

29 November 2016 – ba / zm

Meeting of the SELEVAL Sounding Board

21./22. November 2016, Bern

Participants:

Sounding Board:

Agnetha Bladh, Chair of the Board of the Swedish Research Council, Stockholm, S
Hans de Groene, General Director of the NWO, The Hague, NL
Mary Galvin, Dean of College of Science, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, USA

NIFU:

Liv Langfeldt, Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU), NOR

Supporting Group:

Katharina Fromm, Fabrizio Butera, Christoph Dehio, Friedrich Eisenbrand, Alexander Grob, Jürg Steiger, Frédéric Varone, Dimitri Sudan, Marc Zbinden, Stefan Bachmann, Thomas Griessen

Board of SNSF:

Martin Vetterli, President of the National Research Council (morning, of day 1)
Angelika Kalt, Director of SNSF (afternoon of day 1)

Moderation of day 1:

Roland Siegwart, Prof. at ETHZ, former Vice-President ETHZ, former member of Research Council, former NCCR deputy director

On the **first day** the Sounding Board had a joint meeting with the evaluator of NIFU and members of the Research Council who had been involved in the last two calls. In the meeting of the **second day** only the board members, the President of the RC Division IV and SNSF staff members were present. The goal of this discussion was to come to common statements and recommendations of the three board members which are presented in the report below.

1. General comments on the NCCR selection procedure

After a thorough discussion of the selection procedures and the evaluation results, the board members came to the conclusion that the SNSF does a very good job with regard to the international standards of peer-review of large research programmes. The funding agency appears to have learnt from call to call. Documents and procedures have been improved and optimised constantly. Nevertheless, there are still some aspects which deserve adaptations. In the view of the Sounding Board, the main issues to be addressed are the transparency and the length of the procedure. The experts underlined that this is fine-tuning on a high quality level.

The Sounding Board members emphasized that the NCCRs are an excellent funding scheme. Its various features such as autonomy, long-term nature or structure-building ambitions are impressive and make it quite unique even at an international scale. One member summarised its impressions as follows: “It is a wonderful programme to be jealous of.” Yet, this complexity makes the setup of an evaluation procedure a challenging task.

2. General comments on the evaluation by NIFU

The board members appreciated the NIFU evaluation report as a very useful basis for making recommendations for improvements. It helped them a lot to understand how the evaluation and selection process worked, how the different stakeholders perceived it and which were the most sensitive issues. The Sounding board recommends NIFU to elaborate a bit more on the recommendation chapter. It noted that the recommendations by NIFU were better substantiated in the oral presentation than in the draft version of the report. Furthermore, the discussions between the RC, NIFU and the Sounding Board have highlighted the special importance of the Panel Chairs, and the general role of the Research Council in the decision process. The Sounding Board feels that this aspect should get some more emphasis in the report

The Sounding Board is convinced that the NIFU report together with their own statements and recommendations are a good basis for the SNSF to adapt the NCCR selection procedures. They commended the combination of the evaluation providing data and evidence and the “peer-review” approach with the Sounding Board.

3. NIFU results / recommendations and comments by the Sounding Board

Recommendation 1: Increase the number of experts per proposal

Currently more external review effort is invested at the pre-proposal stage than for the full proposals. This should be changed because the hard decisions are made at the full proposal stage. The Sounding Board agreed that for each project there should be **at least 3 external reviews**. If these reviewers are not members of the panels (as at the preproposal stage), the number could even be increased. With a higher number of external reviews at hand, the SNSF could also consider to have only 3 thematically broader selection panels.

By systematically integrating members with management experience, the panels should be able to evaluate not only the scientific quality but also the structural and centre-related aspects. The interviews in the full proposal stage may become a bit longer. It can also be considered if

representatives of the home institution should be part of the delegation of the applicants. Another solution could be a separate meeting with the home institution, where the main applicant also is present. Some funding agencies even make site visits during the selection process.

Recommendation 2: Allow rebuttals from applicants

The applicants should get the **opportunity to react to the written external reviews**. The opportunity for rebuttals can be granted at the pre-proposal stage, at the full proposal stage or even at both stages. Whether and at which moment rebuttals may be granted also depends on how the evaluation is set-up, for example with regard to the method of peer-review of the pre-proposals or whether the pre-proposal decisions are binding for the submission of full proposals. Rebuttals on the full proposal level should preferably be submitted in writing before the panel meeting. They add to the quality and transparency of the process.

Recommendation 3: The assessments of the structural aspects have to be clarified and made more transparent.

The NIFU reports shows that it was not clear to the applicants what the **role of the structural assessments** was and which actors made decisions based on the structural assessments at which moment in the procedure.

This raises several open questions: What is the intended role of the structural assessments for the selection decisions? Is there a need for a separate assessment of the structural aspects or can they also be assessed by the panel members? Do the structural aspects need to be evaluated both at the pre-proposal and at the full proposal stage? Should SNSF define clearer requirements and thresholds for the structural aspects?

The Sounding Board members see a clear need for clarification of the structural assessments and for a transparent communication about this issue to the applicants. These points should be made clear at the very beginning of the process, in the call. The board refrains from making concrete suggestions here, because a lot is depending on the science policy goals which are assigned to the NCCRs. But they all agree that the conformity of the NCCR proposals with the strategy of the Home Institutions must be an important criterion.

Along the same line, applicants and evaluation panel should be fully aware of the “management criteria” as for example the management structure, the integration planning and the management and leadership by the applicants.

Recommendation 4: Clarify the need for ranking the full proposals

The **need for a ranking of the proposals must be clarified** in advance as well as the role of the panels and of the Research Council in this process. The Sounding Board understands the difficulty to bring the results of the different panels into one ranking list. Science policy aspects would inevitably become part of this decision. However, considering all involved stakeholders and their ability to integrate the diverse criteria, the Research Council seems by far the most appropriate body to judge and rank the proposals. This means that it is the Sounding Board’s opinion that the Council should not delegate too much of the selection to the home institution. And it should accompany the (possibly ranked) short list with an assessment on the criteria, on which the SERI will base its decision upon.

An additional idea would be to ask the universities to rank the supported proposals coming from their institution. However, this could generate too many tensions between the institutions and their applicants, as well as transferring peer review work from SNSF to institutions.

Recommendation 5: Shorten the time for the entire submission and review

The Sounding Board members unanimously are of the opinion that the whole process between publication of the call and communication of the final decisions to the applicants takes too much time (30 months).

The Board members see several possible measures to **shorten the selection process**; they can be combined in various ways:

- **Limit the number of pre-proposals:** The SNSF should consider to give a maximum number of pre-proposals which can be supported per Home Institution. This maximum number could for instance correspond to the expected maximum number of new NCCRs that can be approved. (The Dutch NWO example is even stricter: For 6 new projects within a collaborative programme they set the limit per university to 4 applications). The limit should be the same for small and for big universities. The Sounding Board suggests that SNSF is launching a discussion with the institutions (Rector's Conference) to clarify how they could handle these stricter requirements for their internal pre-selection procedure.
- **Shorter pre-proposals:** The pre-proposals could be limited to the general vision, the coherent research programme for the first 4 years, the list of the Principle Investigators and their projects, and a chapter on organisation, management and leadership. The reduced number of topics to be treated in the pre-proposal will lead to a reduced list of criteria for this first selection step. Since shorter pre-proposals may raise the number of submissions, this measure may be combined with the limitation of applications per institution (see above).
- **Pre-proposal panel:** The appointment of one broad interdisciplinary panel should not be changed. To ask for letters of intent before the formal submission of the pre-proposals could help to have sufficient time to search for suitable experts. The need for additional external written reviews is depending on the size of the pre-proposals and the applied review criteria. In the case of quite short submissions, each external reviewer should receive several pre-proposals to allow for cross-comparison. The ABC-decisions could be made binding for the submission of a full proposal. However, the data of the past NCCR calls shows that there were always some B-pre-proposals which succeeded in the end. At least the C-rated pre-proposals could be formally rejected. Reviews from the pre-proposal panel should be made available to the full proposal panel in order to avoid inconsistent feedback.
- **Reduce preparation time for the applicants:** Compared to funding agencies in other countries, the SNSF is quite generous with respect to the time they grant to the applicants for the preparation of their submissions. The preparation time may be cut at both stages.

The Sounding Board added the following points:

Recommendation 6: Increase transparency wherever possible at all stages of the process

It is evident that a decision process of that length and with so many involved actors has a need for the **highest possible transparency**. The NIFU surveys and interviews show that the steps before the submission (pre-selection by Home Institutions) and after the decision on the shortlist by the SNSF (assessment and final decision by the federal authorities) are perceived as particularly non-transparent by the applicants. The board members were surprised that the final decisions are taken in the ministry. Such a procedure is considered highly unusual for a scientific programme

and internationally no similar cases are known. On the other hand they appreciated that the political actors were not interfering with the research areas in the last two NCCR calls. Nevertheless, the SNSF has also considerable potential to improve transparency. This refers primarily to the recommendation 3 / 4 (structural assessment and ranking) and to the following comments on the role of the different categories of panel members (recommendation 7).

Recommendation 7: Reconsider the role of the Research Council members in the panels and how this is communicated

The survey shows that the **role of the RC members in the panels** is not clear to many applicants. They are often not aware that the scientific assessment is done exclusively by the international experts and that the RC members are only there as observers and to give information on the Swiss context. The fact that the panels are chaired by members of the Research Council suggests that they play a decisive role. Everything they do and say during the meeting can be interpreted as a signal from the SNSF by the applicants and by the panel members. This setting would not be up to the standards in the home countries of the Sounding Board members. They recommend that the panel is chaired by an international member which is not an assigned expert for one specific proposal, but has rather a generalist's view. An alternative would be to elect a retired professor as chairperson who has a lot of experience with evaluation meetings. A Research Council member could still give an introductory presentation to the panel and answer to the questions of the international experts. During the presentation and discussion of the proposals, they should refrain from interfering.

If the SNSF wants to stick to the current model, the responsible RC member should at least not be called "chair" but "moderator".

4. Conclusions

The Sounding Board members unanimously agreed that the perceived lack of transparency and the long duration of the whole procedure are the two main issues to be tackled before launching the next NCCR call. Many of the recommendations commented above are linked to these issues. The board members emphasized that their suggested solutions are just advices from their own experiences. It will be the task of the SNSF Research Council to thoroughly discuss the raised issues and find the solutions which are best adapted to the Swiss context. The Council has proven in the past that it has a remarkable potential for self-reflexion and continuous adaptation of the procedure.