

PRIN 2020

GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATION PANELS

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Italian Ministry for Universities and Research (MIUR) supports public research based on criteria of quality and merit evaluated through a peer review process.

Evaluation panels play a crucial role in this process and panel members are therefore selected by the National Committee of Guarantors for Research (CNGR) on the basis of proven and specific expertise in the relevant field.

1.2. The PRIN (Research Projects of National Interest) Program provides funding for public research projects with a view to promoting the Italian research system, strengthening cooperation between universities and research organizations, and encouraging national participation in initiatives of the European Union Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.

To this end, the PRIN Program awards funding for three-year projects whose nature and complexity may require collaborations between several investigators and whose funding requirements exceed the resources normally available at individual institutions. Depending on the nature of the project, the research team may consist of a single operating unit or a collaboration between units from different universities or institutions.

1.3. (Specifications). The 2020 PRIN call consists of a single funding procedure with the opening of further annual funding windows announced via subsequent notices confirming the continuing availability of funds for 2021 and 2022, and introducing any changes to the regulations set out in the PRIN 2020 call, including those relating to the present guidelines.

1.4. Project proposals can be submitted to the following three main research domains identified by the European Research Council (ERC):

- Life Sciences
- Physical and Engineering Sciences
- Social Sciences and Humanities.

These domains are subdivided into the sectors listed in Annex 1 to the call.

1.5 Three evaluation panels, one for each ERC research domain, are set up in order to select the projects to receive funding. Each evaluation panel has between five and fifteen members (depending on the number of sectors in each research domain), one of whom will be appointed chair by the CNGR. A deputy chair may also be appointed to act on behalf of the chair in the event that he or she is unable to attend panel meetings.

Each evaluation panel nominates three anonymous external experts (peer reviewers) to conduct a scientific evaluation of the projects. Experts are chosen from the MIUR's Register of Expert Peer-Reviewers for Italian Scientific Evaluation (REPRISE) or from the databases of experts engaged by the European Commission, in accordance with the criterion of scientific competence and through a web-based application managed by CINECA. Procedures for the selection of external experts are set out in section 2.4 below.

1.6. External experts may only be selected following the procedure described in section 1.5 above. Experts perform their duties remotely using suitable web-based tools.

1.7. (Conflict of interest and recusal obligations). Panel members must not be involved in any way or form, and in any case pursuant to the principles laid out in Article 51 of the Italian Civil Code, with the preparation of projects submitted to the PRIN 2020 call for proposals (hereinafter referred to as the "call").

1.7.1. Similarly, if a panel member has, in the five years prior to the publication of the call, been employed or contracted by the same university or research institution with which the Principal Investigator (PI) or head of local units participating in the project submitted under the call is affiliated, they must refrain from performing any activities relating to the evaluation procedure (appointing independent experts, assigning final scores, determining the level of funding to be awarded).

1.7.2. A panel member must also refrain from performing activities relating to the evaluation procedure (appointing independent experts, assigning final scores, determining the level of funding to be awarded) of any project in which the PI or a local unit head has co-authored scientific publications with said member in the five years prior to the publication of the call.

1.7.3. The definition of conflict of interest set out in section 1.7.2 above does not apply where the publication involving a panel member and the PI or a local unit head was co-authored by 100 or more authors.

1.7.4. Upon their nomination, each panel member publishes on the CINECA website a declaration of absence of grounds for exclusion and compliance with ethical principles and confidentiality (pursuant to articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000), together with a photocopy of a valid identity document.

False declaration of absence of grounds for exclusion is a criminal offence and is punishable by law pursuant to article 76 of Presidential Decree no. 445/2000.

1.7.5. Panel members authorize the MIUR to publish their respective CVs in the "Transparent Administration" section of the official MIUR website, in accordance with the provisions set out in Legislative Decree no. 33 of March 14, 2013 concerning transparent administration.

1.7.6. In any event, panel members must refrain from making decisions or carrying out activities relating to their duties in any situation of actual or potential conflict of interest.

1.8. Members of the evaluation panels established under the call do not serve on successive evaluation panels set up following each additional notice relating to annual funding windows.

1.9. The evaluation panels are coordinated by the CNGR, which meets the panels once established and coordinates their activities according to a predefined schedule. The administrative functions of the evaluation panels are carried out by the office of the tender manager.

2. EVALUATION PROCEDURE

2.1. Each project proposal is allocated to the evaluation panel pertaining to the primary ERC domain indicated by the PI.

2.2. The scientific evaluation of the project is assigned by the relevant evaluation panel to three external experts (at least one of whom should be employed or contracted by a non-Italian scientific institution or university), whose activities are coordinated by said evaluation panel, pursuant to the procedures set out in Annex 3 to the call.

2.3. The panel chair organizes the panel's activities in accordance with the terms governing the evaluation procedure. The CNGR monitors the overall process and timeline.

2.4. (Selection of experts). For the scientific evaluation of the projects, each evaluation panel is supported by three anonymous external experts selected from the MIUR's Register of Expert Peer-Reviewers for Italian Scientific Evaluation (REPRISE) or from the list of European Commission experts, according to criteria of competence including the correlation between an ERC domain and/or sector and/or keywords provided in the project proposal and those indicated by the REPRISE expert. Persons employed or contracted by universities that are, at the same time, associated by partnership obligations with the university/public research institute with which the PI or unit heads are affiliated may not be selected to serve as experts.

To constitute a conflict of interest in this case, only partnership obligations that give the respective holder the right to vote and to stand for election in the governing bodies of the partner institution apply.

2.5. If the PI has indicated a secondary ERC domain, the evaluation panel may nominate an external expert with specific competence in this domain. The evaluation panel may, in accordance with the primary criterion of competence, assign the group of three experts an appropriate number of projects with similar subject-matter.

2.6. Experts are selected by the evaluation panel in a timely manner. If an expert does not accept the appointment to serve as scientific evaluator within seven days of being contacted, they receive a second invitation. If they do not accept the second invitation within seven days, they are automatically excluded from the expert selection procedure.

If an expert fails to perform their tasks within four weeks from their appointment, they receive a reminder from the evaluation panel. If the expert fails to complete their evaluation within two weeks from the reminder, they will be mandatorily replaced by the evaluation panel.

2.7. (Scientific evaluation). During each step of the scientific evaluation, experts work independently and remain anonymous to each other and to the project proponents being evaluated.

Each project is assessed according to the following criteria:

EVALUATION CRITERIA	SCORE
1. Quality of the research project – scientific merit and innovative nature of the project from an international standpoint – with particular regard to:	Total: 40
a) Clarity and pertinence of the objectives	a) 10

<p>b) Relevance and originality of the proposed project within the specific scientific area</p> <p>c) Methodology adopted and coherence of the project, including the specific contribution of local units (if any)</p> <p>d) Positioning of the project based on the state of the art in the specific scientific area.</p>	<p>b) 10</p> <p>c) 10</p> <p>d) 10</p>
<p>2. Composition of the research team, feasibility and appropriateness of the project – scientific merit of the research team, feasibility of the work plan, and appropriateness of requested funding – with particular regard to:</p> <p>a) Excellence of the PI, local units heads (if any), and the entire research team</p> <p>b) Ability to carry out the proposed project (competence, composition, and complementarity of the entire research team)</p> <p>c) Organization of the project with regard to the proposed objectives, expected timescales for its completion, and resources required (tools, size of research team, management)</p> <p>d) Coherence of the time commitments of members of the research team, congruence and relevance of the spending plan with the objectives and structuring of activities.</p>	<p>Total: 40</p> <p>a) 10</p> <p>b) 10</p> <p>c) 10</p> <p>d) 10</p>
<p>3. Social impact of the project – with particular regard to:</p> <p>a) Challenges addressed by the research project in terms of its impact on technological innovation, industrial applications, economic growth or the solution of social problems, safeguarding of cultural or environmental heritage, including interdisciplinary approaches</p> <p>b) Effectiveness of the dissemination actions of the research project and its outcomes; impact of the project on the scientific community and society in light of the objectives defined by the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.</p>	<p>Total: 20</p> <p>a) 10</p> <p>b) 10</p>
TOTAL SCORE	0–100

2.8. (Score thresholds). Each project is subject to a maximum score threshold of 100 and a minimum score threshold of 75, identified for each research domain.

Any project scoring below the minimum threshold of 75 is not eligible for funding.

2.9. (Procedure for scientific evaluation.) Each external expert, working independently and remaining anonymous to the other experts, compiles an evaluation form for each project using the dedicated IT platform managed by CINECA, indicating the project's strengths and weaknesses, and awarding a score for each of the criteria indicated in the table in section 2.7 accompanied by an explanatory comment, according to the following parameters:

- 0–5 insufficient: critical and/or too many weaknesses
- 6–7 sufficient: weaknesses in several parts of the project

- 8 good: some moderate weaknesses
- 9 very good: very convincing, minor weaknesses
- 10 outstanding: fully convincing, no weaknesses.

2.9.1. The explanatory comment for the score awarded, of a minimum of 500 to a maximum of 700 characters, must address each of the three criteria indicated in the table in section 2.7 above. In order to justify their score, the expert answers, or writes a general response to, the questions contained in the following evaluation form:

EVALUATION FORM	
1. Quality of the research project	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a) To what extent are the objectives of the project clearly and pertinently structured?b) What are the points of originality and innovative aspects of the project?c) To what extent are the proposed research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project?d) To what extent do the objectives go beyond the state of the art in the specific scientific area?
2. Composition of the research group, feasibility and appropriateness of the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a) To what extent have the PI and local unit heads (if any) demonstrated scientific excellence?b) To what extent is the project feasible and appropriate in terms of competence, composition, and complementarity of the research team?c) To what extent is the project consistent with the proposed objectives, expected timescales for its completion, and resources required (tools, size of research team, management)?d) To what extent are the time commitments of members of the research team and the spending plan consistent and congruent with the objectives and activities of the project?
3. Social impact of the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a) To what extent does the project address the challenges of the research field in terms of its impact on technological innovation, industrial applications, economic growth or the solution of social problems, safeguarding of cultural or environmental heritage, including interdisciplinary approaches?b) To what extent does the project propose actions to disseminate its outcomes? What impact can it have on the scientific community and society in light of the objectives defined by the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation?

2.9.2. Having completed their scientific evaluation, each expert uploads their evaluation form on the platform managed by CINECA.

2.9.3. The evaluation panel compares the scores awarded by the three experts and calculates the final score of each individual project.

2.9.4. If the highest and lowest of the three scores differ by no more than 20 points (upper limit of the difference between two scores), the evaluation phase is deemed complete. In this case, the final score is calculated by taking the arithmetic average of the three scores awarded by the experts.

2.9.5. If the highest and lowest of the three scores differ by more than 20 points (upper limit referred to in the previous section), but the highest of the three scores is below the threshold of 75, the evaluation phase is again deemed complete. In this case, the final score is calculated by taking the arithmetic average of the three scores awarded to the project.

2.9.6. If the highest and lowest of the three scores differ by more than 20 points (upper limit referred to in section 2.9.4) and the highest score is above the threshold of 75, the relevant evaluation panel appoints an additional expert, pursuant to the procedure indicated in article 1, section 3 of Annex 3 to the call.

2.9.7. The additional expert will evaluate the research project based on the criteria set out in the Guidelines for Experts.

2.9.8. Once the additional expert's evaluation has been obtained, the evaluation panel calculates the final score to be assigned to the project by taking the arithmetic average of the three closest scores.

2.9.9 In the event that, having obtained a fourth evaluation, the difference between the two sets of three scores used to take the arithmetic average is the same, the set with the highest score will be given priority.

2.10. (Final score). The final score is rounded to the nearest first decimal place and corresponds to one of the following descriptive bands:

Points	Band	Description
100–98	Outstanding	Fully convincing, no weaknesses
97–90	Very good	Very convincing, minor weaknesses
89–81	Good	Some moderate weaknesses
80–75	Sufficient	Weaknesses in several parts of the project
Less than 75	Insufficient	Critical and/or too many weaknesses

2.11. (Ex-aequo). In the event that projects obtain the same score (ex-aequo) and the available budget for the call is not sufficient to provide funding for all, priority will be given to the proposal that obtained the highest score for the criterion "**Quality of the research project** – scientific merit and innovative nature of the project from an international standpoint".

2.11.1 In the event that projects referred to in the previous section obtained the same score for the **"Quality of the research project"** criterion and the available budget for the call is not sufficient to provide funding for all, priority will be given to the proposal that obtained the highest score for the **"Social impact of the project"** criterion referred to in point 3 in the table in section 2.7.

2.11.2. In the event that projects obtained the same score for both the **"Quality of the research project"** criterion and the **"Social impact of the project"** criterion mentioned in sections 2.11 and 2.11.1 above, further priority will be given to the proposal coordinated by the youngest PI.

2.12. (Conclusion of the procedure). At the end of the scientific evaluation procedure, the evaluation panel responsible for each research domain draws up a ranked list of the projects admitted by sector, examines the budget requirements indicated in each project, and determines the appropriate cost and funding (calculated according to the rules in Annex 2 to the call).

2.12.1. The evaluation panel also considers any appropriate changes to each individual item of expenditure, according to the following principles:

- a) the cost of new contracts is established by sector-specific regulations and, if in line with these regulations, cannot be reduced
- b) it is not possible to calculate "overheads" (item of expenditure B) at other than 60% of congruous costs relating to personnel (items of expenditure A)
- c) it is not advisable in general to reduce any non-lump sum items of expenditure by more than 25% of what is indicated in the project, unless appropriately justified.

3. ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

3.1. Panel members are bound by the strictest confidentiality regarding the entire selection process, both in terms of the projects and their evaluation.

3.2. The recusal obligations referred to in section 1.7 of these guidelines constitute to all intents and purposes ethical principles, which panel members are required to respect.

3.3. The unauthorized communication of confidential information is considered a serious breach of the duty of confidentiality resulting from the contractual relationship between panel members and the MIUR.

3.4. In order to ensure the regularity and transparency of the evaluation and selection process, all project participants are forbidden to contact panel members either directly or indirectly, and any such contact may result in the exclusion of the proposal from the selection procedure. Panel members are required to promptly report to the CNGR and to the Process Manager any violation of the ethical principles set out in this section of which they become aware.