



MINISTERUL EDUCAȚIEI ȘI CERCETĂRII

*UE fiscați*

**THE NATIONAL PLAN FOR RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND  
INNOVATION 2015-2020, PNIII**

**Exploratory Research Projects  
2020 Call for proposals**

**Guide for Experts**

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## 1. General Information

This guideline is intended to support experts in the assessment of PCE (Proiecte de Cercetare Exploratorie - Exploratory Research Projects) proposals submitted in response to the call for proposals within the PN-III-ID-PCE-2020-2 program.

The major goal of this call is to support and promote high-quality fundamental, interdisciplinary and/or exploratory research in Romania. The Call is addressed to internationally -recognized researchers with proven scientific achievements in their fields.

- ✓ The maximum funding granted for a project, with a maximum duration of 36 months, is 1.200.000 lei (about 250 K EUR).
- ✓ The budget allocated to this call for proposals, for the entire implementation period, is 90.000.000 lei (about 18,6 mil EUR).
- ✓ The euro exchange rate RON is EUR 1=RON 4,83 lei).

The selection of the project proposals for funding is based strictly on their merits, assessed through peer review evaluation performed by experts in the field.

## 2. Expert evaluators

The expert evaluators are independent experts internationally recognized who meet the selection criteria according to the call documents.

The experts perform the work in a personal capacity and must not represent any organization.

### 2.1 Contractual agreement

The relationship between the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) and the expert evaluators is defined by a contractual agreement written and signed by both parties. By signing this agreement, the expert evaluators accept the conditions regarding the confidentiality, the conflict of interest, and the use of personal data by UEFISCDI, according to the provisions of the Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR) and to the Law 190/2018 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data. More details are available at: <https://uefiscdi.ro/protectia-datelor-cu-caracter-personal>. UEFISCDI cannot allocate proposals to an expert who has not been officially appointed (i.e. the expert has signed the contractual agreement and, in doing so, has agreed to the terms laid down in it, including, in particular, confidentiality and conflict of interest aspects).

The evaluators will be remunerated for their activities after the finalization of the evaluation process.

**Omission to upload the „Contractual Agreement” and its appendixes, in due time, to the dedicated section of the online evaluation platform, will lead to non-payment of the activity as expert evaluator/rapporteur!**

Each expert evaluator will receive an username and an individual password, via email, to securely access the online evaluation platform at [www.uefiscdi-direct.ro](http://www.uefiscdi-direct.ro). A guideline for using the evaluation platform will be made available.

### 2.2 Task of expert evaluators

The expert evaluators are required to:

- read the “Call documents” and the “Guide for Experts”;
- sign the “Contractual Agreement” with all the appendixes and upload them to the evaluation platform (dedicated section);
- read and evaluate the assigned project proposals;

- fill out and submit the evaluation form for each assigned project proposal, providing summative comments, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses and scores for each criterion;
- read the rebuttal (if any);
- participate in consensus discussions regarding all assigned project proposals, by using the "forum" type interface available on the online evaluation platform;
- elaborate the consensus report (rapporteurs only) based on the individual evaluations, the rebuttal (if any) and the discussions with the other evaluators;
- inform UEFISCDI about a disqualifying or a potential conflict of interest;
- not disclose the proposals assigned to third parties.

### **2.3 Conflict of Interest**

Experts must declare that they can carry out the evaluation of a proposal with total confidence, impartiality and competence. They must not find themselves in situations where their impartiality might be questioned, or that could raise suspicion on their recommendations being affected by elements that lie outside the scope of the evaluation.

Conflicts of interest can be “disqualifying” or “potential”.

A disqualifying conflict of interest exists if an expert:

- was involved in the preparation of the project proposal;
- stands to benefit directly should the proposal be accepted;
- has a close family relationship with the applicant;
- works in the same institution as the applicant or was employed by applicant organization within the previous 3 years;
- is involved in a contract or research collaboration with the applicant or had been so in the previous 3 years;
- has co-authored a scientific publication with the applicant in the last 3 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.

When a potential conflict of interest is reported by an expert or brought to the attention of UEFISCDI by other means, UEFISCDI will analyse the circumstances and decide on a case by case basis whether the conflict is real. In the latter case, the expert will be excluded from the evaluation of the respective proposal.

The expert evaluators must notify in written UEFISCDI, at any moment during the evaluation process, if they become aware that either one of these conditions is not satisfied or that they are in conflict of interest. If any situation of a potential conflict of interest or misconduct is brought to UEFISCDI attention, the agency will take all necessary measures to replace the evaluator and terminate the contractual agreement. In such cases, the evaluators will not be paid for the performed activity.

## **3. Evaluation process**

### **3.1 Expert roles**

During the evaluation different roles are assigned to the experts:

**Experts (evaluators)** are internationally - recognized researchers who independently assess a proposal and prepare an Individual Evaluation Report (IER). At least 50% of the experts appointed to each proposal – with the exception of those with specific Romanian topics – should have foreign

institutional affiliation. Each proposal will be evaluated by 3 independent experts, according to Annex 3 of the Call Document. If consensus cannot be reached, a fourth expert will be invited to assess the same proposal. Experts do not discuss, at any stage, any proposal, except with the other two (or three) experts appointed to the same proposal.

**Rapporteurs** are randomly selected among the three experts assigned to the same proposal and they will have the additional tasks to:

- initiate discussions with the other experts involved in the assessment of the proposal;
- mitigate potential conflicting views between experts, to reach a consensus;
- draft the Consensus Report (CR);
- propose scores for each evaluation criterion in line with the comments, after all experts agree to the final form of the CR;
- submit the CR.

**Scientific officers** are representatives of the CNCS (National Scientific Research Council) whose role is to monitor the evaluation process, ensure that all steps and procedures are strictly followed, check the quality of the submitted IERs and CRs and the consistency between comments and scores. When necessary, they may contact the Experts to ask for clarifications or to pinpoint potential conflicting statements. All such communication will be carried out exclusively in the online evaluation platform. Under no circumstances the Scientific officers will be involved in the evaluation process, interfere with the experts opinions or influence their decisions.

### **3.2. General principles of evaluation (both at individual and consensus stage)**

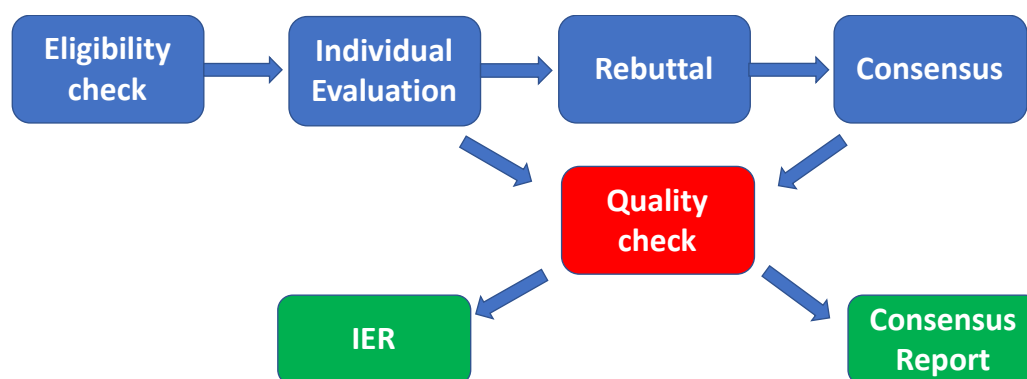
- ✓ The expert must assess the proposals by themselves – do not delegate this task to anybody else;
- ✓ The expert should evaluate the proposal as it is, not as it could be or as the expert would like it to be and without giving recommendations;
- ✓ Comments should be delivered as a bullet point list of strengths (+) and weaknesses (-). General comments or comments that describe parts of the proposal are not recommended. Each argument is put under the right criterion and comments are confined only to the criterion concerned;
- ✓ All comments should be clear statements, based on facts presented in the proposal; opinions of the experts should not appear as comments (“*I think that*”, “*My impression is*”, “*It seems that*”, “*The applicant should*”, “*It may be better*”, etc.);
- ✓ All facts that are considered relevant to the current proposal should be considered, regardless of the section of the proposal where these are to be found;
- ✓ Any comment referring to inexistent or irrelevant criteria is considered a procedural mistake which may lead to a successful redress and justify a re-evaluation of the proposal. Never penalize a proposal based on information that the applicant was not expected to provide.
- ✓ A weakness should be addressed only once so that double penalization does not occur. (*E.g. the methodology may be weak, which may reflect in evaluating both criteria 2.1 and 2.2. However, the expert must decide where to address the criticism and penalize the proposal only once. A too small number of citations may be referring to “research results” (I.1) and “visibility and prestige” (I.2); however, they should be addressed only in criterion I.1;*)
- ✓ The IER must be carefully checked for conflicting statements, especially when these may pop

up under different criteria. (E.g. a weakness could be that the proposal has not sufficient novelty (C2) while a strength would be that the proposed methodology is novel (C4); these statements must be harmonized);

- ✓ The expert must treat all proposals equally and evaluate them impartially on their merits. Comments that hint or refer to gender, institutions, nationality, and age are strictly forbidden;
- ✓ Scores must match the comments (and not vice versa) and should reflect the overall assessment of a criterion. (E.g. it is not correct to have a score of 4.2 for a criterion where only positive comments are listed, without any shortcoming; equally wrong is to find a major weakness, as, e.g. The methodology does not support the proposed solution and scoring it with 4.4);
- ✓ Always keep in mind that you are evaluating a project proposal and not a research paper.

A personal touch: Last, but not least, **evaluate the proposal as you would like it to be evaluated if it were yours: be objective, dispassionate, unbiased, fair and polite.**

### 3.3 Proposal evaluation stages:



**3.3.1. Eligibility Check.** The project proposals are verified by the UEFISCDI personnel, to ensure that all eligibility criteria are fulfilled by both the host institution and the project leader. The list of eligible project proposals will be published on the UEFISCDI website – [www.uefiscdi.gov.ro](http://www.uefiscdi.gov.ro).

**3.3.2. Individual Evaluation.** Each eligible proposal is evaluated independently, online, by at least 3 expert, who will write the individual evaluation report (IER) in the online evaluation platform, providing a list of strengths and weaknesses for each evaluation criterion, according to the evaluation sheet (shown in the next chapter and also in Annex 3 - Evaluation Sheet of the PN-III-ID-PCE-2020-2 call ). To ensure a fair and homogeneous evaluation across a specific domain, the expert will have access to B2 and B3 sections of all proposals within that domain. When all IERs have been submitted, the experts will have access to each other's comments and may adjust their own remarks during discussions. **This is required especially when there are conflicting statements, which should be solved before the rebuttal** (see below). **Information found in pages that exceed the maximum limit for each section will be disregarded.**

**3.3.3. Rebuttal.** The UEFISCDI staff will send the IERs to applicants, with the invitation to submit a rebuttal on the comments expressed by the experts, within five working days. The rebuttal is limited

to 6.000 characters and will consist in counterarguments strictly regarding the criticism formulated by reviewers. The answer of the applicant is not compulsory, and its absence will not affect the next stage of the evaluation process. The experts should carefully read the responses of the applicant and assess whether, after checking with the proposal, they maintain their opinion. New facts or information that appear in the rebuttal but have not been described in the proposal shall be disregarded.

**3.3.4. The Consensus Report (CR).** After rebuttals are received from the applicants, the evaluation process enters the consensus phase, under the coordination of a Rapporteur, randomly selected among the three initial experts. The task of the rapporteur is to coordinate the consensus discussions through a “forum” type interface available on the online evaluation platform, taking into consideration the applicant’s rebuttal (if any). The Rapporteur will identify agreements as well as divergences in the IERs, will exchange views with the other experts and will propose comments acceptable to all the experts involved. Where the views are very different, the Rapporteur will engage the other two experts in a focused discussion on the major disagreements and will seek to clarify any difference of opinion and contradictions.

a) ***Once the consensus is reached***, the Rapporteur will write the CR, making sure the meaning of all comments is clear. In brief, the CR should not contain: i) any reference to the applicant name, gender, age, institutional affiliation or the other experts involved and their IERs; ii) copy-pasted parts of the proposal. Comments should be comprehensive, clear, refer to all sub-criteria and expressed in more than one sentence.

The CR must be approved by all experts before the Rapporteur will propose scores for each criterion, strictly in agreement with the final comments. Keep in mind that the CR gives only the final agreed view of the proposal. Everyone’s voice must be heard, and all must agree to the final scores and comments. **Both high and low scores must be supported by adequate comments. Ensuring consistency between comments and scores is of paramount importance to guarantee a good quality CR.** The other two experts will then express their opinion on the CR and scores by voting “agree” or “disagree” on the same platform. If all experts agree on the CR, the evaluation is considered complete and the CR containing the agreed scores, becomes the Final Report, which is transmitted to the applicant.

b) ***If the consensus is not reached***, each of the three experts will provide their own scores for each evaluation criterion based on the initial IERs. A fourth expert will then be invited to evaluate the project, write and submit the evaluation form, including comments and scores for each criterion. The four scores for each evaluation criterion will be averaged and the farthest score from this average will be eliminated. The remaining three scores corresponding to each criterion will be averaged again, resulting in the final score. The fourth expert will draft the final report by selecting consensually agreed, strong and weak points from each individual report, in accordance with the final score of the project.

### **3.3.5. Quality check of the reports (IER and CR)**

The evaluation process will be monitored during both individual and consensus phases, by Scientific officers appointed by CNCS (avoiding potential conflict of interests). They will assist the funding agency, UEFISCDI, with evaluation management and monitoring. The Scientific officers will not read

the proposals and will not assess the scientific content of the IERs or CRs. They will merely point out issues that decrease the quality of the report (see above), putative conflicts between perceived strengths and weaknesses (e.g. the same aspect of the proposal is identified both as a strength and as a weakness) or mismatches between comments and scores in the CR (e.g. a score of 4.5 in the absence of any identified weakness).

### **3.4 Evaluation Form**

Make your judgment against the official evaluation criteria and nothing else. Please deliver your comments as a clear bullet point list of strengths (+) and weaknesses (-).

#### **3.4.1 Principal investigator (50%)**

**The expert should assess to what extent the past achievements of the researcher (enumerated in sections B1, B2, B3.1 and B3.2) guarantee and/or contribute to the success of the current proposal.**

**Criterion 1.1. (40%)** see sections B1, B3.1 and B2

*To what extent **the excellence of the PI's research results** is demonstrated by the list of publications and patents? To what extent **the originality of the PI's results and their impact on the state of the art** are relevant for the present project?*

**Criterion 1.2. (10%)** see sections B1, B3.2 and B2

*To what extent the **PI's capacity to autonomously manage scientific activities** as a researcher and/or research group leader, as well as the **visibility and prestige in her/his international peer group** is demonstrated? To what extent the **PI's leadership abilities** are validated, what is the capacity to attract funding (academic grants or contracts with industry, where the project leader was the main investigator (PI) or project coordinator)? What is **his/her level of international recognition** (awards, invited talks or doctoral committees in prestigious universities)?*

**Specific guidance for Criterion 1:** The comments in this section must reflect the overall excellence of the PI, taking into account each sub-criterion (1.1 and 1.2). However: a) it is not compulsory that experts comment on every issue or b) to penalize the applicant because e.g. one category of arguments/information, is not satisfactorily addressed, if the overall quality of the PI is excellent. E.g. the track record, visibility and prestige are excellent, but awards or doctoral committees abroad may be missing; this does not necessarily mean that the score should be reduced, unless this is considered essential for the proposal implementation. While bibliometric measures of the excellence (e.g. the Hirsch index, number of papers or citations) are important, these should be used in a judicious manner. These should not be the main and only reason for penalizing the applicant. E.g. simply stating that "the applicant has an H-index = x" without any other explanation should not be considered sufficient for a reduced score; experts should evaluate the quality of PI against all achievements described in the proposal. In assessing the publication/patent record of an applicant (criterion 1.1), experts are advised to pay a special attention to the quality of PI's publications as a principal author.

#### **2. Proposal (50%)**

**The expert should assess to what extent the goals, proposed solution, motivation, novelty, methodology, implementation, described in sections C1 - C5, guarantee and/or contribute to the success of the current proposal.**

**Criterion 2.1 (30%)** see sections C1, C2, C3



To what extent the **overall solution** described in the proposal **is challenging and beyond current state-of-the-art** and which is its potential future impact? To what extent the following aspects: **(1)** significance and the difficulty of the problem being addressed; **(2)** the originality of the proposed solution and the appropriateness of the objectives; **(3)** the potential to advance knowledge in the field and to influence the direction of thought and activity are addressed in the proposal?

**Criterion 2.2 (20%)** see section C4

To what extent the **method, work plan, milestones and deliverables** as defined by the proposal are appropriate to reach the envisioned solution?

How well selected and related to the newest approaches in the field are the methods, design and investigation tools for the effectiveness of the work-plan within the proposed timescale and allocated resources?

Have potential risks areas been appropriately discussed, and have alternative approaches been mentioned?

**Criterion 2.3 – no individual score, no contribution to the other scores** see sections C5 and C4

Please assess the adequacy of the **proposed budget** and suggest possible corrections. Please comment on the match between the work-plan and the budget, as well as on the appropriateness of the proposed mobility (conferences, work-visits) and infrastructure acquisitions included in the budget.

#### NOTES:

- Please be aware that **comments about the budget will not be taken into account when scoring**. The reviewers' opinion will be useful to the funding agency in negotiating the final amount of the grant.
- The final score will be calculated as a sum of the grades for each of the four sub-criteria weighed by the corresponding percentage and multiplied by 20 (final score between 0 and 100);
- To be eligible for funding a project must receive at least a score of 80.
- Experts should make sure that their comments on each criterion are:
  - *Concrete* i.e., they are explicitly referring to the information in the proposal
  - *Complete* i.e., they address all the facets specified by the criterion
  - *Consistent* i.e., they match the score, according to the scoring table

#### 3.5 Assessment against the Evaluation Criteria

The rapporteurs propose a score **only after** consensus has been reached on the comments; make sure that the comments are **concrete, complete** (i.e. address all questions) and **consistent** with the semantics of each score, namely:

<b>0</b>	<b>ABSENT</b>	The proposal fails to address the criterion under examination or cannot be judged due to <i>missing or incomplete information</i>
<b>1</b>	<b>POOR</b>	The criterion is addressed in an <i>inadequate manner</i> , or there are <i>serious inherent weaknesses</i>
<b>2</b>	<b>FAIR</b>	While the proposal <i>broadly addresses</i> the criterion, there are <i>significant weaknesses</i>

<b>3</b>	<b>GOOD</b>	The proposal addresses the criterion <i>well</i> , although <i>improvements would be necessary</i> . <i>A number of weaknesses/shortcomings are present</i> .
<b>4</b>	<b>VERY GOOD</b>	The proposal addresses the criterion very well, although <i>certain improvements are still possible</i> . <i>A small number of weaknesses/shortcomings are present</i> .
<b>5</b>	<b>EXCELLENT</b>	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. <i>Any shortcomings are minor</i>

When scoring, use the full scale, from 0 to 5, using just one decimal, for each evaluation criterion.

The scores must reflect the strengths and weaknesses and they must be in line with the comments. Scores below 4.8 (i.e. also **3 – good** or **4 - very good**) **must reflect the identified weaknesses, which should be clearly indicated** in the Consensus Report.

### 3.6 Deadlines

Deadlines are set for better monitoring and fair assessment of the evaluation process. Experts are kindly asked to meet these, since delays in one individual report might perturb the entire evaluation process.

Days 1-14: 25% of all IERs submitted.

Days 15-21: 60% of all IERS submitted.

Days 22-30: 100% of all IERs submitted.

Days 31-35: quality check for all IERs.

Days 36-40: 100% of all IERs sent for rebuttal.

Days 50-65: all CRs and scores submitted.

Days 66-80: quality check of all CRs, resubmission of CRs if corrections were needed.

Days 80 - onward: ranking list and CR sent to applicants.

***NOTE: Remember that nobody knows everything, and other peoples' point of view are as valid as your own. And there is no shame in learning and changing your mind!***

### Transparency

The list of the expert evaluators who participated in the evaluation process will be published on the UEFISCDI's website, after the end of the competition. The list will not identify the expert evaluators assigned for each project proposal.

### References:

In creating this guide, we adopted several guidelines and principles from the following sources:

1. H2020-MSCA, EJD Manual for experts, 2019

2. ESF - *European Peer Review Guide. Integrating Policies and Practices into Coherent Procedures*, 2011: <http://www.esf.org/activities/mo-fora/publications.html>

3. ERC - *ERC Grant Schemes Guide for Peer Reviewers*, 2011:

[http://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/GuideForERCPeerReviewers\\_2012%2020092011.pdf](http://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/GuideForERCPeerReviewers_2012%2020092011.pdf)

4. [http://ec.europa.eu/research/pdf/workshop\\_igb/rtd\\_evaluation\\_process.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/pdf/workshop_igb/rtd_evaluation_process.pdf)