

# F.R.S.-FNRS REMOTE EXPERTS

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2020 SURVEY

F.R.S.-FNRS

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May 2021

### 1. CONTEXT

The “Analysis, Evaluation and Foresight” unit of the Fund is encharged with identifying and recruiting remote experts. The aim is to make sure that every funding application is reviewed by an adequate number of legitimate experts (3 to 5 depending on the instrument). In order to achieve this goal, a database of experts was created in 2010. To this day, over **13.000 experts** from all over the world have been classified by their level and area of expertise: position, scientific seniority, bibliometric index, reviewing and supervision experience, science prizes won, etc. The F.R.S.-FNRS is concerned with **constantly updating and extending the database**. The goal is, on one hand, to improve the general scientific level of the selected experts and their specialization regarding the applications they are assigned on, and, on the other hand, to ensure a satisfying expert turnover at the first stage. For every call, about **30% of the remote evaluations are done by experts who have never reviewed for the Fund in the past**.

In the framework of the Grants and Fellowships Call 2020, **56.3%** of the remote evaluations were made by a self-declared “specialized” expert (**57.7%** for the Credits and Projects Call 2020) regarding the application, **37.9%** by an expert declaring themselves as “semi-specialized” in the subject (**37.1%** for the Credits and Projects Call 2020) and only **5.8%** by a “non-specialist” (**5.2%** for the Credits and Projects Call 2020). In order to achieve these results, **3805** invitations to review a proposal were sent for the applications of the Grants and Fellowships Call 2020 and **2375** invitations for the Credits and Projects Call 2020. The average rejection rate was **32.6%** for the Grants and Fellowships Call 2020 and **36.0%** for the Credits and Projects Call 2020.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

On **December 8, 2020**, the "Analysis, Evaluation and Foresight" unit launched its fourth online survey of the experts who made at least one remote evaluation for the Fund during the two previous main calls for proposals (Grants and Fellowships 2020 and Credits and Projects 2020). In total, **3366** experts were asked to complete the survey. No reminders were sent so as not to overwork the remote experts.

The questionnaire was brief and quick to complete, in order to collect as many full answers as possible. The main goal was to assess the level of satisfaction of the experts with the evaluation process in force at the F.R.S.-FNRS and to think up possible avenues for improvement. The questionnaire was available in English and French (the respondents were able to choose the language). The answers presented in this report are in English. When considered relevant, analyses were made in order to compare responses by gender of the expert, main area of research or how long the expert has been reviewing for the Fund.

On January 12, 2021, **1389** answers had been collected (**41.3%** of the experts surveyed). We have also received **65** partial answers, that is to say a **4.5%** withdrawal rate. The main results of the full answers collected are presented in this report.

### 3. KEY FINDINGS

- Large number of answers (1389, which amount to a response rate of 41.3%)
- Experts are mainly European, male and over half have been reviewing funding applications for at least 5 years (for the F.R.S.-FNRS or another funding agency).
- **75.2%** of the experts say they receive **an adequate number of invitations** to review from the F.R.S.-FNRS.
- **91.8%** of the experts say that the funding applications they review for the F.R.S.-FNRS are of similar or superior quality to the ones they review for other funding agencies. Only **2.9%** say they are of lower quality.
- Average overall rating given to the evaluation process: **17.3/20**.
- **82.8%** of experts say the remuneration offered by the F.R.S.-FNRS is sufficient if not superfluous. **17.2%** say it is insufficient.
- **58.0%** of the experts find the remunerations offered by other funding agencies similar or inferior (if not inexistent) to the one offered by the F.R.S.-FNRS. For **21.4%** of them, they are superior and **20.6%** do not know.
- **94.7%** of the experts think they are given all the necessary information (e.g. about the various instruments) to make their evaluation.
- **95.6%** of the experts find the grading system of the F.R.S.-FNRS suitable.
- The experts spend an average of **6.0 hours** ( $\pm 3.8$  hours) on their remote evaluations for the Fund.
- **83.1%** of the respondents find the evaluation criteria in force at the F.R.S.-FNRS to be suitable or very suitable for all the funding instruments.
- **90.6%** of the respondents state they are (completely) satisfied with the online platform (e-space) and no expert has stated they are not at all satisfied with the support provided by the F.R.S.-FNRS staff.
- **60.0%** of the respondents feel that they do not receive sufficient feedback regarding the evaluations they have made for the F.R.S.-FNRS and **51.3%** say they have never received any information regarding the final funding decisions.
- **54.4%** of the respondents think that "reviewer fatigue" applies to some extent to them (regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic), **12.4%** feel that it applies to them a lot and **33.2%** say it does not apply at all.
- **45.7%** of the female respondents state that they have less time than usual to review funding applications because of the Covid-19 pandemic, against **34.0%** of the male respondents.
- The F.R.S.-FNRS is committed to taking the results of this survey into account, and the data regarding the two main calls for proposals organized every year will now be published online. They can be found [here](#).

### 3. FACTS AND FIGURES

The response rate of **41.3%** is considered high enough for the answers collected to be considered representative of the surveyed population. However, we cannot rule out that the remote experts most discontent with our processes – or most satisfied – might be more numerous among the experts who did not respond, which could skew the results. Keeping these potential biases and the high number of responses in mind, it is probable that those biases are minimal. Therefore, the results are analysed and considered representative of the population.

The majority of experts who took the survey are men. To the question “What is your gender?”, **72.2%** of them replied “Male”, **27.6%** chose “Female” and **0.2%** “Other” (Figure 1).

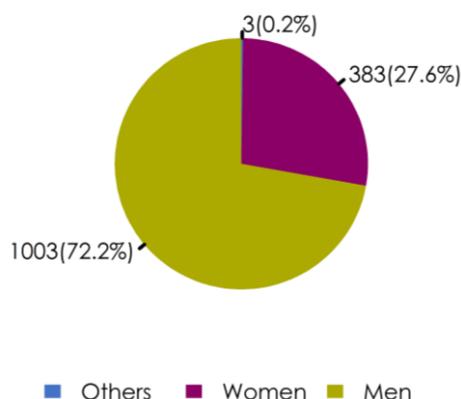


Figure 1. Answers to the question “What is your gender?” (n=1389)

Among the respondents, **8.5%** have been reviewing applications for less than a year, **8.6%** for 1 to 2 years, **29.8%** for 3 to 5 years, **23.6%** for 6 to 10 years and **29.5%** for more than 10 years (Figure 2). Overall, more than half (**53.1%**) of the experts have more than 5 years of experience in funding application evaluation (for the F.R.S.-FNRS or another agency).

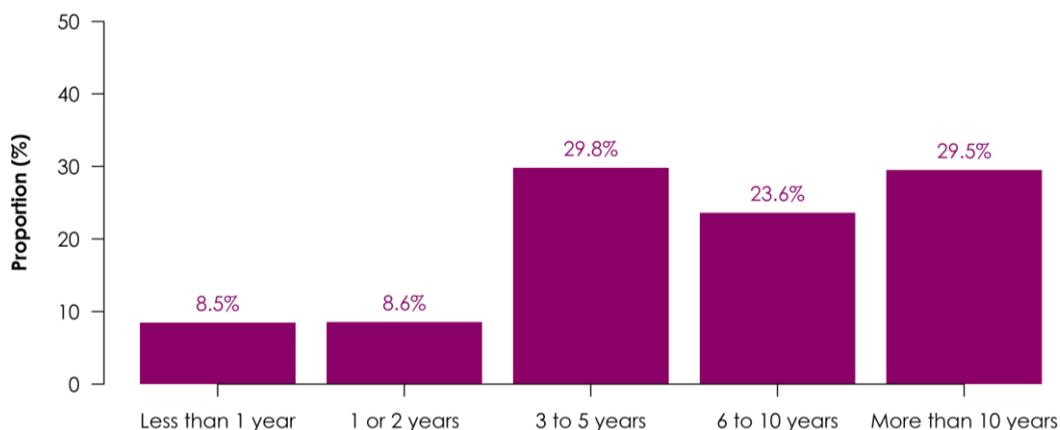


Figure 2. Answers to the question “How many years have you been reviewing funding proposals (for the F.R.S.-FNRS or another funding agency)?” (n=1389)

**34.1%** of the respondents listed Exact and Natural Sciences (ENS) as their main scientific domain, **35.6%** Human and Social Sciences (HSS), **27.1%** Life and Health Sciences (HLS) and **3.2%** are in at least two of these fields (Figure 3). The proportion of female experts is higher in HSS (40.6%) and in HLS (32.2%) than in ENS (11.6%) and among interdisciplinary experts (3.2%) (Figure 4).

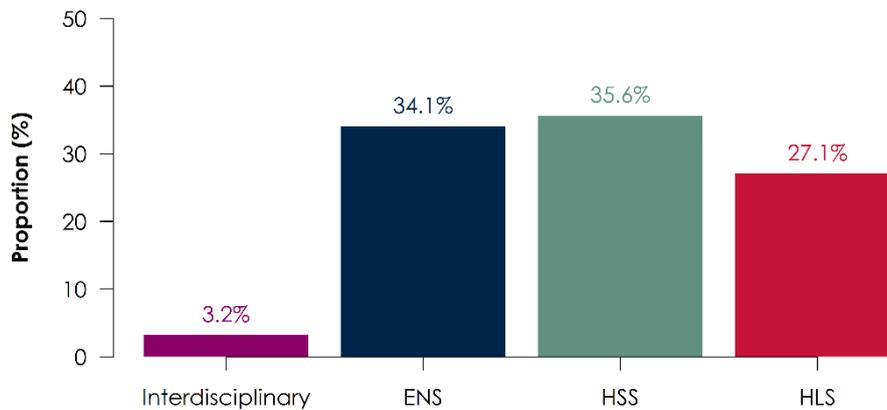


Figure 3. Answers to the question “What is your main scientific domain?” (n=1389)

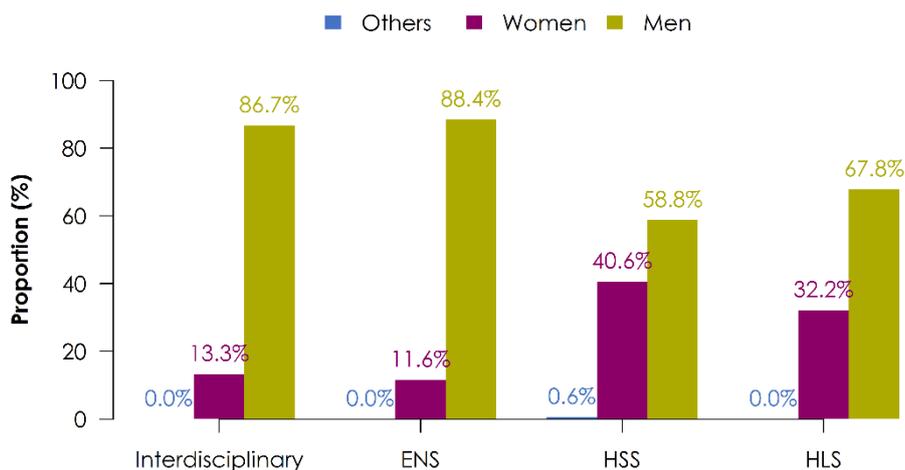


Figure 4. Answers to the question “What is your main scientific domain?”, by gender (n=1389)

The respondents emerge from **47** different countries, mainly European. Below is a list of respondents by country of main institution (Table 1, Figure 5, Figure 6).

#	Country (main institution)	Number of respondents	%
1	France	504	36.3%
2	United States	126	9.1%
3	Italy	117	8.4%
4	United Kingdom	115	8.3%
5	Spain	69	5.0%
6	Canada	62	4.5%
7	Germany	62	4.5%
8	Switzerland	45	3.2%
9	Netherlands	39	2.8%
10	Belgium	36	2.6%
11	Australia	29	2.1%
12	Sweden	25	1.8%
13	Portugal	22	1.6%
14	Greece	19	1.4%
15	Japan	11	0.8%
16	Denmark	10	0.7%
17	Israel	10	0.7%
18	Poland	10	0.7%
19	Finland	8	0.6%
20	Austria	7	0.5%
21	Other countries	63	4.5%

Table 1. Answers to the question "In which country is your main institution located?" (n=1389)

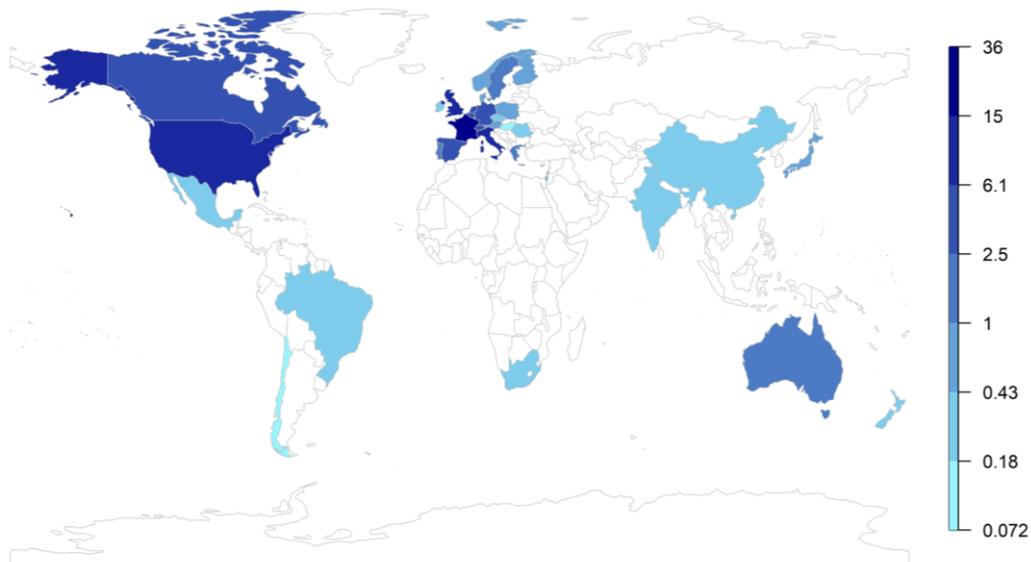


Figure 5. Countries where the home institution of the respondents is located. The intensity of the colours indicates the proportion (as a proportion of total) of experts whose main institution is located in the country in question (logarithmic scale). The countries in white are the ones where no expert located their main institution.

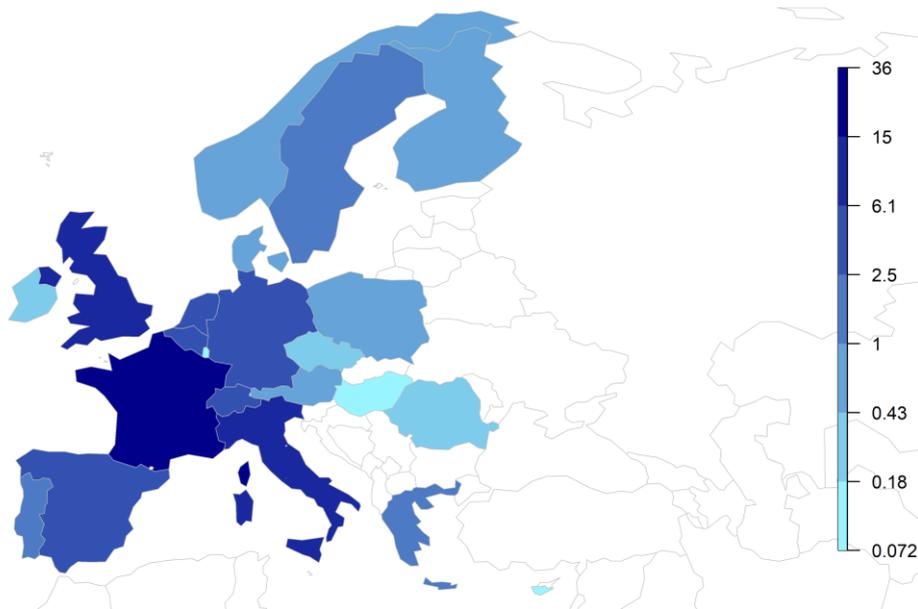


Figure 6. European countries where the home institution of the respondents is located (n=1389). The intensity of the colour of the countries indicates the proportion (as a proportion of total) of experts whose main institution is located in the country in question (logarithmic scale). The countries in white are the ones where no expert located their main institution.

Three quarters (**75.2%**) of the respondents feel that they receive an adequate number of invitations to review funding proposals from the Fund; **24.4%** wish they would receive more invitations (Figure 7). Only **0.4%** of the respondents feel that they receive too many proposals from the F.R.S.-FNRS.

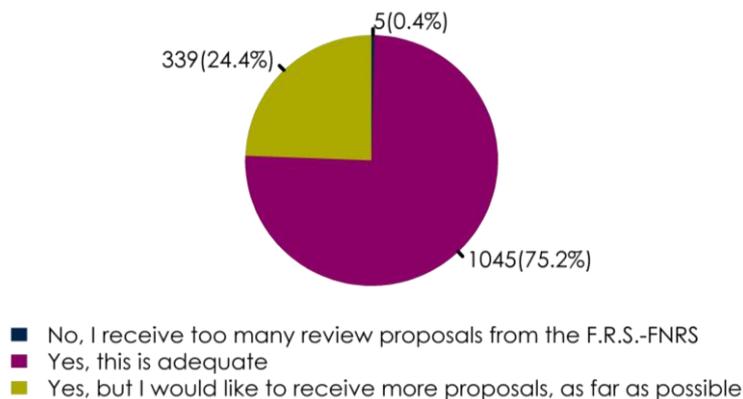


Figure 7. Answers to the question "Are you satisfied with the number of proposals to review that you receive from the F.R.S.-FNRS during each call for proposals?" (n=1389)

Most of the experts (**61.9%**) would like to receive **1 to 2 invitations** to review proposals per call (usually, the Fund organises two calls per year; Figure 8), and **28.1%** wish they would receive **3 to 5** invitations. Only **11** respondents (**0.8%**) no longer want to receive proposals to review funding applications from the Fund.

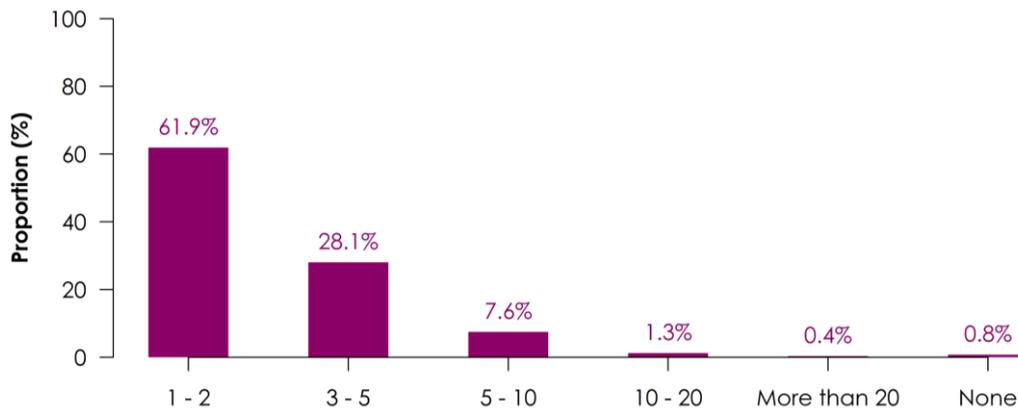


Figure 8. Answers to the question “How many review proposals would you like to receive from the F.R.S.-FNRS during each call? (two calls are usually organized each year, one in March/April and one in August/September)” (n=1389). The item “None” applies to the answer “I do not wish to review any other funding proposal for the F.R.S.-FNRS in the future”.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents (**78.8%**) feels that the funding proposals they have reviewed for the F.R.S.-FNRS are of similar quality to those they review for other funding agencies worldwide. **13.0%** of them find the proposals of the F.R.S.-FNRS to be of higher quality, while a mere **2.9%** feel that they are of lower quality (Figure 9). **2.5%** of the respondents have never reviewed research proposals for other agencies and **2.8%** have no opinion on the matter.

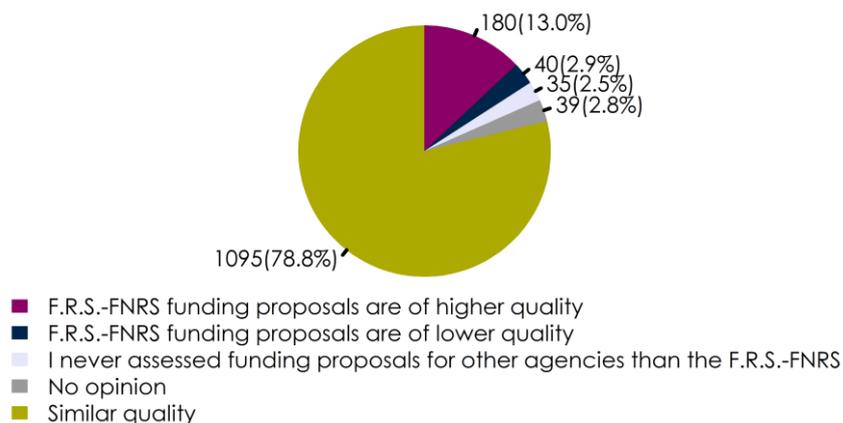


Figure 9. Answers to the question “What is the quality of the funding proposals you had to review for the F.R.S.-FNRS, as compared to what you know of the quality of funding proposals in general?” (n=1389)

The respondents rate their level of satisfaction with the F.R.S.-FNRS reviewing process a **17.3** points out of 20 ( $\pm 2.2$  points). The distribution of marks given by the respondents is presented below (Figure 10). It appears that **19.3%** of the respondents have given a 20 out of 20, while **1.8%** of them gave a mark of 10 points or less.

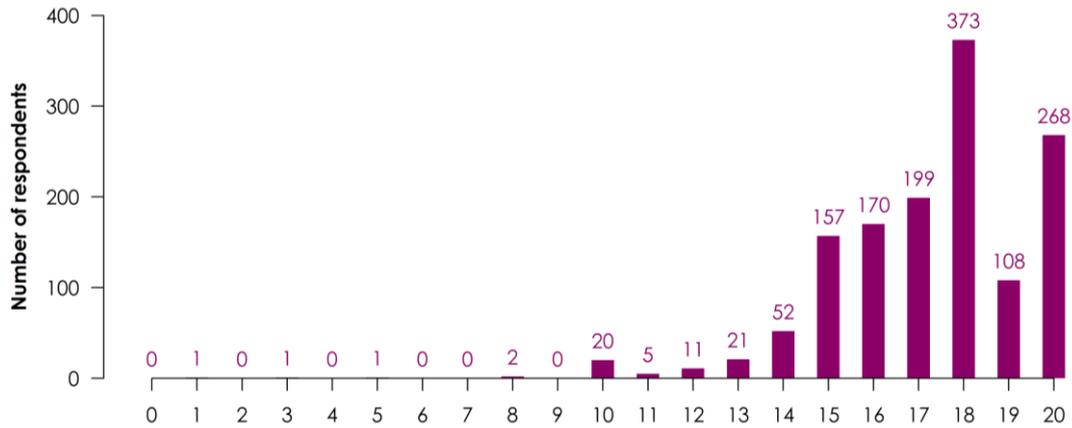


Figure 10. Answers to the question “What is your overall level of satisfaction with the F.R.S.-FNRS reviewing process?” (from 0 to 20, 0 = Not at all satisfied, 20 = Completely satisfied) (n=1389)

Regarding the evaluation criteria in force at the F.R.S.-FNRS, we wanted to know to what extent respondents found them suitable for reviewing research proposals in general (i.e. for all funding instruments), projects involving interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research, or innovative or risky research. **83.1%** of the respondents consider them to be suitable for reviewing all funding instruments, **70.2%** for evaluating innovative or risky research and **73.9%** for evaluating interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research. By contrast, a very low number of experts find them not (at all) suitable (**1.0%** for reviewing all funding instruments, **3.2%** for reviewing innovative or risky research and **2.7%** for reviewing interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research) (Figure 11). Additionally, **15.9%** of the experts responded that they either did not know or that the question was not applicable for all funding instruments, vs. **26.6%** for innovative or risky research and **23.5%** for interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research.

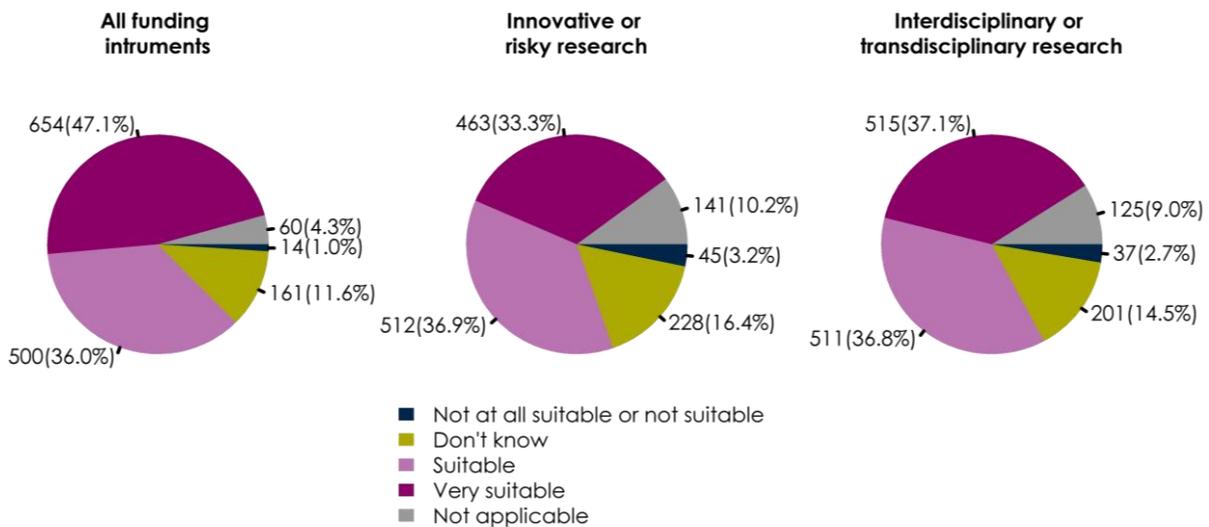


Figure 11. Answers to the question “To what extent do you consider that the evaluation criteria in force at the F.R.S.-FNRS are adapted?” for all funding instruments (left), for innovative or risky research (middle) and for interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research (right) (n=1389)

Almost all (**93.4%**) of the respondents would recommend other potential experts to apply in order to become F.R.S.-FNRS experts themselves (Figure 12).

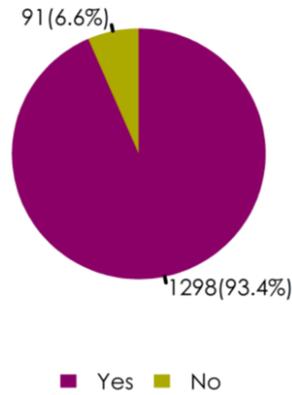


Figure 12. Answers to the question "Would you recommend to other potential experts to apply to the F.R.S.-FNRS to become an expert?" (n=1389)

The majority (**76.0%**) of the experts consider the remuneration offered by the F.R.S.-FNRS for the remote evaluation of applications sufficient. As a matter of fact, **6.8%** of them feel like it is unnecessary. By contrast, **17.2%** of them consider the remuneration offered to be insufficient (Figure 13).

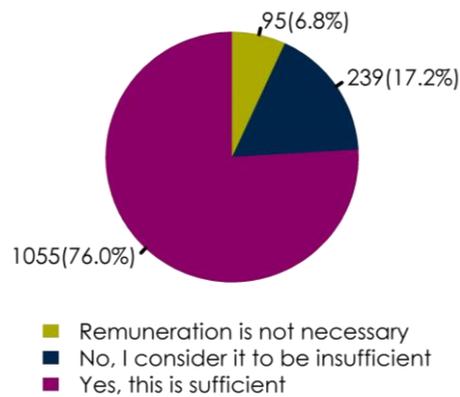


Figure 13. Answers to the question "Are you satisfied with the level of remuneration that the F.R.S.-FNRS offers to remote reviewers?" (n=1389)

**36.8%** of the respondents feel that the remuneration offered by other funding agencies for reviewing activities are similar, **6.2%** think that they are inferior, while **21.4%** state that they are superior (Figure 14). **20.6%** do not know and according to **15.0%** of the respondents, other agencies do not offer remunerations for remote evaluation.

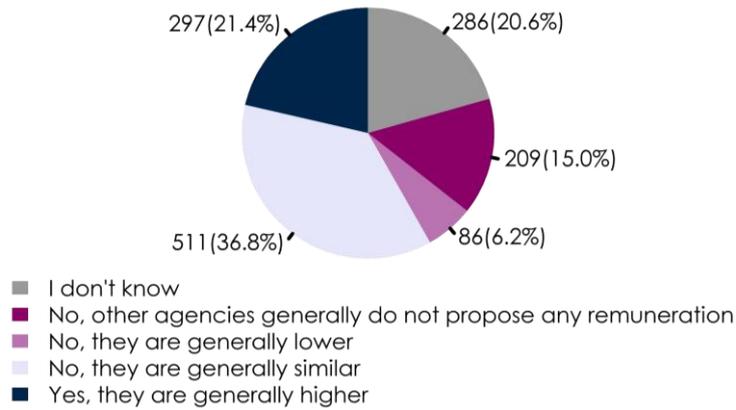


Figure 14. Answers to the question "To your knowledge, do other funding agencies give higher remunerations to their remote reviewers than the F.R.S.-FNRS does?" (n=1389)

**94.7%** of the respondents consider that they have all the necessary information (e.g. regarding funding schemes) to perform their review(s) (Figure 15).

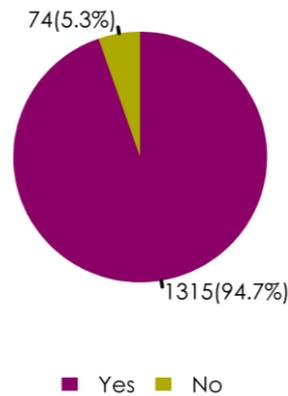


Figure 15. Answers to the question "When you perform reviews for the F.R.S.-FNRS, do you consider to have all the necessary information available (regarding funding schemes for example) to perform your evaluations?" (n=1389)

**90.6%** of the respondents report that they are satisfied by the online platform (e-space), among whom **35.5%** are completely satisfied (Figure 16). Only **1.2%** state that they are not satisfied. It is worth noting that none of them declared not being satisfied at all with the platform.

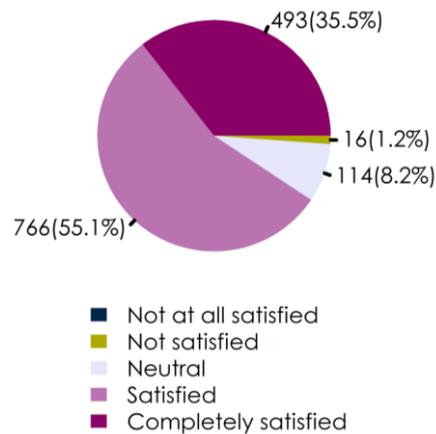


Figure 16. Answers to the question "What is your general level of satisfaction with the online platform (e-space)? Registration on the platform, navigation on the platform, etc.?" (n=1389)

**68.8%** of the respondents are satisfied with the support provided by the staff of the F.R.S.-FNRS, including **42.8%** who are completely satisfied (Figure 17). **25.8%** have no opinion on the matter and no expert has reported not being satisfied (at all) with the support of the experts by the F.R.S.-FNRS staff.

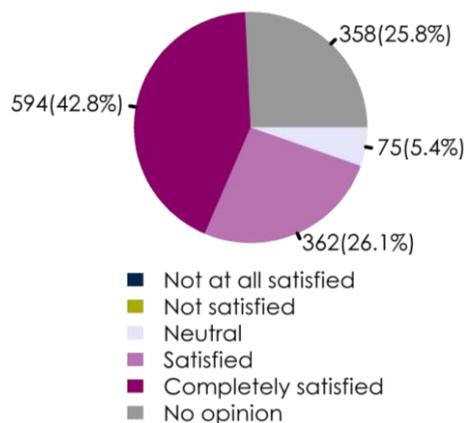


Figure 17. Answers to the question "What is your general level of satisfaction with the support of the experts by the staff of the F.R.S.-FNRS? (Processing time for questions asked, quality of response provided, etc)" (n=1389)

**60.0%** of the respondents consider that they do not receive enough feedback regarding the reviews they performed for the F.R.S.-FNRS (Figure 18), and **51.3%** state they have never received any information concerning the final funding decisions (Figure 19). This can partly be explained by the fact that the e-mails regarding the final funding decisions of the reviewed proposals in the framework of the Credits and Projects Call 2020 were sent to the experts in January 2021, that is, after the survey had already been launched. Among those who reported not receiving enough feedback regarding the reviews they performed for the Fund or those who stated they did not receive the information regarding the final funding decisions, **32.8%** wish they would receive more information about the success rate, **48.7%** regarding the final funding decisions (grant or rejection) on the proposals they reviewed, and **35.5%** wish to receive the final evaluation report delivered by the Scientific Commission (Figure 20).

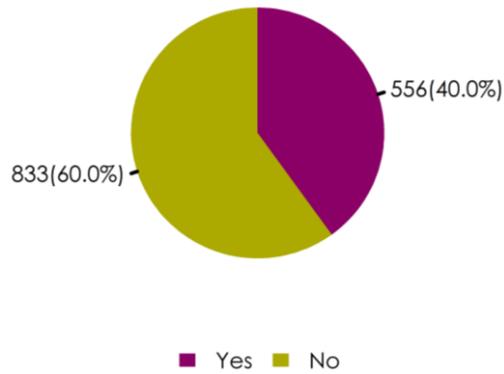


Figure 18. Answers to the question "The F.R.S.-FNRS communicates to each remote expert the final decisions on granting proposals. Do you consider that the feedback you have received regarding your reviews for the F.R.S.-FNRS is sufficient?" (n=1389)

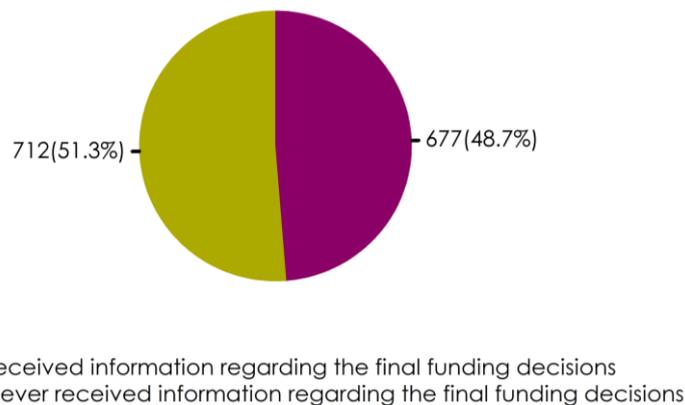


Figure 19. Proportion of respondents who say they have (or have not) received information about the final funding decisions (n=1389)

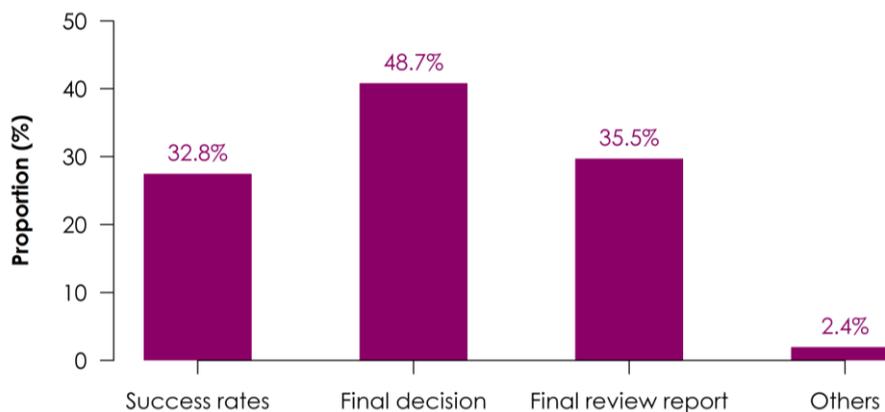


Figure 20. Information that the respondents would like to receive regarding the reviews they have performed for the F.R.S.-FNRS (n=833)

**72.0%** of the respondents state that they do not receive more feedback regarding the evaluations they perform for other funding agencies, while **14.3%** feel that they receive more feedback (Figure 21).

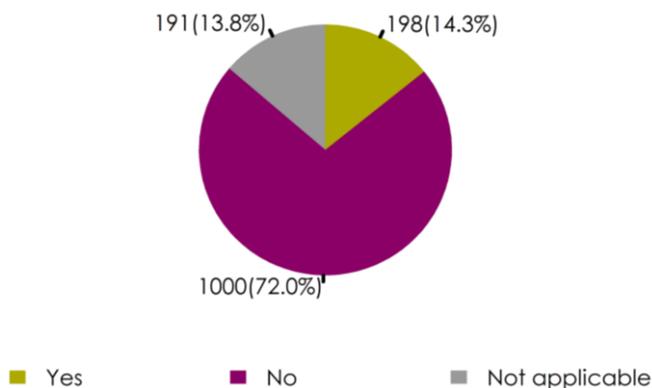


Figure 21. Answers to the question "In general, do you get more feedback about the reviews you do for other funding agencies?" (n=1389)

The vast majority of respondents find the grading system in force at the F.R.S.-FNRS to be adequate (**95.6%**), while **4.4%** say they need more information about it (Figure 22).

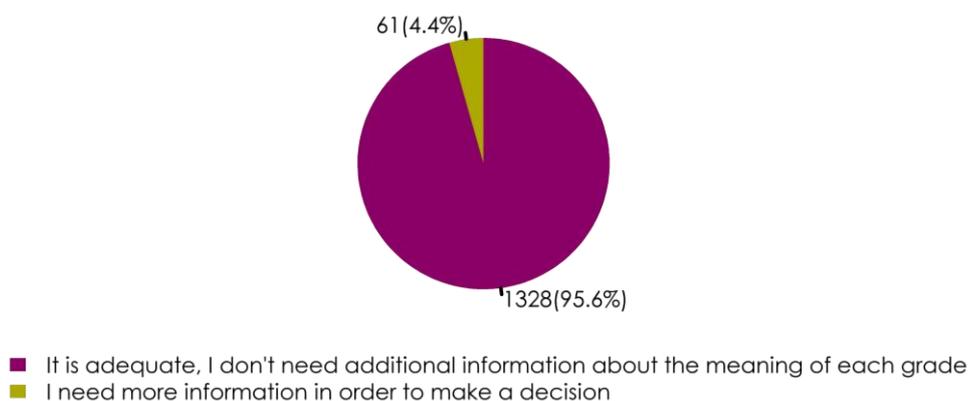


Figure 22. Answers to the question "What is your opinion regarding the F.R.S.-FNRS grading system? (A+: Outstanding; A: Excellent; A-: Very good; B+: Good; B: Average; B-: Weak; C: Insufficient)" (n=1389)

The respondents spend on average **6.0 hours** ( $\pm 3.8$  hours) performing a remote review for the Fund (Figure 23). The median time dedicated was 5 hours.

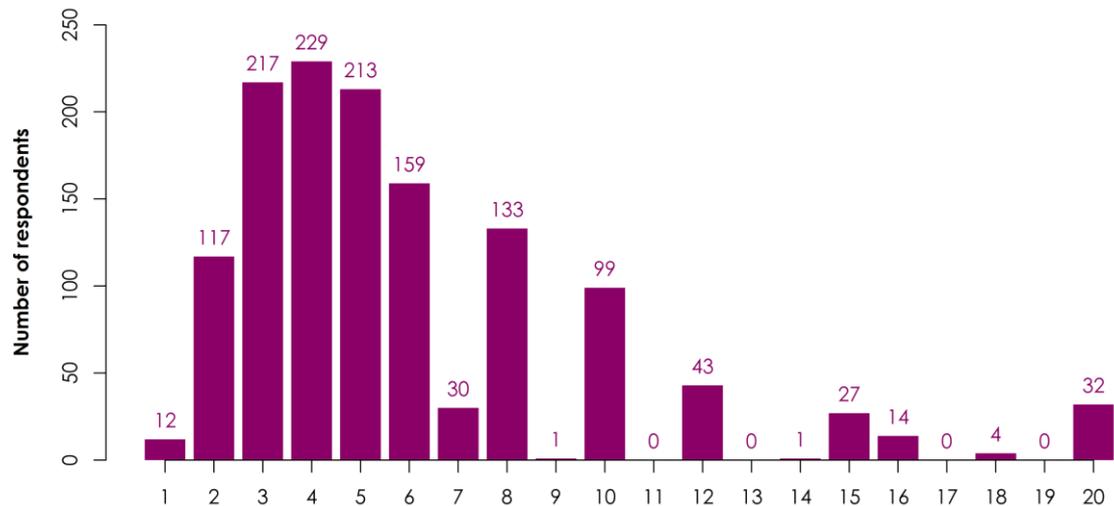


Figure 23. Answers to the question "How much time (in hours) does it take you in average to perform the review of one F.R.S.-FNRS funding proposal?" ( $n=1389$ ). 58 answers (4,2%) were not taken into account because they were considered to be outliers or wrongly encoded data.

Whatever their main domain is, experts spend on average the same amount of time reviewing funding proposals for the Fund (Figure 24). Respondents whose main domain is ENS spend on average 6.3 hours ( $\pm 3.9$  hours), HSS experts 5.8 hours ( $\pm 3.8$  hours), HLS experts 5.8 hours ( $\pm 3.9$  hours), and interdisciplinary experts 5.7 hours ( $\pm 3.4$  hours). Women and men spend on average a similar amount of time performing funding proposal reviews for the Fund ( $6.0 \pm 3.9$  hours for women and  $6.0 \pm 3.8$  hours for men) (Figure 24).

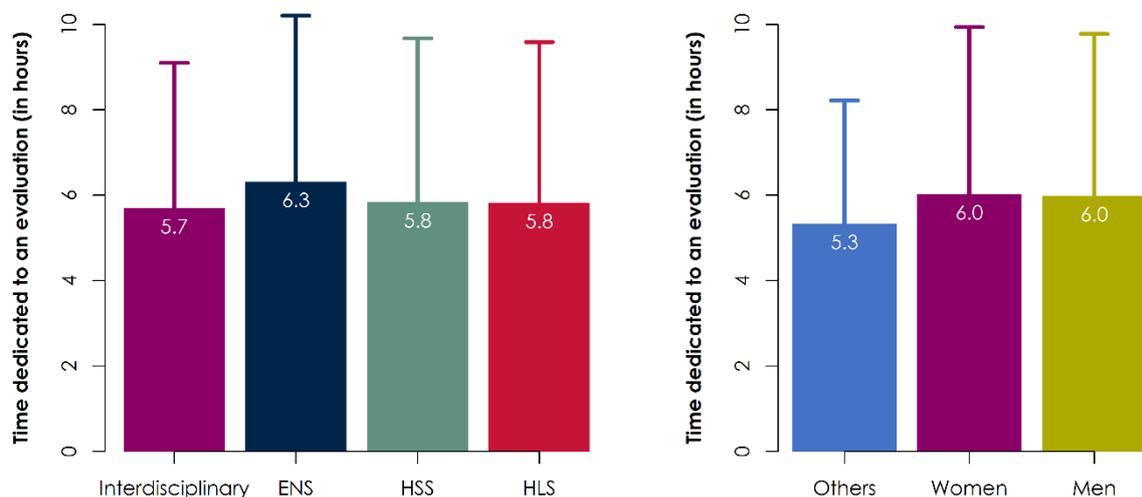


Figure 24. Answers to the question "How much time (in hours) does it take you on average to perform the review of one F.R.S.-FNRS funding proposal?" (error bars: standard deviation), by main research domain (left,  $n=1389$ ) and by gender (right  $n=1389$ ). 58 answers (4,2%) were not taken into account because they were considered outliers or wrongly encoded data.

As times goes by, 'peer review fatigue'<sup>1</sup> starts growing, and researchers as a whole report having less and less time to perform evaluations. This "phenomenon" is well-known in the field of scientific policy and is linked to the growing difficulties funding agencies encounter when it comes to recruiting reviewers. 'Reviewer fatigue' arises when experts in a field are repeatedly asked to review research, both in their own country, and internationally. This adds to the list of 'services to research' that is demanded of researchers, which also includes peer review of publications, editorial positions, and supervision. This can lead to a decrease in the quality of evaluations performed (i.e. for lack of time, evaluations can be botched, shorter or less exhaustive) and usually means researchers are busier. Concerned about this issue, we asked the F.R.S.-FNRS remote experts questions in order to assess to what extent they are affected by this issue.

Among the experts surveyed who performed at least one remote review for the Fund in the framework of the previous two main calls for proposals, **54.4%** can somewhat relate to 'reviewer fatigue' (regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic), **12.4%** can strongly relate and **33.2%** cannot relate at all (Figure 25). The gender of the respondent (Figure 26) and the number of years since they started reviewing funding proposals (for the F.R.S.-FNRS or another funding agency) (Figure 27) do not seem to influence whether an expert can more or less relate to 'reviewer fatigue'.

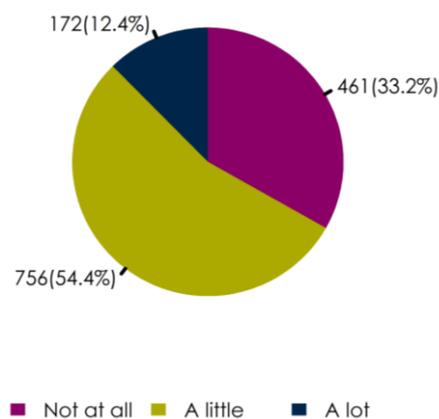


Figure 25. Answers to the question "To what extent do you think that 'reviewer fatigue' applies to you (independently of the Covid-19 pandemic)?" (n=1389)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.scienceeurope.org/media/3twixim0/se-position-statement-research-assessment-processes.pdf> ; consulted on January 21, 2021 at 11:22 a.m.

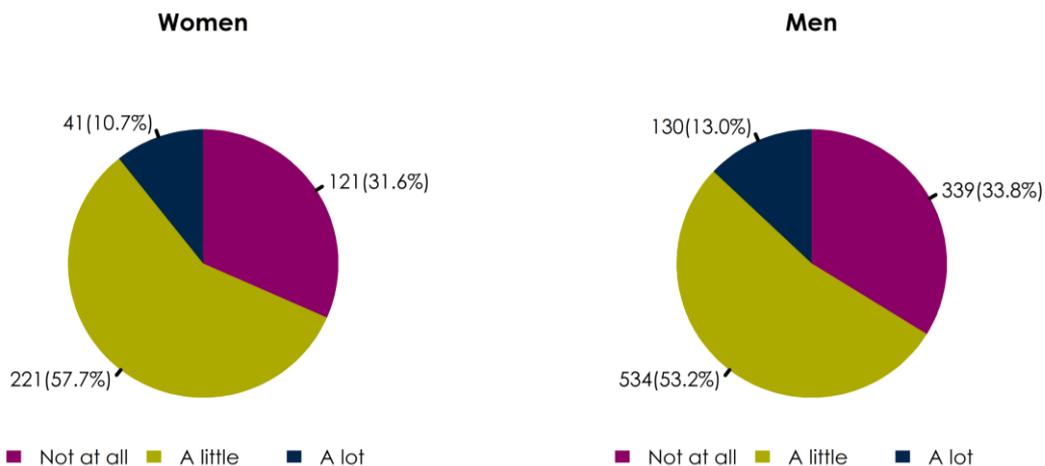


Figure 26. Answers to the question “To what extent do you think that 'reviewer fatigue' applies to you (independently of the Covid-19 pandemic)?”, by gender (n=1386)

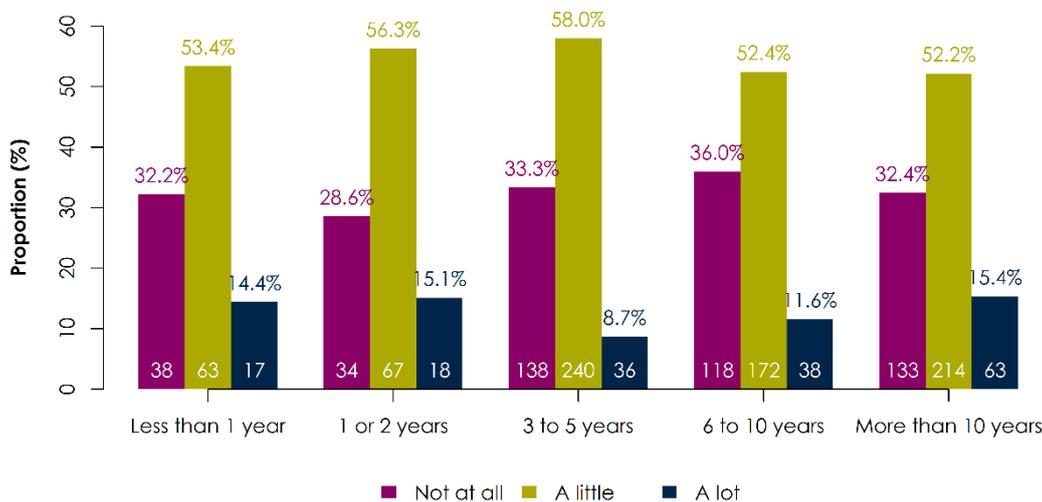


Figure 27. Answers to the question “To what extent do you think that 'reviewer fatigue' applies to you (independently of the Covid-19 pandemic)?” by number of years the respondents have been reviewing proposals (for the F.R.S.-FNRS or another funding agency) (n=1389)

15.6% of respondents state the Covid-19 pandemic allowed them to have more time than usual to review funding proposals, 47.2% say they have as much time and 37.3% have less time (6.8% of them said they have a lot less time) (Figure 28).

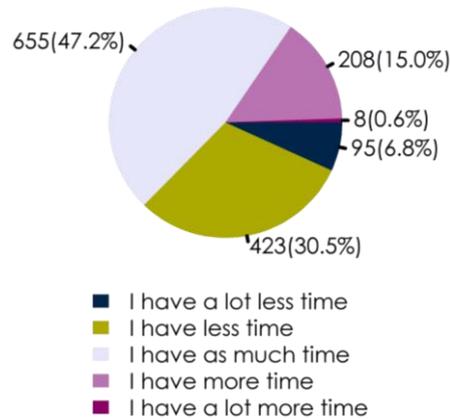


Figure 28. Answers to the question "How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the time you usually have available to perform funding proposal reviews?" (n=1389)

The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have impacted women more than men in terms of time they usually have to review funding proposals. Indeed, **45.7%** of female respondents have less time (of whom 10.7% said they have a lot less time) than usual to review funding proposals because of the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to **34.0%** of male respondents (of whom 5.3% stated they have a lot less time) (Figure 29).

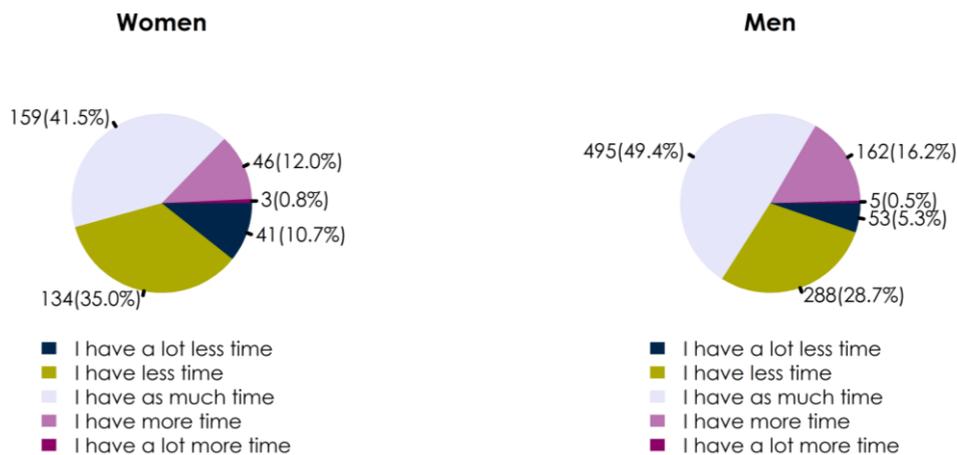


Figure 29. Answers to the question "How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the time you usually have available to perform funding proposal reviews?", by gender (n=1386)

Comparing answers by respondents' main research domain, the Covid-19 pandemic appears to have had a greater impact for HSS experts than for ENS or HLS experts in terms of the time they typically had available to perform funding proposal reviews. Indeed, **42.2%** of HSS experts reported having less time than usual to perform reviews of funding proposals due to the Covid-19 pandemic (of which 8.9% reported having a lot less time), compared to **34.0%** for ENS experts (of which 4.7% reported having a lot less time) and **34.3%** for HLS experts (of which 6.9% reported having a lot less time) (Figure 30). It is important to note that effects of gender may merge with effects of domain. For example, there is a higher proportion of women in HSS. This makes it difficult to determine whether the effects observed have more to do with domain or gender.

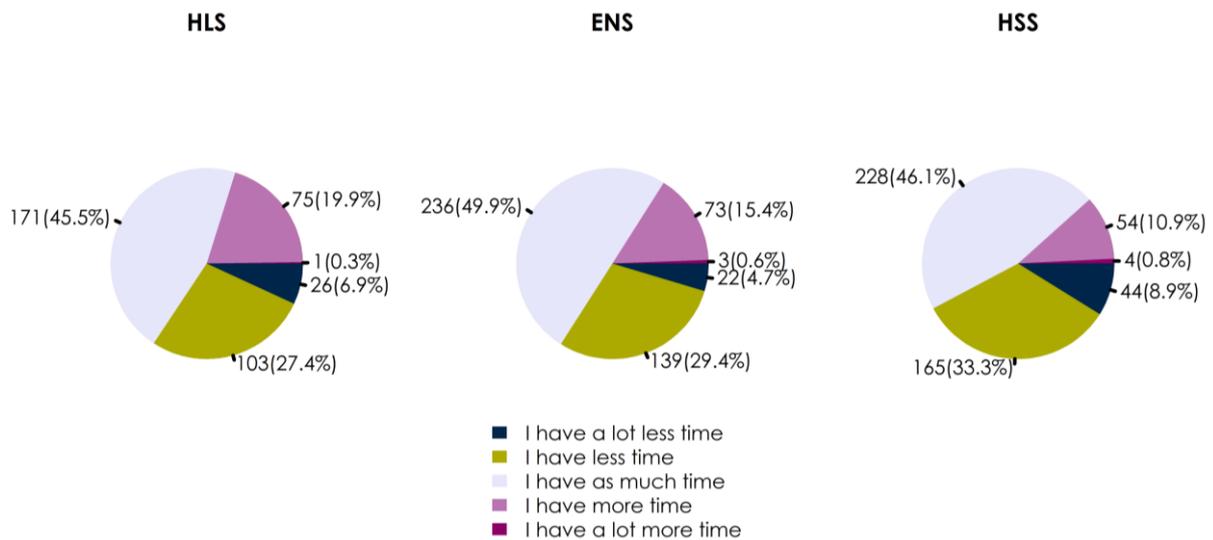


Figure 30. Answers to the question "How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the time you usually have available to perform funding proposal reviews?", by main research domain (n=1344)

It is worth noting that the interpretation of the answers to the questions about average time dedicated to performing a funding proposal review for the Fund and about "reviewer fatigue" might be partially biased by the sample. Our analysis is based on answers given by experts who agreed to spend time completing our survey. For this reason, we can assume that the experts who did not reply to our survey are less likely to devote time to performing a funding proposal review for the Fund and/or feel more concerned by "reviewer fatigue".

Finally, respondents were asked to make one or several free-form comments if they wished to do so. The analysis of these comments is not easily quantifiable and cannot be represented in the form of graphs. Many of them are positive and congratulate the procedure. Some ask questions about it. Others make suggestions for improvement, which in some cases are relevant to the Fund. Namely, that it would be interesting to **provide the experts with more data** on the calls, as many of them have asked for it, for example on the distribution of the scores awarded in previous calls and the success rates. In addition, we have been systematically communicating the results of funding decisions (grant or rejection) for a few calls, but it seems **that a certain number of experts do not receive this information**, possibly because of spam filters and automatic mailings (see [Figure 18](#) and [Figure 19](#)). Many also express a desire for **more feedback on the evaluation of proposals they have been asked to perform for the Fund**.

## 4. CREDITS - CONTACT

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The Board of Trustees of the FNRS of April 27, 2021 took note of these analyzes.

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