

CROATIAN SCIENCE
FOUNDATION

[PROJECT PROPOSAL EVALUATION MANUAL]

The Board of the Croatian Science Foundation determined the content of the *Project proposal evaluation manual* at its 8th session held on October 22, 2013 (O-1766-2013).

EVALUATION MANUAL

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Board of the Croatian Science Foundation determines Project proposal evaluation manual designed for all participants of the evaluation procedure (reviewers, members of the Standing Committees, members of evaluation panels), as well as the applicants.

This document elaborates and describes the evaluation procedure of project proposals submitted to Calls of the Croatian Science Foundation (hereinafter referred to as „Foundation“). Evaluation procedure carried out by the Foundation is essentially competitive and includes comparison of projects submitted for each Call, taking into account conditions of the Call, scientific quality and feasibility of the project that have to be met, as well as the balanced development of scientific areas and fields in Republic of Croatia.

Terms with the following meanings are used in the text of this manual:

Applicant – person submitting the project proposal to a Call.

Project proposal – application directed to evaluation.

Principal investigator – leader of the project approved for funding.

Project – project proposal approved for funding.

Peer review – experts evaluate the project proposal and do not discuss their ratings with others.

Panel review– project proposals are evaluated by a group of experts and the procedure includes a discussion and an agreement before making a conclusion.

Board of the Foundation– a body which controls the work of the Foundation and makes decision on project funding.

Standing committees – Committees appointed by the Board for a period of two years for implementation and monitoring of the evaluation procedure and giving recommendations for funding to the Board.

Evaluation panels – temporary committees appointed by Standing Committees for evaluating project proposals on a certain Call deadline.

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

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

1.1. Basic evaluation principles

The project proposals evaluation procedure of the Foundation is based on principles of quality, transparency, equality of treatment, confidentiality, impartiality and efficiency and speed. During the 2011, the Foundation, as a member of the Forum member organizations of the European Science Foundation on the peer review topic (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 standardisation of basic evaluation procedures at a global level.

Therefore, the Foundation's evaluation procedure is based on the following principles¹:

Expert assessment – Reviewers should possess relevant knowledge and expertise in order to evaluate project proposals on the level of contributions to the broader scientific field which the project proposal belongs to, as well as in relation to specific objectives and methodology of a specific project proposal. Reviewers are selected based on clearly defined criteria.

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

Impartiality – Project proposals are evaluated fairly and based on their quality. Conflicts of interest must be registered and processed according to established and public procedures.

Consistency – evaluation procedure should be consistent with the Call type, adjusted to characteristics of scientific fields and in proportion with 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 listed in project proposals, including intellectual property, and all other documents.

Integrity and ethical issues– Ethics and integrity are the highest principles in the entire process of evaluation and their preservation is the responsibility of all persons involved in the evaluation.

1.2. Conflict of interest evasion

The entire process of Foundation's funds allocation is based on trust that the applicants and the public have in all persons involved in the evaluation procedure and decision-making on the financing of scientific research. Therefore, the prevention of conflicts of interest is one of the basic prerequisites for ensuring equality and inviolability of the evaluation procedure. While it is impossible to prescribe all situations in which conflicts of interest may arise, in the Regulations on the Prevention of Conflicts of Interest², the Board has set out the basic

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

²Document is available at www.hrzz.hr.

principles and rules which determine and resolve conflicts of interest for all persons involved in the allocation of funds.

1.3. Interdisciplinarity

Considering that more and more research exceeds the boundaries of its main discipline with its content and methods, it is necessary to pay special attention to interdisciplinary project proposals in the evaluation procedure. In order to ensure that such project proposals are recognised and evaluated appropriately, applicants will be able to mark them as interdisciplinary. All evaluation procedure participants are required, in each step of the evaluation (the appointment of project proposals to evaluation panels, selection of evaluation experts, etc.), to ensure appropriate treatment of interdisciplinary project proposals, taking into account all their specific qualities.

2. *EVALUATION PROCEDURE PARTICIPANTS*

The evaluation procedure is based on the work of Standing Committees' members, evaluation panels' members and reviewers.

Standing Committees

Standing committees are established by the Board, and their tasks are as follows:

- *ensuring that the project proposal evaluation procedure is implemented according to the rules and deadlines prescribed by the Board*
 - *grouping the project proposals that have met the administrative verification into panel groups*
 - *determining the members of the evaluation panel that will evaluate short project proposals in each panel group*
 - *overseeing the work of evaluation panels (responsibility for carrying out tasks within deadlines and according to the rules of the Foundation, reviewing recommendations for funding and results of the evaluation after peer review)*
 - *giving funding recommendations to the Board.*
- (I) Standing Committees are established according to scientific fields: natural sciences, technical sciences, biotechnical sciences, biomedicine and health, social sciences and humanities.
- (II) The number of standing committee members is determined by the Board, but it shall not be less than 7 or more than 11.
- (III) The identity of standing committees' members is made publicly available and published on the Foundation's website.
- (IV) The members of standing committees have a mandate of two years, with the possibility of one re-election.
- (V) Members of standing committee do not evaluate project proposals.
- (VI) Each standing committee has a coordinator appointed by the Board. The coordinator is responsible for managing the work of the committee, convening board meetings, organization of work within the committee, adherence to deadlines, communication with Foundation's office, coordination of work with coordinators of other standing committees and ensuring respect of the rules of the Foundation. In case he is

prevented, the coordinator can give his authority to another member of the standing committee.

- (VII) Standing committees make decisions at meetings, usually by consensus. If it is impossible to reach a consensus, decisions are brought by majority of votes. It is necessary that the meeting of the standing committee attend at least five members. Meetings may be held electronically. Standing Committee meetings are also attended by an employee of the Foundation's Office which takes minutes. If necessary, meetings of standing committees may be attended by other persons authorized by the Board.
- (VIII) Certain decisions can Standing Committee's coordinators bring on their own and/or in consultation with the coordinator of another standing committee (e.g. transfer of project proposals to another scientific field).
- (IX) Members of Standing Committees cannot apply project proposals for the duration of the mandate or participate in one as team members.
- (X) Standing Committees do not receive regular compensation for their work.

Evaluation panels

Evaluation panels are appointed by Standing Committees, and their tasks are as follows:

- *short project proposals evaluation*
 - *directing project proposals to peer review or proposing not to direct project proposals to peer review (with explanation)*
 - *suggesting reviewers directed to peer review*
 - *reading received reviews (all members read all reviews)*
 - *evaluation and assessment of the justification of financial plans, ethical issues and, if necessary, other additional criteria established by the Board*
 - *ranking of project proposals and issuing funding recommendations.*
- (I) Evaluation panels are not permanent, they are appointed for a certain Call deadline for processing project proposals. The number of evaluation panels is not limited and depends on the number of received project proposals and their scientific field.
 - (II) The number of evaluation panel members is determined by Standing Committees, but it cannot be less than 5.
 - (III) The identity of panel evaluation members is not available to public for the duration of the evaluation procedure. After the evaluation procedure completion, a list of all evaluation panel members may be published on the website of the Foundation.
 - (IV) Each evaluation panel has a coordinator. The panel members elected a coordinator among themselves. The coordinator organises the work of the evaluation panel,

ensures the adherence to deadlines, communicates with the Standing Committee and the Office of the Foundation and ensures the respect of the rules of the Foundation.

- (V) Evaluation panels do not receive compensation for their work.

Reviewers

- (I) Reviewers are independent international experts who evaluate the full project proposals directed to peer review which by evaluation panels. In special cases, for the project proposals from humanities, reviewers may be Croatian scientists.
- (II) The reviewers evaluate project proposals according to pre-established criteria in the Evaluation form.
- (III) Within one Call, one reviewer is mainly responsible for the evaluation of one project proposal.
- (IV) Reviewers are suggested by evaluation panels.
- (V) The identity of reviewers is not publicly available, but is known only to the Office of the Foundation.
- (VI) Reviewers receive no compensation for their work.

3. EVALUATION PROCEDURE AND PROJECT PROPOSALS SELECTION

The project proposals' application and evaluation procedure is done electronically via the electronic application system (<http://epp.hrzz.hr/>). The aim is to accelerate and facilitate the project proposal submission, and later, the administration and implementation of the evaluation procedure which is to be carried out of only electronically at all stages. The Foundation will accept project proposal applications received only through the Electronic Application and Assessment System (EPP). The Foundation will not accept or receive printed versions of project proposals and reviews.

The evaluation procedure conducted by the Croatian Science Foundation consists of the following steps:

3.1. Call for proposals

- (I) Foundation's grants are awarded solely on the basis of public calls (tenders) that are published on Foundation's website.

- (II) Call content is determined by Article 7 of the Regulations on the conditions and procedure for allocation of resources to achieve the aims of the Foundation.

3.2. Receiving project proposals

- (I) Proposals will be accepted only after the Call release, on Foundation's official forms and in the manner prescribed in the Call. When submitting project proposals, applicants are required to adhere to all Foundation's general acts and additional guidelines published along with each Call.
- (II) When submitting project proposals, applicants select scientific field which their project proposal belongs to. In the case of interdisciplinary project proposals, the applicant should number (1-6) all fields that his project proposal covers.
- (III) Project proposals should be submitted only in electronic version via the Electronic Application and Assessment System (<http://epp.hrzz.hr/>). An electronic version of the project proposals must contain all required signatures and authentications. It is not necessary to send a hardcopy of the project proposal.
- (IV) Project proposals will be accepted only until the deadline (date and time) specified in the Call. After the deadline, the applicants cannot submit, amend or modify project proposals. Foundation's Office may, in certain cases, seek amendments or clarifications from applicants.

3.3. Administrative verification

- (I) Administrative verification of all received project proposals begins after the Call deadline, and is implemented by the Foundation's Office.
- (II) Administrative verification entails the review the application documentation while filling out the appropriate protocol for administrative verification. Protocols for administrative verification are available to all applicants simultaneously with the release of the Call.
- (III) Proposals that did not meet the administrative verification will not be directed to further evaluation procedure, and the applicants will be informed.
- (IV) If, during the evaluation procedure it is subsequently determined that the project proposal for any reason does not satisfy the conditions of the Call or other rules prescribed by the general acts of the Foundation, it is possible to make a decision on the exclusion of the project proposal from evaluation procedure at any time. The decision to exclude the project proposal from further evaluation procedure is made by the Board.

3.4. Project proposal grouping

- (I) All project proposals that met the administrative verification are directed to further evaluation procedure in order to be grouped according to areas within which they were submitted by the applicants.
- (II) Basic information on all project proposals within a certain scientific field the Foundation's Office shall forward to the appropriate Standing Committee.
- (III) Interdisciplinary project proposals shall be directed to a scientific field which the applicant numbered with 1 or 2. It is the task of the Standing Committee to ensure proper processing of interdisciplinary project proposals.
- (IV) All proposals reported in the same scientific field the Standing Committee group into evaluation panel and determine the members of each panel. When grouping project proposals, Standing Committees should take into account the scientific fields within which the project proposals were submitted.
- (V) In certain cases, Standing Committees or evaluation panels can transfer project proposal to the scientific field that the applicant did not choose for his project proposal. Such a decision must be explained in writing. The decision to transfer the project proposal to another scientific field and another evaluation panel is brought by the coordinator of the Standing Committee with the approval of the coordinator of the Standing Committee to which the proposal is transferred.

3.5. First evaluation step – short project proposal evaluation

- (I) In the first step, the evaluation panels evaluate short project proposals assigned to them, and then make a decision on directing project proposals to peer review.
- (II) Short project proposal evaluation is carried out electronically, according to predefined criteria and for short project proposals evaluation forms determined by the Board. Short project proposals evaluation forms are made available to applicants simultaneously with the Call release.
- (III) Decision to direct project proposals to the second step of evaluation shall be made at the meeting. If members of evaluation panel determine that the project proposal should be directed to the second round of evaluation (peer evaluation), they propose by reviewers and the project proposal is immediately sent to further procedure, and the applicant is notified.
- (IV) If evaluation panel members do not recommend sending the project proposal to the second evaluation step, they are required to explain in writing the reason why the proposal is not sent to further procedure. The decision on not sending the project proposals to further evaluation is made by the Board, and a notification on this, with panel explanation is sent to the applicant.

- (V) For applicants whose project proposals did not meet the basic quality criteria during short project proposal evaluation, members of the evaluation panel may suggest a restriction on the ability to submit project proposal to the next Call. The final decision on the limitation of application is made by the Management Board.

3.6. Second evaluation step– peer review

- (I) For each project proposal directed peer review it is necessary to provide two reviews. Reviews are sent to applicants upon completion of the entire evaluation procedure.
- (II) Peer evaluation involves assessment of the full project proposal. If the reviewer, upon having examined the project proposal, estimates that he does not have the expertise to evaluate the project proposal, he should inform the Foundation as soon as possible and, if possible, recommend another expert who could evaluate this proposal.
- (III) Reviewers base their evaluation solely on documents that they received and they implement it in accordance with the procedures of the Foundation.
- (VI) Full project proposal evaluation is carried out according to predetermined criteria through evaluating forms determined by the Board. Full project proposal evaluation forms are made available to applicants simultaneously with the Call release.
- (IV) Reviewers have no possibility of communicating and exchanging information.

3.7. Evaluation panels – final evaluation

- (I) Upon peer review completion the evaluation panel members read all reviews, assess project proposals' financial plans, and discuss ethical issues and, if necessary, additional criteria determine by the Board for particular Calls.
- (II) When evaluating financial plan, evaluation panel members must assess whether all of the items that the applicant proposes are purposeful, absolutely necessary and justified by the actual needs of the project and whether the financial amount are appropriate for each item according to the project proposal work plan.
- (III) Following the evaluation, the evaluation panels to determine whether the project proposal complies with the determined criteria, and decide whether to recommend it for funding. Project proposals that the panel determines that have met the criteria and receive a recommendation for funding must be ranked.

3.8. Standing Committees – recommendation for funding

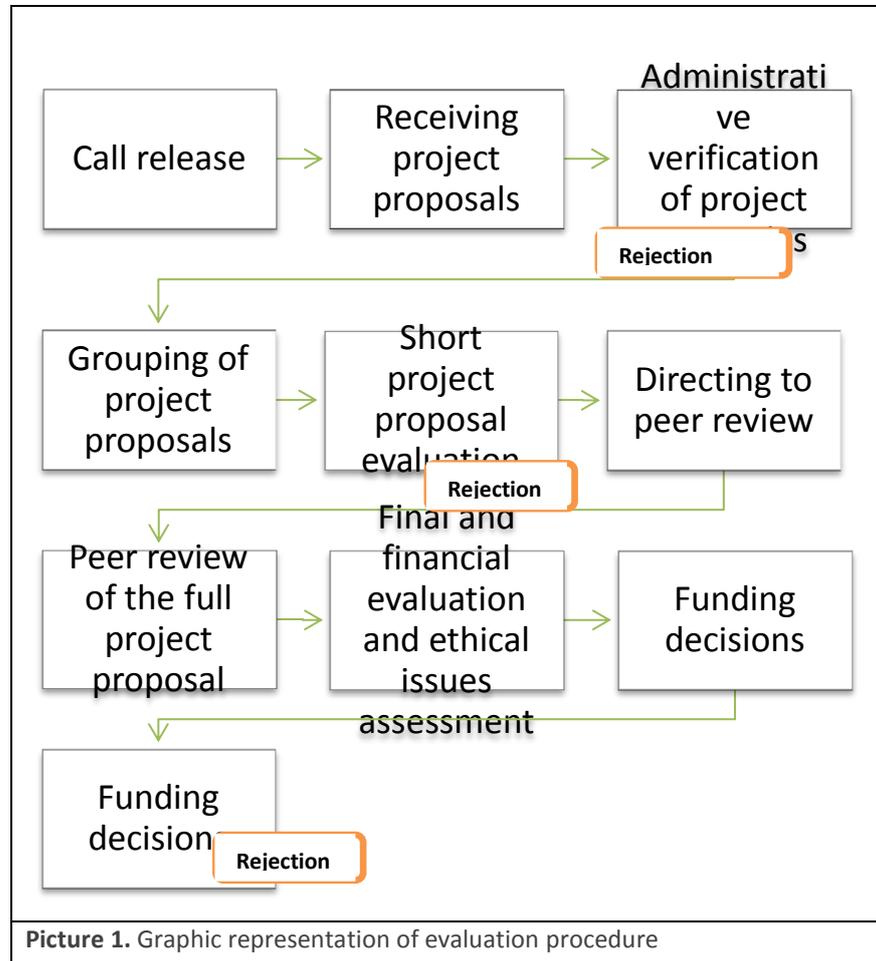
- (I) Upon receiving evaluation results and recommendation of evaluation panels, Standing Committees make recommendations for funding.
- (II) Panel coordinators (or other members), that will explain the recommendations for funding, can attend the meeting of the Standing Committee.
- (III) When making recommendations for funding, Standing Committees should take into account the implementation of the evaluation procedure, evaluation results, the availability of financial resources and the balance of the development of scientific fields and branches within a scientific area.
- (IV) Standing Committees cannot change the order of projects in the rankings, which are determined by the evaluation panels, but may require additional explanation from the panels.
- (V) If Standing Committees, in their recommendations, differ from the ranking established by the panel for evaluation, the difference must be explained in writing.
- (VI) Standing Committees are required to notify the Board if there is a suspicion that the evaluation procedure is not conducted in accordance with the rules of the Foundation.

3.9. Decision on funding

- (I) Based on evaluation results and recommendations of Standing Committees, the Foundation's Board decides on project proposal funding.

The Board may decide not to conduct the two-stage evaluation procedure as described above. In the event of any such decisions, the Board shall prescribe the evaluation procedure and publish it the on the date of releasing the call, at the latest.

3.10. Graphic representation of the evaluation procedure



4. EVALUATION CRITERIA

- (I) Project proposal evaluation criteria within a certain Call are determined by the Board. The evaluation criteria shall be adjusted individually to each Call in order to reflect the purpose and goals of the programme.
- (II) All criteria that shall be applied in the evaluation must be made available to applicants simultaneously with the Call release.

(III) General criteria for evaluating project proposals are scientific quality, relevance and research feasibility, applicant quality and research environment.

Scientific quality and research relevance:

- *scientific foundation of the project proposal and quality of the research plan*
- *the importance of the proposed topic in relation to the whole area of research*
- *potential of the project proposals to improve research area*
- *competitiveness of the project proposal in relation to the existing research on the same subject*
- *suitability and competitiveness of the proposed methodology (as compared to the best in the area)*

Project proposal feasibility:

- *clarity and realism of the objectives and good planning of activities that lead to the achievement of objectives*
- *realism and feasibility of the research (with respect to the planned time, objectives, intended results and resources available)*
- *identifying risks and finding adequate solutions*
- *assessment of the planned capacity for the execution of the project (financial support, number and competence of team members, institutional support)*

Applicant and research environment quality:

- *scientific competence of the applicant (estimated based on previous accomplishments)*
- *applicant's competence for project management*
- *Previous research contributions of the applicant and team members in the proposed area*
- *Institutional support (providing adequate infrastructure and other conditions necessary for the implementation of the project)*

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

(V) In addition to the above mentioned general criteria, the Board may prescribe additional criteria for project proposal evaluation. All criteria that will apply in the evaluation must be made available to applicants simultaneously with the Call release.

5. CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF EVALUATION PANELS' MEMBERS AND REVIEWERS

- (I) Members of evaluation panel and reviewers should be selected so that the best match between their areas of expertise and topics of the project proposal are looked for.
- (II) The criteria for their selection may vary depending on the type of programme and the type of evaluation, and special attention should be paid to the selection of panels and reviewers for evaluating interdisciplinary project proposals.
- (III) The main criterion for selection of panel members and reviewers are appropriate competencies for assessing project proposals (determined on the basis of current scientific research and achievements) and competence in the area of programme within which the Call was announced and independence (absence of conflict of interest)
- (IV) Scientific competence is crucial in selecting reviewers. However, in the selection of evaluation panel it is not necessary that a person is an expert in every single subject, but that the members of the panel as a group have the necessary competencies for evaluating the assigned proposals.
- (V) Reviewer must have equal or greater competence in relation to the applicant whose project proposal he evaluates.
- (VI) Peer review must be international. In certain cases, project proposals from humanities, one review can be Croatian when there is a valid reason.
- (VII) The main criteria for selection of Croatian and international reviewers who will conduct the evaluation are:
 - *PhD degree or other proven professional competence related to the topic of the project proposal*
 - *appropriate competencies for assessing project proposals (estimated on the basis of current scientific research and achievements) - reviewers should be experts in the topics of the project proposal*
 - *competence in the area of the programme within which the Call was released*
 - *independence (absence of conflict of interest)*
 - *Excellent knowledge of English language*

6. CODE OF CONDUCT FOR PERSONS INVOLVED IN THE EVALUATION PROCEDURE

- (I) All persons involved in the evaluation procedure conducted by the Foundation must respect the principles of confidentiality, integrity, impartiality and independence. It is expected that the tasks entrusted to them are completed responsibly, respecting the highest ethical and professional standards of their profession, not constituting or representing the interests of the institution where they are employed, nor any other organisation.
- (II) All persons involved in the evaluation procedure should equally treat all project proposals, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, nationality or social origin, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, language, disability, political opinion, social or economic conditions of applicants.
- (III) All persons who are in any way involved in the evaluation procedure the Foundation obliges to respect the confidentiality of the information they come into contact
- (IV) The members of Standing Committees, members of evaluation panels and reviewers are not allowed to discuss projects with third parties, nor discuss with other participants in the evaluation procedure, except during the formal discussion at committee meetings.
- (V) Members of Standing Committees, members of evaluation panels and reviewers should not publicly disclose the identity of the panel members and reviewers.
- (VI) Members of Standing Committees, members of evaluation panels and reviewers must not communicate directly with applicants (project leaders or co-workers).
- (VII) In case that any participant in the evaluation directly or indirectly associated with one or more project proposals or in relation to them has any other interest that could affect the neutrality of the evaluation, he shall report such facts as soon as he becomes aware of them.
- (VIII) Ratings and comments entered into evaluation forms by reviewers are basic feedback to applicants. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the reviewers take into account the manner and style of comment writing that should primarily be substantive, quality, specific, purposeful, targeted and polite
- (IX) Comments should be formulated in the form of statements and / or an explanation of the advantages and disadvantages of the project proposal. All comments will be submitted to the applicant unchanged.
- (X) When writing comments, members of the evaluation panels and reviewers should adhere to the following guidelines:
 - Use clear, analytical and unambiguous comments
 - Use grammatically correct and complete sentences, no jargon

- Avoid highlighting insufficient knowledge of the project area that is being evaluated or no confidence in the project
- Do not refer to the age of the applicant, its nationality, gender, or anything that is related to the private life of applicant
- Avoid describing, i.e. retelling parts of the project
- Avoid any expression of disrespect to the applicant / project leader, his profession or field of science that deals with the proposed project.

President of the Board

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