THE NATIONAL PLAN FOR RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION 2022-2027, PNCDI IV

PROGRAMME 5.2. HUMAN RESOURCES

Subprogramme 5.2.1 – Start in Research, Research projects for stimulating young independent teams 2023 Call for proposals

Guidelines for Expert Evaluators

www.cncs-nrc.ro
www.uefiscdi.gov.ro

Contents

Romanian National Research Council and its executive agency, UEFISCDI, welcome you as a scientific expert evaluator for the Research projects for stimulating young independent teams Call 2023 (TE - 2023). This document specifies in detail the evaluation process, its inputs and outputs, and defines the responsibilities of the participants in the process.

1. General Information of the call

The major goal of this call is to support young researchers, with PhD, who have established an independent research programme, obtaining significant results in their own research domain, for the creation or strengthening of their own research team. The call is addressed to young researchers from Romania and from abroad, with achievements demonstrated through the quality and the international recognition of obtained scientific results.

- ✓ The maximum funding granted for a project, with a maximum duration of 24 months, is 500.000 lei (about 100 K EUR).
- ✓ The budget allocated to this call for proposals, for the entire implementation period, is 52.500.000 lei (about 10.50 Million EUR).
- ✓ The estimated funding rate equivalent to approx. 105 project proposals.

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, with excellence as the sole criterion.

2. Governance of the call

The National Research Council is an advisory body of Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitization (MCID). The NRC consists of representatives of national RDI system (academia, national research institutes, Romanian Academy), having a scientific profile internationally recognized. The NRC is the scientific coordinator of the call and supervises the activity of UEFISCDI.

The Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding, UEFISCDI, is a research funding agency. It organizes competitions and subsequently monitors the implementation of research projects accepted for funding. UEFISCDI manages 20% of several funding programmes within National Plan for RDI.

The expert evaluators are internationally recognized independent experts who meet the selection criteria according to the call documents. They are responsible for the scientific evaluation of the submitted proposals according to the evaluation criteria.

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

During the evaluation process an expert evaluator could receive the task of Rapporteur (may act as both expert evaluator and Rapporteur for a number of allocated projects).

The Scientific Officers (SOs) are representatives of the National Research Council (avoiding potential conflict of interest) whose role is to support and monitor the evaluation process, ensure that all steps and procedures are strictly followed. These SOs also check the quality of the Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs) and Consensus Reports (CRs) and the consistency between comments and scores, at any stage (i.e., both before and after submission). When necessary, they contact the expert evaluators to ask for clarifications, to pinpoint potential conflicting statements or inappropriate/incorrect statements. All such communication will be carried out exclusively in the online evaluation platform. Under no circumstances the Scientific Officers (SOs) will be involved in

the evaluation process, interfere with the expert' evaluators assessment of the proposals or influence their decisions.

3. Conflict of Interest

The expert evaluators and Scientific Officers must declare that they have competence in the evaluation of a project proposal, respecting confidentiality and impartiality. They should not be in a position where their impartiality could be questioned or where there could be a suspicion that the recommendations are affected by elements outside the scope of the evaluation.

There is a distinction between "obvious" and "potential" conflicts of interest.

An obvious conflict of interest exists if an expert evaluator:

- was involved in the preparation of the project proposal;
- is involved as a Project leader or team member in the TE 2023 competition;
- would have direct benefits if the project proposal would be accepted for funding;
- has a close family relationship with the Project leader;
- is an employee of the project's host institution;
- was co-author of a scientific publication with the Project leader or one of the research team members in the last 5 years;
- was the coordinator of the doctoral thesis of the Project leader or one of the members of the research team;
- has an affiliation or pending transfer to any Department/Research Center of the project's host institution;
- is in an ongoing scientific or personal conflict with the Project leader or one of the research team members;
- has evaluated a proposal of the Project leader in the TE 2021 competition;
- is in any other situation that could compromise her/his ability to impartially evaluate the project proposal.

A potential conflict of interest may be considered, even in cases not covered by the disqualifying conflicts above, if an expert evaluator:

- has been employed, in the last 3 years, in the project's host institution;
- is involved in a research or collaboration contract with the Project leader or the host institution, or has been in the last 3 years;
- is in any other situation that could question her/his ability to evaluate the project proposal impartially, or that could create this situation from the perspective of a third party.

Before starting the assessment of proposals allocated to them, the expert evaluators will need to login at the Submission and Evaluation platform, https://uefiscdi-direct.ro/. Upon login, the expert evaluators get access to the Principal Investigator/Project leader information and the proposal's summary of the respective allocated proposals. This will allow the expert evaluators to check their potential conflict of interest and directly announce the UEFISCDI staff if such conflicts are identified.

Once you have confirmed that you do not have a conflict of interest, you will be given full access to proposals.

Expert evaluators and Scientific Officers are obliged at any time during the process to immediately notify UEFISCDI (by any means) if they find that one of the aforementioned conditions is no longer

met. UEFISCDI will analyze the circumstances of the case and decide, based on the objective elements of the information at its disposal, the existence of an actual conflict of interest. If such a conflict is established, the expert evaluator will be disqualified in the same manner as in the case of an obvious conflict and will not be paid for the performed evaluation.

4. Contractual agreement

The relationship between 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 evaluation tasks, 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 evaluator 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 expert evaluators will be remunerated for their activities after the finalization of the evaluation process. The following expenses will be covered by the call:
- 60 € (54 € net amount) evaluation fee per one individual evaluation;
- 60 € (54 € net amount) additional fee per proposal assigned as Rapporteur;
- 295 € (266 € net amount) fee per day for participation in panel meeting.

The expert evaluator must sign the "Contractual Agreement" with all the appendixes and upload them to the evaluation platform (dedicated section).

Omission to upload the „Contractual Agreement" and its appendixes, in due time, to the dedicated section of the online evaluation platform, will lead to delay of payment for the activity as expert evaluator/Rapporteur!

5. Evaluation process

The evaluation process is described in the Call document https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/resource-863644-information-package_te-2023.pdf.
The eligibility check is made by UEFISCDI staff. If, during or after completion of the evaluation stage, a non-compliance with any of eligibility criteria is found, the project proposal will be declared ineligible and will be excluded from the competition.

5.1 General principles of evaluation (for individual/consensus/panel stage)
- ✓ The expert evaluator must assess the proposals by themselves – do not delegate this task to anybody else.
- ✓ The expert evaluator should evaluate the proposal as it is, not as it could be or as the expert evaluator would like it to be, and without giving any recommendations or suggestions.
- ✓ Each criterion/sub-criterion must be addressed by a list of Strengths/Weaknesses of minimum 200 and maximum 2000 characters. Comments should be delivered as a bullet point list of Strengths (+) and Weaknesses (-), listed separately, under the titles "Strengths" and "Weaknesses". General comments or comments that describe parts of the proposal are

not acceptable.

✓ Each argument should be placed under the specific criterion, with great care of not mixing criteria (e.g., comments about the work plan will not be placed under "State of the art" or comments about the novelty of the project should not be placed under "Quality of the Principal Investigator/Project leader").

✓ All comments should be clear statements, based on facts presented in the proposal and not on opinions of the expert evaluators (e.g. comments as "*I think that*", "*My impression is*", "*It seems that*", "*The applicant should*", "*It may be better*", etc. must be avoided).

✓ 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. E.g., if the proposal describes the work plan in the "*Project Feasibility*" section, it must be carefully evaluated.

✓ Any comment referring to inexistent or irrelevant criteria for the present competition 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 (e.*g., do not evaluate the TRL since these are basic research projects, or do not evaluate socio economic impacts if these are not relevant for the domain/area or are not specifically required; please do not confuse socio economic impact with dissemination*).

✓ The comments should evaluate the quality of the described criterion under evaluation and not summarise it or suggest improvements.

✓ 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 2.2 and 2.3. However, the expert evaluator must decide where to address the criticism and penalize the proposal only once. A too small number of citations may be referring to "research output" (1.1) and "visibility and impact" (1.2); however, they should be addressed only in criterion 1.2*);

✓ 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 (C1) while a strength would be that the proposed methodology is novel (C2); these statements must be harmonized)*; remember that IERs are sent to the applicants and comments in IERs must be carefully prepared in order to contain clear weaknesses and strengths of the proposal.

✓ The expert evaluator must treat all proposals equally and evaluate them impartially on their merits. Comments that hint, indicate or refer to names, numbers, gender, institutions, nationality, and age are strictly forbidden.

✓ Initial scores are granted for each criterion and sub-criterion taking into account the concordance between scores and comments, in accordance with Table 1 in Appendix 4.

✓ After receiving the response of the Principal Investigator/Project leader, the three expert evaluators will determine the final individual scores, taking into account, in the situations where it is necessary, the response of the Principal Investigator/Project leader.

✓ Scores must fully reflect the balance between strengths and weaknesses (and not vice versa). Scores must reflect the overall evaluation of a criterion and the expert evaluators must use

the full range of scores to appropriately highlight the quality of the proposal (*e.g., it is not correct to have a score of 4.5 for a criterion where only positive comments are listed, without any weaknesses; equally wrong is to find a major weakness, as, e.g.: The methodology does not support the proposed solution and scoring it with 4.0*);

- ✓ The panel members will analyse all proposals with no consensus reached or above the threshold (80 points) and will prepare the final report which will be sent to the Principal Investigator/Project leader.
- ✓ The expert evaluators should keep in mind that they are evaluating a project proposal and not a research paper. The comments should evaluate the quality of the described criterion under evaluation and not summarise it or suggest improvements.

A personal touch to the expert evaluators: Please, **evaluate the proposal as you would like it to be evaluated if it were yours: be objective, dispassionate, unbiased, fair and polite.**

5.2 Task of expert evaluators

The expert evaluators are required to:
- read the "Call documents" and the "Guidelines for Expert Evaluators";
- inform UEFISCDI about an obvious or a potential conflict of interest;
- read and objectively evaluate the assigned project proposals;
- meet all deadlines of the evaluation process;
- fill in and submit the evaluation sheet for each assigned project proposal, providing comprehensive comments that evaluate the proposal in a critical way, addressing all the evaluation criteria for each point, avoiding summarizing and advising on improvements, clearly highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal as it was submitted by the applicant and not its potential;
- read the rebuttal (if any);
- actively participating in consensus discussions regarding all assigned project proposals, by using the "forum" type interface available on the online evaluation platform; comments at the consensus stage are compulsory;
- elaborate the consensus report (Rapporteurs only) based on the individual evaluations, the rebuttal (if any) and the discussions with the other expert evaluators and ultimately agree the scores for each evaluation criterion that fully reflects the agreed comments in the final evaluation report;
- not disclose the proposals assigned to third parties;
- communicate with the assigned Scientific Officer from the National Research Council and Technical Officer from UEFISCDI for any issue that might appear at any moment during the evaluation process;
- take part at the panel meeting (panel members are mainly Rapporteurs).

5.3 Proposal evaluation stages

According to the Document Call, the Funding Application is in A4 format, uses Times New Roman font, 12 font size, 1.15 line spacing and 2 cm margins. Any modification to these parameters is forbidden (excepting the figures and their captions). The explanatory text is preserved. The imposed number of pages (Section C – Funding application) does not contain the requested Budget (Section

C6) and Bibliographic references (Section C7), these will be written on additional pages. For each section the text marking the information and the mandatory sections of the application will be maintained.

5.3.1. The Individual Evaluation
Each project proposal declared eligible is evaluated from the quality point of view, independently, online, using the platform https://uefiscdi-direct.ro/, by three expert evaluators, which form the committee of expert evaluators. The evaluation of each project begins at the moment the committee of the expert evaluators is completed.

These fill in the evaluation sheets (Individual Evaluation Reports) by identifying the strengths and weaknesses for each evaluation criterion, with their explicit highlighting, according to the evaluation sheet (shown in section 5.3.8 of this Guide). The scores are given for each criterion and sub-criterion taking into consideration the concordance between the scores and comments in accordance with Table 1 from the evaluation sheet.

To ensure a fair and homogeneous evaluation across a specific domain, the expert evaluator will have access to the statistical chart of all competing Principal Investigators/Project leaders and as well as to the B2 section (*Visibility and impact of the scientific contribution of the Project leader*).

When all IERs have been submitted, the expert evaluators will have access to each other's comments and may adjust their own remarks and scores during this phase. This is required especially when there are conflicting statements, which should be solved before the rebuttal.

5.3.2. The Rebuttal
The IERs are sent to the applicants, without scores, with the invitation to submit a rebuttal on the comments expressed by the expert evaluators within five working days. The rebuttal is limited to 6.000 characters (including spaces) and consists of counterarguments strictly regarding the criticism formulated by expert evaluators. The applicant should not include in the rebuttal any supplementary information. New facts or information that appear in the rebuttal but have not been described in the proposal shall be disregarded. The expert evaluators should carefully read the responses of the applicant and assess whether, after checking with the proposal, they maintain their opinion. The rebuttal of the applicant is not mandatory, and its absence will not affect the next stage of the evaluation process.

5.3.3. Establishing the final individual scores
After the submission of the rebuttal by the applicant, the three expert evaluators will determine the final individual scores, taking into account, in the situations where it is necessary, the rebuttal.

5.3.4. Appointment of the fourth evaluator
If the difference between the maximum and minimum score given by the three expert evaluators exceeds 10 points, the evaluation process continues by appointing a fourth expert evaluator within the domain of the project, with an institutional affiliation abroad (except for Romanian-specific projects). After the additional expert evaluator's individual evaluation and scoring, she/he will have access to the comments and the scores originally given by the first three expert evaluators, as well as the Project leader's rebuttal, if any, and will be able to adjust the comments and given scores. The four individual scores will then be averaged, and the score furthest from the average will be eliminated. If there are two scores equally distant from the average of the four, the score of the expert evaluator with the lower score on Criterion 1 of the Evaluation Sheet (Principal Investigator) will be eliminated.

5.3.5. Consensus initiation and Consensus Report (CR) writing

After the final individual scores were established, the evaluation process enters the consensus stage, under the coordination of a Rapporteur, 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 expert evaluators, and will propose comments acceptable to all the expert evaluators involved. Where the views are very different, the Rapporteur will engage the other two expert evaluators in a focused discussion on the major disagreements and will seek to clarify any difference of opinion and contradictions. All expert evaluators have to actively participate in the discussion and clearly express their opinion within a reasonable time (5 working days after the discussion started). Please note that the CR is NOT a collection of all statements from each IER, but comments that reflect the opinions of all expert evaluators regarding the evaluated criteria.

a) *Once the consensus is reached*, the Rapporteur will write the CR in the form of a bulleted list of Strengths and Weaknesses for each criterion. The comments in the final CR must be clearly formulated, reflecting opinions of all expert evaluators. In brief, the CR MUST NOT contain: i) any reference to the applicant's name, gender, age, institutional affiliation or the other expert evaluators involved and their IERs; ii) copy-pasted parts of the proposal. Comments MUST be comprehensive, clear, refer to all sub-criteria and not limited to one short sentence, explain weaknesses. Comments MUST NOT make suggestions for improvements.

The Rapporteur will propose scores for each criterion, AFTER reaching consensus on the comments and strictly in agreement with the balance between the final comments listed as strengths and weaknesses. Keep in mind that the CR gives 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 appropriate comments. Ensuring consistency between comments and scores is of paramount importance to guarantee a good quality CR**. The other two expert evaluators will then express their opinion on the CR and scores by voting "agree" or "disagree" on the same platform.

If all expert evaluators agree on the CR, the consensus is reached. The proposals above the threshold of 80 points will enter in the evaluation panel meeting step.

For the proposals below threshold of 80 points, the CR containing the agreed scores becomes the final report which is transmitted to the applicant.

b) *If the consensus is not reached*, the expert evaluator(s) who has (have) voted "disagree" will be asked to detail(s) the reasons for disagreeing with the CR for any particular criterion. The scores and comments provided by the disagreeing expert evaluator for the criterion or criteria in question will be part of the overall Consensus Report. Following the Individual Evaluation, the CR will be available to all Panel members during the Panel Evaluation.

5.3.6. Panel Evaluation

Proposals for which no consensus has been reached and those above the threshold of 80 points granted in Consensus Report will be analysed/discussed in the expert evaluators panels, which will establish the final hierarchy of the projects.

Projects where consensus was reached on all criteria/sub-criteria and have obtained less than 80 points are declared unfundable.

Each panel member, before the panel meeting, will have access to: the project proposals; the comments of the expert evaluators; the Consensus Reports; the Project leader's rebuttal (if any) for

all projects assigned to the panel. Along with the Rapporteur assigned to the project, for each project, another member of the panel with expertise in the subdomain of the project will be appointed, who will have the task of carefully reading all the information related to the respective project and to intervene during the discussions regarding the respective project.

In a first phase, the panel will analyze the projects without consensus and establish, by vote, the Final Evaluation Report (the comments and score for each criterion/sub-criterion).

In the second phase, to establish the final ranking of the research projects, the projects are discussed based on the evaluation criteria; the panel having the possibility to arbitrate the summative comments from the Consensus Reports and adjust the final scores of the projects.

For this purpose, the panel will make use of all available information, including the applicant's rebuttal (if any), information from Section B2 (Visibility and impact of the scientific contribution of the Project leader) of all applications in the domain corresponding to the panel.

The panel's decisions can only be taken with the approval vote of at least 2/3 of the panel members present at the time of the vote, with the condition that the quorum to be ensured (50% + 1 of the number of confirmed panel members). If this majority does not exist, to change the score of a particular project, the final score of the project is calculated as the average of the scores proposed at the panel level. The decision will be motivated by a panel report. This report is sent to the Principal Investigator/Project leader at the end of the evaluation.

For each project discussed in the panel meeting, the Final Evaluation Report is elaborated. If the panel agrees with the Consensus Report, it becomes the Final Evaluation Report.

The panel meetings are coordinated by a chair a member of CNCS and a vice-chair a member of CNCS or of the specialized commissions of CNCS whose areas of expertise are different from the panel's domain. They will moderate the debates in the panel without intervening in the decision-making.

5.3.7. Quality check of the reports (IER /CR)
The evaluation process will be monitored during both individual and consensus stages by the Scientific Officers. They will assist the funding agency, UEFISCDI, with evaluation management and monitoring. The Scientific Officers will not read the proposals and will not evaluate the scientific content of the IERs or CRs. They will merely point out issues that decrease the quality of the IER or CR (see below), such as:
- 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);
- inadequate comments as, e.g., comments placed under the wrong criterion or comments about irrelevant issues which are not required by the call;
- mismatches between comments and scores in the CR (e.g., a score of 4.5 in the absence of any identified weakness);
- names, age, gender, numbers etc. (see above);
- other issues that may decrease the quality of the report.

5.3.8. Evaluation Sheet
Make your judgment against the official evaluation criteria, as stated in the Evaluation Sheet, and nothing else. Please deliver your comments as a clear bullet point list of comments listed as Strengths (+) and Weaknesses (-). When no weakness is identified, the Report should state: "*Weaknesses. No major weakness identified.*"

1. *Principal investigator (PI) - 40% of the total score*

Note: When evaluating the academic achievements of the PI (Research output / Visibility and impact of the PI's research output), the evaluators are advised to take into account the current debates at the level of the international academic community concerning the dissemination of research results. This concerns, in particular, the doubts and reservations articulated regarding the qualitative standards practiced in the framework of the process of research evaluation/peer-review by certain academic publishers/journals. The Romanian National Research Council (CNCS) strongly advises against and discourages the publication of research results in „predatory publishers/journals", according to the definitions/lists currently in use by the academic community in countries with advanced academic standards.

Criterion 1.1 Quality of the PI's research output - 40% of the total score of Criterion 1 *(see sections B1 and B4 of the Funding Application).*

- Evaluate to what extent the PI's research has led to progress in their field of expertise, in general (i.e. not only in the narrow field/theme of the project). In relation to the specificity of each particular field of research, evaluate to what extent the PI has contributed to establishing new research directions and to elaborating new theories/ research methods/ research strategies/techniques.
- Comment on the importance of the PI's scientific discoveries, as reflected in their track record or other achievements.

Criterion 1.2 Visibility and impact of the PI's research output - 30% of the total score of Criterion 1 *(see section B2 of the Funding Application).*

- Evaluate to what extent the PI's scientific output is internationally recognized.
- Comment regarding the extent to which the research directions /theories /methods /strategies /techniques developed by the PI have been widely accepted and recognized by the international scientific/academic community.
- Comment regarding the international academic visibility of the PI, particularly on how this visibility can be assessed on the basis of scientific/scholarly articles published in Q1 and Q2 academic journals.
- Comment on the statistical charts of H-index (according to WoS Core Collection/Scopus), citations and average citations per item/publication (excluding self-citations), Q1/Q2 articles and chapters and books published by international publishers (for the Humanities and Social Sciences) of all competing PIs, for use if relevant. Comment on the most relevant 10 citations in Q1/Q2 journals regarding the PIs published articles. In the case of the Humanities comment on the most relevant book-reviews regarding the PIs publications.
- Use the list of the most representative works (according to the specificity of each particular field of research) to assess the PI's research output. Please take into account the relative weight/relevance of the articles published by the PI in Q1/Q2 journals. In the case of the Humanities and Social Sciences (where relevant and appropriate), please take into account the academic reputation and status of the international academic publishers, as well as of the Romanian academic publishers and journals, according to the current classification system of the Romanian National Research Council (CNCS) (Appendix 7a, 7b) and according to the academic quality standards, as currently defined in (Appendix 1 - Minimal eligibility standards for the Project leader).

- In the case of the Humanities, please take into account the relevance and impact of the journals and publishers within the professional sub-field of the PI, as well as the presence and dissemination of the PI's publications in the most important and relevant foreign libraries (according to Appendix 1 – Minimal eligibility standards for the Project leader).
- In the field of Mathematics, while the use of numerical indicators in evaluating the PI is permitted, it is not particularly encouraged. The evaluation of this criterion should not be based exclusively on such indicators, and should rather include the evaluator's objective assessment of the intrinsic value of the PI's scientific contributions and of its actual impact on advancing the state-of-the-art in the specific mathematical field.

Criterion 1.3 Match between the PI's previous research output and the proposed topic - 30% of the total score of Criterion 1 (*see section B3 of the Funding Application****).***
- Evaluate to what extent the PI's research output is relevant for the present project. Assess the quality and appropriateness of the researcher's existing professional experience in relation to the research proposal.
- Comment on how the previously published work or previous projects of the PI relates to the proposed research.

Specific guidance for Criterion 1*:* The comments in this section must reflect the overall excellence of the PI, taking into account each sub-criterion and the CV of the researcher (1.1, 1.2, and 1.3). 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 low score; experts should evaluate the quality of PI against all achievements described in the proposal and how they are related to and indicative for the current proposal. In assessing the publication/patent record of an applicant (criterion 1.1), expert evaluators are advised to pay a special attention to the quality of PI's publications as main author in the field of the current proposal. In section B2 of the application form the PI's were asked to list the most representative scientific results (articles or books), maximum 10 items in total. The CV in section B4 should be evaluated in relation to each of the three criteria. The achievements and overall excellence should be assessed in relation to the proposed research. Numbers, in general, are important, however *these are not the only or best indicator of the researcher's excellence*. In addition, more emphasis should be placed on the quality of the publications, as opposed to their quantity. A small number of high-impact publications may be of higher value, compared to a large number of papers in low impact journals.

2. Research Project - 60% of the total score

The expert should evaluate 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 State-of-the-art and originality/innovation - 30% of the total score of Criterion 2 *(see section C1 of the Funding Application).*

- Evaluate whether the problem/issue addressed by the project is clearly identified in relation to the state-of-the-art in the field.
- Comment on the originality and novelty of the proposed solution and assess the extent to which the proposed work is ambitious and goes beyond the current state-of-the-art in the field.
- If previous projects of the applicant addressing a similar topic are mentioned, comment on the novel aspects investigated in the present project.

Criterion 2.2 Research objectives, methodology and work plan - 30% of the total score of Criterion 2 *(see section C2 of the Funding Application).*

- Evaluate the clarity and coherence of the research and innovation objectives. Are the research and innovation objectives realistically achievable, measurable and verifiable?
- To what extent is the proposed methodological approach suitable for reaching these objectives? Comment on the soundness of the methodology, including the concepts, models and assumptions that underpin the project, and on whether important methodological challenges are identified, including the proposed measures to tackle these challenges.
- How effective is the work plan (timelines, milestones, deliverables) in terms of achieving the proposed objectives?
- Assess whether the Gantt Chart (mandatory) is consistent and complete, in relation to the whole work plan (taking into account WPs, scientific deliverables, milestones).
- Comment on the coherence of the project's approach in terms of activities and time scales.

Criterion 2.3 Feasibility (resources, research team and preliminary results) - 20% of the total score of Criterion 2 *(see section C3 of the Funding Application).*

- To what extent will the infrastructure support and human resource (research team) available at the host institution ensure the successful implementation of the project?
- Are there any preliminary results presented in support of the hypothesis and the proposed solution? A lack of preliminary results is not considered a weakness and should not be penalized; however, when preliminary results are presented, this could be considered as a strength, supporting the project's feasibility.
- Evaluate to what extent the personnel structure of the research team will be appropriate for developing a young research team.

Criterion 2.4 Risks and contingency plans - 10% of the total score of Criterion 2 *(see section C4 of the Funding Application).*

- Comment on the research risks that might endanger the achievement of the objectives. To what extent does the risk analysis correctly identify potential pitfalls?
- Comment on the effectiveness of the alternative solutions proposed.

Criterion 2.5 Expected impact and dissemination plan - 10% of the total score of Criterion 2 *(see section C5 of the Funding Application).*

- To what extent is the expected scientific/scholarly output of the proposed work realistically described and how likely is it to lead to significant progress in the field?

- How will the proposed research impact (the visibility of) the host institution, the PI and the research team?
- Comment on the project's social, economic, or cultural impact, only if relevant for the proposed research. Please take into account that these are fundamental research projects. This is valid also for the potential social or economic impact.
- Comment on the quality of the proposed measures to disseminate the scientific/scholarly output of the proposal.
- Assess how the appropriate open science practices are implemented, as an integral part of the proposed methodology.

Criterion 3 Budget this section will not be scored (*see section C6 of the Funding Application*).
- Please provide an overall assessment of the research budget requested and evaluate to what extent it is justified by the proposed research activities.

Note: There will be no score associated with this criterion, but the assessment will be useful to the funding agency in negotiating the final terms of the financial award.

NOTES:

1. The final score will be automatically calculated as a weighted sum of the scores for each sub-criterion multiplied by 20 (final score between 0 and 100), when introduced into the online platform.

Final grade = 20*[(s1.1*40/100 + s1.2*30/100 + s1.3*30/100)*40/100 + (s2.1*30/100 + s2.2*30/100 + s2.3*20/100 + s2.4*10/100 + s2.5*10/100)*60/100], where si.j is the score for criterion i.j

2. Expert evaluators 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 and are not contradictory
- *Inoffensive* i.e., they do not contain discriminatory, offensive statements or adjectives
- *Explanatory* i.e., it is clear what makes a comment a weakness or a strength. Examples of poor comments: "The methodology is described" - is it enough? insufficient? excellent? new? obsolete? or "The novelty is not good" (why? what is missing?) or "The team is not appropriate" (what competency is missing?), etc.

5.3.9. Assessment against the Evaluation Criteria
Recommendations for Evaluators/Rapporteurs:
1. Propose a score only after wrote the comments; make sure that the comments are concrete, complete (i.e. address all questions) and consistent with the semantics of each score, namely:
Table 1.

0	**ABSENT**	The proposal fails to address the criterion under examination or cannot be judged due to *missing or incomplete information*
		The criterion is addressed in an *inadequate manner*, or there are *serious*

1	UNSATISFACTORY	*inherent weaknesses*
2	SATISFACTORY	While the proposal *broadly addresses* the criterion, there are *significant weaknesses*
3	GOOD	The proposal addresses the criterion *well*, although *improvements would be necessary. A number of weaknesses/shortcomings are present.*
4	VERY GOOD	The proposal addresses the criterion very well, although *certain improvements are still possible. A small number of weaknesses/shortcomings are present.*
5	EXCELLENT	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. *Any shortcomings are minor*

2. When scoring each sub-criterion use the full scale, from 0 to 5 – in 0.5 increments.

3. The scores must reflect the strengths and weaknesses and they must be in line with the comments. Scores **below 5, including 4.5, must be in accordance with the identified weaknesses, which should be clearly indicated** in the Individual Evaluation Report/Consensus Report! I**f no weakness is identified, the score is 5.**

4. Each strength and weakness must be reflected **only once** in the report and the scores, i.e. there is **no double penalty, no double reward**.

6. 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.

7. 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%20 20092011.pdf
4. http://ec.europa.eu/research/pdf/workshop_igb/rtd_evaluation_process.pdf

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