FNR Ethics Charter and Code of Conduct for Research Assessment

Preamble

The public funding granted for research must be allocated in a way that guarantees transparency and impartiality. This means that good practices need to be established throughout the process, from the design of calls for proposals, through the project selection mechanisms, to how the use of funds is monitored.

Purpose of this document

The purpose of this document is to establish a basic code of good conduct to be followed by the actors involved in overseeing, managing and handling programmes run by the FNR, and particularly in the scientific review and assessment process. The FNR reserves the right to amend and complete the code in the future, particularly through rules that are specific to each of its programmes.

If an applicant or project team have serious suspicions that the rules laid down in this document have been breached, they may inform the FNR in writing, stating his reasons. The FNR will provide a written reply.

To whom this document applies – « Actor »

It is understood that any person working with the FNR in any capacity in connection with its allotted remit will be required to comply or to ensure compliance with all the provisions of this document. In particular, the following persons are directly concerned (non exhaustive list):

- The Secretary general of the FNR ;
- Members of FNR's Board ;
- Members of FNR's Scientific Council ;
- FNR Staff members ;
- Expert panel members nominated by the FNR ;
- External reviewers mandated by the FNR ;
- External consultants mandated by the FNR.

These individuals will be called generically « Actor » in the following. The FNR will forward the present Ethical charter to all Actors.

FNR staff members have a provision to respect confidentiality in their employment contract. Expert panel members and external reviewers are required to sign a declaration that they will observe confidentiality and disclose any actual or potential conflict of interests.
General principles

The FNR adheres to the *Statement of Principles for Scientific Merit Review*, issued by the 2012 «Global Summit on Merit Review», which is annexed to the present code of conduct and is an integral part of it. It is the collective responsibility of all Actors to ensure that these principles are enforced.

All Actors must observe the principle of **confidentiality**, whether in relation to information known only by them, or opinions expressed at Board, Council or expert panel meetings. All Actors must ensure that **impartiality** is guaranteed in the decision-making processes.

To this end, Actors are required:

- not to disclose to any third party information intended to remain confidential, in particular, information contained in submitted proposals, project reports and evaluation reports as well as rankings of proposals or other details about the review of proposals;
- to take all reasonable steps to ensure that such information is kept in a secure place and in due course is disposed of in a secure fashion;
- not to communicate to a third party the identity of external reviewers or any information likely to break their anonymity;
- not to communicate with applicants or project teams about any aspect of a submitted proposal or a project report unless they are requested to do so as part of the evaluation process established by the FNR; if clarifications are needed, they must be obtained using a procedure authorised by the FNR;
- to respect the intellectual property of applicants and project teams and to not appropriate and use as their own, or disclose to any third party, ideas, concepts or data contained in any proposal or a project report;
- to assess proposals and reports fairly, according to the specified criteria and excluding all other considerations; opinions expressed must contain a statement of reasons;
- to undertake all reviewing activities in a personal capacity and to not delegate or sub-contract the performance of any such activities or part thereof to third parties;
- not to bring mental, psychological or economic pressure to bear on any of the other Actors to recommend or select a given project;
- not to accept any gifts or favours (with more than a symbolic value) that might subsequently place them in another party’s debt and thus impair their objectivity.

If an Actor comes under any pressure whatsoever from a project initiator or any other person, he must notify the Secretary general of the FNR, who will take appropriate measures to protect the Actor’s reputation and the FNR’s interests.

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1 Actors are allowed to participate in events and working lunches that take place in the framework of the regular interaction and information exchange between the FNR and research organizations.
Written minutes of all Board, Scientific Council and expert panel meetings are drafted, distributed to participants for validation and to those absent for information. Except where necessary, the names of those who put forward an opinion should not be mentioned.

Conflict of interest

Conflict of interest means any situation where an Actor is required to give an opinion or is involved in making a decision about a proposal or project to which he is in some way connected, or has any other allegiance that impairs or threatens to impair his impartiality. The following cases are covered in particular (although not exclusively).

The assessment of a proposal or project

- which involves
  - a close associate (actual or former – within the past 5 years\(^2\)) of the Actor, i.e. through collaboration on projects, joint publications, etc.
  - a member (actual or former – within the past 5 years) from the Actor’s organization or company,
  - a first- or second-degree relative of the Actor,
  - any other person with whom the Actor has or has had (within the past 5 years) a close professional or personal relationship.

- in which the Actor himself stands to benefit if the proposal or project is accepted (e.g. involvement in the project, publication or exploitation of the potential results of the proposal);

- in which the Actor himself may be disadvantaged if the proposal or project is accepted (e.g. scientific rivalry, competition or professional hostility);

- involving an organization or company that employs or has previously (within the past 5 years) employed the Actor;

The idea of a conflict of interests may be extended to a group of individuals or even an agency, institution or company, where that entity is required to give an opinion or is involved in making a decision from which it could itself benefit.

Handling of a potential conflict of interest

In the event of a potential or actual conflict of interest or the suspicion of such a conflict, the following course of action should be followed:

- The Actor concerned must inform an arbitrator about the actual or potential conflict of interest;

\(^2\) As a matter of good practice, such interests should always be declared, even if they date back more than 5 years.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person concerned by a potential conflict of interest</th>
<th>Arbitrator</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FNR Staff</td>
<td>Secretary general of the FNR</td>
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<td>Secretary general of the FNR</td>
<td>Chair of the Board</td>
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<td>Member of the Scientific Council</td>
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<td>Chair of the Scientific Council</td>
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<td>Chair of the Board</td>
<td>Vice-chair of the Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>Member of an expert panel</td>
<td>FNR programme manager</td>
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<td>Chair of an expert panel</td>
<td>Secretary general of the FNR</td>
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<td>External reviewer/consultant</td>
<td>Secretary general of the FNR</td>
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<tr>
<td>Any other Actor</td>
<td>Secretary general of the FNR</td>
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- Other Actors may, on their own initiative, bring a potential conflict of interest to the attention of the arbitrator;
- The arbitrator assesses whether there is a conflict of interest: if applicable, he may consult with the other members of the concerned body (Board, Scientific Council, expert panel);
- The arbitrator takes the necessary steps to prevent any risk of undue consideration of interests or any decision that might be equated with favouritism; such steps might, in particular, include the temporary replacement of the person likely to be affected by a conflict of interest; if a Chairperson is concerned, he will temporarily leave the chair to a deputy; if a Board, Council or panel member is concerned, he may be requested to temporarily leave the meeting;
- A written record must be made of the actual or potential conflict of interest and the steps taken to deal with it (e.g. arbitrator’s acknowledgement, note in minutes of a meeting, name of the person who has temporarily replaced the Actor concerned).

FNR staff, members of the Board and members of the Scientific Council make an annual declaration of their personal, professional and business ties that are prone to give rise to conflicts of interest in relation with their FNR-related duties.
Appendix: Statement of Principles for Scientific Merit Review, issued by the 2012 «Global Summit on Merit Reviews»:


STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES FOR SCIENTIFIC MERIT REVIEW*

Preamble
Research funding agencies worldwide identify and support scientific research that creates new knowledge and benefits society. Trusted with government funding, these agencies are publicly accountable for their funded research efforts. As stewards of the public trust, these institutions must demonstrate excellence in the assessment of proposed research and be responsive to program objectives. Rigorous and transparent scientific merit review helps to assure that government funding is appropriately expended on the most worthy projects to advance the progress of science and address societal challenges.

The rapid growth of research and education capacity worldwide is enabling unprecedented opportunities for global collaboration to expand scientific knowledge and to improve the quality of life and well-being of citizens. To foster collaborations and to realize the benefits of international cooperation, the following Principles for Scientific Merit Review are endorsed at the May 2012 Global Summit on Scientific Merit Review.

Principles

Expert Assessment
Collectively, reviewers should have the appropriate knowledge and expertise to assess the proposal both at the level of the broad context of the research field(s) to which it contributes and with respect to the specific objectives and methodology. Reviewers should be selected according to clear criteria.

Transparency
Decisions must be based on clearly described rules, procedures and evaluation criteria that are published a priori. Applicants should receive appropriate feedback on the evaluation of their proposal.

Impartiality
Proposals must be assessed fairly and on their merit. Conflicts of interest must be declared and managed according to defined, published processes.

Appropriateness
The review process should be consistent with the nature of the call, with the research area addressed, and in proportion to the investment and complexity of the work.

Confidentiality
All proposals, including related data, intellectual property and other documents, must be treated in confidence by reviewers and organizations involved in the review process.

Integrity and Ethical Considerations
Ethics and integrity are paramount to the review process.

* The terms Merit Review and Peer Review are used interchangeably in the context of this document.