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Guide for Peer Reviewers

Applicable to the ERC Starting, Consolidator & Advanced Grants
(ERC Work Programme 2017)

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1. Introduction

The selection of proposals for funding by the European Research Council (ERC) is based strictly on peer review evaluation with excellence as the sole criterion. The ERC uses a typical panel-based system, in which panels of high-level scientists and/or scholars make recommendations for funding either autonomously or based on the feedback of specialists external to the panel - the Remote Referees.

The ERC Rules for Submission

The ERC Scientific Council (ERC ScC) has established a document, adopted by the European Commission, namely the 'ERC Rules for the submission of proposals and the related evaluation, selection and award procedures relevant to the Specific Programme of Horizon 2020 - the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020)' ([ERC Rules for Submission](#))¹. The ERC Rules for Submission define a number of high-level requirements on the processes implemented by the ERC.

The ERC Work Programme

The ERC ScC has also established the [ERC Work Programme \(ERC WP\) for 2017](#)², which, inter alia, defines the parameters of the Call for Proposals for ERC Starting, Consolidator and Advanced Grants. More specifically, it defines the call deadlines and the call budgets. It stipulates that a two-step peer review procedure will be applied following a single submission of a full proposal, sets the framework for budgetary implementation, and specifies the evaluation criteria.

This document

The ERC ScC establishes the peer review evaluation methodology and this document (also referred to as the 'rules of procedure for ERC panels' in section 3.6 of the ERC Rules for Submission) complements the abovementioned legal texts. It specifies in more detail the peer review evaluation process and its inputs and outputs, and it defines the responsibilities of the participants in the process. It details a number of important issues, such as: clarification of the methodology as regards interdisciplinary proposals; practical guidelines for the management of conflict of interest; and clarification of cross-panel and cross-domain issues.

2. Domain structure and panel structure

The ERC has the mandate to implement a bottom-up, investigator-driven approach to research funding. Consequently, the principal objective of the peer review system is to select the best science, independent of its discipline and independent of the particularities of the review panel structure.

Indeed, proposals of an interdisciplinary nature that cross the boundaries between different fields of research, pioneering proposals addressing new and emerging fields of research or proposals introducing unconventional, innovative approaches and scientific inventions are strongly encouraged. These proposals are assessed within the primary review panel. Nevertheless, when additional expertise is necessary, reviewers from other panels may be involved as well.

Where a call specifies a two-step evaluation procedure a single submission of the full proposal is followed by a two-step evaluation process. Initially the applicant decides to which primary panel they submit the proposal. The review of the proposals is then conducted in

¹ European Commission C(2015)4975 of 23 July 2015

² European Commission C(2016)4616 of 25 July 2016

two steps by review panels.

In this context, the ERC has established a panel structure consisting of 25 panel titles, grouped in three main research domains, covering the entire spectrum of science and scholarship in the remit of the ERC:

- Physical Sciences and Engineering (PE)
- Life Sciences (LS)
- Social Sciences and Humanities (SH)

In defining the panel structure, a forward-looking approach was taken and narrow discipline definitions have been avoided.

The 25 panel titles are accompanied by a list of panel keywords indicating the fields of research covered by the respective ERC panels. The panel keywords must always be read and understood in the overall context of the panels' titles and sub-titles.

3. Panel Chairs, Panel Members and Remote Referees

The panels

An ERC panel consists of a chairperson and between 11 and 15 members. The Panel Chair and the Panel Members are selected by the ERC ScC on the basis of their scientific reputation and following the criteria set up by the ERC ScC Standing Committee on Panels. The Panel Chair and the Panel Members make a significant commitment of their time to the ERC peer review evaluation process. Each panel meets twice to carry out a two-step review of proposals.

Panel Chairs and Panel Members perform the following tasks:

1. Familiarisation with proposals of their panel in preparation for the panel meetings.
2. Individual remote review - by electronic means - of a subset of those proposals in preparation for the panel meetings.
3. Participation in the panel meetings.

Panel Chairs have additional tasks and responsibilities, while working in close collaboration with the ERC Executive Agency's (ERCEA) Scientific Officers of the panel concerned:

1. To chair the panel meetings.
2. To (re-)allocate proposals to review panels. Although the initial allocation is based on the expressed preference of the applicant, when necessary, owing to the expertise required for their evaluation, proposals may be reallocated to different panels at the beginning of the evaluation. This reallocation should be done by common agreement of the two Panel Chairs concerned in the main interest of the applicant aiming to ensure a competent and fair evaluation of the proposal.
3. To assign proposals to Panel Members (and to Remote Referees) for individual reviewing. Panel Chairs will pay particular attention to the rules on conflict of interest and exclusion of experts (e.g. the concerned member of a Panel will be informed by the relevant Panel Chair in the presence of an ERCEA Scientific Officer).
4. To ensure the panels produce all necessary deliverables of the required quality standards by the end of the panel meetings, including the ranked lists and feedback to applicants.
5. To attend the Initial Panel Chairs' meeting in order to assess the response to the call for proposals and plan the work of the panel accordingly.

6. To select experts for remote evaluation³.

If a Panel Chair is unable to attend the meeting, this task can be delegated to the Deputy Panel Chair⁴.

The names of the Panel Chairs are publicly available after the call publication. The names of Panel Members are published after the final results have been communicated to all the applicants.

The Remote Referees

In addition to the Panel Members (who act as 'generalists'), the ERC evaluations rely on input from Remote Referees. They are scientists and scholars who bring in the necessary specialised expertise. Remote Referees work remotely and deliver their individual assessments by electronic means. They do not participate in panel meetings and normally their involvement is limited to step 2 of the evaluation process. Due to the specialised nature of the work, the demands on the time of individual Remote Referees are comparatively smaller (of the order of a day). The names of all Remote Referees are made public once a year, after the final results have been communicated to all the applicants.

The assignment of Remote Referees to proposals is carried out under the responsibility of the Panel Chair in collaboration with the Panel Members and the ERCEA's Scientific Officers. Any member of the international scientific community can act as a Remote Referee, subject to the approval and accreditation of the person in question and their acceptance of the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest. There should also be a regular rotation of experts, consistent with the appropriate balance between continuity and renewal.

In the second step of the peer review evaluation process, to take advantage of the best spectrum of specialised expertise, in addition to Panel Members, reviews are requested from two to five Remote Referees who work remotely. All the reviews will then form the basis for the panel discussions.

The contracts for paid ERC experts

The relationship between the ERCEA and the reviewers is defined by a written and signed agreement (the Contract⁵). Signature of this contract by the reviewer indicates acceptance of the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest (Annex 1, Code of Conduct to the expert contract), and use of personal data by the ERCEA. The ERCEA cannot make proposals available to a reviewer who has not been officially contracted (i.e. signed the Contract and, in so doing, agreed to the terms laid down in it including in particular, confidentiality and conflict of interest aspects).

A breach of the Code of Conduct or other serious misconduct by a reviewer may be qualified as grave professional misconduct and may lead to the termination of the contract of this independent expert.

For the case of Remote Referees, a letter of appointment⁶ will be issued.

³ Panel Chairs are mandated by the ERC Scientific Council. See footnote 28 of the ERC Rules for Submission.

⁴ Panel Chairs are asked to appoint a Deputy Panel Chair at the beginning of the evaluation process.

⁵ The model expert contract was adopted by the European Commission Decision C(2013)8373 of 10 December 2013 amended by C(2016) 5455 of 29 August 2016.

⁶ See Annex B to the ERC Rules for Submission.

Exclusion of independent experts at request of an applicant

If it is provided in the ERC WP⁷, applicants submitting proposals may request that up to three specific persons would not act as peer reviewers in the evaluation of their proposal. Such a request is made at the time of proposal submission in the administrative submission forms.

If the person identified is an independent expert participating in the evaluation of a call for proposals, they may be excluded from the evaluation of the proposal as long as the ERCEA remains in the position to have the proposal evaluated.

Such a request will be treated confidentially by the authorised staff of the ERCEA and the concerned Panel Chair. If the excluded expert is a member of the panel, they will be informed in confidence about the request concerning him/her. In the case of exclusion of the Panel Chair, the authorised staff of the ERCEA may consult the Deputy Panel Chair accordingly.

4. The approach to interdisciplinary proposals

Research proposals of a multi- and interdisciplinary nature are strongly encouraged throughout the ERC's research grants. Proposals of this type are evaluated by the ERC's primary panels with the appropriate external expertise where necessary.

The initial choice indicated by the applicant when submitting their proposal is paramount in determining the panel under which a proposal is evaluated. An applicant who considers their proposal as interdisciplinary (i.e. cross-panel or cross-domain) can also explicitly mention a second panel in the application form. The broad definition of the panels allows many interdisciplinary proposals to be treated within a single panel (mainstreaming of interdisciplinarity). During the evaluation process, potentially interdisciplinary proposals are flagged as such, and the panel may request additional reviews from appropriate members of other panel(s) or additional Remote Referees.

Responsibility of the panels

The responsibility to ensure that cross-panel/cross-domain proposals receive equal and fair treatment rests fundamentally with the panels to which they are allocated. No proposal is allocated to multiple panels, ensuring an equal treatment of all proposals.

The structure of the evaluation criterion, defined in the ERC WP, allows the panels to fulfil this responsibility. In the first step, the review panels can come to clear recommendations on the potential of the Principal Investigator, and the quality of the research proposed, even while recognising that certain scientific aspects of the proposals may not be fully covered by the panel's specialties. The same may be true for proposals that fall entirely within the panel. The panels and Panel Members therefore play a 'generalist' role.

5. Distribution of budget: main principles

Allocation of indicative budget to panels

The ERC WP establishes that an indicative budget is allocated to each panel in proportion to the budgetary demand of its assigned proposals. The budget is calculated on the basis of the cumulative grant request of all proposals to the panel as a proportion of the cumulative grant request in response to the indicative budget of the call.

⁷ See section 3.3 of the ERC Rules for Submission.

6. The individual reviews

Individual reviews are carried out prior to panel meetings. Panel Members and Remote Referees participate in the individual review stage.

Minimum requirements

The ERC Rules for Submission stipulate that each proposal shall be reviewed by at least three peer reviewers. In step 1, all proposals are reviewed by Panel Members. In case of an oversubscription, they will be supported by Members of other panels and by Remote Referees. In step 2, reviews are carried out by Panel Members (ideally three) and Remote Referees (ideally two to three).

The applicant submits the proposal to a primary review panel. If the applicant has indicated a secondary review panel, the primary panel will determine whether the proposal is indeed cross-panel or cross-domain and if necessary may request additional reviews by appropriate Members of other panel(s) or additional Remote Referees. If the primary panel decides that the proposal is well within the panel's scope and no additional expertise is necessary then it will only be evaluated by this panel.

Each application may be assigned to a 'lead reviewer'⁸ who introduces the proposal to the panel for discussion and is responsible for drafting the panel comment. The panel comment is part of the 'Evaluation Report' which is returned to the applicant as feedback.

The interpretation of 'individual' review

During the individual reviewing/remote evaluation process, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between reviewers. Moreover, during the remote evaluation of proposals (i.e. before panel meetings), Panel Members should not disclose the proposals assigned for their evaluation to other experts. When a Panel Member considers that they have insufficient expertise to evaluate any of the assigned proposals, they should immediately inform the ERCEA's Scientific Officers and the Panel Chair, so that the proposal can be reassigned to another reviewer.

Marks and comments

Individual reviewing consists of:

- Providing a succinct explanatory comment substantiating the mark for the Research Project.
- Indicating to which extent the reviewer agrees with the statements related to the excellence of the Principal Investigator and providing an optional explanatory comment.
- Awarding marks for the two main elements of the proposal - the Research Project and the Principal Investigator.

The importance of marks and comments

Both marks and comments are critically important. The individual review marks determine the relative position on the initial ranking list and serve as a starting point for the panel discussions. These marks are not communicated to the applicants; only the final outcome expressed as A, B or C (see section 10). All comments are included in the Evaluation Report and therefore reproduced in the feedback to applicants. Reviewers should therefore take care about the formulation of comments in their individual assessments.

⁸ The 'lead reviewer' is a Panel Member selected from those assigned to evaluate the proposal. A 'lead reviewer' may be assigned to each proposal during the evaluation process. The lead reviewer's role is to briefly introduce the proposal to their peers during the panel meeting and draft the panel comment in order to reflect the main points of the panel discussion. The panel comment drafted by the 'lead reviewer' is agreed upon in its final version by all Panel Members.

The nature of the comments

Comments should be provided at each step by each reviewer for the Research Project. They should be of good quality, genuine, succinct but substantial. They should also be impeccably polite.

Comments should take the form of a statement and explanation of key strengths and key weaknesses of the proposal, in light of the evaluation criterion.

Reviewers are obliged to observe the following guidelines:

- Use dispassionate, analytical and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Critical comments should be constructive.
- Avoid self-declaration of insufficient expertise (personal or panel) or non-confidence in the proposal.
- Avoid reference to the applicant age, nationality, gender, or personal matters.
- Avoid making reference to scores in the comments.
- Avoid any direct comparison with any other proposals.
- Avoid any reference or comparison with previous assessments.
- Avoid comments that give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the Principal Investigator, the proposed science, or the scientific field concerned.

Individual reviews have to be submitted in due time to the ERCEA and at the latest prior to the panel meeting.

The range of marks

Panels and Remote Referees will evaluate and mark the proposals according to:

- 1: Research Project, and
- 2: Principal Investigator

Each proposal receives a mark on a scale from 1 to 4 for each of the two above sections. Marks are awarded in integers or halves. Marks range from 1 (non-competitive) to 4 (outstanding). As a general recommendation, it seems reasonable to reserve the highest mark, i.e. 4.0 (outstanding), for the top 10% of proposals, marks 4.0 or 3.5 only for the top 20%, and mark 3.0 only for the top 30% of proposals. In all cases, reviewers are requested to base their assessment strictly on the evaluation criterion.

While numerical marks from 1 to 4 are used in the remote evaluation phase and serve as a starting point for the panel meetings, the outcome of the panel meeting is expressed as A, B or C (see section 10). Hence, the individual numerical marks are not communicated to the applicants. At the end of each evaluation step, the proposals will be ranked by the panels on the basis of the marks they have received and the panels' overall appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses.

Review of the requested EU contribution

Panels should only recommend reductions of the requested grant where there are specific recommendations for a particular proposal (i.e. there should be no across-the-board cuts). Recommendations for amendments to the amount granted must be documented and explained in the panel comments for each proposal concerned, based on an analysis of the resources requested and necessary to carry out the work.

The appropriate level of budget should be evaluated within the first element of the proposal (the 'Research Project') under the heading 'Scientific Approach' which refers to resources. Panels are advised to consider carefully whether recommendations for large reductions may

in fact be a reflection of a weak proposal and whether it would be advisable to reject the proposal.

7. Conflict of Interest for paid ERC experts

The conflict of interest rules for Remote Referees are outlined in their appointment letter (see Annex B to the ERC Rules for Submission).

Peer reviewers should not be put in a situation in which their impartiality might be questioned, or where the suspicion could arise that recommendations are affected by elements that lie outside the scope of the review. To that effect, the ERC has formulated a clear set of rules pertaining to conflict of interest.

These rules are annexed to the Contract and can also be found at the end of this document. Since a new expert contract has been adopted with the effect of 01/01/2017 there are two Annexes. For ERC experts that have signed a contract before 1 January 2017 please see Annex 1 for the Conflict of Interest rules applying to them. For experts that have signed a contract after the 1 January 2017 the rules outlined in Annex 2 applies.

On the basis of the information available, the Panel Chair shall avoid making conflicting assignments of proposals to reviewers.

8. The eligibility and evaluation criteria

The criteria express the objectives of the ERC activity at the level of the review. They are, therefore, defined in the applicable ERC WP. There are two types of criteria:

- Eligibility criteria.
- Evaluation criterion.

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria are simple, factual and legally-binding. Their interpretation does not involve scientific judgement. Hence, eligibility is not part of the peer review evaluation process. Instead, it is carried out in parallel by the ERCEA. Nevertheless, if an expert considers a proposal to be potentially ineligible during the evaluation process they should clarify the case immediately with the ERCEA's Scientific Officers. In some (rare) cases, proposals may be declared ineligible during or even after the peer review evaluation process, as their ineligibility can only be confirmed with some delay.

Evaluation criterion

Excellence is the sole criterion of evaluation and is at the core of the peer review evaluation process. It is applied to the evaluation of both the Research Project⁹ and the Principal Investigator in conjunction. The detailed elements applying to the excellence of the Research Project and the Principal Investigator(s) for each step and their interpretation are described in the applicable ERC WP. All assessments on proposals must be made against the evaluation criterion and its detailed elements alone.

The incorrect application of the evaluation criterion or the application of inexistent or irrelevant criteria for the step concerned is considered a procedural error, which may justify a re-evaluation of the proposal.

⁹ The feasibility of the scientific approach is assessed at step 1. The detailed scientific approach (methodology, timescales and resources included) is assessed at step 2.

9. Preparation and organisation of the panel meetings

Briefings of experts

At the start of the evaluation session, Panel Chairs are invited to Brussels for an Initial Panel Chairs' Meeting. This meeting's purpose is two-fold – the first is to brief the Panel Chairs on all relevant aspects of the evaluation processes and procedures, and the second is to work on tasks including the assignment of the proposals with the ERCEA's Scientific Officers. Furthermore, at the start of each evaluation meeting, Panel Chairs and Members are briefed by their ERCEA Scientific Officers. These briefings cover matters such as the evaluation processes and procedures; the content of research topics under consideration; the terms of the experts' contract, including conflict of interest rules, completion of tasks and approval of reports and the possible consequences of non-compliance; instructions to disregard any excess pages; and the need to evaluate proposals 'as they are'; and very limited scope for recommending improvements to highly scored proposals¹⁰.

For experts evaluating remotely, particular attention will be given to their briefing when specially adapted material may be needed (e.g. CD-ROMs, on-line presentations). Close contact is maintained with the individual experts to assist them with any query.

Autonomy of Panel Chairs

Panel Chairs have a high degree of autonomy in the conduct of their meetings, within the ERC Rules for Submission, the ERC WP and this Guide: which proposals to discuss in detail, in which order, when to resort to voting and how to vote, etc. The conduct of the meetings will also be influenced by the number of proposals to be reviewed by the panel.

The efficiency of meetings and preparation

The ERC attaches great importance to the principle that panel meetings should be efficient. For this reason, preparatory work is carried out in advance of the meeting by electronic means:

1. Panel Members familiarise themselves with proposals in their panel, in order to be able to make high-quality recommendations.
2. In step 1, Panel Members, individually and remotely, review a subset of submitted proposals.
3. In step 1, each Panel Chair is asked to recommend potential Remote Referees¹¹ for an in-depth review of those proposals they recommend to be retained for step 2.
4. In step 2, Panel Members, individually and remotely, review a subset of retained proposals.
5. In step 2, Remote Referees contribute to the evaluation process with individual reviews prepared remotely.

The prior individual reviewing stage increases the efficiency of evaluation in two ways:

1. By creating a preliminary ranking of proposals; this allows panel discussions to focus on those proposals that merit substantial discussions and an early elimination of the low-ranked proposals.
2. By gathering elements of the feedback to applicants; particularly for the low ranked proposals, the comments obtained by their individual reviewing may sufficiently capture substantial reasons for the rejection.

Ranking methodology

Starting from the preliminary ranking, panels may decide to go through a process of successive elimination stages, where the depth of discussion increases as the number of

¹⁰ See section 3.6.1 – '*Briefings of the panels*' in the ERC Rules for Submission.

¹¹ See footnote 28 of the ERC Rules for Submission.

proposals in contention decreases. Panels will provide an appropriate panel comment for each unsuccessful proposal at step 1 and for all proposals at step 2 (see section 11 below).

The possible use of a voting system

In the later stages of the peer review evaluation process, panels may expedite their ranking process by the use of a voting system (e.g. a majority vote on one or more proposals, with each Panel Member having one vote per proposal being considered). A Panel Chair/Member cannot vote for a proposal if under a conflict of interest, and in such case, an appropriate adjustment is applied. Voting can be an effective way of finalising a ranking list.

Outputs of the panel meetings

The output of any panel meeting, to be provided at the end of the meeting, consists of the following elements:

1. The ranked list of proposals;
2. The feedback to applicants (see section 11 below);
3. A panel report.

The panel report

In addition to the ranked list of proposals, the panel report (prepared by the Panel Chair) briefly documents the evaluation methodology followed by the panel. It may also contain, as deemed appropriate, reflections on issues such as the quality of proposals in relation to the budget and observations on cross-panel/cross-domain proposals. It may furthermore contain recommendations to be taken into account by the ERC in future review sessions.

10. The tasks of the panel meetings

In step 1 of the evaluation process Part B1 of the proposal is assessed, marked and ranked.

In cases where panels determine that a proposal is of a cross-panel or cross-domain nature, panels may request additional reviews by appropriate members of other panel(s). At the end of step 1, the proposals will be ranked by the panels on the basis of the marks they have received and the panels' overall appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses.

The panel then makes three types of recommendations:

1. Proposals of sufficient quality to pass to step 2 of the evaluation, scored **A**. The total budget of proposals selected for step 2 may correspond to up to 3.0 times the panel's indicative budget¹².
2. Proposals of high quality but not sufficient to pass to step 2 of the evaluation, scored **B**. These proposals are not further evaluated and will not be recommended for funding. In this case applicants may be subject to resubmission restrictions in future calls if specified in the applicable ERC WP¹⁵.
3. Proposals that are not of sufficient quality to pass to step 2 of the evaluation, scored **C**. In this case applicants may be subject to resubmission restrictions in future calls if specified in the applicable ERC WP¹³.

At step 2 the complete version (i.e. Parts B1 and B2) of the retained proposals are assessed and ranked by the panel.

¹² See under 'Evaluation procedure and criteria' of the ERC WP 2017.

¹³ See under 'Restrictions on submission of proposals' of the ERC WP 2017.

In cases where panels determine that a proposal is of a cross-panel or cross-domain nature, panels may request additional reviews by appropriate members of other panel(s) or additional Remote Referees.

For the Starting and Consolidators Grant Calls, Principal Investigators whose proposals have been retained for the step 2 of the evaluation may be invited for an interview to present their proposal to the evaluation panel in Brussels.

At the end of step 2 the panel produces a final ranking list.

At this point the panel makes two types of recommendations:

1. those proposals which fully meet the ERC's excellence criterion and are therefore recommended for funding **if sufficient funds are available**, scored **A**;
2. those proposals which meet some but not all elements of the ERC's excellence criterion and therefore will not be funded scored **B**.

Proposals recommended for funding will be funded by the ERC if sufficient funds are available¹⁴. Proposals will be funded in priority order from the respective panel budgets based on their rank. If any funds are still available from the panel budgets or additional funds become available, proposals will then be funded in order of their 'normalised accumulated budget'¹⁵.

At the end of each step, applicants will receive an Evaluation Report which will include the ranking range of their proposal out of the proposals evaluated by the panel.

11. Feedback to applicants (the Evaluation Report)

Apart from recommendations on fundable proposals and their ranking, the most important output of the panel meetings is the feedback to applicants. According to the ERC Rules for Submission, the ERCEA will provide an Evaluation Report to each applicant, which documents the results of the evaluation. Especially in the case of rejection, the Evaluation Report needs to convey a comprehensive explanation of the fate of the proposal and the position of the panel with regard to it. The principle applied is that the Evaluation Report of each proposal contains a documentation of all comments and observations it received from both Panel Members and the peer reviewers who have carried out individual assessments of the proposal.

Elements of the Evaluation Report

The Evaluation Report of any proposal comprises three components:

1. The recommendation of the panel (A, B or C grade plus ranking range).
2. A comment by the panel, written by the 'lead reviewer' or another Panel Member, and approved by the panel.

¹⁴ Additional funds can become available in cases such as the failure of the granting procedure to projects, the withdrawal of proposals, budget savings agreed during the granting procedure, or the availability of additional budget from other sources.

¹⁵ The recommended normalised accumulated budget (NAB) for every panel is calculated by summing the normalised budget (recommended budget divided by panel's indicative budget) of each proposal from the top position down to the actual position of the given proposal. Thus, the normalised accumulated budget takes into account the position of the proposal in its panel ranking, the recommended budget of the proposal and of all proposals ranked higher in the same panel and the indicative budget of the panel.

3. The comments from the individual assessments given by Remote Referees and Panel Members prior to the panel meeting.

The comments by individual reviewers

The comments by reviewers (Panel Members and peer reviewers) are included in the Evaluation Report as received. They may be subject to mild editing by the ERCEA, without altering their intended message, in order to enhance clarity, remove any inappropriate, irrelevant or polemic remarks, remove revelation of the Remote Referees' identity, misleading recommendations, etc. These individual comments may not necessarily be convergent - differences of opinion about the merits of a proposal are legitimate among evaluators, and it is potentially useful for an applicant to be informed of the various views.

The panel comment

In many cases the comments by the individual reviewers provide a sufficient explanation of the panel's decision. In such cases, the panel comment simply acknowledges the weaknesses or strengths pointed out by the individual reviewers without containing observations that substantially deviate from the views expressed by the individual reviewers.

In other cases, the panel may take a position that is different from what could be inferred from the comments/marks of the individual reviewers. For example, if the panel discussion reveals an important weakness in a proposal the panel comment shall document its reasons in a substantial comment.

In step 1, a number of proposals of reasonable/good quality but ranking below the budgetary cut-off level will be rejected. Such proposals may typically have positive comments from individual reviewers. However, they do not gather enough support from Panel Members when taking into account the budgetary constraint. In such cases, the panel comments may be expressed in these terms.

The panel comment is the key element of the information provided to the applicants at the end of the evaluation. It should clearly explain the decision adopted by the panel substantiating the reasons which led to the panel decision.

Panel members should ensure that scientific recommendations made to PIs (which may or may not be taken into account) are clearly distinct from their budget recommendations to ERCEA (which are binding though final decision is made by the ERCEA Director).

12. The role of the ERC Scientific Council

The ERC ScC may delegate its members to attend panel meetings. The role of these delegates is to ensure and promote coherence of reviews between panels, to identify best practices, and to gather information for future reviews of the procedures by the ERC ScC.

In conformity with the mandate of the ERC ScC to carry out the scientific governance of the ERC, and in line with the role of the ERC ScC foreseen in the ERC WP, ERC ScC members will abstain from influencing the results of the peer review evaluation process.

13. The role of independent observers

Under the ERC Rules for Submission, independent experts may be appointed as observers to examine the peer review evaluation process from the point of view of its working and execution. The independent observers are independent of the ERCEA and of the ERC ScC. Their function and role is described in section 3.4 of the ERC Rules for Submission.

14. Annex 1

Conflict of Interest rules annexed to the Contract that was signed before 1 January 2017.

Article 2 – Obligations of Impartiality¹⁶

1. The expert must perform their work **impartially**. To this end, the expert is required to:

- a) inform the contracting party or relevant service of any conflicts of interest arising in the course of their work including of any proposal competing with the proposal where the expert may have a conflict of interest;
- b) confirm there is no conflict of interest for each proposal s/he is evaluating by signing a declaration in the electronic evaluation system.

2. **Definition of the conflict of interest:** For a given proposal, a conflict of interest exists if an expert:

- a) was involved in the preparation of the proposal.
- b) stands to benefit directly or indirectly if the proposal is accepted.
- c) has a close family or personal relationship with any person representing an applicant legal entity.
- d) is a director, trustee or partner or is in any way involved in the management of an applicant legal entity.
- e) is employed or contracted by one of the applicant legal entities¹⁷ or any named subcontractors.
- f) is a member of an Advisory Group set up by the Commission to advise on the preparation of EU or Euratom Horizon 2020 work programmes, or work programmes in an area related to the call for proposals in question.
- g) is a National Contact Point, or is directly working for the Enterprise Europe Network.
- h) is a member of a Programme Committee.
- i) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with the principal investigator of any proposal s/he is requested to evaluate as an additional reviewer from another panel (cross-panel or cross-domain proposal).
- j) has or has had during the last five years, a scientific collaboration with the principal investigator of the proposal.
- k) has or has had a relationship of scientific rivalry or professional hostility with the principal investigator of the proposal.
- l) has or has had in the past, a mentor/mentee relationship with the principal investigator of the proposal.
- m) has submitted a proposal as a principal investigator or a team member, under the same call.
- n) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with the principal investigator of any proposal submitted to their panel.

In the following situations the contracting party or relevant service in consultation with the ERC Scientific Council will decide whether a conflict of interest exists, taking account of the

¹⁶ This section is an extract from Annex 1 to the expert contract.

¹⁷ However, the contracting party or relevant service may decide to invite an expert who is employed or contracted by one of the applicant legal entities or any named subcontractors to take part in the panel review session, if the expert works in a different department/laboratory/institute from the one where the work is to be carried out, and if the constituent bodies operate with a high degree of autonomy, and if such a role is justified by the requirement to appoint the best available experts and by the limited size of the pool of qualified experts.

objective circumstances, available information and related risks. The contracting party or relevant service may decide that the expert takes part or not in the evaluation of the given proposal or of the call

when an expert:

- i. was employed by one of the applicant legal entities in the last three years.
- ii. is involved in a contract or grant agreement, grant decision or membership of management structures (e.g. member of management or advisory board etc.) research collaboration with an applicant legal entity or a fellow researcher, or had been so in the last three years.
- iii. is in any other situation that could cast doubt on their ability to participate in the evaluation of the proposal impartially, or that could reasonably appear to do so in the eyes of an external third party.

3. Consequences of conflicts of interest

- a) If a conflict of interest referred to in points (m) and (n) of paragraph 2 is reported by the expert or established by the contracting party or relevant service, or becomes apparent at any stage of the evaluation, the expert must not evaluate any proposal in the call ('out of the call' rule). Any comments and scores already given by the expert will be discounted. If necessary, the expert will be replaced.
- b) If a conflict of interest referred to in points (a) to (l) of paragraph 2 is reported by the expert or established by the contracting party or relevant service, the expert must not evaluate the given proposal or take part in any discussion or scoring of it. The expert must leave the room or the electronic forum when the proposal is discussed ('out of the room' rule).

If it is revealed during an evaluation that an expert has knowingly concealed a conflict of interest, the expert will be immediately excluded, and sanctions will apply (see Articles 14, 15, 16 and 18 of the Contract or in the Financial Regulation and its implementing rules). Any panel meeting in which s/he has participated will be declared null. The panel meeting will be reconvened and the proposal(s) concerned will be re-evaluated.

15. Annex 2

Conflict of Interest rules annexed to the Contract that was signed after 1 January 2017.

Article 2. IMPARTIALITY¹⁸

2.1 The expert must perform his/her work **impartially** and take all measures to prevent any situation where the impartial and objective implementation of the work is compromised for reasons involving economic interest, political or national affinity, family or emotional ties or any other shared interest ('**conflict of interests**').

The following situations will **automatically** be considered as **conflict of interest**:

(a) for a proposal s/he is requested to evaluate, if s/he:

- (i) was involved in the preparation of the proposal;
- (ii) is a director, trustee or partner or is in any way involved in the management of an applicant (or linked third party or other third party involved in the action);
- (iii) is employed or contracted by one of the applicants (or linked third parties, named subcontractors or other third parties involved in the action)
- (iv) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with the principal investigator of the proposal s/he is requested to evaluate as an additional reviewer from another panel (cross-panel or cross-domain proposal);
- (v) has (or has had during the last five years) a scientific collaboration with the principal investigator of the proposal;
- (vi) has (or has had) a relationship of scientific rivalry or professional hostility with the principal investigator of the proposal;
- (vii) has (or has had), a mentor/mentee relationship with the principal investigator of the proposal.

In this case, the expert must be excluded from the evaluation of the proposal concerned and may not take part in any discussion or scoring of the proposal and must leave the room or the electronic forum when it is discussed ('out of the room' rule). Part(s) of an evaluation to which the expert already participated must be declared void. Comments and scores already given must be discounted. If necessary, the expert must be replaced and the proposal concerned must be re-evaluated.

However, in exceptional and duly justified cases, the responsible Agency staff may decide to nevertheless invite the expert to take part in the evaluation, if:

- the expert works in a different department/laboratory/institute from the one where the action is to be carried out and

¹⁸ This section is an extract from Annex 1 to the expert contract adapted to ERC experts

- the departments/laboratories/institutes within the organisation concerned operate with a high degree of autonomy and
- the participation is justified by the requirement to appoint the best available experts and by the limited size of the pool of qualified experts.

In this case, the other experts in the group of evaluators will be informed about the situation of the expert.

(b) for a proposal s/he is requested to evaluate AND for all proposal competing for the same call budget-split, if s/he:

- (i) was involved in the preparation of any proposal assigned to the same panel within the same call budget-split;
- (ii) would benefit if any proposal assigned to the same panel within the same call budget-split is accepted or rejected;
- (iii) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with a person (including linked third parties or other third parties) involved in the preparation of any proposal assigned to the same panel within the same call budget-split, or with a person which would benefit if such a proposal is accepted or rejected.

In this case, the expert may not evaluate any proposal in the call concerned ('out of the call' rule). Part(s) of an evaluation to which the expert already participated must be declared void. Comments and scores already given must be discounted. If necessary, the expert must be replaced and the proposals concerned must be re-evaluated.

(c) for ALL *proposals* under the call in question, if s/he:

- (i) is a member of an advisory group set up by the Commission to advise on the preparation of EU or Euratom Horizon 2020 work programmes or work programmes in an area related to the call in question;
- (ii) is a National Contact Point (NCP) or is working for the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN);
- (iii) is a member of a programme committee
- (iv) has submitted a proposal as a principal investigator or a team member, under the same call;
- (v) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with the principal investigator of any proposal submitted to his/her panel.

In this case, the expert may not evaluate any proposal in the call concerned ('out of the call' rule). Part(s) of an evaluation to which the expert already participated must be declared void. Comments and scores already given must be discounted. If necessary, the expert must be replaced and the proposal concerned must be re-evaluated.

The following situations **may be** considered as **conflict of interest** — if the responsible Agency staff so decides in consultation with the ERC Scientific Council, in view of the objective circumstances, the available information and the potential risks:

- (a) employment of the expert by one of the applicants (or linked third parties or other third parties involved in the action) in the last three years;
- (b) involvement of the expert in a contract, grant, prize or membership of management structures (e.g. member of management or advisory board etc.) or research collaboration with an applicant, a linked third party or another third party involved in the action in the last three years;
- (c) any other situation that could cast doubt on his/her ability to participate in the evaluation impartially, or that could reasonably appear to do so in the eyes of an outside third party.

In this case, the responsible Agency staff may decide in consultation with the ERC Scientific Council to exclude the expert from the evaluation (and on the scope, i.e. only for the proposal concerned or also for competing proposals or the entire call) and, if necessary, to replace him/her and organise a re-evaluation.