

SNSF Starting Grants – Description of the evaluation process and guidelines for the evaluators

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) set up Temporary Backup Schemes in March 2014. The aim of these schemes is to allow excellent researchers who work or plan to work at Swiss research institutions to apply for grants at the SNSF which are comparable to the frontier research grants of the ERC. This became necessary due to the successful mass immigration initiative. This document describes the general reviewing process of **SNSF Starting Grant** proposals and shall serve as **guidelines** for the researchers involved in the evaluation procedure. However, minor adjustments of the reviewing process might occur, for example if an evaluator is exceptionally and for well justified reasons prevented to participate in parts of the evaluation process.

The contents of the following documents are also relevant to the evaluation procedures and therefore need to be considered:

- Regulations of the Commission of the Swiss National Science Foundation for the Temporary Backup Schemes for "Horizon 2020" (CTBS)
- Call for Temporary Backup Schemes for "Horizon 2020" SNSF Starting Grants 2014
- Extended call document: SNSF Starting Grants.

In all aspects not specifically mentioned here or in one of the three above mentioned legally binding documents, the requirements set out in the Funding Regulations of the SNSF apply (http://www.snf.ch/SiteCollectionDocuments/allg_reglement_e.pdf).

1. Overview of the evaluation procedure

The evaluation procedure for the SNSF Starting Grant proposals is divided into four successive steps:

- **Submission of applications and administrative measures:** the administrative offices of the SNSF receive applications from researchers via the mySNF platform. They then check whether the formal requirements for submitting an application have been met. This includes the verification of eligibility.
- **Evaluation phase 1:** in the first step of the evaluation, the synopsis, CV and track record are assessed by members of the evaluation panel. During the first panel meeting, every application is assessed and assigned a mark (A, B or C) by a consensus decision of the panel. Only proposals rated A are considered for the second phase of the evaluation. The CTBS verifies whether the recommendations of the panel comply with the procedural rules and decides which proposals are to be admitted to the second stage of evaluation. The outcome of the first evaluation phase is communicated to all applicants.

- **Evaluation phase 2:** in the second phase of the evaluation, the complete application files are assessed by external reviewers as well as by members of the evaluation panel. Additionally, the applicants are invited to present their project to the panel. During the second panel meeting, again every application is assessed and assigned a mark (A or B) by a consensus decision of the panel. Only proposals rated A are considered for funding.
- **Decision:** the CTBS verifies whether the recommendations of the panel comply with the procedural rules and the allocated panel budgets. It then forwards the verified decisions to the Presiding Board of the Research Council for endorsement. The SNSF informs applicants of the final decision.

2. Evaluation steps

2.1 Submission of applications and administrative measures

Formal criteria: the administrative offices of the SNSF receive applications from researchers via the *mySNF* platform. They confirm receipt of the applications to the applicants. They check whether the formal criteria are met, particularly with regard to completeness of the dossier, correct formatting and the fulfilment of formal and personal requirements by the applicants. If any faults are found, the administrative offices may set a deadline for their correction or decide not to consider the application and inform the applicant accordingly. Furthermore, the administrative offices carry out checks to detect any cases of plagiarism. In confirmed cases, the evaluation procedure is stopped and proceedings are initiated. Depending on their outcome, the applicants may face sanctions.

Eligibility criteria are regarded as formal criteria because they are factual and easily verified. The verification does not require any scientific assessments and is done prior to the evaluation procedure. Applications whose ineligibility can only be confirmed at a later stage may be deemed ineligible during or even after the evaluation procedure. However, such cases are extremely rare.

Distribution of proposals: once the eligibility check has been completed, the eligible proposals are assigned to the three panels on the basis of the choice made by the applicant, after verification by the administrative offices and the panel chairs. Interdisciplinary proposals which cannot be treated within one single panel will be assigned to a primary and a secondary panel. The CTBS makes the final decision with regard to the distribution of proposals among the panels. Each proposal will be assigned to three panel members (one main referee, two co-referees) by the panel chair upon suggestion by the administrative offices. Request for reallocations by the panel members will be considered as far as possible. Panel members cannot evaluate proposals in the event of conflicts of interests and are further excluded from the relevant documents and discussions. The administrative offices systematically check whether there are any conflicts of interests. In addition, conflicts of interests must be declared by the panel members.

Allocation of funds to panels: once the eligible proposals are assigned to the panels, the CTBS will allocate the funds to the three panels proportionally to the requested budgets.

2.2 Evaluation phase 1

Evaluation of synopsis, CV and track record by panel members: for every application, at least three panel members elaborate a written review remotely and independently. Two criteria are considered: 1: Scientific quality of the research project, and 2: Qualifications of the applicant (see section 4. Evaluation criteria). Marks and comments are required for each criterion (see section

5.1 Individual reviews). In phase 1, the nature, ambition, projected impact and feasibility of the proposed research are considered as well as the potential and achievements of the applicant.

First panel meeting: the panel meets to discuss each proposal on the basis of the reviews. The main referee presents a given proposal and the co-referees complete the presentation. The other members of the panel are invited to comment. For each proposal, the panel needs to reach a decision (if possible by consensus) which is documented by the main referee. He/she is responsible for drafting the panel summary comment for the proposal, which – besides communicating the marks A, B or C – reflects the outcome of the panel discussion. Only proposals rated A are considered for the second phase of the evaluation. The maximum number of proposals selected for phase 2 corresponds to 50% of the proposals evaluated by each panel. High-quality proposals that are, however, not good enough to pass to phase 2 of the evaluation, are rated B. Proposals of lesser quality are rated C and do not pass to phase 2 of the evaluation either.

CTBS meeting: the Commission verifies whether the recommendations of the panel comply with the procedural rules and decides which proposals are to be admitted to the second phase of evaluation.

Feedback to applicants: all applicants are informed of the result of the evaluation by a decision letter. For rejections, the decision letter takes the form of a ruling, and the evaluation report (see section 5.3.) is made available via mySNF. To successful applicants, the conditions, time and place of the interview are communicated.

2.3 Evaluation phase 2

Suggestion of external experts: for proposals admitted to the second evaluation phase, the main referee is responsible for selecting suitable external reviewers. He/she can be assisted by the co-referees and by administrative offices. The administrative offices ask these experts to review the proposal, after checking whether there are any conflicts of interests and taking into account the negative list of the applicant.

Evaluation of complete proposal, CV and track record by the referees and the external reviewers: the referees do a second remote and independent evaluation or revise the first review based on the complete proposal. Additionally, a minimum of two external reviewers provide a review. All reviews apply the same two criteria as in the first step of the evaluation and use the same scale of marks. However, for each criterion, an additional aspect is considered; for the research project, the appropriateness of methodology, resource planning and time scale are evaluated and for the qualifications of the applicant, his/her commitment is taken into account (see section 4. Evaluation criteria).

Interviews: the applicants are invited to present their project to the review panel. Mostly the main referee and the co-referees ask questions (e.g. concerning critical points emphasised by external experts). The interview lasts approximately 25 minutes. It is up to the panel to decide on the detailed structure of the interview (i.e. how long the presentation or the following question and answer session is to last).

Second panel meeting: just after the interviews, a panel meeting is held to suggest a final rating of all the proposals. For each proposal, the panel needs to reach a decision (if possible by consensus) which is documented by the main referee. He/she is responsible for drafting the panel summary comment, which – besides communicating the marks A or B – reflects the outcome of the panel discussion. The decision is based on all reviews submitted for the second evaluation phase and the interview. The possible outcomes for a given proposal are A (proposals which fully meet

the excellence criterion and are therefore recommended for funding) or B (proposals which meet some but not all elements of the excellence criterion and therefore will not be funded). The budget of the funded projects must be discussed and, if necessary, revised. Each panel forwards its decisions, including the proposed funding, and a panel report to the CTBS.

2.4 Decision

CTBS meeting: the Commission verifies whether the provisional decisions of the panel at the second phase of evaluation comply with the procedural rules and with the allocated panel budget. It then forwards the verified decisions and any comments to the Presiding Board of the Research Council for endorsement.

Meeting of the Presiding Board of the Research Council: the Presiding Board is asked to endorse the final decision.

Feedback to applicants: all applicants evaluated in phase 2 are informed about the result of the evaluation by a decision letter (ruling) and the evaluation reports of the second phase (see section 5.3 Evaluation report). Although they were not the basis for the final decision, the evaluation reports of the first phase will also be communicated to the applicants for their information. For funded applications, the decision letter contains the amount of funding and – if applicable – conditions for funding.

3. Organisation and tasks of the evaluation bodies

3.1 Commission for Temporary Backup Schemes (CTBS)

The CTBS comprises four members: the President of the National Research Council, one member from the humanities and social sciences, one member from biology and medicine and one member from mathematics, natural & engineering sciences (see [“Regulations of the Commission of the Swiss National Science Foundation for the Temporary Backup Schemes for "Horizon 2020"”](#)). With regard to the SNSF Starting Grants, the CTBS is responsible for 1) the appointment and support of the evaluation panels, 2) the selection of the panel chairs, 3) the attribution of funds to the panels and, 4) ensuring that there are no conflicts of interests. At the end of the first evaluation phase, the CTBS verifies whether the recommendations of the panel comply with the procedural rules and decides which proposals are to be admitted to the second phase of evaluation or definitively rejected. Likewise, it verifies whether the provisional decisions of the panel in the second phase of evaluation comply with the procedural rules and the panel budgets. It then forwards the verified decisions to the Presiding Board of the National Research Council for endorsement.

3.2 Evaluation panels

The following three panels will evaluate the proposals:

- Panel for the humanities and social sciences;
- Panel for mathematics, natural and engineering sciences;
- Panel for biology and medicine.

Each panel has between 6 and 20 members who cover the thematic range of the panel and the incoming proposals as well as possible. The panel chair and the panel members are selected by the CTBS on the basis of their excellent scientific reputations and their experience as members of international review panels. Each panel meets twice to carry out the two-phase review of proposals.

Tasks of panel members:

- As panel member: familiarising themselves with proposals of their panel so as to prepare for the meetings;
- As panel member: participating in the two panel meetings and in the interviews;
- As main referee and co-referee: providing a written review of a subset of the proposals for the first and for the second panel meeting (see section 5.1 Individual reviews). Applications are assigned to referees primarily on the basis of the referee's knowledge of the research field addressed by the application;
- As main referee: writing a panel summary comment after both meetings (see section 5.2 Panel summary comment);
- As main referee: suggesting external experts for proposals that have been rated A in the first phase of evaluation, assisted by the two co-referees and/or the administrative offices on request.

Additional tasks of panel chairs, assisted by the administrative offices:

- Chair the panel meetings;
- Check the allocation of the proposals to evaluation panels;
- Assign proposals to panel members for individual reviewing;
- Pay particular attention to the rules on conflicts of interests;
- Ensure the panel produces all necessary deliverables to the required quality standards by the end of the panel meetings (see section 5.2 Panel summary comment);
- Collaborate with the CTBS in order to assess the response to the call for proposals and plan the work of the panel accordingly;
- Prepare a panel report which briefly documents the evaluation methodology implemented by the panel but may include observations and reflections on other relevant topics.

The names of the panel chairs and of the panel members will be published once the applicants have been informed about the outcome of phase 2.

3.3 External reviewers

For the second evaluation phase, the SNSF requires written reviews from at least two external reviewers. These researchers are selected on the basis of their specialised expertise with respect to a given proposal. External reviewers work remotely and independently. They cannot be panel members at the same time.

4. Evaluation criteria

The only criterion guiding the evaluation of the proposals is scientific quality. It will be applied to the assessment of both the proposed research and the scientific achievements and potential of the individual applicant.

4.1 Scientific quality of the research project

- **Ground-breaking nature and projected impact:** to what extent will the proposed research and its projected outcomes affect / transform the research practices of a large number of researchers / research fields?
- **Ambition and contribution of the project beyond the state of the art:** to what extent does the proposed research address grand challenges / important problems at the frontier of a scientific field and promise important advances in knowledge?

- **High risk / high gain balance:** to what extent is the scientific problem / approach non-mainstream and uncertain but balanced by potentially high impact outcomes?
- **Feasibility:** to what extent is the scientific approach feasible against the background of scientific knowledge and overall project design?
- **Appropriateness of the methodology, the resource planning and the proposed time-scale:** To what extent are the chosen methods, the required resources, the team composition and the proposed time scale appropriate for achieving the goals of the project? *This criterion is only used in phase 2 of the evaluation.*

During phase 1 of the evaluation, the criteria are applied to the extended synopsis and during phase 2 to the research plan.

4.2 Qualifications of the applicant

- **Intellectual capacity, creativity and ability to conduct original research:** to what extent has the applicant demonstrated independent and creative thinking which bears the potential for ground-breaking research?
- **Scientific achievements:** to what extent are the achievements of the applicants original and ground-breaking, and to what extent do they go beyond the state of the art?
- **Commitment:** to what extent is the applicant committed to the project and willing to devote a significant amount of time to it? *This criterion is only used in phase 2 of the evaluation.*

In phase 1 and phase 2 of the evaluation, the criteria are applied to the CV and the track record of the applicant.

5. Evaluation outcomes and outputs

5.1 Individual reviews

Panel members and external reviewers provide individual written reviews of the proposals prior to the meetings. Each proposal is reviewed by at least three panel members and – in phase 2 – additionally by at least two external reviewers. The reviews comprise comments and marks based on the two criteria (scientific quality of the research project and qualifications of the applicant).

Each of the reviewers gives the relevant proposal marks ranging from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (non-competitive) based on the two evaluation criteria. Integers and halves are used. The highest mark (4.0) should be reserved for the top 10%, marks 4.0 and 3.5 for the top 20% and marks 4.0, 3.5 and 3.0 for the top 30%. These marks will not be communicated to the applicants as they serve as starting points for the panel discussions (see section 5.2 Panel summary comment).

Comments must be succinct explanations which substantiate the marks awarded to the proposal based on the two evaluation criteria. They should briefly set out the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. They should refer neither to the applicant's age, gender, nationality or other personal matters, nor to the marks or to other proposals and other assessments. The comments will be included in the evaluation report to the applicants.

5.2 Panel summary comment

In phase 1, each proposal is discussed and rated in the panel. On the basis of the marks and comments of the individual reviews and the panel's overall appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses, each proposal is rated **A** (high quality, sufficient to pass to phase 2), **B** (high quality but

not sufficient to pass to phase 2) or **C** (not of sufficient quality to pass to phase 2). The panel summary comment for a proposal includes the overall appreciation of the panel and the rating (A, B or C). It is prepared by the main referee, verified by the panel chair and the administrative offices and included in the evaluation report. The panel summary comment is the most important part of the information sent to the applicant after the evaluation.

In phase 2, each of the remaining proposals is discussed and rated in the competent panel. The rating is based on the marks and comments of the individual reviews, the interview with the applicant and the panel's overall appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. Proposals are rated either as **A** (fully meet all criteria, recommended for funding) or **B** (do not fully meet all criteria, not recommended for funding). The panel summary comment for a proposal includes the overall appreciation of the panel, the rating (A or B) and – for successful proposals, if applicable – a justification of financial cuts. It is prepared by the main referee, verified by the panel chair and the administrative offices and included in the evaluation report.

The comments by the individual reviewers often sufficiently determine the fate of a proposal. In such cases, the panel summary comment might simply confirm the strengths or weaknesses highlighted by the reviewers. In other cases, the panel may take a different position which is not based solely on the reviewer's remarks. This is generally the case when the panel discussion brings to light a crucial weakness in a proposal. The panel summary comment then needs to be correspondingly more elaborate. In addition, a number of proposals of high quality are rejected because they come to lie below the funding line, based on the rating. Reviewers may well make positive comments on proposals in this category. In view of the limited budget, however, the panel is obliged to reject them. In such cases, the panel summary comments may be expressed in these terms.

5.3 Evaluation report

The evaluation report represents the key element of the feedback given to applicants. It comprises all individual reviews and the panel summary comment for phase 1 in case a proposal is rejected at this stage. For proposals which passed to phase 2, the evaluation report includes the individual reviews and the panel summary comment of phase 2. Although they were not the basis for the final decision, the evaluation reports of the first phase will also be communicated to the applicants for their information.

5.4 Panel report

A panel report is addressed to the CTBS. It briefly documents the evaluation methodology implemented by the panel but may include observations and reflections on other relevant topics.

6. Other important principles

6.1 Inter-disciplinary proposals

A proposal is usually attributed to the panel indicated by the applicant. Applicants who consider their proposals to be interdisciplinary (i.e. across panels) should explicitly mention a second panel in the application form. However, thanks to the breadth of the panels, many interdisciplinary pro-

posals can be evaluated by a single panel. The panel in question identifies potentially interdisciplinary proposals during the evaluation procedure and may ask qualified members of other panels to provide additional reviews.

6.2 Exclusion of independent experts at applicant's request

Applicants may indicate up to three persons who should be excluded from the evaluation of their proposal. Such requests must be made when the proposal is submitted and must be justified by well-founded reasons pertaining to direct scientific rivalry, professional hostility or similar situations. If the person identified is an independent expert, he/she may be excluded from the evaluation of the proposal as long as it remains possible to have the proposal evaluated. If the person to be excluded is a member of the competent panel, he/she will be informed in confidence about the request concerning him/her. He/she will be asked to leave the meeting/interview when the concerned proposal is discussed and he/she will not have access to the relevant documents.

6.3 Conflict of interests (CoI)

Devising, organising and conducting scientific evaluation procedures for applications is the main activity of the SNSF. If during this activity a situation occurs in which a decision on an application would be either personally, professionally or financially to the advantage or to the detriment of a person involved in the evaluation procedure, this is referred to as a conflict of interests. However, it is not necessary for the said person to actually have a conflict between rivalling interests, rather any circumstances that are objectively suited to creating the impression of partiality or of a threat to impartiality are sufficient. This objective assessment is made from the point of view of the applicants.

The assignment of proposals to main referees, co-referees and external reviewers should not result in any potential conflicts of interests. Such conflicts can be deemed to exist if a referee/co-referee/external reviewer

- is a mentioned collaboration partner;
- has jointly published or closely collaborated with the applicants in the last five years;
- professionally depends on or competes with the applicants, or has done so until recently or will do so in the foreseeable future;
- works at the same institute as the applicants (or in the same or in a closely linked organisational unit);
- has close personal ties with the applicants (partnership, family ties, friendship);
- is otherwise biased.

Panel members and external reviewers cannot evaluate proposals in the event of conflicts of interest and are further excluded from the respective documents and discussions. The administrative offices systematically check whether there are any conflicts of interests. In addition, conflicts of interests must be declared by the panel members.

The principles with regard to the handling of conflicts of interests are set out in the Organisational Regulations of the National Research Council under "Withdrawals". These regulations will be applied in this evaluation procedure (both for the panel members and the external reviewers). In the Regulations issued by the SNSF, "withdrawal" refers not only to leaving meetings physically, but also to "withdrawing" from documents.

6.4 Searching for, selecting and contacting external reviewers

It is the responsibility of the relevant main referee to select external reviewers for an application. He/she can be assisted by the co-referees and/or the administrative offices on request. In any case, the names of the selected external reviewers must be made available to the administrative offices, and only they will contact the indicated persons via the web platform *mySNF* after clarifying that there are 1) no potential conflicts of interests, 2) the person is not explicitly excluded by the applicant. It is very important that referees provide a sufficient number of names of potential external reviewers as early as possible. Given the response rate with regard to SNSF requests for external reviews (approx. 40%) the administrative offices will ask for 6-8 names of experts. The administrative offices actively monitor the review situation for each application and make the main referee aware of any problems.

6.5 Review of the requested budget

Panels should modify only the requested budget of individual projects and not apply across-the-board cuts. For any modification to the level of the requested grant for a particular proposal there must be specific recommendations in phase 2 of the evaluation. Recommendations for amendments to the amount granted must be documented and explained in the panel comments and based on an analysis of the funds requested to carry out the work. The appropriateness of resources should be evaluated under the heading 'Methodology, resource planning and proposed time scale'. Panels should consider carefully whether recommendations for large reductions may in fact reflect the weakness of a proposal and whether the proposal should rather be rejected altogether.