UKRO Horizon Europe Condensed

Evaluation of proposals

When putting together a proposal, researchers need to be aware of the evaluation criteria and the evaluation process itself. An explanation of the assessment process and criteria are given in the **General Annexes** to the Horizon Europe Work Programme. This factsheet provides an overview of these criteria and the general evaluation process in the programme, as well as some of the novelties introduced by the Commission when compared with Horizon 2020. Finally, it provides useful information on how to become an evaluator of proposals in Horizon Europe.

The factsheet is written particularly with collaborative projects - funded under **Pillar II of Horizon Europe** - in mind, although, much of the information will also apply to proposals under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, the European Research Council and the European Innovation Council calls. The Commission publishes a bespoke Guide for Applicants which, among others, covers evaluation particularities for these schemes (e.g. panels, scoring systems, interviews).

Applicants are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the aims and aspirations of Horizon Europe before beginning a proposal to understand the context of the call topic of their interest and therefore the relevance of their proposed project to the Work Programme and the expected impacts. Further information about applying for Horizon Europe funding is available in UKRO's **dedicated factsheet**.

Evaluation process

Overarching rules

Several well-established principles underpin the international peer review managed by the European Commission: *Quality, Transparency, Equality of treatment, Impartiality, Efficiency and Ethical considerations*.

For each call, the Commission establishes a pool of independent evaluators contacting experts registered on the **Portal Expert Database**. Evaluators assist the EU services in their personal capacity and the selection is based on criteria such as professional expertise and experience, language skills (English in particular), geographical diversity, business-academia sector balance, gender balance, regular rotation (to include newcomers), and absence of conflict of interest.

Before starting the evaluation process, the experts are briefed on the evaluation rules, the content of the R&I topics under consideration, the need to disregard excess pages, the need to evaluate proposals as they were submitted rather than their potential, as well as the terms of their contract (e.g. confidentiality, impartiality, conflicts of interest, completing tasks and approving reports, penalties for non-compliance).

Evaluation stages

All proposals within a call (or within a coherent part of a call) are evaluated together. Each admissible and eligible proposal is reviewed by at least three independent experts. The entire process includes the three steps outlined below, which for most calls take place remotely, with limited numbers of meetings in Brussels:

Phase 1: Individual evaluation

Experts work individually. Each expert gives a score for each criterion, with explanatory comments, and prepares an 'individual evaluation report (IER)'. They also indicate if the proposal falls entirely outside the scope of the part of the call which they are evaluating or involves security issues that will need further scrutiny. The experts will also advise the Commission if applicants have the sufficient operational capacity with respect to their role and tasks in the proposed action. This assessment is based on the competence and experience of the applicants, including operational resources (human, technical and other) and, if applicable, (exceptionally) the concrete measures proposed to obtain it by the time of the implementation of the tasks.

Phase 2: Consensus group

After carrying out an individual evaluation, an expert will join other experts who have evaluated the same proposal in a consensus group, to agree on a common position, including comments and scores. Each group is assisted by a moderator who impartially seeks a consensus and ensures that each proposal is evaluated fairly, according to the evaluation criteria. The moderator is normally a Commission official, with exchanges happening via online tools.
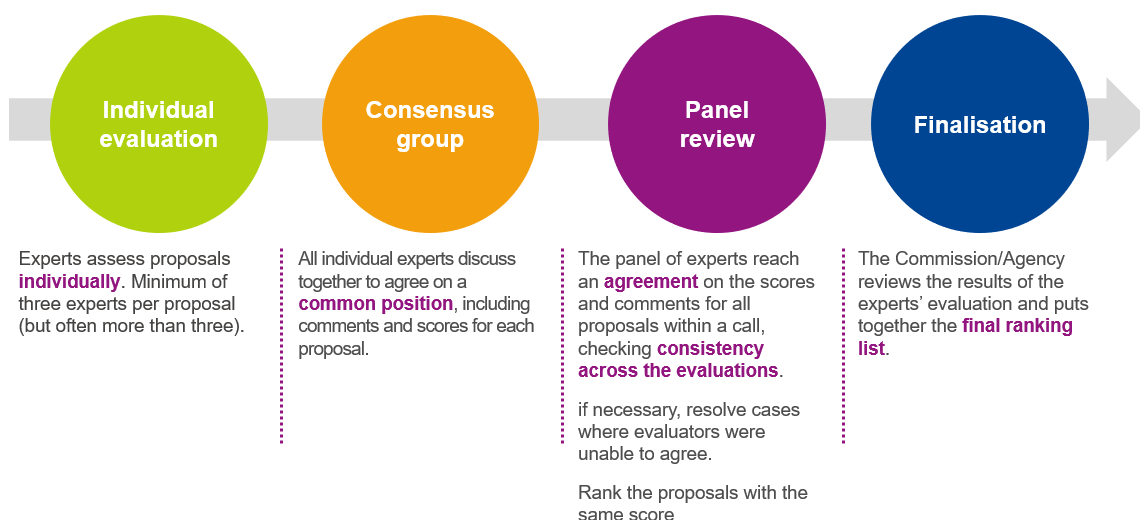
Phase 3: Panel review

Finally, a panel of experts reach an agreement on the scores and comments for all proposals within a call, checking consistency across the evaluations, if necessary, resolving cases where evaluators were unable to reach an agreement and giving a priority order for proposals with the same score.

The panel may comprise experts from consensus groups, new experts, or a combination of the two. There may be one panel covering the whole call or several panels covering different parts of the call. Each panel is responsible for one or more ranked lists, as defined by the indicative budget and call conditions set out in the Work Programme.

After the finalisation of the evaluation, the Commission produces a ranked list of proposals with the list of projects for possible funding depending on the available budget. All applicants receive the Evaluation Summary Reports (ESR) via the Funding &Tenders Portal. For one-stage calls, the whole process can take a maximum of five months from the call deadline, while for two-stage calls, the timing is a bit different: up to three months for the first stage and a maximum of five months for the second stage.

In cases of applications for joint or coordinated calls with third countries, international or non-profit organisations, the joint selection and evaluation procedures are indicated in the specific call conditions.

Individual evaluation

Experts assess proposals **individually**. Minimum of three experts per proposal (but often more than three).

Consensus group

All individual experts discuss together to agree on a **common position**, including comments and scores for each proposal.

Panel review

The panel of experts reach an **agreement** on the scores and comments for all proposals within a call, checking **consistency across the evaluations**.

if necessary, resolve cases where evaluators were unable to agree.

Rank the proposals with the same score

Finalisation

The Commission/Agency reviews the results of the experts' evaluation and puts together the **final ranking list**.

Source: European Commission

Novelties in the process

Under selected Horizon Europe calls, the Commission has been piloting two new mechanisms in the evaluation process (blind evaluation and 'right to react'), and any wider roll-out will depend on the pilot outcomes:
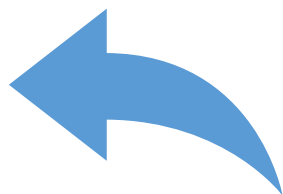
'Right to react (rebuttal)'

- It consists of an additional step between the individual evaluations and the consensus meeting, where individual evaluation reports will be made available on the Funding & Tenders Portal, giving the applicants a limited window to comment on the initial statements made by the evaluators. The objective is to clarify any misunderstandings rather than to allow the applicants to submit additional information.
- The experts are then required to consider this input before finalising the final Evaluation Summary Reports. Such a scheme will increase the quality and level of detail in the feedback given to applicants.

Blind evaluation

- Anonymous stage one proposals (in two-stage submissions) will be tested in some 2023-2024 calls for proposals, partly as a response to voices from countries that are underrepresented in Horizon 2020 (so-called 'Widening countries'). It means that at stage one of the evaluation process the applicants' identity will not be revealed to the experts. The second stage, in which full proposals are submitted, will not be anonymised.

Portfolio approach

- In addition, for Horizon Europe Missions and European Innovation Council Challenge calls, the selection of projects to receive funding will apply a '**portfolio approach**', to enhance their impact. Following the individual evaluation step, the Evaluation Committee, using predefined Challenge/Mission considerations, will establish a 'coherent collection' of successful projects from the highest scoring ones for each category or component and proposed for funding.

Evaluation review procedure

If the consortium believes that the evaluation procedure was flawed, the coordinator can submit a complaint. The results notification letter includes detailed instructions and provides an email address that should be used to request redress, normally within 30 calendar days. Only the procedural aspects of an evaluation may be the subject of a request for an evaluation review (e.g. evaluators' comments relating to a different proposal, etc.) The evaluation of the merits of a proposal will not be the subject of an evaluation review.

Evaluation criteria and scoring system

In Horizon Europe there are three assessment criteria: *Excellence, Impact* and *Implementation*.

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.

Since calls may be subject to either a single-stage or a two-stage submission procedure, elements scored under each section and at each submission stage are highlighted in the **General Annexes** to the Work Programme. The three criteria are normally given equal weighting, other than in 'Innovation Actions', where the *Impact* criterion is weighted at 1.5.

In the case of full applications, typically, the threshold for individual criteria is 3 and the overall threshold, applying to the sum of the three individual scores, is 10. For the evaluation of first-stage applications under a two-stage submission procedure, only the *Excellence* and *Impact* criteria are evaluated. In some topics, additional evaluation criteria, or higher thresholds can apply. Where this is the case these are explained in the 'Topic conditions and documents' section.

The conditions for dealing with *ex aequo* proposals may include the following criteria:

- The extent to which the proposals address aspects of the call.

- Score awarded for Excellence. When these scores are equal, priority will be based on scores for Impact. In the case of Innovation Actions, the score for Impact always prevails.

- Gender balance among the personnel named in the proposal who will be primarily responsible for carrying out the project.

- If necessary, any further prioritisation will be based on geographical diversity (new) or other factors related to the objectives of the call, or to Horizon Europe in general. These may include, for example, enhancing the quality of the project portfolio through synergies between projects or, where relevant and feasible, involving SMEs.

A set of project self-evaluation forms has been provided on the **F&T Portal** to help applicants with in-house and/or peer group reviews of their projects before final submission. Applicants may want to note the following points:

- The number of pages allocated to a specific area in the application template does not necessarily correlate directly with the importance of that area in the evaluation process. It is necessary to address all evaluation criteria appropriately.

- Project budgets should be realistic for the work proposed; if budgets are deemed inappropriately high by evaluators this will be reflected in a reduced score under the *Implementation* criterion.

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- Horizon cross-cutting issues should not be underestimated even in 'narrow/technical' topics. Proper consideration should be given to gender equality and inclusiveness, effective integration of social sciences and humanities (SSH), ethics and integrity, Open Science practices, international cooperation, 'Do no significant harm' principle/Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence (where applicable) and measures to maximise impact.

- Diversity of expertise, nationalities and sector representation among Horizon Europe evaluators is usually wider than in national R&I calls, therefore applicants should avoid country-specific terminology or assumptions on the level of reviewers' knowledge in the specific project area.

Some points to bear in mind when drafting the different parts of the application:

- **Excellence:** In Horizon Europe, 'excellence' refers to both research and innovation excellence. How well does the proposal fall within the topic scope? How 'frontier' or cutting edge is the research? How 'innovative' will the project results be? Will it make a significant contribution and progress existing knowledge? Are disciplinary boundaries being crossed (if applicable)? Have you considered the gender dimension of research, Open Science and effective integration of Social Sciences and Humanities?

- Being very logical and specific about research goals is key, applying SMART objectives can help with the proposal's clarity.

- **Impact**: Have you shown exactly how the project will achieve the impacts set out in the topic description? Have you thought about the academic impact – publications? Conferences? Data-management? Have you thought about the socioeconomic impact – growth? Job creation? Potential market size? Management of IP? Regular review of exploitation potential? Policy outputs? Social benefits? Have you addressed public engagement? A communication/ media / social media strategy? Involvement of user groups? Education?

  The new structure of the *Impact* section requires presenting 'Project's pathways towards impact', 'Measures to maximise impact' and 'Summary canvas' which visualise links between the key elements of long-term impact (needs/results/measures and target groups/outputs/impacts).

- **Implementation**: Does your consortium match the activities in the proposal and have an appropriate balance of sectors? Have you fully justified your budget? Is your Work Plan sound and consistent (measurable work packages and deliverables, realistic timeline)? Have you got a risk management plan?

- Overall presentation matters. Experts read proposals in electronic versions, so applicants can use infographics and images to communicate their ideas.
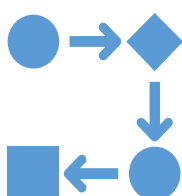
Lump sum proposals

Proposals submitted to calls with the lump sum funding model are assessed according to the standard procedures. The evaluation of the *Excellence* and *Impact* criteria is the same as in any other proposal.

Under the *Implementation* part, experts check the work package costs estimations, assessing whether the resources proposed are reasonable and justified by the proposed activities. Evaluators would use their knowledge and professional experience, as well as the new **Horizon dashboard for lump sum evaluations** to assess the personnel costs.

Costs calculations that are clearly overestimated or underestimated will lead to a reduced score under the Implementation criterion.

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Excellence	Impact	Quality and Efficiency of Implementation
Clarity and pertinence of the **project's objectives**, and the extent to which the proposed work is ambitious, and goes beyond the state-of-the-art. Soundness of the proposed **methodology**, including the underlying concepts, models, assumptions, inter-disciplinary approaches, appropriate consideration of **the gender dimension** in research and innovation content, and the quality of **open science practices** including sharing and management of research outputs and engagement of citizens, civil society and end users where appropriate.	Credibility of the **pathways** to achieve the expected **outcomes and impacts** specified in the work programme, and the likely scale and significance of the contributions due to the project. Suitability and quality of the **measures to maximize expected outcomes and impacts**, as set out in the dissemination and exploitation plan, including communication activities.	Quality and effectiveness of the **work plan**, assessment of risks, and appropriateness of the effort assigned to work packages, and the resources overall. Capacity and role of each **participant**, and extent to which the **consortium** as a whole brings together the necessary expertise.

Become an Expert Evaluator

Becoming a peer reviewer in Horizon Europe is the best way to get to know the evaluation process in the new programme and become successful as an applicant faster. Every year around 20,000 experts support the Commission with the implementation of its R&I schemes.

To be considered as a potential reviewer, interested researchers and other specialists need to register in the **Portal Expert Database in the dedicated 'Work as an expert' area of the F&T Portal**. The Commission's call for expression of interest for experts is permanently open and there are no nationality restrictions. Signing up in the system is straightforward but only fully completed profiles are taken into consideration. Using specific Horizon Europe terminology can help to match the application with the expertise sought by the call coordinator, therefore reading the Work Programme and calls documents is recommended. Keeping the information up to date is also important.

Selected experts sign a contract with the Commission and are remunerated for their work. Beyond assisting with the evaluation of proposals, experts may be tasked with monitoring projects and providing opinions on specific technical issues in Horizon Europe and other EU programmes.

Horizon Dashboard Section on Expert Evaluators in Horizon Europe

A **new section of the Horizon Dashboard** provides statistical information about experts evaluating proposals. It is composed of two data sheets: *Experts in the database*; and *Contacted experts*.

The first data sheet includes generic information about all experts currently registered in the database. The second one shows detailed information about those individuals who are contracted to evaluate Horizon Europe proposals. The tool has useful filters, which allow the user to find detailed information about evaluators (e.g. nationality). For data protection purposes, personal information is not included.

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More information

- **Horizon Europe website**
- **General Annexes to Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023-24**

Horizon Europe's legal basis:

- **Regulation establishing Horizon Europe**
- **Decision establishing the Specific Programme of Horizon Europe**
- **First Strategic Plan for Horizon Europe (2021-2024)**
- **Second Strategic Plan for Horizon Europe (2025-2027)**

Other useful websites and resources

- **Horizon Europe Programme Guide**
- **Standard Horizon Europe evaluation forms (see 'Templates and Forms' under 'Reference documents')**
- **Funding & Tenders Portal - 'Work as an Expert' Section**
- **Call for expressions of interest for experts 2021-2027 and FAQs**
- **Model Contract for Experts**
- **Standard Briefing for experts evaluating proposals (including lump sum budgets)**
- **H2020 Experts names (annual lists)**
- **UKRO webinar 'Become an Expert Evaluator in Horizon Europe'**
- **Horizon Dashboard section on expert evaluators in Horizon Europe**
- **Horizon Dashboard section with personnel costs for lump sum projects**
- **Lump sum funding in Horizon Europe – EC website**

UKRO Portal