Peer review guidelines
PEER REVIEW GUIDELINES

INTER MOBILITY PROGRAMME

These guidelines for reviewers and panel members explain the FNR’s peer review process and explain how to evaluate proposals for the ‘INTER Mobility Programme’. Please also consult the INTER Mobility Programme Description.

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Changes to the previous call: (for the full description go to the sections listed below)

1.2. Role of Persons Involved in the Peer Review Process; 4. Selection Criteria;

5. Guidelines for Reviewers; 5.1. Review Form; 6. Guidelines for Panel Members

The FNR is pleased to announce that it adheres to the “Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA)” and therefore has introduced changes in how it assesses research proposals. This means that FNR evaluates quality and impact independently of journal-based metrics and give value to all research outputs. These peer review guidelines have been adapted accordingly.
1. Peer Review Process

1.1. The Process

In the first step, the FNR checks for the administrative validity of the proposal (eligibility and completeness) and the general fulfilment of the selection criteria and threshold.

Then each proposal, which passes the first step, is usually sent to two independent, international reviewers who are asked to complete a written evaluation (using the ‘Review Form’).

Based on these reviews, the FNR will prepare a review synthesis for each proposal including a proposition whether the proposal should be funded or not.

A panel, chaired by a ‘rapporteur’, assesses the project proposals, the written evaluations and the syntheses and decides on the proposals to be retained for funding. The panel then prepares a panel conclusion report which is addressed to the FNR decision bodies.

In the last step, the FNR decision bodies will validate the selection procedure and the proposals to be funded based on the recommendation of the panel.

After the funding decision, the applicants will receive the FNR feedback as well as the anonymous written evaluations of their proposal.

1.2. Role of Persons Involved in the Peer Review Process

1.2.1. Role of Reviewers

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 ‘Programme Description’ and the present ‘Peer Review Guidelines’.
- Sign in advance a ‘Review Participation Form’ which includes a ‘Confidentiality Agreement’.
- Thoroughly read the assigned 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, we also kindly ask you to evaluate quality and impact independently of journal-based metrics and give value to all types of research outputs.

For more details, please refer to chapter 5 (Guidelines for Reviewers).

1.2.2. Role of Panel Members

For each call a panel of high-level experts is established by the FNR, chaired by a ‘rapporteur’. The overall objective of the panel is to analyse the reviews and syntheses and propose a selection of projects that fulfil the selection criteria and which should thus be funded by the FNR.

To achieve this, each panel member is supposed to:
• Carefully read the ‘Programme Description’ and the present ‘Peer Review Guidelines’.
• Thoroughly read the proposals, reviews and syntheses assigned to them.

During the ‘Panel Meeting’, the panel members will discuss the reviews and the review syntheses in order to rank the proposals according to the selection criteria (see chapter 4) 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.

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

The panel will classify the proposals into two categories:
• Proposals which fulfil the necessary quality criteria and should be funded by the FNR.
• Proposals which do not fulfil the quality criteria and should thus not be funded by the FNR.

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.

Please refer to chapter 6 (Guidelines for Panel Members).

1.2.3. Role of the ‘Rapporteur’

The FNR appoints one Panel Chair for each call. He/she plays a pivotal role programme and accompanies the evaluation process for several years.

His/her role is to:
• Chair the ‘Panel Meeting’.
• Supervise the evaluation process of the proposals.
• Present the selection of proposals to the FNR’s decision bodies.
• Follow-up of funded proposals.

In all his/her actions, the ‘rapporteur’ is supported by the ‘FNR Programme Manager’.

1.2.4. Role of the FNR Programme Manager

The ‘FNR Programme Manager’ will support all involved experts during the evaluation process. He/she will, in cooperation with the panel chair, take care that the FNR rules and procedures are respected. If necessary, the ‘FNR Programme Manager’ will provide the panel with background information to the Luxembourg research landscape and the national context in general.

Based on the written reviews, the ‘FNR Programme Manager’ will draft a first synthesis of a funding decision.

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’.
2. Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest

2.1. 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.).

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

After the funding decision has been made by the decision bodies of the FNR, the review statements are sent to applicants without naming the reviewer.
2.2. Conflict of Interest

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

2.2.1. 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 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.

2.2.2. 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.
3. Guidelines for Writing Evaluations

The following style recommendations\(^1\) 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 page 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 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 panel conclusion as well as the anonymised reviews will be sent to the visiting fellow(s).

\(^1\) Inspired from « Reviewers Handbook », 2007 – 2008, MRC.
4. Selection Criteria

Through the INTER Mobility Programme the FNR intends to support:

- Post-Docs and senior researchers working in Luxembourg to visit the outstanding, leading research institutions in the field abroad or
- The visit of established, outstanding senior researchers from abroad in Luxembourg’s public research institutions.

Therefore, reviewers are requested to evaluate all proposals according to the selection criteria listed below. The weighting of these criteria is shown in the following table:

**Table 1: Selection Criteria for incoming researchers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Relative Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential to foster innovative internationally competitive research and exchange of key knowledge and technological know-how / Added value to the research programme (strategic development) of the Luxembourg research group</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International reputation in the relevant domain of competence and research track record of the seconded fellow</td>
<td>Very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected outcomes</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Selection Criteria for outgoing researchers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Relative Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential to foster innovative internationally competitive research and exchange of key knowledge and technological know-how / Added value to the research programme (strategic development) of the Luxembourg research group</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International reputation in the relevant domain of competence and research track record of the visited research group</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected outcomes</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.
4.1. Potential to foster innovative internationally competitive research and exchange of key knowledge and technological know-how / Added value to the research programme (strategic development) of the Luxembourg research group

- Ambition and challenge to address scientific or technological problems of current interest and relevance on an international level of expertise.
- Methods proposed have to be sound, rigorous, state-of-the-art and appropriate to the proposed investigation.
- Feasibility and efficiency of the project plan
- Appropriateness of budget with respect to planned work

- Fit to the strategic development of the Luxembourg research group
- Mid- to long-term scientific added-value for the Luxembourg research group
- Soundness of proposed mid- to long-term cooperation
- (Financial and in kind) commitment of the Luxembourg group
- (Financial and in kind) commitment of the foreign group

4.2. Incoming researcher: International reputation in the relevant domain of competence and research track record of the seconded fellow

The track record should be assessed in relation to highest international standards in the concerned field of research, e.g. in terms of:

- (first or corresponding author) publications
- Awarded competitive funding by FNR, EC and other research funding institutions
- Contractual research with private sector companies (if applicable)
- Patents (if applicable)
- PhD students supervised
- International visibility
- Membership in editorial boards of scientific journals
- Reviewer for research funding institutions
- All other criteria deemed appropriate

Assessments should be made based on scientific content rather than journal-based publication metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors or the identity of a journal.

The value and impact of all research outputs (including datasets and software, training of researchers, intellectual property) in addition to research publications should be considered, as well as a broad range of impact measures including qualitative indicators of research impact, such as influence on policy and practice.

Career breaks (e.g. child care, employment in the private sector) should not be assessed negatively. Additional skills that may be complementary to the standard academic research profile should be taken into account.
4.3. Outgoing researcher: International reputation in the relevant domain of competence and research track record of the visited research group

The track record should be assessed in relation to highest international standards in the concerned field of research, e.g. in terms of:

- (first or corresponding author) publications
- Awarded competitive funding by FNR, EC and other research funding institutions
- Contractual research with private sector companies (if applicable)
- Patents (if applicable)
- PhD students supervised
- International visibility
- Membership in editorial boards of scientific journals
- Reviewer for research funding institutions
- Impact on career development of the seconded fellow
- All other criteria deemed appropriate

Assessments should be made based on scientific content rather than journal-based publication metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors or the identity of a journal.

The value and impact of all research outputs (including datasets and software, training of researchers, intellectual property) in addition to research publications should be considered, as well as a broad range of impact measures including qualitative indicators of research impact, such as influence on policy and practice.

Career breaks (e.g. child care, employment in the private sector) should not be assessed negatively. Additional skills that may be complementary to the standard academic research profile should be taken into account.

4.4. Expected outcomes

- Quantitative indicators (if applicable):
  - potential for long-term collaboration
  - follow-up competitive projects or jointly supervised PhD students
  - joint publications
  - datasets
  - reagents
  - software
  - patents (if applicable)

- For outgoing fellows: Impact on the future career of the seconded fellow
- For incoming fellows: Impact on the future development of Luxembourg research group
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 ‘Programme Manager’ to evaluate a proposal because it is closely related to your field of expertise. Each proposal will usually be submitted to 2 reviewers.

Before you may access the 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 ‘Programme Description’ explains the objectives of the programme.
- The present ‘Peer Review Guidelines’.
- The assigned Full Proposal.

5.1. Review Form

You are invited to complete and submit the ‘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 4 parts:
- Part 1: Ethical considerations
- Part 2: Evaluation of the proposal
- Part 3: Overall assessment
- Part 4: Scoring of the proposal

The applicants will receive an anonymised copy of your evaluation for consideration.

5.1.1. Ethical considerations

Please comment if the proposal gives rise to any ethical issues and, if applicable, whether these have been adequately addressed.

5.1.2. Evaluation of the proposal

Please carefully read the descriptions of the (sub)criteria in chapter 4 Selection Criteria and comment concisely on each selection criterion to the best of your abilities, professional skills, knowledge and ethics.

Assessments should be made based on scientific content rather than journal-based publication metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors or the identity of a journal.

The value and impact of all research outputs (including datasets and software, training of researchers, intellectual property) in addition to research publications should be considered, as well as a broad range of impact measures including qualitative indicators of research impact, such as influence on policy and practice.

Please also consult the style recommendations in chapter 3 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.
5.1.1. Scoring of the proposal

The scoring system is used to underline the reasoned comments and arguments provided. It is based on a scale ranging from excellent to fair/poor (See Table 2: Scoring System to evaluate the individual selection criteria).

Table 2: Scoring System to evaluate the individual selection criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fair/Poor</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential to foster innovative internationally competitive research and exchange of key knowledge and technological know-how</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For incoming researchers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International reputation in the relevant domain of competence and research track record of the seconded fellow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>International reputation in the relevant domain of competence and research track record of the visited research group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Top scores should only be awarded to proposals of exceptionally high quality.

The overall assessment of the proposal (see next section) and justification for the funding recommendation (see Table 3: Funding Recommendation based on the Overall Assessment) should be consistent with your comments in the individual subcriteria sections.

5.1.2. Overall assessment

The following points should be addressed in the overall assessment of the proposal:

- most important strengths and weaknesses of the project proposal,
- any modifications to the proposal that are necessary,
- any other comments justifying the funding recommendation.
### Table 3: Funding Recommendation based on the Overall Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final Score</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **A+**      | Proposal of excellent quality and outstanding international standards that should be funded as proposed. The proposal scores excellent on all or most subcriteria.  
- e.g. a researcher with an outstanding track record visits a world-leading research institution with excellent prospects for further cooperation between the two groups. |
| **A**       | 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 subcriteria.  
E.g. a project that ticks all the boxes but is missing something to make it really excellent. |
| **B**       | Proposal of very good quality, but with shortcomings in one of the selection criteria. The proposal could be improved to become an excellent proposal.  
- E.g. the proposal needs to improve the explanation on how a future sustainable cooperation between both groups is set up. |
| **C**       | Proposal of insufficient quality and with major shortcomings in one or more selection criteria.  
e.g.  
- The visiting scientist coming to Luxembourg does not have an outstanding track record in relation to his/her career  
- The foreign institution that a Luxembourg scientist is going to does not have an outstanding reputation at the international level. |
6. Guidelines for Panel Members

Before you may evaluate a proposal, you have to sign the ‘Panel Participation Form’ which includes a ‘Confidentiality Agreement’.

Please read the following documents that will be made available to you:

- Programme Description
- Peer Review Guidelines
- Proposal
- 2 reviews written by independent experts (at the latest 10 days before panel meeting)

In order to improve the comprehensibility of the funding decisions, your arguments brought up in the panel discussion need to fulfil the following quality requirements:

- Your arguments should be based on the arguments provided in the written reviews. Do not only reiterate individual comments by reviewers but clearly state how the significant individual comments of the reviewers lead to your conclusion.
- Any new positive or negative argument raised (which does not appear within any of the written reviews) needs to be clearly justified with evidence.
- Resolve major conflicting arguments stated within different reviews by proposing a justified opinion/solution.
- Factual information which has a major influence on the funding decision needs to be checked on validity.
- Criticism should be supported with examples.
- Indicate possible modifications or recommendations to improve the quality of the proposal.
- Clearly explain the impact of each statement for the overall assessment. The proposed funding decision should be comprehensible and duly justified. The main argument(s) which lead to a positive or negative funding decision need to be unambiguously highlighted.
- Assessments should be made based on scientific content rather than journal-based publication metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors or the identity of a journal.
- The value and impact of all research outputs ((including datasets and software, training of researchers, intellectual property) in addition to research publications should be considered, as well as a broad range of impact measures including qualitative indicators of research impact, such as influence on policy and practice.

Please respect these recommendations as the anonymized reviews and the ‘Panel Conclusion’ are forwarded to the applicants.
6.1. Panel Meeting

Prior to the meeting, the FNR secretariat will prepare a ranking based on the reviews. Proposals which did not fulfil the minimal criteria of at least a ‘fair’ rating on all criteria will not be discussed (exceptions may be made if the panel member considers it necessary and justified to discuss the proposal in the panel).

Then the panel will start with the actual discussion of the proposals starting with the top ranked one (5 minutes of presentation and 10 minutes of discussion for each proposal). Panel members should discuss the evaluation findings and readjust the ranking of the proposal if deemed necessary (including argumentation).

If the evaluation of the panel differs from the written reviews or new information is discussed, a strong argumentation needs to be presented.

After ranking all the proposals, the panel should discuss which proposals should benefit from a financial support of the FNR independently of available funding. This step should ensure that even the last funded project fulfils the quality criteria of the FNR.

6.1.1. Panel Conclusion

The FNR secretariat will prepare a first draft of the panel conclusions which will be sent to the panel members for validation within 5 working days.

The ‘Panel Conclusion’ will serve as the basis for the formal decision process within the FNR and will be presented in full to the FNR’s decision bodies. This document should therefore be as comprehensive as possible, clear and unambiguous. The anonymised ‘Panel Conclusion’ as well as the anonymised written reviews will also be sent to the applicants.

The panel members may also give some overall considerations on the quality of the proposals, the quality of the evaluation process and recommendations for future calls.

6.1.2. Selection of proposals to be retained for funding

The final funding decision is based on the written reviews, the syntheses and the panel discussion. Within this programme the FNR intends to support visits which will clearly contribute to the strategic development and thus competitiveness of the Luxembourg research groups/institutions. The foreign research group must be of outstanding international reputation in the field. The plan to establish a sustainable cooperation between the Luxembourg group and a world-leading foreign institution needs to be convincing and supported by an institutional commitment.
Table 4: Minimal requirements for a positive funding decision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Relative Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential to foster innovative internationally competitive research and exchange of key knowledge and technological know-how</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added value of the secondment to the research programme (strategic development) of the Luxembourg research group</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International reputation of the visited research group</td>
<td>Excellent (for visits abroad) At least “Good” (for visits to LU)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International reputation in the relevant domain of competence and research track record of the seconded fellow (in relation to his/her career stage)</td>
<td>Excellent (for incoming) At least “Very Good” (for outgoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected outcomes</td>
<td>At least “Very Good”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>