Peer review guidelines
# Peer Review Guidelines

**ATTRACT**

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Further call information, forms and guidelines are available on the FNR webpage:  
www.fnr.lu/attract

*Version Call 2020, 03/07/2019*
1. Background Information

Introduction

The ATTRACT programme by the National Research Fund (FNR) aims to support the Luxembourg research institutions to expand their competences in **strategic research areas** by attracting **outstanding young researchers** with high potential to Luxembourg. The programme is designed for researchers not yet established in the country.

The ATTRACT grant shall enable them to set up their own research group in a domain of strategic relevance to the host institution. ATTRACT candidates are employed by the institution either in a tenured position or in a tenure track, with predefined conditions and criteria for career development based on a final assessment of their achievements at the end of the ATTRACT funding period. Details of career track requirements are included in the [ATTRACT Programme Description](#).

ATTRACT proposals must be submitted jointly by the candidate and the host institution. Proposals submitted should be innovative and of high scientific quality and candidates must have gained a minimum of two and a maximum of eight years’ professional experience since successful completion of doctoral studies.

Proposals selected under the ATTRACT programme have a lifespan of five years. The financial contribution by FNR can be up to EUR 1.5 M€ or 2 M€ for ‘Starting Investigators’ or ‘Consolidating Investigators’ respectively.

Within the frame of the ongoing Performance Contract 2018-2021 (PC) with the Luxembourgish Government (see FNR [website](#)), emphasis will be put on the assessment of ATTRACT candidates in light of their contribution to the development of a given priority area for Luxembourg (the so called **strategic merit assessment**). Proposals will need to show how the candidate’s research activities will integrate into the institution’s strategy and how the candidate will contribute to strengthen this particular field. The FNR will look at the past and present achievements within the particular research field in Luxembourg as well as the past and future investments of the institution within this domain.

**The ATTRACT objectives are:**
- Enabling the recruitment of high potential researchers
- Strengthening research areas of strategic importance to Luxembourg
- Offering recruited ATTRACT fellows interesting career perspectives, through a tenure track with transparent promotion criteria

**Important indication to reviewers:** The FNR has signed the “Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)” and therefore has introduced changes in how it assesses research proposals. This means that the FNR evaluates quality and impact independently of journal-based metrics and gives value to all research outputs.
2. Peer Review Process

2.1. Three-Stage Process

The peer review process is divided into three stages:

- Remote Pre-proposal Assessment
- Remote Full Proposal Evaluation
- Interview Panel in Luxembourg

2.1.1. First Stage: Pre-Proposal Assessment

The mandatory Pre-Proposals are assessed according to the following elements:

- Administrative Eligibility Check
- Strategic Merit Assessment

Administrative eligibility check

In order to be retained, the Pre-Proposals and Full Proposals must fulfil all of the following administrative eligibility criteria:

- Proposals must be submitted by an eligible FNR beneficiary organisation.
- Proposals must be submitted before the deadline.
- Proposals must be complete (i.e. all of the requested components and forms must be included). Proposals must respect the requested character limits.
• The applicant must not be employed yet at the institution (or must be employed for less than a year by the host institution at the time of the Full Proposal deadline).

Applications not conforming to one of these elements are rejected at this stage.
The provision of false information as well as plagiarism may result in a rejection of the proposal. The FNR reserves the right to pursue further steps according to the FNR Research Integrity Guidelines.

**Strategic Merit Assessment**
The **ATTRACT standing panel** will assess Pre-Proposals on their potential contribution to strengthening strategic priority research domains in Luxembourg (see SMA criteria below). The standing panel will also assess the provision by the host institution of the appropriate framework conditions in terms of starting position and career perspectives.

Candidates retained in the preproposal stage will be invited to submit a Full Proposal. All candidates and host institutions, whether invited or not, receive the feedback of the Strategic Merit Assessment.

**2.1.2. Second Stage: Full Proposal Assessment**

Each Full Proposal is sent to **at least three reviewers** who are asked to complete a written evaluation (using the 'Review Form').

Based on the evaluations, the ATTRACT standing panel selects up to 5 candidates who are invited to present and defend their ATTRACT project proposal in front of an interview panel.

**2.1.3. Third Stage: Interview Panel**

The **interview panel** is composed of members of the ATTRACT standing panel, as well as project experts (usually one of the 3 reviewers of the project). Representatives of the research institution will also be present during the interview session. The representatives of the institution will not take part in the panel discussion to come up with the funding recommendations.

During the panel, candidates are invited to give a presentation of 20 minutes comprising the following parts:

- a brief presentation of themselves, their personal background and why they decided to apply for the ATTRACT grant at this moment in their career
- a description of the project, explaining the novelty and innovative aspects of their research, its feasibility, the underlying hypotheses and the methodology to be put into place
- specific answers to the questions raised by the evaluators (their full anonymised evaluation is therefore sent to the applicants prior to the interview session).
- their strategy to set up a sustainable, independent and internationally visible research group having a long-term impact beyond the project, including strategic national and international collaborations and follow-up projects envisaged
The post presentation interview of 20-30 minutes will be conducted by an expert in the candidate’s research domain. All panel members may address additional questions to the candidate.

In the concluding part of the interview panel “à huis clos”, the panel members assess the candidates and give a final grade. Similar to a recruitment panel, only excellently rated (A+) candidates will be considered for a final funding recommendation to the FNR’s Board. Should no candidate meet the criteria of excellence, the panel explicitly reserves the right not to propose any candidate for funding.

In the final step, the FNR Board will select the proposals to be funded based on the panel recommendations. The final decision represents the view of the FNR, and not of the individual reviewers or the panel.

2.2. Role of Persons Involved in the Peer Review Process

2.2.1. Role of Reviewers

Full Proposals will be evaluated in writing by three independent and senior experts in the relevant field with regard to the criteria set out below. Reviewers are international, independent experts in a specific subject who are invited to evaluate a research proposal closely related to their field of expertise and to submit a written review.

They are requested to:

- Carefully read the ‘Peer Review Guidelines’.
- Sign in advance a ‘Review Participation Form’ which includes a ‘Confidentiality Agreement’.
- Thoroughly read the assigned Full Proposal.
- Complete and submit a ‘Review Form’ providing comments and scoring the proposal.

When evaluating research proposals, reviewers should comment briefly on each selection criterion to the best of his/her abilities, his/her professional skills, knowledge and ethics.

As a signatory of the DORA Declaration, the FNR expects panel members and reviewers to evaluate quality and impact independently of journal-based metrics and to give value to all types of research outputs.

2.2.2. Role of Panel Members

The ATTRACT Panel comprises the permanent “ATTRACT Standing Panel” as well as the “Interview Panel” which consists of the ATTRACT Standing Panel plus at least one senior expert in the field of each interviewee.

The ATTRACT standing panel’s role is to serve as a permanent panel during the three stages, the Pre-Proposal stage, the Full Proposal stage and the interview panel, and makes sure that the aims of the ATTRACT programme are fully respected.
During the Pre-Proposal stage, the **standing panel** is responsible for the Strategic Merit Assessment, recommending the proposals to be invited (or not) to submit a Full Proposal. Following the Full Proposal submission, based on the remote reviews received, the standing panel’s role is to select a limited number (usually not more than five) of candidates who will be invited to present their projects to the interview panel in Luxembourg.

Similar to a recruitment panel, the **interview panel** analyses the reviews and interview outcomes to select the candidate(s) that best fulfil the ATTRACT selection criteria (rated excellent or A+ overall) and should be funded by the FNR.

Panel members are supposed to:

- Carefully read the ‘Peer Review Guidelines’.
- Thoroughly read the ‘Full Proposals’ and related reviews assigned to them.
- Evaluate each proposal and reviews (resolving any possible conflicting reviews).

During the **interview panel**, the panel members will listen to the candidates' presentations, address questions to each candidate regarding the project and his/her objectives, and discuss the reviews in order to rank the proposals according to the ‘**ATTRACT Selection Criteria**’ to the best of their knowledge and ethics. As the panel members are experts with a strong reputation and a wide horizon, they are expected to take part in a lively discussion even if they are not an explicit expert in the field of all concerned proposals.

At the end of the meeting, the panel will be asked to comment the overall quality of the proposals and the evaluation procedure, and to give recommendations for future calls.

### 2.2.3. Role of FNR Staff

The ATTRACT programme coordinator will support all involved experts during the evaluation process. He/she, in cooperation with the panel chair, will take care that the FNR rules and procedures are respected. He/she will provide the panel with background information to the Luxembourg research landscape and the national context in general. He/she will involve FNR thematic programme managers of the respective fields of the proposals.

The FNR staff does not provide any information regarding the status of the applications to the applicants while the evaluation procedure is in progress and until the funding decision has been taken by the ‘FNR Board of Administration’.
3. ATTRACT Selection Criteria

Reviewers are requested to evaluate all ATTRACT proposals according to the selection criteria of the ATTRACT Programme.

SMA Criteria

1. **Value of strategic development and expected impact**
   Experts will assess the strategic alignment of the proposal with the national R&D strategy and strategic orientation of the institute. They will judge the added value of candidate’s research programme to strategic research focus of the host institution as well as the potential for synergies with existing research competences at the host institution in order to ascertain the potential for the integration of the candidate into the research institution in terms of thematic orientation and (technological) expertise. Their assessment will also be based on the past investments and achievements of the institute as well as its commitment (in terms of further investment) to the domain.

2. **Track-Record and Potential of Candidate**
   The scientific track record (publications, awards, patents, etc.) and past achievements beyond scientific output (contribution to the development of institutions, IP generation, collaboration with private sector etc.) will be assessed as well as the candidate’s potential to establish/consolidate and lead an independent and internationally competitive research group.

The FNR distinguishes between two categories of applicants and the reviewers should evaluate the candidates in light of these two categories:

**Category 1 “Starting Investigator”:**
The starting investigators are postdoctoral researchers having made some outstanding contributions to their field of science (through high impact papers for example). They have not yet established (or only just started) their own independent research programme and group, but show great potential in their ability to set up and to establish a research programme and team capable of significantly advancing research in a relevant domain.

**Category 2 “Consolidating investigator”:**
Consolidating investigators are experienced postdoctoral researchers with proven track record in the field (high impact papers and acquired external funding for example). They have already established their own independent research line and with the ATTRACT grant they can further consolidate their research programme and group. These candidates may have already been appointed to their first established academic post or group leader position.

The FNR estimates that suitable ATTRACT candidates need to have reached the category 2 stage within 5 years postdoctoral experience barring specific circumstances that may have prevented them devoting time to research after their PhD (such as career breaks).
Full Proposal Evaluation Criteria

1. Track-Record and Potential of Candidate
   See above

2. Scientific Quality and Originality of the Project
   The research project presented within the proposal will be assessed in light of its innovativeness and the international competitiveness:
   - Originality of project idea and ambition to address challenging scientific or technological problems of current interest and relevance on an international level of expertise.
   - Appropriateness of methodological approach (presenting the level of risk that is inherent to a challenging research project)
   - Knowledge of State-of-the-art literature and appropriateness of references.
   - Awareness of competitive landscape and ambition to go beyond the current state of the art.

3. Feasibility, Quality and Efficiency of the Project Plan
   The experts will assess if the scientific approach is sufficiently focused, appropriate and the objectives are achievable:
   - Realistic schedule and milestones, compatible with resources available and requested.
   - Appropriateness of human resources (number of personnel and qualification);
   - Appropriateness of research infrastructure requested and provided by host institution;
   - Appropriateness of budget with respect to planned work.
   - Convincing assessment of the potential risks associated with the project and associated prevention strategies

4. Potential impact of project outcomes
   Experts will look at the potential to establish a productive and sustainable research group which will make significant contributions to the current knowledge in the field and in the training of the next generation of researchers. In this regard, the strategic relevance of the new research group for the host institution is particularly important. The experts will also look at the group’s strategy for the dissemination and exploitation of the research findings (e.g. IP protection strategies, public engagement, collaboration with actors from the society and the economy etc.).
4. Guidelines for Writing Evaluations

The following style recommendations¹ should guide reviewers and panel members during the composition of their evaluations:

- The assessment should be more than just a rating and needs good justification for the arguments.
- 1.5 pages of substantive comments may be sufficient – not too long but enough to be able to back up the assessment and funding recommendation.
- The overall rating should match the comments – otherwise the domain panel and the applicants might not have confidence in the assessment.
- Generalists in the field should be able to understand the comments - care has to be taken not to adopt a bias in favour of work in the expert’s own specialism i.e. “x is a vitally important area etc.”
- References to other key papers in the field are useful.
- Set out the strengths and weaknesses of each criterion and of the whole proposal in a structured way.
- Feedback should be balanced with constructive criticism and supported with examples.
- Where appropriate, suggest alternative approaches to improve the proposal.
- Particular concerns should be highlighted about the assessment or aspects of the proposal.

Please note that the anonymised reviews will be sent to the ATTRACT applicant and their host institution.

5. Guidelines for Reviewers

This chapter describes the tasks of the reviewers, defined as international, independent experts in a specific subject.

You have been invited by the FNR to evaluate a research proposal because it is closely related to your field of expertise. Each Full Proposal will usually be submitted to 3 reviewers. Before you may access the ‘Full Proposal’, you have to sign the ‘Review Participation Form’ which includes a ‘Confidentiality Agreement’.

Please read the following documents that will be sent to you:

- The present ‘Peer Review Guidelines’.
- The assigned Full Proposal.

5.1. Review Form

You are invited to complete and submit the ‘ATTRACT Review Form’ sent to you by email. Please provide a written evaluation and a rating for each criterion as requested in the form. The ‘Review Form’ contains 3 parts, ethical considerations, the evaluation of the proposal according to the selection criteria and an overall assessment. Please note that anonymised reviews will be sent to the ATTRACT applicant and their host institution.

5.1.1. Ethical considerations

Please comment if the proposal gives rise to any ethical issues.

5.1.2. Evaluation of the proposal

You should carefully read the description of the criteria in the ATTRACT Selection Criteria chapter and comment concisely on each selection criterion to the best of your abilities, professional skills, knowledge and ethics.

Please also consult the style recommendations in chapter 4 Guidelines for Writing Evaluations as it is very important that the review is based on coherent comments or arguments that will help the FNR to reach a decision and subsequently formulate a meaningful panel conclusion which will be forwarded to applicants. It is therefore essential that the FNR receives sufficiently detailed and coherent assessments for each selection criterion.

In addition to the written comments, a scoring system is used per selection criterion to underline the reasoned comments and arguments provided. It is based on a scale ranging from poor/fair to excellent.

Top scores should only be awarded to proposals of exceptionally high quality. Please give scores for each of the criteria.
5.1.3. Overall assessment

Please provide an overall assessment of the elements evaluated in relation to the application. Indicate the most important strengths and weaknesses of the candidate and the project proposal and provide any necessary supplementary comments.

A final score should be given according to the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final Score</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>Proposal of excellent quality and outstanding international standards that should be funded as proposed. The proposal scores excellent on all or most criteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Proposal of very good quality and high international calibre that should be funded. The proposal scores very good (and even excellent) on all or most criteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Proposal of very good quality, but with shortcomings on one of the selection criteria. The proposal could be improved to become an excellent proposal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Proposal of insufficient quality and with major shortcomings on one or more selection criteria.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest

6.1. Confidentiality

All research plans and evaluation statements are confidential documents. Application documents should therefore be handled with care and treated as confidential before, during and after the evaluation process.

Reviewers and panel members must not disclose any information concerning application documents or evaluations to outsiders, nor should they use confidential information to their own or any other party’s benefit or disadvantage.

Reviewers and panel members must not communicate with applicants. Reviewers and panel members’ advice to the FNR on any proposal may not be communicated by them to the applicants or to any other person. Panel members are not allowed to disclose the names of other experts participating in the evaluation. Where proposals are posted or made available electronically to reviewers, who then work from their own or other suitable premises, the reviewer will be held personally responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of any documents or electronic files sent and returning, erasing or destroying all confidential documents or files upon completing the evaluation as instructed. Reviewers and Panel members may not show the contents of proposals or information on applicants to third parties (e.g. colleagues, students, etc.).

Experts participating in the interview session shall not be contacted for meetings or scientific exchanges before, during or after the official interview during their stay in Luxembourg by the ATTRACT candidates or their hosts, in order to ensure that they act neutrally without any interaction that might influence their judgement.

If reviewers are contacted by anyone who has questions about application documents or evaluation statements, please direct them to the FNR contact person.

After the funding decision has been made by the decision bodies of the FNR, the reviews are sent to applicants without naming the reviewer.

6.2. Conflict of Interest

All persons involved in the review process are required to declare any personal interests according to the following criteria.

6.2.1. Circumstances in which a conflict of interest may exist

A disqualifying conflict of interest exists if a person:

- was involved in the preparation of the proposal
- has had close collaboration with the applicant(s) (e.g. has co-authored and published an article with the applicant during the past three years)
- stands to benefit directly should the proposal be accepted (e.g. is involved in the publication or exploitation of the potential results of the proposal)
• has a close family or close friendship relationship with any person representing an applicant organisation in the proposal. This includes:
  - a spouse, child, grandchild, sibling, parent, grandparent
  - a person otherwise especially close (e.g. fiancé/e or a close friend), and/or their spouses
  - a sibling of a parent or his/her spouse, a child of a sibling, previous spouse
  - a child, grandchild, sibling, parent or grandparent of a spouse and/or their spouses, a child of a sibling of a spouse
  - or a half-relative comparable to the above mentioned

• is a director, trustee or partner of an applicant organisation

• is employed by one of the applicant organisations in a proposal

• is in any other situation that compromises his or her ability to evaluate the proposal impartially

A potential conflict of interest may exist, even in cases not covered by the clear disqualifying conflicts indicated above, if a person:

• was employed by one of the applicant organisations in a proposal within the previous three years

• is involved in a contract or research collaboration with an applicant organisation, or has been so in the previous three years

• is in any other situation that could cast doubt on his or her ability to evaluate the proposal impartially, or that could reasonably appear to do so in the eyes of an external third party

Persons involved in the peer review process must also declare a conflict of interest at any time during the process.

6.2.2. Inability to perform obligations and termination

If for some reason the reviewers and panel members are not able to fulfil their obligations for a given work, the FNR should be informed immediately. The work cannot be delegated to another person without the prior written agreement of the FNR.
7. Additional Documents

In addition to the peer review guidelines and the proposal, reviewers may consult the

**ATTRACT call documents:**

- ATTRACT Programme Description
- ATTRACT Guidelines for Applicants
- ATTRACT Templates