

Guidelines for the Expert Panel

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The reviewing process

To ensure the best possible expertise necessary for evaluating the applications, the Evaluation Committee of the Estonian Research Council (hereinafter *Council*) is entitled to form Expert Panels. The members of the Expert Panels shall carry out the work with complete independence, will not represent the interests of their employer, and will not disclose the confidential information that has become known to them while carrying out the work.

The reviewing process will take place online in Estonian Research Information System ETIS: the applications can be accessed in ETIS and the reviews as well as the combined evaluations will be submitted via ETIS. The language to be used throughout is English.

The Evaluation Committee will appoint the Chair of the Expert Panel and decide which members of the Expert Panel will evaluate which applications. The Evaluation Committee will also appoint the rapporteur for each application. The members of the Expert Panel will gain access to the applications in ETIS after the applications have been distributed between the members of the Expert Panel, the conflicts of interest have been declared and the authorisation agreements have been signed. Please refer to the guidelines for navigating in ETIS. If after receiving access to the applications, a member of the Expert Panel realises that he/she does not have the right expertise to evaluate an application appointed to them, the expert mentioned must notify the contact person of the Council. If possible, the application will then be reassigned to another member of the same Expert Panel.

Tasks of the member of the Expert Panel

Evaluation of applications involves the following tasks:

- writing reviews for the applications that have been appointed to them;
- discussing applications with the other members of the Expert Panel who have reviewed the same application (if necessary);
- making suggestions for obtaining additional reviews for the applications that have been appointed to them (if necessary);
- as a rapporteur, compiling the combined evaluation;
- participating in the meeting(s) of the Expert Panel;
- as a rapporteur, making changes to the combined evaluation as agreed upon during the meeting, and confirming the combined evaluation in ETIS.

Guidelines for reviewing applications

There are two grant types: team grant (PRG) and starting grant (PSG). The applications must be evaluated based on the evaluation guidelines.

[“Guidelines for Evaluating Team Grant Applications”](#)

[“Guidelines for Evaluating Starting Grant Applications”](#)

Each application will be reviewed by at least three independent experts, one of whom shall act as the rapporteur. At least two experts have to be the members of the Expert Panel, other(s) can be external reviewer(s). If necessary, the Expert Panel members who are evaluating the same application are entitled to have discussions in smaller groups to reach a consensus.

If the reviews have been submitted electronically in ETIS and the discussion with the members of the Expert Panel who are evaluating the same application has taken place (if necessary), then the rapporteur will prepare the draft of the combined evaluation.

The combined evaluation should be submitted to ETIS at least two days before the meeting of the Expert Panel. Based on the discussion taking place during the meeting, it will be possible to change and make additions to the combined evaluation. Therefore, the scores and the text inserted into ETIS before the meeting may not be final. Because of that, before the Panel meeting, the combined evaluation should be *saved* in ETIS, and *confirmed* finally only after the meeting has taken place.

The language used in the reviews and in the combined evaluations has to be neutral. Offensive phrases and discriminatory expressions referring to the gender, age, origin, etc. of the applicant have to be avoided. The evaluations have to be justified based on the facts derived from the application and/or reviews. A substantial, understandable, and sufficiently comprehensive evaluation helps to prevent subsequent misunderstandings and disputes.

Each part of the application shall be evaluated separately from the other parts and in accordance with the evaluation criteria described in the evaluation guidelines. For example, if the score given for the competence and potential of the applicant is very high, then it is not allowed to raise the lower score given for the feasibility of the project.

When assessing the research achievements of the applicants, focus on the scientific content and refrain from using surrogate measures of the quality of research outputs, such as Journal Impact Factors. Throughout the evaluation the qualitative judgement of the panels should be paramount and quantitative indicators should be used responsibly. Please note that the ERC Scientific Council has endorsed the DORA declaration and signed the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment.

Avoid any reference or comparison with previous assessments (in case of a resubmitted proposal).

Avoid copy-paste from the proposal. Copy-paste from individual reviews of other experts can be used if it is agreed at the expert panel meeting.

Please note that the incorrect implementation of the evaluation criterion or the involvement of inexistent or irrelevant criteria is considered a procedural error.

Suggesting additional reviewers (if necessary)

In order to achieve the best possible evaluation result, it may be necessary to obtain a review from a researcher who is not a member of the Expert Panel. The Research Funding Officer shall be informed about the necessity to contact an additional reviewer by the Chair of the Expert Panel and/or by the rapporteur.

The principle that serves as the basis for selecting the additional reviewer is that the aim is to find the most professionally qualified and suitable reviewer (an active researcher with a doctoral degree) who does not have a conflict of interest (which will be checked by the Research Funding Officer) with the application and who is an eminent researcher in his/her research field. In case of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary project applications, reviewers from different research fields can be involved in the evaluation process.

The Research Funding Officer will contact and communicate with the reviewers who do not belong to the Expert Panel.

Meeting of the Expert Panel

Before the meeting, the preparatory work is carried out in advance of each meeting by electronic means.

- the members of the Expert Panel are required to familiarise themselves with the relevant materials;
- to write the reviews in ETIS by the deadline;
- to compile the combined evaluations in ETIS by the deadline.

The meeting of the Expert Panel will be convened by the Research Funding Officer. The meeting will be chaired by the Chair of the Expert Panel. The Expert Panel may also make decisions via electronic voting, but no remuneration is intended for that. The need for electronic voting shall be initiated by the Chair of the Expert Panel or, if necessary, by the Estonian Research Council.

The quorum shall exist if at least 2/3 of the members of the Expert Panel participate in the meeting or vote electronically. The decisions shall be taken by consensus. If consensus cannot be reached, then the decision will be made by simple majority vote. The decisions made during the meeting of the Expert Panel and via electronic voting shall be documented in the minutes.

Participation in the meeting is mandatory for the members of the Expert Panel.

If the member of the Expert Panel is going to be late, has to leave early, or is unable to participate, then he/she has to inform the Research Funding Officer and the Chair of the Expert Panel about that at least on the day before the meeting.

During the meeting of the Expert Panel, the conflicts of interest declared by the members of the Expert Panel will be specified once again before the discussion on each of the applications. The member(s) of the Expert Panel who has/have declared a conflict of interest with the application will not participate in the discussion on this application and will have the leave from among the other members.

During the meeting of the Expert Panel, the rapporteur shall introduce the applications that had been appointed to him/her and explain the scores and evaluations given to these applications identifying the proposals' strengths, weaknesses and concerns to the other members of the Expert Panel.

The combined evaluation

The combined evaluation (i.e. preliminary final evaluation, which will be available for applicant) shall be the coherent result of the analysis, discussion, and opinions of the Expert Panel, not a copy-paste of individual reviews. It has to be kept in mind that the combined evaluation has to be in accordance with the evaluation guidelines of this particular grant type and that the relevance of the evaluations has been checked in terms of each evaluation criterion, especially if the given evaluation remains below the qualification threshold. The output of the meeting of the Expert Panel will be the confirmed combined evaluations, incl. the scores for the relevant evaluation criteria, for starting and team grant applications. Since the combined evaluation is the only document available to the applicant, the combined evaluation must be as comprehensive as possible.

The minutes of the meeting of the Expert Panel shall include the decisions made after the discussion on each of the applications as well as the justification for these decisions. The justification is especially important if the score given in the combined evaluation greatly differs from the score agreed upon as a result of the discussion.

After the meeting of the Expert Panel

If agreed upon during the panel meeting, rapporteur will make corrections to the combined evaluation(s).

The Council will make the preliminary final evaluation and the position of the applicant in the ranking list known to the applicant. The applicant is entitled to submit objections to the evaluation (hearing). At the hearing, attention will be paid to the assessment of the adherence to procedural rules and to the correction of possible factual errors. The scientific evaluation given in the preliminary final evaluation will not be re-evaluated.

Based on the preliminary final evaluations and on the results of the hearing, the Evaluation Committee will approve the final evaluations of the applications as well as the final ranking lists of the applications, and make funding proposals.

The applications that have received the funding proposal shall be presented to the Expert Panel on Research Ethics and Data Management for assessment of Research Ethics and Data section of the application. This expert panel can approve or conditionally approve the application without changing the application's place in ranking list.

Chair of the Expert Panel

The additional tasks of the Panel member who is appointed as Chair of the Expert Panel are as follows:

- making proposals for appointing the members of the Expert Panel(s);
- advising the members of the Expert Panel, if necessary;
- familiarising oneself in ETIS with all the applications processed by this particular Expert Panel with which he/she does not have a conflict of interest;
- consulting with the rapporteurs and making suggestions for obtaining additional reviews, if necessary;
- chairing the meeting(s) of the Expert Panel or, if necessary, authorising the right to chair to a different member of the Expert Panel or to the Research Funding Officer;
- following the regulations and agreements during the meeting(s), incl., keeping to the timetable, together with the Research Funding Officer and the member(s) of the Evaluation Committee;
- confirming the minutes of the meeting;
- examining the objections submitted during the hearing and giving an assessment on these together with the rapporteurs, if necessary;
- making proposals for excluding the members of the Expert Panel.

Avoiding conflicts of interest

The member of the Expert Panel shall avoid all conflicts of interest. A conflict of interest is a situation in which the member of the Expert Panel or a related party is in a position to derive personal benefit from the actions taken or decisions made by him/her, or from the results he/she has the capacity to affect. The following situations in particular, but not exclusively, classify as a conflict of interest:

- 1) the member of the Expert Panel has been involved in the preparation of the application;
- 2) the Principal Investigator or the member of the (senior) research staff of the application is:
 - 2.1) a blood relative of the member of the Expert Panel (parent or a relative of the parent's descendant, incl. his/her child and grandchild) or a relative of him/her by marriage (spouse or partner, their parent, or a relative of their parent's descendant). Adoptive parent, spouse of the parent, and foster parent are also regarded as parents, and the adopted child and the spouse's child are also regarded as the relatives of the descendants;
 - 2.2) a person with whom he/she has a superior-subordinate relationship;
 - 2.3) a person with whom he/she has co-authored a research article in the past five years;
 - 2.4) a person whose doctoral work he/she has supervised in the past five years;
 - 2.5) a person who relates to the member of the Expert Panel via a shared household or whose position or activity otherwise significantly and directly affects the member of the Expert Panel, or who is significantly or directly affected by the activity of the member of the Expert Panel outside the work being carried out, or who acts in the interests of or on behalf of the member of the Expert Panel.

The conflicts of interest shall be declared before the members of the Expert Panel gain access to the applications. If a conflict of interest becomes apparent during the evaluation of the application, then the member of the Expert Panel shall inform both the Chair of the Expert Panel and the Research Funding Officer about that as soon as possible.

In case of a conflict of interest, the member of the Expert Panel will not:

- gain access to this particular application in the Estonian Research Information System (hereinafter *ETIS*) and will not see the names of the reviewers and the evaluations that have been compiled;

- participate in the discussion on this application;
- make proposals regarding the position of this application in the ranking list of the applications.

Authorisation agreement

The members of the Expert Panel work under an authorisation agreement. The authorisation agreement includes the list of the applications for which the member of the Expert Panel has to write a review and/or compile a combined evaluation as well as the list of application for which the expert panel member has declared the conflict of interest. The authorisation agreement also establishes the remuneration intended for the review(s), combined evaluation(s), and participation in the meeting. The remuneration for writing one review is €100, the remuneration of the rapporteur for writing the combined evaluation is €100. The remuneration for active participation in the meeting of the Expert Panel is €250 (per day). The remuneration for the additional tasks of the Chair is €350.

By signing the authorisation agreement, the member of the Expert Panel will also confirm the declaration of confidentiality and the conflicts of interest.

Schedule

April/May	Declaring the conflicts of interest and defining the levels of expertise on the topics of the applications
	Signing the authorisation agreement with the Council
	Kick-off meeting
May	Reviewing applications in accordance with the evaluation guidelines
May/June	Discussion with other panel members who have reviewed the same applications, and preparation of the combined evaluations if you are the rapporteur
May/June	Panel meeting
June	If necessary, making corrections to the combined evaluations after the meeting
August	If necessary, participation in the hearing (via e-mail)