

Guidelines for referee panels assessing Researcher Projects 2023

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A. Overview

The Research Council of Norway (RCN) has issued three calls for proposals for Researcher Project with submission deadline 8 February 2023:

- Researcher Project for Scientific Renewal
- Researcher Project for Young Talents
- Large-scale Interdisciplinary Researcher Project

The calls contained one or more *topics*, each with specific priorities.

The assessment process has three main steps:

1. The applications are assessed by a set of referee panels.
2. The RCN administration assesses each application's relevance to the selected topic and its priorities.
3. The RCN portfolio boards make the funding decisions.

It is essential and fundamental to the process that the scale of marks is applied according to its definitions (see section E) and used consistently across all panels.

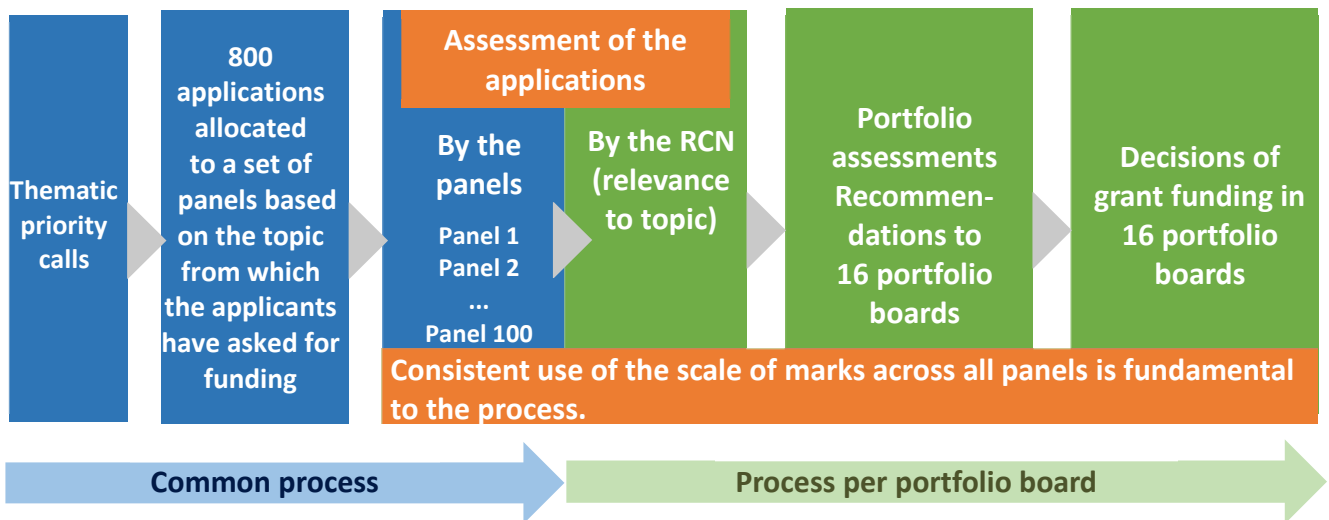


Figure 1: Overview of the assessment process. Applications are submitted to a specific topic and assigned to panels based on the topic from which the applicants have asked for funding. Based on the panel's assessment, the relevance assessment and other points outlined in the call, recommendations are presented to the 16 different portfolio boards.

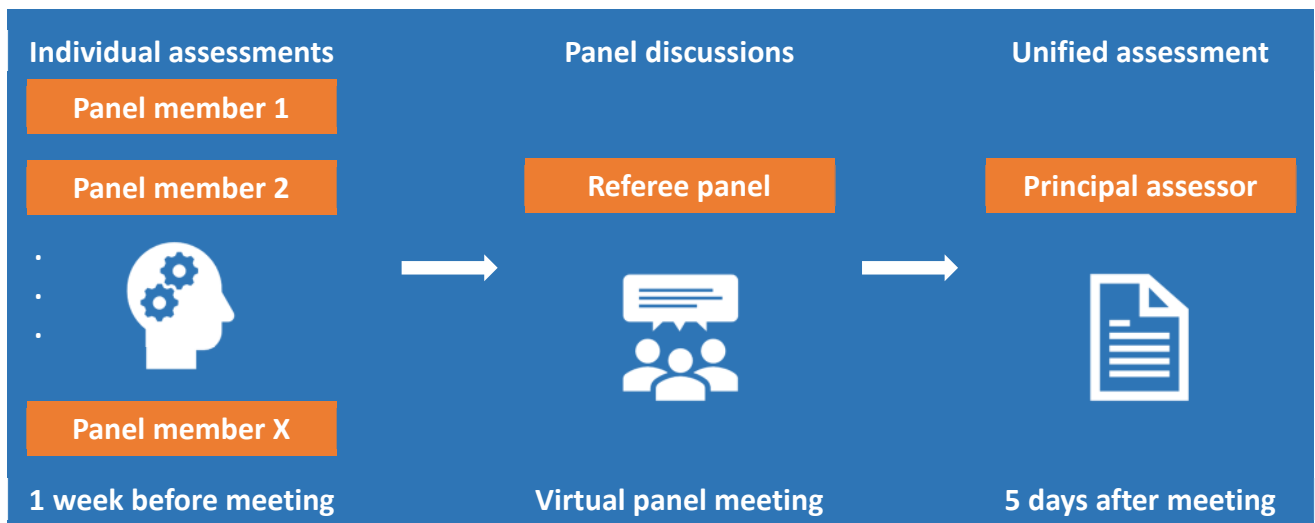


Figure 2: Overview of the referee panel assessment process. Panel members submit individual assessments of all applications prior to the meeting, discuss the proposals in a joint virtual meeting, and submit a unified panel assessment afterwards.

B. The referee panel assessment process

All panel members are required to read and participate in the assessment of all applications.

Each application is assigned a principal and a second assessor. Please note that you may be asked to serve as principal or second assessor for proposals that are outside your main areas of expertise. If adequate/sufficient expertise is not represented in the panel, the RCN administration will recruit additional external expertise to support the panel's work.

Your assessment should be based on the application form, the 11-page project description, and the project manager's and key project participants' CVs. You also have access to the specific priorities for the topic selected by the applicant at the end of these guidelines. This is to let you see the context in which the application is written. However, assessment of relevance to the topic, is not your task, but is performed by the RCN administration. Please note that the applicants are not asked to submit letters of support.

1. Individual assessment of applications prior to panel meeting

Prior to the panel meeting, we ask you to prepare and submit individual assessments of each proposal as follows:

- *The principal assessor* submits a draft for a complete written assessment (at least 5 to 10 sentences) and a mark for each of the four assessment criteria.
- *The second assessor* submits a brief written assessment (at least 2 to 3 sentences) and a mark for each criterion.
- *The other panel members* submit a mark for each criterion and are not required to give any written comments.

The individual assessments should be submitted no later than 1 week prior to the panel meeting.

2. Panel meeting discussion

When all referees have submitted their individual assessments, they are made available to the rest of the panel. To prepare for the discussions in the meeting, we ask you to read the other referees' assessments.

During the meeting, each proposal is discussed, and the panel agrees on a unified assessment based on the individual assessments and the discussions of each proposal. The discussion starts with the *principal assessor* giving a brief review of the proposal and his/her assessment. Then follows the *second assessor* and the other panel members that provide their comments. The members of the panel strive to reach consensus.

It is essential that the scale of marks is applied according to its definition (see section E).

3. Completing and submitting the final assessments

The principal assessor is responsible for updating the electronic assessment form to reflect the panel's unified assessment of the application. The written assessment serves as important feedback for the applicant, and as an essential basis for the portfolio boards' funding decisions.

The final assessment should consist of a mark and written comments for each criterion. The written comments should be consistent with and justify the given marks. Make sure that your written assessment for each criterion includes answers to the following questions:

- What are major strengths?
- What are the major weaknesses?
- Why did the panel decide on the given mark?

The comments should consist of minimum 5 to 10 full sentences for each criterion. A sentence consisting of only 1-3 words, does not count as one of the 5-10 sentences. Keep in mind; how would you prefer the feedback for your own proposals to be formulated?

The purpose of the feedback is to make the applicant understand why the panel decided on the given marks. It is not intended to serve as a recipe/description on how to improve the proposal.

It is an advantage if the final assessment forms are completed and submitted during the meeting/towards the end of the meeting. If they are not, the principal assessor must submit the remaining assessments within five days.

The RCN administration will ensure that the written feedback is phrased in an appropriate manner and consults the principal assessor if adjustments are needed.

Overview panel deliverables:

Deliverables from panel members *prior* to the meeting:

- An individual assessment of and/or marks for each application, in line with your role as principal or second assessor or other panel member

Deliverables from the referee panel *during and after* the meeting:

- A unified written assessment of and marks for each application

C. The objectives and purposes of the calls for proposals

The overall objective of the Researcher Projects is to promote renewal and development in research across all disciplines and thematic areas. In addition, the calls have specific purposes, which should be considered when marking (see section E for the scale of marks):

Researcher Project for Scientific Renewal is intended to support scientific renewal and development in research that can help advance the international research front. It is intended for researchers who have demonstrated the ability to conduct research of high scientific quality.

Researcher Project for Young Talents is targeted towards young researchers in the early stages of their careers who have demonstrated the potential to conduct research of high scientific quality. The intention is to give talented young researchers the opportunity to pursue their own research ideas and lead a research project.

Large-scale Interdisciplinary Researcher Project is intended to advance the research front by providing larger-scale allocations to interdisciplinary projects. The Research Council will provide support for researchers from different subject areas to work together to generate new knowledge that would not be possible to obtain without interdisciplinary cooperation. Applicants must have demonstrated the ability to conduct research of high scientific quality.

This panel will assess XX applications in total:

- Researcher Project for Scientific Renewal: XX applications
- Researcher Project for Young Talents: XX applications
- Large-scale Interdisciplinary Researcher Project: XX applications

D. The assessment criteria

On the basis of the application form, the 11-page project description, and the CVs of the project manager and key project participants, we ask you to assess the projects with respect to these four criteria:

Excellence – potential for advancing the state-of-the-art

The extent to which the proposed work is ambitious, novel, and goes beyond the state-of-the-art

- Scientific creativity and originality.
- Novelty and boldness of hypotheses or research questions.
- Potential for development of new knowledge beyond the current state-of-the-art, including significant theoretical, methodological, experimental or empirical advancement.

Excellence – quality of R&D activities

The quality of the proposed R&D activities

- Quality of the research questions, hypotheses and project objectives, and the extent to which they are clearly and adequately specified.
- Credibility and appropriateness of the theoretical approach, research design and use of scientific methods. Appropriate consideration of interdisciplinary approaches.
- The extent to which appropriate consideration has been given to ethical issues, safety issues, gender dimension in research content, and use of stakeholder/user knowledge if appropriate.

Quality of R&D activities - please note:

Regarding "safety issues": Where relevant, we ask you to consider if the applicant has described in a satisfactory manner how potentially undesirable effects from carrying out the project, on human and animal health, climate and the environment and society at large, can be avoided.

Regarding "ethical issues": The assessment of a proposal is not an ethical approval of the research project. If relevant, the applicant should briefly have described how ethical issues will be dealt with, to assure the panel that there is an appropriate plan for management of ethical issues.

Impact

Potential impact of the proposed research

- Potential for academic impact: The extent to which the planned outputs of the project address important present and/or future scientific challenges.
- The extent to which the planned outputs are openly accessible to ensure reusability of the research outputs and enhance reproducibility.
- Potential for societal impact (**only if addressed by the applicant**): The extent to which the planned outputs of the project address UN Sustainable Development Goals or other important present and/or future societal challenges.
- The extent to which the potential impacts are clearly formulated and plausible.

Communication and exploitation

- The extent to which the appropriate open science practices are implemented as an integral part of the proposed project to ensure open sharing and wide distribution of research outputs.
- Quality and scope of communication and engagement activities with different target audiences, including relevant stakeholders/users.

Impact - please note:

Academic impact: All Researcher Projects are to generate new insights at the frontiers of knowledge, regardless of the ambitions of societal impact. This means that for all proposals, we ask you to assess the potential academic impact (Chapter 2.1 in the project description).

Societal impact: It is optional for the applicant to describe the potential for societal impact. You should therefore assess potential for societal impact **only if** the applicant has included a description of this in the project description Chapter 2.2.

Communication and exploitation: Your assessment of such activities should be based on the project description. The applicants are instructed to leave the Dissemination plan section in the application form blank.

Implementation

The quality of the project manager and project group

- The extent to which the project manager has relevant expertise and experience, and demonstrated ability to perform high-quality research (as appropriate to the career stage).
- The degree of complementarity of the participants and the extent to which the project group has the necessary expertise needed to undertake the research effectively.

The quality of the project organisation and management

- Effectiveness of the project organisation, including the extent to which resources assigned to work packages are aligned with project objectives and deliverables.
- Appropriateness of the allocation of tasks, ensuring that all participants have a valid role and adequate resources in the project to fulfil that role.
- Appropriateness of the proposed management structures and governance.

Implementation - please note

Project manager: The Research Council of Norway is a signatory to the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment \(DORA\)](#). Therefore, we kindly ask you to bear in mind the following when assessing applicants' CVs:

- Do not use journal impact factor to evaluate the quality of the applicants' previous work
- Be sensitive to legitimate delays in research publication and personal factors that may have affected the applicant's record of outputs.

Project group: Please note that you are not to assess the qualifications of candidates for doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships. The applicants are instructed not to specify candidates for such positions in the application or submit their CVs.

E. The scale of marks

The applications will be handled in a common process in the portfolio boards after being assessed in one of our panels (Fig. 1). Therefore, it is essential that all panels use the assessment criteria, as defined above, and scale of marks as defined below.

Mark	Defining characteristics
7	<i>Exceptional</i> The proposal addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion exceptionally well. Shortcomings are not present, or only very minor.
6	<i>Excellent</i> The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Only minor shortcomings are present.
5	<i>Very good</i> The proposal addresses the criterion very well. A small number of shortcomings are present.
4	<i>Good</i> The proposal addresses the criterion well. A number of shortcomings are present.
3	<i>Fair</i> The proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are a number of significant weaknesses.
2	<i>Weak</i> The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
1	<i>Poor</i> The proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.

Please note:

The mark 7 – Exceptional – is only intended for proposals that address a criterion in a way that is outstanding, i.e., truly exceptional proposals that are normally very rare. These proposals are of the absolutely highest quality. The proposals have no shortcomings, or such shortcomings are clearly irrelevant, with respect to the elements that are considered for the criterion.

F. General guidelines for writing the assessments

All reviewers are kindly asked to follow these general guidelines:

- Make sure that your marks are in line with your comments.
- Comments should reflect strengths and weaknesses with the application
- Use dispassionate, analytical and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Avoid using "I" or "my" etc. The final assessment must be worded in a way that makes it clear that the panel jointly has agreed on the text.
- Avoid self-declaration of insufficient expertise (personal or panel) or non-confidence in the proposal.
- Avoid reference to the applicant's age, nationality, gender, or personal matters.
- Avoid any direct comparison with other contemporary proposals.
- Avoid any reference or comparison with assessment of previous proposals.

- Avoid comments that merely give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the project manager, the proposed science, or the scientific field concerned.
- Avoid recommendations or advice on improving the proposal
- Avoid contradictory statements relative to the strengths and weaknesses, either under the same or different criteria
- Avoid double penalization by stating the same weakness under different criteria

Examples of good vs. poor comments

<p>POOR COMMENTS MERELY ECHO THE SCORE</p> <p><i>The innovative aspects of the proposed research are poor.</i></p>	<p>GOOD COMMENTS EXPLAIN IT</p> <p><i>This proposal is not convincingly innovative in X and it does not properly take [xxx] into account.</i></p>
<p>POOR COMMENTS ARE AMBIGUOUS</p> <p><i>The resources for the project are unrealistic.</i></p>	<p>GOOD COMMENTS ARE CLEAR</p> <p><i>The project is overambitious, given the complexity of the activity proposed and the duration of the proposed work.</i></p>
<p>POOR COMMENTS ARE VAGUE AND SUBJECT TO INTERPRETATION</p> <p><i>We think the management is probably inadequate.</i></p>	<p>GOOD COMMENTS ARE PRECISE AND FINAL</p> <p><i>The management plan is inadequate. It does not include a clear description of overall responsibility for the activities; it also lacks a risk management plan.</i></p>
<p>POOR COMMENTS ARE INACCURATE AND PROVIDE AN OPENING FOR A COMPLAINT</p> <p><i>There is no discussion of a dissemination strategy. The supervisor is not experienced.</i></p>	<p>GOOD COMMENTS CLOSE THE QUESTION</p> <p><i>The proposal fails to address the dissemination strategy at the appropriate level of detail. The supervisor does not demonstrate in the proposal an adequate level of experience in this field.</i></p>
<p>POOR COMMENTS INCLUDE WORDS LIKE...</p> <p><i>Perhaps, think, seems, assume, probably ...</i></p>	<p>GOOD COMMENTS INCLUDE WORDS LIKE...</p> <p><i>Because, specifically, for example ...</i></p>

Source: [MSCA-IF Evaluation step by step. Manual for evaluators 2018.](#)

G. Information about the topics

The applications to be assessed by this panel are targeted towards X different topics/the topic X. Below you'll find the specific priorities for each of the topics/the topic in the panel. You may use this information to see the context in which the proposal is written. However, assessment of relevance to the topic is not your task, but will be performed by the RCN administration.

[The specific priorities for each of the topics in the panel will be listed here]

You may read the complete calls for proposals [here](#) (not required).