

Evaluation Guide

Rules of procedures for *ex-ante* evaluation, selection and granting.

FOREWORD

THE FUND FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH – FNRS¹

The mission of the FNRS aims at promoting free (fundamental) scientific research within the French-speaking Community of Belgium (CFB)² through its grant allocation process for researchers and institutions (mostly CFB universities).

In order to fulfil this mission, the FNRS has set up funding instruments, which are subject to calls for proposals occurring at different times along the year. The granting depends on a peer review of the quality of the proposal and is based on scientific excellence.

FNRS CALLS FOR PROPOSALS AND DOCUMENTS

The documents related to the calls for proposals include:

- the regulations, which specify the requirements for the calls and the functioning modalities in case of granting;
- the guide for applicants, which describes the general principles of the calls and the functioning of each instrument;
- the guide for reviewers, which specifies the rules to be applied for the proposals' evaluation, and the characteristics of each instrument to experts who take part in the two *ex-ante* evaluation steps;
- the evaluation guide, which presents the rules for the evaluation, selection and granting procedures.

Rules and regulations adopted by the FNRS Board of Trustees constitute the reference framework of the calls. They are thus the only documents that bind the FNRS.

All the calls for proposals are announced on the [FNRS website](#), where the related documents can also be found.

CONTENT OF THE EVALUATION GUIDE

The guide provides a comprehensive presentation of the evaluation process of the FNRS and is divided into 4 parts:

- the first part specifies the general funding principles of the FNRS;
- the second part describes the submission steps for a proposal;
- the third part presents the peer review process;
- the fourth part describes how the evaluation is finalised by the FNRS Board of Trustees.

¹ *In order for the document to be easier to read, the Fund for Scientific Research – FNRS (F.R.S.-FNRS) is shortened to “FNRS” hereinafter.*

² *In order for the document to be easier to read, the French-speaking Community of Belgium is shortened to “CFB” hereinafter.*

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE FNRS & ITS FUNDING SCHEMES

1.1 CALLS FOR PROPOSALS OF THE FNRS

Every year, the FNRS organises several calls for proposals divided into different major instruments carried out within the framework of a bottom-up approach: researchers are free to suggest the research theme they seek to develop, within the research institution that agrees to host them, on condition that the institution provides access to the FNRS funding for the related instrument.

The two main FNRS calls are spread over the year and include 2 major types of instruments:

- The “Grants and Fellowships” call, opening in December: instruments that fund researchers with four different levels of expertise;
- The “Credits and Projects” call, opening in spring: instruments that fund individual or collaborative research based on researchers' initiative.

Besides, complementary grants may be allocated independently of these calls via permanent instruments dedicated to ‘life of research’ (Mobility, Congresses...).

The FNRS reviews the proposals in order to identify those whose quality is high enough and deserving to be granted.

1.2 PRINCIPLES

The selection of the application files submitted under the funding schemes of the FNRS is performed on the basis of scientific excellence, and depends on a peer review. To that end, the FNRS Board of Trustees shall appoint independent experts that participate in the evaluation of proposals.

This evaluation guide establishes the rules for the evaluation, selection and granting procedures. These rules are based on the following principles:

- **Excellence:** the applicants selected to receive a grant must show a high level of quality with regard to the criteria presented in the calls for proposals.
- **Transparency:** the decision to allocate a grant is based on rules and procedures clearly defined. Besides applicants should be given sufficient information about the results of the evaluation of their proposals.
- **Confidentiality:** all the proposals, data and related documents communicated to the FNRS are considered confidential. Only the information contained in the applicant's summary sheet is considered public. In case of granting, this information will be used on the [FNRS website](#) or in any other document intended for the public, for the sake of both transparency and the duty to account for the proper use of public monies (accountability).

- **Ethical aspects:** in the context of any evaluation process, the FNRS refers to the great principles of an ethically justified scientific practice as defined by the Code of Ethics for Scientific Research in Belgium, and to the international standards.

1.3 GENERAL PROCEDURE OF THE EX-ANTE EVALUATION

For the instruments related to calls for proposals, the FNRS Board of Trustees has adopted the principle of a one-phase and a two-step evaluation of the proposals. The entire process occurs in three successive parts involving key factors:

- **The administrative work:** for the instruments related to this type of evaluation, the FNRS receives proposals submitted through [e-space](#), a web-based management platform dedicated to the calls for proposals.
- **The evaluation** is divided in **two** different **steps** (except for some instruments). Step 1 consists in the remote individual evaluation and depends on experts selected by the FNRS who are specialised in the field of the proposal. Step 2 depends on Scientific Commissions made up of experts who meet in sessions in order to set up a consolidated ranking and finalise the evaluation reports of the applicants.
- **The funding decision** is made when the FNRS Board of Trustees approves the funding and provides the applicants and promoters (if any) with the result of their proposal and the final evaluation report. If applicable, depending on the instrument, applicants and promoters may receive the evaluation report issued by the first-step individual experts anonymously.

1.4 THE GUIDANCE COMMITTEE

The [Guidance Committee](#) (COMA - Comité d'accompagnement) is made up of 12 members:

- 11 members: including 1 member appointed by UCLouvain, 1 member appointed by ULB and 1 member appointed by ULiège for each scientific field (SEN: Exact and Natural Sciences; SVS: Life and Health Sciences; SHS: Human and Social Sciences) and 2 members appointed by UNamur and UMons for the 3 scientific fields (SEN; SVS; SHS);
- The Guidance Committee shall be chaired by the Secretary General of the FNRS.

The Guidance Committee shall suggest a composition of the Scientific Commissions to the FNRS Board of Trustees and the list of possible individual reviewers.

Moreover, the Guidance Committee may suggest possible improvements of the procedure on the basis of the experience of its members in the evaluation procedure.

1.5 OPEN ACCESS POLICY

The FNRS endorses the principle of open access to scientific publications financed wholly or partly from the public funding. This support has led to the implementation of an institutional mandate providing Open Access to publications from FNRS funded research projects and by researchers under the “Open Access Green Road” business model.

The Regulation ([FR-EN](#)) specifies the conditions under which the FNRS grant recipients shall store, when possible, all the funded research results of which they are authors or co-authors in their institution's repository.

Scientific publication resulting partially or fully from the funding of the FNRS and its Associated Funds shall mention the source of this funding as follows:

- In case of a project: “*This work was supported by the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique - FNRS under Grant(s) n° [ID number]*”,
- In case of a fellowship: “[*Full name or Initials*] is a [*title*] of the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique - FNRS”.

1.6 SAN FRANCISCO DECLARATION ON RESEARCH ASSESSMENT (DORA)

The FNRS is signatory to the San Francisco Declaration on research assessment, which consists of a set of recommendations for best practices in assessment of scholarly research (www.sfdora.org).

A major element of DORA is to oppose the use of impact factor to evaluate the quality of scientific work.

2. SUBMISSION OF THE PROPOSALS

2.1 CALLS FOR PROPOSALS

The annual [calendar](#) of the calls for proposals is published on the FNRS website.

For each call the FNRS shall create or update all materials that are available to the applicants.

2.2 PREPARATION OF THE PROPOSAL³ BY THE APPLICANT

The applicant makes a certain number of choices that do have an impact on the evaluation process of the project:

- when choosing the language of the proposal (French or English), the applicant will influence the selection of individual reviewers who can read and understand either French or English;
- when selecting descriptor fields and depending on the summary of the project, the applicant will guide the FNRS in the selection of individual reviewers;
- if necessary, the applicant may indicate up to 3 experts s/he does not wish to have as reviewers and justifies her/himself;
- the applicant will have to select the Scientific Commission that will be in charge of finalising the evaluation of the proposal.

It is recommended to applicants who wish to have their application file assessed by [Scientific Commissions](#) dedicated to SEN (Exact and Natural Sciences) and SVS (Health and Life Sciences), as well as the Scientific Commission SHS-2, domains to submit their application in English⁴.

2.3 SELECTION OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMISSION AND DESCRIPTOR FIELDS

When submitting an application via [e-space](#), applicants select the Scientific Commission they would like the proposal to be evaluated by (except when there is a unique panel created for a specific call, such as the Infrastructure & Large Equipment call).

³ Notice to applicants: the FNRS insists on **strict compliance with the instructions given for each part of the proposal** (scientific section relevant to the instrument selected, number of pages allowed for documents to be enclosed with the application form...) and stresses again the sovereign consideration of the Scientific Commissions assessing the application file.

⁴ Should the application file be submitted in French, the FNRS may require the applicant to provide a translation in English for the purpose of conducting the ex-ante evaluation.

Then, they select 2 to 6 descriptor fields in order of relevance. Notice that at least 2 descriptor fields⁵ must be relevant to the Scientific Commission of their choice and, they may complete their selection with unrestricted keywords, if necessary.

When selecting the Scientific Commission, applicants should consider the various Scientific Commissions as a whole and make a choice while taking into account all the fields covered by the Scientific Commission desired.

2.4 SUBMISSION OF THE PROPOSALS

The proposals may be submitted either in French or in English via [e-space](#), the web-based application available to anyone involved in a proposal: applicant(s), validating person(s), referees, reviewers, and the FNRS administrative staff.

Each person is identified with a user ID and a password. The access and display are adjusted in accordance with one's role.

During the preparation of the electronic file, basic controls are performed online, in particular on some eligibility conditions related to the selected instrument, and on the completeness of the required data (mandatory fields).

As soon as the applicant finishes and validates the proposal, it is automatically submitted to the "validating person(s)" for approval. A "validating person" is someone (promoter, rector...) in charge of a validation task of the proposal, as part of the submission process.

The submission is considered effective once the last "validating person" required by the instrument has validated the proposal.

In the event a "validating person" refuses to validate a proposal before the online submission deadline, the applicant is automatically informed and can modify the application file or submit a new one, if s/he wishes to do so. However, if this refusal occurs after the deadline, the proposal is then automatically rejected (see eligibility).

2.5 RECEIVING THE PROPOSALS

2.5.1 VERIFYING THE ELIGIBILITY

The administrative staff of the FNRS ensures compliance with the closing date and hour indicated in the call and verifies the eligibility of the proposal for the selected instrument.

⁵ In the case applicants select only one descriptor field relevant to the Scientific Commission selected, they shall justify the selection concerning the Scientific Commission in the application form.

Applicants who select the Scientific Commission SUSTAINABILITY, dedicated to research projects relating to sustainability through interdisciplinarity, must demonstrate the "sustainability" aspect of their research project, including interdisciplinary aspects (max. 2,000 characters, including spaces).

To be evaluated, the proposals must meet the eligibility criteria. If it clearly appears before, during, or after the evaluation phase that a proposal does not meet one or several of these criteria, including the completeness of the file, the FNRS will consider it ineligible and will retrieve it from the evaluation process. The FNRS will then notify the applicants concerned.

2.5.2 CONTACTING SCIENTIFIC EXPERTS/REFERENCE PERSONS

For instruments where scientific experts/reference persons may be required to give an opinion on the application of an applicant, the FNRS shall contact the persons the applicant has indicated and specify the information they will have to provide.

Applicants shall contact the scientific experts or reference persons prior to mentioning their contact details in the application form to make sure that they are willing to accept the mission entrusted to them.

By submitting an application form, the applicant renounces all access to the confidential inputs related to their application (promoter⁶, scientific experts or reference persons).

No information will be communicated to the applicant on the receipt of the inputs to ensure confidentiality.

Inputs are intended for the Scientific Commissions.

Reference letters (promoter and reference persons) of a Research Associate fellowship (CQ) applicants recommended by the Scientific Commissions for appointment will also be sent to the universities, as part of the internal selection by the universities.

⁶ For applicants to a fellowship for Research Fellow (ASP), Medical Doctor Applicant to an MSc and a Ph.D. (CSD), Clinical Master Specialist Applicant to a Ph.D. (SD), Veterinary MD. Ph.D. Student (VETE-CCD), Postdoctoral Researcher (CR), Postdoctoral Medical Doctor Applicant to an MSc (CSPD), Postdoctoral Clinical Master Specialist (SPD) and Research Associate (CQ), an opinion letter is requested from the promoter at the time of the validation.

3. EVALUATION OF THE PROPOSALS

The calls for proposals of the FNRS have some evaluation principles in common:

- Applicants are aware of the evaluation criteria while preparing their proposal;
- Except for some instruments⁷, the proposals are reviewed in two steps:
 - The first step is performed by remote individual experts,
 - For the second step, Scientific Commissions gather in meetings to establish a consolidated ranking of the proposals;
- The FNRS Board of Trustees relies on the help of remunerated experts, who do not belong to the FNRS, and mostly come from outside the CFB (these independent experts are the key actors of the evaluation);
- The composition of the Scientific Commissions is published on the [FNRS website](#);
- The names of the reviewers linked to a proposal remain undisclosed;
- A final evaluation report is sent to the applicants and to the possible promoters, notifying them of the decision of the FNRS Board of Trustees. The report is prepared by “rapporteurs” and “co-rapporteurs”, who are members of the Scientific Commissions;
- The decision to fund proposals is made by the FNRS Board of Trustees.

3.1 INDIVIDUAL REVIEWERS (STEP 1)

Experts who are selected according to the research field of the proposal mostly come from outside the CFB.

An expert is entrusted with the task of providing a written argumentative appraisal (notes and comments) concerning the proposal based on the evaluation criteria known by the applicants, using the language chosen by the applicant.

An expert is usually in charge of reviewing several proposals, which may depend on different instruments within the same call for proposals. However, the expert is not required to establish any ranking between them, as each proposal must be reviewed independently. A marking grid for the proposals is provided in section 3.6, with the intention to standardise the grading system.

Experts must possess the required skills and knowledge in the fields in which they are expected to intervene, as well as a high level of professional experience. There is no nationality criterion required for this role.

⁷ Instruments intended for young researchers who expect to obtain a doctoral thesis do not provide for the participation of individual reviewers (step 1). Indeed, for such instruments, the proposal is assigned to two “rapporteurs”, both members of the Scientific Commission selected by the applicant.

Moreover, for instruments which are not related to calls for proposals, or in case of a request for an extension or a renewal of a proposal that has already been reviewed in a previous session, the FNRS Board of Trustees bases the funding decision on opinions, which recommend or not the continuation of the funding for a new period. Depending on the instruments, opinions may come from referees, academic authorities, a dedicated Commission, etc.

The Presidents of the Scientific Commissions, before whom the proposals are submitted, shall validate the selection of individual experts who should assess those proposals.

In order to build a pool of experts, the FNRS constitutes a database, from which the individual experts considered for a given call for proposals are selected. The call for experts is open permanently. The FNRS Board of Trustees is responsible for their appointments.

3.2 THE SCIENTIFIC COMMISSIONS (STEP 2)

3.2.1 MISSIONS

The Scientific Commissions (FNRS PhD [FR-EN](#) / International [FR-EN](#) or for a specific call such as Infrastructure & Large Equipment) shall meet at the FNRS (Rue d'Egmont, 5 – 1000 Brussels) to establish a consolidated ranking of the proposals that will be suggested to the FNRS Board of Trustees. They also validate the final evaluation report to be sent to the applicant and to the possible promoter (“Researcher” instrument), along with the notification of the decision of the FNRS Board of Trustees.

In order to carry out their work, the Scientific Commissions have the application files, individual evaluation reports (if applicable) and consolidated draft reports prepared by the “rapporteurs” at their disposal. The Scientific Commissions base their decisions on the evaluation criteria, which are provided both to the applicants and the first-step reviewers.

3.2.2 ROLE OF THE PRESIDENTS

The President of a Scientific Commission is in charge of:

- Validating step 1 experts to whom the administrative staff of the FNRS has assigned the submitted application files (fellowships and projects);
- Nominating “rapporteurs” and “co-rapporteurs” from among the members, and assigning them proposals related to their fields of expertise while making sure to equally distribute the workload;
- Leading the work of the Scientific Commission, in an independent way;
- Organising a vote in which all members participate, if the “consensus” procedure is unsuccessful;
- Signing the final evaluation reports to be addressed to the applicants.

3.2.3 ROLE OF THE “RAPPORTEURS” AND “CO-RAPPORTEURS”

For instruments aiming at obtaining a doctoral thesis, given that individual experts (step 1) are not involved, the weight of the “rapporteur” is thus crucial within the evaluation procedure. Therefore, a second “rapporteur” is designated. The “rapporteurs”, both members of the Scientific Commission selected by the applicant, shall draw up a preliminary evaluation report individually in order to prepare the work and the debates of the Scientific Commission.

For the other instruments, each proposal is assigned to a single “rapporteur”, who is assisted by a “co-rapporteur” for the task. Both are members of the Scientific Commission selected by the applicant.

- The “rapporteur” shall prepare the work and the debates of the Scientific Commission, through the elaboration of a consolidated evaluation draft report, based on all the elements made available to them. The draft report will afterwards be reviewed by the Scientific Commission.
- The “co-rapporteur” is not required to draw up any evaluation report but shall examine it by ticking off the appropriate box. During the meeting of the Scientific Commission, the “co-rapporteur” will be invited to express his/her opinion on the proposal and may bring, when appropriate, a complementary perspective or a different point of view.

If the instrument provides for the participation of individual experts (step 1), and if a major disagreement arises concerning their reports, the “rapporteur” can organise a debate (by email) before the meeting of the Scientific Commission to reach a consensus, in which s/he will act as a moderator.

At the end of the meeting, the designated “rapporteur” shall draw up the final evaluation report intended for the applicant on the basis of preliminary reports and considering the discussions held by the Scientific Commission.

3.2.4 APPLICATIONS RANKING

The main criterion of the FNRS evaluation policy is the scientific excellence of the projects, in the light of the specific evaluation criteria defined (and potentially weighted) for each funding instrument.

However, members of the Scientific Commissions often have to decide between applications that have received the same score for excellence according to these evaluation criteria.

The FNRS Board of Trustees has decided to allow the following for the ranking of these projects:

- The use of a balance between major fields/major disciplines,
- Drawing lots⁸, if the use of a balance between major fields/major disciplines does not help to decide between applications.

3.3 EXPERTS APPOINTMENT CONDITIONS

The FNRS shall send a letter of appointment to each selected expert, whether they are an individual reviewer or a member of a Scientific Commission. This letter constitutes an agreement between the FNRS and the expert, specifying the precise terms and conditions for the expert: it imposes respect of a code of conduct and lays down essential

⁸ The details of the draw will be specified and implemented during the Scientific Commission's meeting.

regulations in terms of confidentiality. It includes the description of tasks s/he is entrusted with, as well as the conditions for the remuneration and reimbursement of expenses.

Upon information provided by the experts, the FNRS has put in place a mechanism that ensures they do not face a conflict of interest regarding the proposals they are invited to evaluate. To that end, experts must sign a declaration stating that there is no conflict of interest at the time of the appointment and that they commit to informing the FNRS in case where such a conflict would arise during the fulfilment of their tasks.

3.4 POSSIBLE CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

Experts must cease their work when they might, in any way, benefit from the acceptance or the rejection of a proposal.

Experts shall also withdraw from the evaluation in the following circumstances:

- they have an active collaboration with the applicant⁹ (i.e. being co-author of a publication with the applicant, having participated in the writing of the proposal, or being involved in the publication or implementation of the possible results of the proposal during the last 3 years);
- they hold (or have held during the last 3 years) a hierarchic or directly subordinate position with regard to the applicant;
- they are currently competing with the applicant for the same position;
- they have introduced a funding application to the FNRS under the same call and as part of the same instrument;
- the applicant is a close person; the notion of closeness will be explained at the time of the appointment;
- they are cited as scientific expert or reference person in an application file submitted by the applicant;
- they have been member of the applicant's thesis jury and belong to the same university.

Experts shall cease their work in case where they face any other situation that may raise doubts as to their ability and impartiality to evaluate the proposal, or that could reasonably give an external third party this impression.

3.5 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The use of natural language processors, large language models, or other generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies in the evaluation work of remote experts and/or members of Scientific Commissions is prohibited. No data (whether personal or not) may be processed using these tools.

⁹ Depending on the call in question, the term "applicant" shall be understood to mean:

- An applicant to a fellowship or the applicant's promoter/co-promoter,
- A promoter/co-promoter or the project leader of a funding request.

3.6 DATA PROTECTION

The FNRS expects certain standards regarding data management when allocating a proposal for assessment by an expert. Therefore, the funds invites each expert to read the [information notice](#).

3.7 EVALUATION CRITERIA

The objectives of each instrument and their related evaluation criteria and possible weightings are explained in detail and for each call in the guide for reviewers destined to help the reviewers in different practical aspects of their work and more particularly to provide clear rules and contribute to consistency among individual reviewers and the Scientific Commissions.

3.8 PROPOSALS GRADING SYSTEM

The experts (individual experts as well as members of the Scientific Commissions) shall review the aspects to be considered for each evaluation criterion and classify them into three categories:

Categories	Grades	
A ¹⁰	A+	outstanding
	A	excellent
	A-	very good
B	B+	good
	B	average
	B-	weak
C	C	insufficient

Experts must provide comments - preferably in the language chosen by the applicant - (stressing on the strengths / the weaknesses / providing general comments) consistent with the categories assigned and that can be used to sustain the work of the "rapporteurs" of the Scientific Commissions and the final evaluation report to be sent to the applicant.

¹⁰ Fundable range, subject to budget availability.

4. FUNDING DECISION AND FINALISATION

The funding decision (granting or rejection) is within the competence of the FNRS Board of Trustees.

4.1 FUNDING DECISION

At the end of the evaluation, the decision on the funding will be made by the FNRS Board of Trustees, depending on the budget available, and on the basis of the final grading and final consolidated reports elaborated by each Scientific Commission. The Board of Trustees shall decide on the granting or rejection, as well as on the granted amounts, if necessary.

4.2 COMMUNICATION TO THE APPLICANTS

The administrative staff of the FNRS informs the applicant(s) about the funding decision for their proposal. Within 15 days following the Board of Trustees meeting (the month is specified in the mini-guide of the concerned call), the administration transfers to the applicant(s), and to the promoter(s) if applicable:

- the final evaluation report, and
- the evaluation reports by the first-step individual experts on an anonymous basis if provided for in the instrument process.