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a Cercetării, Dezvoltării și Inovării

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Collaboration projects with Republic of Moldova

Guideline for Expert Evaluators

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Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding, UEFISCDI and National Agency for Research and Development from Republic of Moldova, NARD welcome you as a scientific expert evaluator for the Collaboration projects with Republic of Moldova Call. 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 consolidate the already existing research networks and to develop new collaborations between groups of researchers from Romania and Republic of Moldova.

The duration of a project is maximum 24 months.

The funding from the state budget granted for a project is:

- ✓ 500.000 lei - for a consortium formed by a research organization from Romania (250.000 lei) and a research organization from Republic of Moldova (250.000 lei);
- ✓ 750.000 lei - for a consortium formed by a research organization from Romania (300.000 lei) and two research organizations from Republic of Moldova (225.000 lei/organization);
- ✓ 1.025.000 lei - for a consortium formed by a research organization from Romania (350.000 lei) and three research organizations from Republic of Moldova (225.000 lei/organization).

The selection of the project proposals for funding is based strictly on their merits, through peer review evaluation performed by expert evaluators in the domain, with excellence as the sole criterion.

2. Specific objectives

By financing this type of projects, the following objects are pursued:

- ✓ Achievement of joint research-development projects that highlight the expertise/excellence potential of researchers from Romania and Republic of Moldova, which require access to existing research infrastructures in Romania;
- ✓ Training the young generation of researchers who carry out their scientific activity in the research institutions from Republic of Moldova by consolidating their professional positions and advancing their careers;
- ✓ Mobility of researchers from the two countries for exchange of best practices and transfer of knowledge;
- ✓ Identification of complementarity between existing research infrastructures in Romania and in Republic of Moldova and collaboration in their use, including collaboration to jointly participate in international research platforms, especially those from ESFRI.

3. Governance of the call

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 National Agency for Research and Development (NARD) is a central administrative authority under the Government of the Republic of Moldova. NARD is responsible for the implementation of the research, innovation and development of national policy, the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Horizon 2020 and other European Programmes and the coordination of Moldovan Office for Science and Technology in Brussels (MOST).

The expert evaluators are internationally recognized experts, preferably researchers from the Romanian and Moldavian scientific diaspora. People who carry out their scientific activity in one of the two countries cannot be expert evaluators. Evaluating experts are doctors of science (mandatory condition) with experience demonstrated through (non-cumulative): scientific articles, patents, research and development projects.

4. Conflict of Interest

Any details of the evaluation process and its outcomes, or about any proposals submitted for evaluation must be treated as confidential and must not be disclosed. Experts indicate electronically, during the evaluation process, that confidentiality of any documents or electronic files provided to them is maintained. All confidential documents or files must be returned, erased or destroyed upon completion of the evaluation, unless otherwise instructed.

The expert evaluators must declare, on writing, their impartiality and competence in the domain to which the project proposal subject to evaluation belongs, as well as their confidentiality. The expert evaluator undertakes to notify UEFISCDI, in writing, at any time, during the evaluation process, if it finds that one of these conditions is not satisfied or that it is in conflict of interest. In the situation where UEFISCDI finds or is informed about the existence of a conflict of interest or a deviation, it will take the necessary measures to replace the expert evaluator in question.

The evaluations are anonymous, ensuring the confidentiality of the evaluation experts.

Experts must declare that they can carry out the evaluation of a proposal with total confidentiality, 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.

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 Project Director/Partener(s) Leader;
- ✓ works in the same institution as the Project Director/Partener(s) Leader;
- ✓ is involved in a contract or research collaboration with the Project Director/Partener(s) Leader or had been so in the previous 3 years;
- ✓ has co-authored a scientific publication with the Project Director/Partener(s) Leader or with one of the known members of the research teams in the last 5 years;
- ✓ has been the director/coordinator of the doctoral thesis of the Project Director/Partener(s) Leader or one of the known members of the research team;
- ✓ has an affiliation, or pending transfer, to any Department, Institution or Research Centre involved in the application;
- ✓ is participating in an on-going scientific or inter-personal conflict with the Project

Director/Partener(s) Leader or one of the known members of the research team;

- ✓ 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.

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

- ✓ was employed by the one organization that has applied the project proposal within the previous 3 years;
- ✓ is involved in a research collaboration or contract of Project Director, or had been so, 3 years prior to the submission;
- ✓ 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.

Before starting the assessment of proposals allocated to them, the evaluators will need to login at the Submission and Evaluation platform, <https://uefiscdi-direct.ro/>. Upon login, the evaluators get access to the Project Director/Partener Leader(s) information and the proposal's summary of the respective allocated proposals. This will allow the experts to check their potential conflict of interest and directly announce the UEFISCDI staff if such conflicts are identified. Full access to the proposal is given after the expert has confirmed that there is no conflict of interest.

The expert evaluators must notify UEFISCDI, via email/in writing, 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. 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.

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

5. 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 evaluator 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 evaluator must sign the "Contractual Agreement" with all the appendixes and upload them to the evaluation platform (in the 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!

6. Evaluation process

The evaluation process is described in the Call document, <https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/proiecte-de-colaborare-cu-republica-moldova>.

The eligibility check is made by UEFISCDI and NARD staff in order to ensure that national eligibility criteria are fulfilled. Only the project proposals declared eligible by both funding agencies will enter to the evaluation process. If, during or after completion of the evaluation phase, a non-compliance with any of eligibility criteria is found, the project proposal will be declared ineligible and will be excluded from the competition.

6.1. General principles of evaluation

- ✓ 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 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.
- ✓ All comments should be clear statements, based on facts presented in the proposal and not on opinions of the experts (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.
- ✓ 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.
- ✓ The comments should assess 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.
- ✓ The Individual Evaluation Sheet (IES) must be carefully checked for conflicting statements, especially when these may pop up under different criteria. Remember these IESs are sent to the applicants and comments in IESs must be carefully prepared in order to contain clear weaknesses and strengths of the proposal.
- ✓ The expert 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 awarded for each criterion taking into account the concordance between scores and comments, in accordance with Table in Annex 2.

- ✓ After receiving the response of the Project Director (if any), the three experts will determine the final individual scores, taking into account, in the situations where it is necessary, the response of the Project Director, if any.
- ✓ Consensus is considered to have been reached if the difference between the scores granted by the three expert evaluators does not exceed 10 points. In this situation, the final score of the project proposal is the average of the three scores given by the expert evaluators. If consensus was not reached after the individual evaluation (the difference is higher than 10 points), the expert evaluators can interact, through the online platform, and will adjust their scores and comments to reach a consensus. Project proposals for which consensus is not reached will be evaluated by one more expert evaluator who completes the individual evaluation sheet, having access to the comments and scores initially granted by the first three expert evaluators, as well as to the rebuttal (if any). To calculate the final score, the four individual scores are averaged, and the score farthest from the average will be eliminated. If there are two scores equally far from the average, the score of the expert evaluator with the lowest grade on the first criterion from the evaluation sheet is eliminated. Afterwards, the average of the three remaining scores is calculated, establishing the final score of the project proposal.
- ✓ Scores must fully reflect the balance between Strengths and Weaknesses (and not vice versa). Scores must reflect the overall assessment of a criterion and the experts 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 experts should keep in mind that they are evaluating a project proposal and not a research paper. The comments should assess 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.**

6.2 Task of expert evaluators

The expert evaluators are required to:

- ✓ read the “Call documents” and the “Guideline for expert evaluators”;
- ✓ inform UEFISCDI about a disqualifying 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 and relevant scores, 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) and adjust or not the individual final scores and comments taking into account the rebuttal (if any);
- ✓ the consensus is reached if the difference between the scores granted by the 3 expert evaluators does not exceed 10 points. In this situation the final score of the project proposal is the average of the 3 scores granted by the evaluators.
- ✓ if the consensus is not reached after the individual evaluation stage (the difference between scores exceeds 10 points), the expert evaluators must actively participate in the discussions, by using the “forum type” interface available on the online platform, in order to adjust their scores and comments to reach the consensus.
- ✓ the project proposals without consensus will be assigned for evaluation to a 4th individual expert evaluator. This expert evaluator will have access to the comments and scores initially granted by the first 3 expert evaluators, as well as, to the rebuttal (if any).
- ✓ to calculate the final score, the four individual scores are averaged, and the score farthest from the average will be eliminated. If there are two scores equally far from the average, the score of the expert evaluator with the lowest score on the first criterion from the evaluation sheet is eliminated. Afterward, the average of the 3 remained scores is calculated, reaching the final score of the project proposal.
- ✓ not disclose the proposals assigned to third parties.
- ✓ communicate with the assigned contact from UEFISCDI about issues that might appear during the evaluation process.

6.3 Proposal evaluation stages

According to the Document Call, the Funding Application uses Times New Roman, 12 points, 1.15 interline space and 2 cm margins. Any changes to these parameters (except tables, figures or legends) are prohibited. **Excess pages will not be considered by the expert evaluators in the evaluation process.**

The imposed number of pages (Section B2.1 – max. 4 pages, Section B2.2 – max. 4 pages/person, Section B3 – max. 5 pages and Section B.4 – max. 3 pages). In each section of the application, the explicative text will be maintained.

6.3.1. Individual Evaluation.

Each eligible proposal is evaluated independently, online, by 3 expert evaluators. They will fill in the Individual Evaluation Sheet (IES) identifying the strengths and weaknesses for each evaluation criterion, explicitly highlighting them, according to the evaluation sheet presented in section 6.3.4 of this guide. For each criterion scores will be assigned strictly according to the associated comments.

- ✓ **excess pages will not be considered by the expert evaluators in the evaluation process!**

After the finalization of all individual evaluations, each evaluator has access to the other 2 expert evaluators comments and scores. If necessary, they can adjust their own initially granted scores and comments.

6.3.2. Rebuttal

After the completion of the individual evaluation, UEFISCDI’s staff makes available to the Project

Directors, in the accounts from the online platform for submitting project proposals, the concatenated sheet with the three individual evaluations (without scores), with the invitation to formulate, in writing, a point of view to the expert evaluators' comments.

If it is the case, the project directors' rebuttal, limited to 4.000 characters (including spaces), will be completed using a form available in the online project proposal submission platform, within 3 working days from the date of the initial response request. The point of view of the Project Director will be written in English and will consist strictly of a response to the critical comments of the expert evaluators, as they appear in the concatenated sheet without introducing new elements to the project proposal. The response of the Project Director is not mandatory, and its absence does not affect the evaluation of the project.

6.3.3. Reaching the Consensus

After the Rebuttal (if any), the expert evaluators are automatically notified of its existence in the platform.

They then determine the final individual scores, taking into account the rebuttal, if any.

Consensus is considered to have been reached if the difference between the scores granted by the three expert evaluators does not exceed 10 points. In this situation, the final score of the project proposal is the average of the three scores given by the expert evaluators.

If consensus was not reached after the individual evaluation (the difference is higher than 10 points), the expert evaluators can interact, through the online platform, and will adjust their scores and comments to reach a consensus.

Project proposals for which consensus is not reached will be evaluated by one more expert evaluator who completes the individual evaluation sheet, having access to the comments and scores initially granted by the first three expert evaluators, as well as to the rebuttal (if any). To calculate the final score, the four individual scores are averaged, and the score farthest from the average will be eliminated. If there are two scores equally far from the average, the score of the expert evaluator with the lowest grade on the first criterion from the evaluation sheet is eliminated.

Afterwards, the average of the three remaining scores is calculated, establishing the final score of the project proposal.

6.3.4 Evaluation Sheet

Make your judgment against the official evaluation criteria, as stated in the evaluation sheet, and nothing else. Please deliver your comments as Strengths (+) and Weaknesses (-). When no weakness is identified, the score is 5.

Criterion 1: Project Director and Partner Leader(s) - 40% of total score *(see section B.2 of funding application)*

- *Evaluate to what extent the Project Director's / partner Leader(s)'s scientific output is internationally recognized.*
- *Evaluate to what extent the Project Director's / partner Leader(s)'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.*

Criterion 2: Scientific Excellence - 30% of total score

(see section B.3 of 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.
- Evaluate the clarity and coherence of the research objectives. Are these objectives realistically achievable, measurable and verifiable?
- To what extent is the proposed methodological approach suitable for reaching these objectives?
- How effective is the work plan (timelines, deliverables) in terms of achieving the proposed objectives?
- Comment on the coherence of the project's approach in terms of activities and time scales.

Criterion 3: Project feasibility - 30% of total score

(see section B.4 of funding application)

- To what extent will the research infrastructure available at the host institution and human resource (research teams) ensure the successful implementation of the project?
- Evaluate to what extent the project activities will increase the research capacity / enhance the scientific performance of researchers from Republic Moldova. Does the project build the experience and the competence of the researchers /organizations involved?

Criterion 4: Budget; this section will not be scored

(see section B.5 of funding application)

- Please provide an overall assessment of the requested budget 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.

Recommendations for expert evaluators:

1. Propose scores according to your comments in the individual evaluation stage. **M**ake sure that the comments are **concrete, complete** (i.e. address all questions) and **consistent** with the semantics of each score, namely:

0	ABSENT	The proposal fails to address the criterion under examination or cannot be judged due to <i>missing or incomplete information</i> .
1	UNSATISFACTORY	The criterion is addressed in an <i>inadequate manner</i> , or there are <i>serious inherent weaknesses</i> .
2	SATISFACTORY	While the proposal <i>broadly addresses</i> the criterion, there are <i>significant weaknesses</i> .
3	GOOD	The proposal addresses the criterion <i>well</i> , although <i>improvements would be necessary</i> . A number of <i>weaknesses/shortcomings</i> are present.
4	VERY GOOD	The proposal addresses the criterion very well, although <i>certain improvements</i> are still possible. A <i>small number of weaknesses/shortcomings</i> are present.
5	EXCELLENT	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

2. When scoring each 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 evaluation sheet!
4. If **no weakness is identified, the score is 5.**
5. 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.**

Note: The final score will be calculated as a weighted sum of the scores for each criterion multiplied by 20 (final score between 0 and 100);

Final grade = 20*(c1*40/100 + c2*30/100 + c3*30/100) ci is the score for criterion i.

7. 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.