

My Experience as an Expert Evaluator for the EC

UKRO Webinar – Become an Expert Evaluator in Horizon Europe

A webinar organised by the UK Research Office (UKRO), a European office of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

Dr Erica Yang

Managing Director, Chilton Computing Ltd, UK

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A little bit about me

- PhD in computer science from Durham University, UK
- After PhD, various positions at UK Russell Group universities, including Leeds & Oxford.
- 11 years as Research scientist at Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Science and Technology Facilities Council (now part of UKRI - UK Research and Innovation)
 - Involved in many collaborative national (UK) and international projects
 - Helped EC funded international projects evaluate international fellowships
 - Led big multiparty collaborative R&D projects and build consortiums
 - Group leader in Visual Analytics and Imaging Systems (left in 2018)
- 3 years as a managing director and founder running Chilton Computing Ltd, an Oxford-based AI imaging company



Track records in evaluating Horizon projects

- Worked for the Commission as an expert evaluator for 5+ years across ICT, space, and secure society programme (no rapporteur experience)
- Topics are wide ranging, from data analytics, IoT, big data, AI, computational modelling, digital twins, smart cities, space data infrastructure, to digital innovations for protecting critical infrastructure
- #contracts/invitations have increased over the years, especially since 2018
 - A big feature of H2020 is its emphasis on innovation-driven projects with industry and society impacts. I have experience in **both academia and industry**
 - Another is the big push from the Commission for **gender balanced** decision making. Constantly, the Commission looks for experts, especially women evaluators, from academia or industry!

When applying for a grant under **Horizon 2020**, you are encouraged to promote **gender balance** at all levels in your teams and in management structures. Applicants should seek at having a **balanced** participation, as close as possible to 50/50, of both men and women in the teams and among the leading roles.

https://ec.europa.eu/cross-cutting-issues/gender_en

Gender - H2020 Online Manual - European Union



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Why I signed up?

- At the time, I have already had a **good few years postdoctoral experience** with UK national projects and European projects, even have projects with international partners outside of Europe.
- It was at an **important point of my career** that I want to explore a leadership role in bigger projects. So, on one hand, I started to coordinate big H2020 proposals. And on the other hand, I started to actively coordinate proposals in the UK as well.
- I want to **step up** to lead big international projects. So, I signed up and felt that that would help me better understand the process and write better proposals.
- It is a good way of **gaining international leadership profile**, and widening my professional network. Of course, there is always a curiosity dimension to it!

Enhance chances to get invited...

- Expert database: me - update it perhaps once or twice a year
- I believe the Commission uses many ways to reach out to the experts – all help! Not just your profile in the database!
 - Internet search – your blog!
 - Tweets – your voice on a topic!
 - LinkedIn – your credentials and your voice!
 - Your website – your expertise, your career
 - Your activities – publications, committees, speaker in established conferences and events (EC has flagship events!), (professional) community services

Benefits of being an evaluator

https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/wp/2018-2020/annexes/h2020-wp1820-annex-h-esacrit_en.pdf

- As a result of several years being an evaluator
 - I often have a sense of whether a proposal (including my own proposal!) is going to win...
- Impact on my own research and projects
 - Project collaborators
 - See and meet a wider range of experts from many other countries, from other academic fields and industrial sectors, very different styles, but all interesting and highly intelligent people!
 - Exchange thoughts, contacts, and opportunities (e.g. Invited to keynote speech in conference)
- Networking opportunities
 - Good friends and good fun - Every year to Brussels! You get paid to do that!
 - Boost of self-confidence
- Proposal writing skills
 - After reading so many proposals, you truly understand the importance of:
 - The call topic text!
 - The award criteria – 3 criteria, the evaluators score a proposal strictly following the criteria (and sub-criteria)!
 - The evaluation process, including the scoring method as well!
 - What a good or bad proposal looks like!

| | Award criteria | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| | Excellence <i>The following aspects will be taken into account, to the extent that the proposed work corresponds to the topic description in the work programme:</i> | Impact <i>The following aspects will be taken into account:</i> | Quality and efficiency of the implementation <i>The following aspects will be taken into account*:</i> |
| All types of action (except Framework Partnership Agreement; see below) | Clarity and pertinence of the objectives; Soundness of the concept, and credibility of the proposed methodology; | The extent to which the outputs of the project would contribute to each of the expected impacts mentioned in the work programme under the relevant topic; | Quality and effectiveness of the work plan, including extent to which the resources assigned to work packages are in line with their objectives and deliverables; |

https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/from-evaluation-to-grant-signature/evaluation-of-proposals/elig_eval_criteria_en.htm

Scores

Experts score each **award criterion** on a scale **from 0 to 5** (half point scores may be given):

- 0 – Proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.
- 1 – Poor. The criterion is inadequately addressed or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
- 2 – Fair. The proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.
- 3 – Good. The proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
- 4 – Very good. The proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
- 5 – Excellent. The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.



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The process in general & Brexit

- Evaluation is mainly about evaluators' discussion and reaching consensus (well, or not). All independent experts, not representing any organisation/country! May the best (people and proposals) win!
- Conflict-of-Interest checks and re-checks are thoroughly implemented! Quality assurance and consistency checks are well established.
- The Commission is constantly and genuinely looking for improvements.
- It is a fair and square process. – assured confidence in the system!
- At the start of every evaluation (week) briefing, there is always an explicit mentioning of the fact that UK participation should be treated as before, no change has been introduced as far as Brexit is concerned.
- The process is described well -

https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/from-evaluation-to-grant-signature/evaluation-of-proposals/eval_process_results_en.htm

Tips on what to avoid in proposals

- Forgot to describe what the SMART objectives are
 - Specific - what specific differences in what specific areas the proposal is trying to make
 - Need to have a baseline – where it is today
 - Achievable
 - **People** - Justify why they are the best people in the best position to do it
 - **Know-how and state-of-the-art** - Demonstrate that they have and know preliminary successful results in the field.
 - Understand the “**big picture**” (next slide)
 - Have a **good implementation plan** for the timeframe of the project
- Length of your proposal. Two bad signs:
 - Too long (more than 70 pages for an one-stage RIA) – The winning bid is not the one with the highest word count, for sure!
 - Too short

Key features of the winning proposals

(my experience was with the 2nd and 3rd pillars)

- Very clear positioning in terms of its expected impacts
 - Overriding goal for any bid: enhancing global competitiveness of European science and innovation
 - Depend where the call sits – your positioning must be clear and people need to get it soon with the “train ride” test, i.e. don’t go beyond the 1st page!
 - Science - What science challenge the proposal seeks to address?
 - Industry – What end-users/customers in what industry the proposal seeks to serve?
 - Society – what society issues/challenges it aims to tackle



Good signs

- **People** - Do they have the right people on board?
- **Objectives** - Are they able to clearly elaborate on their unique positioning, offerings, and end goals?
- **Presentation** - Ability to use infographics and images to communicate!

– These are all good signs!



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Thank you for listening!

Any Questions?

The End