H2020 Programme

Guidance

Drafting High-Quality Reports in the H2020 Evaluation Process

Version 1.0
19 November 2018
IMPORTANT NOTICE

This document is designed to help Commission/Agency/Joint Undertaking staff to brief and guide the evaluators as well as the rapporteurs and quality controllers of reports generated in the H2020 evaluation process. It concerns in the first place the Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) as the end product of the evaluation communicated to applicants, but also the intermediate reports, which form the precursor of the ESR, the Consensus Report (CR) and, as applicable (e.g. if the CR is a collation of IERs), the Individual Evaluation Report (IER).

The first part of this document is the official Guidance Note — Quality standard for ESRs (Ares(2016)841779), which was endorsed by the CSC Executive Committee of 11 June 2015 upon proposal by the Proposal Submission and Evaluation Policy Group.

The second part gives practical guidance for evaluators, rapporteurs and quality controllers: points of attention and "tips and tricks", illustrated by tailored examples. It is based on guidance compiled in CNECT (R5) and the Call Coordinators' Network of the Research Executive Agency.

This document replaces the above mentioned Guidance Note.

This Guidance should be read in conjunction with the description of the H2020 evaluation process of the H2020 Grant Proposals Vademecum.

Other information
For more information on the Evaluation Summary Report, the Consensus Report and the Individual Evaluation Report, and their place in the evaluation process, see the H2020 Grant Proposals Vademecum.

HISTORY OF CHANGES

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<td>15.11.2018</td>
<td>▪ Initial version</td>
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REVISED MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORTS

Endorsed by the CSC Executive Committee of 11 June 2015 upon proposal by the Proposal Submission and Evaluation Policy Group

- Every ESR must contain sufficient information for the applicant to understand the assessment of the experts, and the reasons for the resulting score. Scores and comments are provided for each criterion.

- The level of detail should be proportionate to the size and complexity of the proposal, and broadly consistent across proposals submitted to a call under similar conditions.

- For full proposals, as a guideline, comments under each criterion would normally amount to at least 100 words. The number of words will often considerably exceed this. There will be cases where much shorter comments will be appropriate, for example when the proposal fails to address the aspects covered by a criterion.

- For first stage proposals, and short full proposals (e.g. SME instrument phase 1), the comments will generally be much more succinct. They may be based on a collation of individual comments (or selections of the individual comments), which may be edited.

- In all cases, comments must be consistent with the meaning of the scores. ESRs are reviewed for clarity, normally by a person not involved in the consensus discussion.

- An ESR whose comments do not give an indication why the particular score was awarded for each criterion would be regarded as grounds for upholding a complaint in an evaluation review, and may lead to a re-evaluation.
2. Further practical guidance for evaluators, rapporteurs and quality controllers on drafting reports\(^1\) in the H2020 evaluation process

The Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) represents the feedback to the applicant and it should therefore give a clear assessment of the proposal based on its merit, provide a clear feedback on the proposal’s weaknesses and strengths with comments which are consistent with the scores. High quality reports\(^1\) are crucial to the success of the evaluation. **The basic quality principle** therefore is:

| Put yourself in place of the applicant: "If this was my proposal, would I find this report fair, accurate, clear and complete, even if it brings bad news?"

Characteristics of a good evaluation report\(^1\)

- The comments are a **value judgement** that fairly reflects **the strengths and the weaknesses**, so that a **justification** for the scores is presented. They should not merely echo the scores, but explain them in **concrete terms**.

  > Evaluators should keep in mind that their task, certainly in the individual evaluation phase and the consensus group phase, is not to decide about the selection of the proposal by comparison with other projects, but to evaluate the proposal on its own merit. The ESR must therefore not contain comparative statements.

The comments should be of appropriate length (not too short, not too long). It is recommended that approximately 2-3 specific sentences are provided per sub-criterion (for the evaluation of a full proposal).

**Tip for evaluators/rapporteurs:**

*Use specific examples from the proposal ("For example") to make the argument, without falling into pointlessly copying text or summarising the proposal.*

**Example:**

Avoid: "The methodology is described."

Write: "The methodology is poorly described as it fails to sufficiently address X, Y and provides insufficient reference to Z."

Avoid: "The innovative aspects of the research programme are poor."

Write: "This proposal is not innovative in X or Y, and it does not take Z into account."

**Specific case: evaluation of second-stage proposals under a two-stage submission procedure**

Inconsistencies between the stage 1 ESR and the stage 2 ESR should be avoided. Any difference in opinion should be specifically justified in the comments of the stage 2 ESR. For more info, see Grant Proposals Vademecum section 4.2.5.

**Specific case: re-submissions**

In this case (i.e. for re-applications submitted within 2 years and declared in the proposal forms), comments and scores that differ significantly from those awarded in the previous ESR should be specifically justified if the resubmitted proposal was produced under comparable conditions (e.g. same type of funding programme and broadly similar topic/call and conditions). For more info, see Grant Proposals Vademecum section 4.2.5 for more info.

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\(^1\) Evaluation Summary Report (ESR), Consensus Report (CR) and, as applicable (e.g. if the CR is a collation of IERs), Individual Evaluation Report (IER). See “Important Notice” on page 2.
Specific case: borderline²
If no weaknesses and only a limited number of shortcomings have been identified, but the proposal is not judged excellent either, the consensus group should take the time and special care when justifying the score.

- The report should be "just complete". This means:
  - Comments address all aspects (sub-criteria) referred to in the criteria, and, equally importantly, these criteria and sub-criteria only.
  - The report addresses the additional questions³, as applicable:
    - in scope/out of scope
    - operational capacity of applicants
    - exceptional funding for third country participants/international organisations (IOs)
    - use of human embryonic stem cells (hESC)
    - best value for money of SME Instrument Ph2 subcontracts

⚠️ If an applicant is found to be ineligible or to lack the operational capacity for (its part of) the action, and if the rejection of the applicant will not lead to the ineligibility of the proposal, the proposal must be evaluated without the participant (i.e. disregarding its activities and estimated budget)⁴. The ESR should reflect this.

- The evaluation of one criterion should not influence the evaluation of another criterion. In particular, the same weakness/shortcoming should not be referred to under different criteria (no double penalisation).
  - This does not preclude the possibility that the quality of a particular proposal is correlated across criteria.

- The comments must reflect the assessment of the criteria in the frame of what is requested in the call (topic description, specificities of the type of action, etc.).
  - This principle is inherent in the actual formulation of the award criteria "Excellence" and "Impact".

Example:
An evaluator might really appreciate a proposal and score it high, even if a significant part of the proposal is out of the scope of the topic in question, while another evaluator might also see the merits of the proposed work, but because it doesn’t properly address the call topic, score it lower. At the consensus meeting the moderator should recall that

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² in the sense that the proposal would score 4,0 or higher out of 5, but not 5 (see the definition of the scoring scale in the Grant Proposals Vademecum section 4.2 (Introduction "Evaluation – How does it work?")).

³ More info is available in the Grant Proposals Vademecum section 4.2 (Introduction "Evaluation – How does it work?"))

⁴ With regard to operational capacity, keep in mind that if during the individual evaluation phase an expert believes that a partner lacks sufficient operational capacity, the experts should nonetheless continue to evaluate the full proposal, including the parts related to the applicant concerned. It is only later on — at consensus group stage — that the consensus group, if it agrees that the applicant lacks sufficient operational capacity, should continue to evaluate the proposal without this applicant (i.e. disregarding their activities and their estimated budget). See Grant Proposals Vademecum
criteria need to be addressed in the frame of the call topic and that failure to fully address the topic should be reflected in the score.

- The comments should be **precise and definite**.

  **Examples:**
  
  **Avoid:** "We think the management plan is probably inadequate given the duration of the project and the number of partners."
  
  **Write:** "The management plan is inadequate. It does not include clear overall responsibility for the training activities; it lacks a problem-solving mechanism in the event of disputes between partners."
  
  **Avoid:** "The resources for the project are unrealistic"
  
  **Write:** "The resources in WP 4 and 6 are underestimated given the complexity of the activity proposed."
  
  **Avoid:** "Good potential impact can be foreseen."
  
  **Write:** "The exploitation and dissemination plan addresses well the key target audiences and provides a detailed and well thought out strategy for engaging with them, for example having confirmed presentation slots at national teacher conferences will ensure a significant impact. However, the lack of detail on X is a shortcoming."
  
  Care must be taken not to make categorical statements needlessly and to **avoid factual mistakes**. If in doubt, instead of writing "This proposal does not address X", it is advisable to write "This proposal does not significantly [or sufficiently] addresses X".

  **Example:**
  
  **Avoid:** "There is no discussion of a dissemination strategy."
  
  **Write:** "Dissemination activities are listed but the proposal lacks a clear dissemination strategy, in particular activities like X, Y and their interaction are not clearly described and Z was not properly taken into account."
  
  Whenever factual statements are made, they should be explicitly verified.

  **Tip for evaluators/rapporteurs:**
  
  **Avoid unnecessary details** that could easily be a factual mistake e.g. page numbers, amounts (of whatever kind), project duration, etc.

  **Example:**
  
  "Concerns are expressed regarding the possibility to achieve the objectives of the project in three years." ... and the actual duration was four years.
  
  "The proposal provides a clear statement of activities divided among three objectives" ... and there were in fact eight objectives.
  
  "Late field test (Month 30) does not allow enough time to improve solution." ... and the field test was in fact planned in month 24

- The comments should consist of **clear, concise and complete sentences**.

  **Tip for evaluators/rapporteurs:**
  
  Start from the given vocabulary ("...poor, fair, good, very good, excellent...") and expand from there, using:

  - **vocabulary for positive comments:**
    
    extremely relevant, credible, very clear, precisely specified, realistic, very innovative, extremely well suited, timely, convincing, comprehensive, high quality, justified, very well identified, strong, highly effective, thoughtful, very promising, evidence, well-formulated, carefully prepared, very professionally prepared, fully in line, very profound, sound, very convincingly integrated, clearly articulated, coherent, well balanced, very plausible, ambitious, clear advances, well above average, ...
  
  - **vocabulary for negative comments:**
    
    insufficient, minimal, fails to describe, unacceptable, inadequate, very generic, not evident, unfocused, very weak, bad, does not meet the requirements, inappropriate,
limited, unclear, not sound enough, not specified, no significant impact, unjustified, overestimated …

**Examples:**
"The proposal has a standard management plan" … does this mean "up to standard" or "ordinary"?

- **The comments must not be discriminatory, offending or inappropriate**

**Examples:**
Avoid: "There are too many partners from country X in the consortium."
Write: "The project’s effort and impact is over-concentrated in one country or region."

Avoid: "The coordinator is not adequately experienced."
Write: "The coordinator does not demonstrate in the proposal an adequate level of experience in this field."

"The proposal is naïve."
"The overall budget is distributed quite asymmetrically; the coordinating institution is taking close to one third of the entire funding requested."

- **The comments must not be based on assumptions.** If the proposal is unclear on important aspects, the comment(s) and lower score(s) for the applicable criterion/criteria should reflect this. Comments should **not suggest ignorance or doubt.**

**Tip for evaluators/rapporteurs:**
Do not use words like... "Perhaps, Think, Seems, Assume, Probably"

**Example:**
Avoid: "We don’t understand the relevance of Workpackage 4 to the goal of the project."
Write: "The proposer has not adequately explained the relevance of Workpackage 4 to the goals of the project."

Ignorance about the requirements for proposals is also to be avoided since it may lead to irrelevant comments.

**Example:**
"A consortium agreement has not been included"… while a consortium agreement is not mandatory at proposal stage.

- **Experts evaluate proposals as they were submitted, not on their potential if certain improvements were to be made.** As a consequence the comments must **not contain recommendations or suggestions** to improve the project (e.g. additional partners, additional work packages, resources that need to be cut or added, …)

⚠️ Keep in mind that selected proposals are not negotiated. The "no negotiation" approach is explained in the Grant Agreement Preparation (GAP) Vademecum.

**Example:**
Avoid: "The proposal should have included partners with more expertise in digital curation."
Write: "The proposal does not fully demonstrate that the necessary expertise relating to digital curation is present and therefore it is not clear if the project objectives can be met."

- **After balancing the identified weaknesses and strengths, and taking a holistic view, the comment for a criterion, taken as a whole, must be consistent with**
The meaning of the score that is awarded for that criterion. The meaning of the scoring scale (0-5) is defined in the H2020 Grant Proposals Vademecum.

⚠️ The meaning of the scores has a qualitative component ("shortcoming" (minor) vs. "weaknesses" (more significant), "very well", well",...), as well as quantitative component ("any", "a small number of", "a number of",...).

**Tip for evaluators/rapporteurs:**
Focus on the content first. In other words, draft the comments for each sub-criterion first, before assigning the score that aligns.

**Examples:**
The comment "The proposal fails to properly address the issues and criteria listed in the call topic." corresponds to a score of 0.

The comment "The development of X has enormous potential for impact and exploitation. The expected impact of XX and XXX tools will have a great contribution to the final goal of improving Y-related conditions. The training component for more junior researchers is an excellent initiative of the proposal." corresponds to a score of 4.5-5.

If a comment indicates weaknesses only, then a score higher than 2 is incommensurate.