
- Satisfactory (2) – the application addresses most of the aspects of the evaluation criteria in very general terms and there are significant weaknesses. Major revision and clarification would be needed to improve the application.
- Good (3) – the application addresses most of the relevant aspects of the evaluation criteria well, but a number of shortcomings are present. Some questions could be elaborated on more thoroughly and more clearly. A sound research project with some issues to be considered.

- Very good (4) – the application addresses most of the relevant aspects of the evaluation criteria very well and only a small number of shortcomings or issues to be considered are present. Minor revision and clarification would be suggested. The application is competitive on an international scale.
- Outstanding (5) – the application is remarkably well elaborated, and all sub-criteria of the evaluation criteria have been met at an excellent level. The application is competitive on an international scale. An exceptionally strong application in all respects. The score “outstanding” is exceptional and it will be necessary to provide an additional justification for this score.

8. Processing the applications in the Research Ethics and Data Management Expert Panel

8.1. In evaluating the applications, the following selection criteria must be followed, and all scores must be justified. The justification must be based on the sub-criteria. Additional remarks can be made about each individual criterion.

Selection criterion	Sub-criteria	Evaluation scale
<p>Research ethics, incl. the potential ethical risks accompanying the implementation of the project</p> <p><i>This criterion will be evaluated only by the Research Ethics and Data Management Expert Panel</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly assessed and described whether the project raises the issues of research ethics (e.g., questions related to human participation or involvement of animals; gender, age, cultural, etc. diversity issues; political, religious, societal, historical, and other sensitive topics; maintenance of biodiversity, environmental intervention, etc.)? 2. Has the applicant provided a description of the action plan to address the legal requirements of research ethics (e.g., ethics committee approvals, specific research protocols, etc.) and explained how the requirements are to be met during the project? 3. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly addressed potential risks that concern research integrity which may arise during the project (e.g., credentials and questions of authorship, ownership of data and intellectual property rights, etc.)? 	<p>Appropriate, conditionally appropriate</p>
<p>Research data management</p> <p><i>This criterion will be evaluated only by the Research Ethics and Data Management Expert Panel</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly described the questions regarding research data management, incl. the collection, documentation, storage and back-up of data, open data regulations, repository selection, etc.? 2. Has the applicant provided a description of the action plan to address the legal requirements of data management (e.g., the collection, management, storage, and destruction of sensitive data; field-specific data protection requirements, etc.) and explained how the requirements are to be met during the course of the project? 	<p>Appropriate, conditionally appropriate</p>

8.2. Interpretation of the research ethics and data management evaluation scales:

- Appropriate – there are no shortcomings; there are some shortcomings or issues to be considered; the Panel may make suggestions or proposals for organising the activities of the project which are related to research ethics and/or data management more effectively.
- Conditionally appropriate – there are significant shortcomings related to research ethics and/or data management and to ensure that the project will be implemented in compliance with the requirements of research ethics and/or data management, the Panel will prescribe certain conditions that the PI and the institution are required to fulfil upon receiving the grant.