

# Evaluation Guide

Rules of procedures for *ex-ante* evaluation, selection and granting.

## FOREWORD

### THE FUND FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH – FNRS<sup>1</sup>

The mission of the FNRS aims at promoting free (fundamental) scientific research within the French-speaking Community of Belgium (CFB)<sup>2</sup> through its grant allocation process for researchers and institutions (mostly CFB universities).

In order to fulfil this mission, the FNRS has set up funding instruments, which are subject to calls for proposals occurring at different times along the year. The granting depends on a peer review of the quality of the proposal and is based on scientific excellence.

### FNRS CALLS FOR PROPOSALS AND DOCUMENTS

The documents related to the calls for proposals include:

- the regulations, which specify the requirements for the calls and the functioning modalities in case of granting;
- the guide for applicants, which describes the general principles of the calls and the functioning of each instrument;
- the guide for reviewers, which specifies the rules to be applied for the proposals' evaluation, and the characteristics of each instrument to experts who take part in the two *ex-ante* evaluation steps;
- the evaluation guide, which presents the rules for the evaluation, selection and granting procedures.

Rules and regulations adopted by the Board of Trustees of the FNRS constitute the reference framework of the calls. They are thus the only documents that bind the FNRS.

All the calls for proposals are announced on the [FNRS website](#), where the related documents can also be found.

### CONTENT OF THE EVALUATION GUIDE

The guide provides a comprehensive presentation of the evaluation process of the FNRS and is divided into 4 parts:

- the first part specifies the general funding principles of the FNRS;
- the second part describes the submission steps for a proposal;
- the third part presents the peer review process;
- the fourth part describes how the evaluation is finalised by the Board of Trustees of the FNRS.

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<sup>1</sup> In order for the document to be easier to read, the Fund for Scientific Research – FNRS (F.R.S.-FNRS) is shortened to “FNRS” hereinafter.

<sup>2</sup> In order for the document to be easier to read, the French-speaking Community of Belgium is shortened to “CFB” hereinafter.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION: THE FNRS & ITS FUNDING SCHEMES

## 1.1 CALLS FOR PROPOSALS OF THE FNRS

Every year, the FNRS organises several calls for proposals divided into different major instruments carried out within the framework of a bottom-up approach: researchers are free to suggest the research theme they seek to develop, within the research institution that agrees to host them, on condition that the institution provides access to the FNRS funding for the related instrument.

The three main FNRS calls are spread over the year and include 3 major types of instruments:

- The “Grants and Fellowships” call, opening in December: instruments that fund researchers with four different levels of expertise;
- The “Credits and Projects” call, opening in spring: instruments that fund individual or collaborative research based on researchers' initiative;
- The “Large equipments” call: instruments that focus on research infrastructures and the like.

Besides, complementary grants may be allocated independently of these calls via permanent instruments dedicated to ‘life of research’ (Mobility, Congresses...).

The eligibility criterion which is common to all the instruments is that applicants must pertain to a CFB research institution or to a state scientific institution.

The FNRS reviews the proposals in order to identify those whose quality is high enough and deserving to be granted.

## 1.2 PRINCIPLES

The selection of the application files submitted under the funding schemes of the FNRS is performed on the basis of scientific excellence, and depends on a peer review.

To that end, the Board of Trustees of the FNRS shall appoint independent experts that participate in the evaluation of proposals.

This evaluation guide establishes the rules for the evaluation, selection and granting procedures. These rules are based on the following principles:

- **Excellence**: the applicants selected to receive a grant must show a high level of quality with regard to the criteria presented in the calls for proposals.
- **Transparency**: the decision to allocate a grant is based on rules and procedures clearly defined. Besides applicants should be given sufficient information about the results of the evaluation of their proposals.

- **Confidentiality:** all the proposals, data and related documents communicated to the FNRS are considered confidential. Only the information contained in the applicant's summary sheet is considered public. In case of granting, this information will be used on the FNRS website or in any other document intended for the public, for the sake of both transparency and the duty to account for the proper use of public monies (accountability).
- **Ethical aspects:** in the context of any evaluation process, the FNRS refers to the great principles of an ethically justified scientific practice as defined by the Code of Ethics for Scientific Research in Belgium, and to the international standards.

### 1.3 GENERAL PROCEDURE OF THE EX-ANTE EVALUATION

For the instruments related to calls for proposals, the Board of Trustees of the FNRS has adopted the principle of a one-phase and a two-step evaluation of the proposals. The entire process occurs in three successive parts involving key factors:

- **The administrative work:** for the instruments related to this type of evaluation, the FNRS receives proposals submitted through [SEMAPHORE](#), a web-based management platform dedicated to the calls for proposals.
- **The evaluation** is divided in **two** different **steps** (except for some instruments). Step 1 consists in the remote individual evaluation and depends on experts selected by the FNRS who are specialised in the field of the proposal. Step 2 depends on Scientific Commissions made up of experts who meet in sessions in order to set up a consolidated ranking and finalise the evaluation reports of the applicants.
- **The funding decision** is made when the Board of Trustees of the FNRS approves the funding and provides the applicants and promoters (if any) with the result of their proposal and the final evaluation report. If applicable, depending on the instrument, applicants and promoters may receive the evaluation report issued by the first-step individual experts anonymously.

### 1.4 THE GUIDANCE COMMITTEE

The Guidance Committee (COMA - Comité d'accompagnement) is made up of 13 members:

- 12 members: each scientific field (SEN: Exact and Natural Sciences; SVS: Life and Health Sciences; SHS: Human and Social Sciences) is represented by 4 members, who are appointed by the UCL (1 member), the ULB (1 member), the ULg (1 member) and the small and medium sized universities, i.e., UNamur, UMons or USL-B (1 member);
- The Guidance Committee shall be chaired by the Secretary General of the FNRS.

The Guidance Committee shall suggest a composition of the Scientific Commissions to the Board of Trustees of the FNRS and the list of possible individual reviewers.

Moreover, the Guidance Committee may suggest possible improvements of the procedure on the basis of the experience of its members in the evaluation procedure.

## 1.5 OPEN ACCESS POLICY

The Board of Trustees of the FNRS has decided to endorse the principle of Open Access to scientific publications supported in full or in part by public funding. This support has led to the implementation of an institutional mandate concerning open access to publications from FNRS funded research projects and by researchers under the “Open Access Green Road” business model.

This [mandate](#) specifies the conditions under which the FNRS grant recipients shall store, when possible, all the funded research results of which they are authors or co-authors in their institution's repository.

Any scientific publication which has benefited from a grant from the FNRS shall mention the source of the funding as follows: “*This work was supported by the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique - FNRS under Grant(s) n° [ID number]*”. The same procedure applies to open access publications.

## 2. SUBMISSION OF THE PROPOSALS

### 2.1 CALLS FOR PROPOSALS

The annual calendar of the calls for proposals is published on the [FNRS website](#).

For each call the FNRS shall create or update all materials that are available to the applicants.

### 2.2 PREPARATION OF THE PROPOSAL<sup>3</sup> BY THE APPLICANT

The applicant makes a certain number of choices that do have an impact on the evaluation process of the project:

- when choosing the language of the proposal (French or English), the applicant will influence the selection of individual reviewers who can read and understand either French or English;
- when selecting descriptor fields and depending on the summary of the project, the applicant will guide the FNRS in the selection of individual reviewers;
- if necessary, the applicant may indicate up to 3 experts s/he does not wish to have as reviewers and justifies her/himself;
- the applicant will have to select the Scientific Commission that will be in charge of finalising the evaluation of the proposal.

It is recommended to applicants who wish to have their application file assessed by [Scientific Commissions](#) dedicated to SEN (Exact and Natural Sciences) and SVS (Health and Life Sciences) domains to submit their application in English<sup>4</sup>.

### 2.3 SELECTION OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMISSION AND DESCRIPTOR FIELDS

When submitting an application via SEMAPHORE, applicants shall select their Scientific Commission. Then they will have to select from 2 to 6 descriptor fields in order of

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<sup>3</sup> Notice to applicants: the FNRS insists on **strict compliance of the number of pages** allowed for documents that shall be enclosed with the application form and stresses again the sovereign consideration of the Scientific Commissions in case the file would exceed the applicable page limit.

<sup>4</sup> Should the application file be submitted in French, the FNRS may require the applicant to provide a translation in English for the purpose of conducting the ex-ante evaluation. Applicants who select the Scientific Commission FORESIGHT, dedicated to research projects relating to sustainable development (covering Nature Sciences, Applied Sciences, Human and Social Sciences), must demonstrate the "sustainable development" part of their research project, including interdisciplinary aspects (2000 characters max.).

relevance. Notice that at least 2 descriptor fields<sup>5</sup> must be relevant to the Scientific Commission of their choice and, they may complete their selection with unrestricted keywords, if necessary.

When selecting the Scientific Commission, applicants should consider the various Scientific Commissions as a whole and make a choice while taking into account all the fields covered by the Scientific Commission desired.

## **2.4 SUBMISSION OF THE PROPOSALS**

The proposals may be submitted either in French or in English via [SEMAPHORE](#), the web-based application available to anyone involved in a proposal: applicant(s), validating person(s), referees, reviewers, and the FNRS administrative staff.

Each person is identified with a user ID and a password. The access and display are adjusted in accordance with one's role.

During the preparation of the electronic file, basic controls are performed online, in particular on some eligibility conditions related to the selected instrument, and on the completeness of the required data (mandatory fields).

As soon as the applicant finishes and validates the proposal, it is automatically submitted to the "validating person(s)" for approval. A "validating person" is someone (promoter, rector...) in charge of a validation task of the proposal, as part of the submission process.

The submission is considered effective once the last "validating person" required by the instrument has validated the proposal.

In the event a "validating person" refuses to validate a proposal before the online submission deadline, the applicant is automatically informed and can modify the application file or submit a new one, if s/he wishes to do so. However, if this refusal occurs after the deadline, the proposal is then automatically rejected (see eligibility).

## **2.5 RECEIVING THE PROPOSALS**

### *2.5.1 VERIFYING THE ELIGIBILITY*

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The administrative staff of the FNRS ensures compliance with the closing date and hour indicated in the call and verifies the eligibility of the proposal for the selected instrument.

To be evaluated, the proposals must meet the eligibility criteria. If it clearly appears before, during, or after the evaluation phase that a proposal does not meet one or several of these criteria, including the completeness of the file, the FNRS will consider it

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<sup>5</sup> *In the case applicants select only one descriptor field relevant to the Scientific Commission selected, they shall justify the selection concerning the Scientific Commission in the application form.*



ineligible and will retrieve it from the evaluation process. The FNRS will then notify the applicants concerned.

### *2.5.2 CONTACTING REFEREES*

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For instruments where referees may be required to give an opinion on some of the applicant's qualities, the FNRS shall contact the persons the applicant has indicated and specify the information they will have to provide.

Opinion letters from promoters as well as from referees are confidential and are intended to be for the use of members of the Scientific Commissions only.

### 3. EVALUATION OF THE PROPOSALS

The calls for proposals of the FNRS have some evaluation principles in common:

- Applicants are aware of the evaluation criteria while preparing their proposal;
- Except for some instruments<sup>6</sup>, the proposals are reviewed in two steps:
  - The first step is performed by remote individual experts,
  - For the second step, Scientific Commissions gather in meetings to establish a consolidated ranking of the proposals;
- The Board of Trustees of the FNRS relies on the help of remunerated experts, who do not belong to the FNRS, and mostly come from outside the CFB (these independent experts are the key actors of the evaluation);
- The composition of the Scientific Commissions is published on the FNRS website at <http://www.fnrs.be/>;
- The names of the reviewers linked to a proposal remain undisclosed;
- A final evaluation report is sent to the applicants and to the possible promoters, notifying them of the decision of the Board of Trustees of the FNRS. The report is prepared by “rapporteurs” and “co-rapporteurs”, who are members of the Scientific Commissions;
- The decision to fund proposals is made by the Board of Trustees of the FNRS.

#### 3.1 INDIVIDUAL REVIEWERS (STEP 1)

Experts who are selected according to the research field of the proposal mostly come from outside the CFB.

An expert is entrusted with the task of providing a written argumentative appraisal (notes and comments) concerning the proposal based on the evaluation criteria known by the applicants, using the language chosen by the applicant.

An expert is usually in charge of reviewing several proposals, which may depend on different instruments within the same call for proposals. However, the expert is not required to establish any ranking between them, as each proposal must be reviewed independently. A marking grid for the proposals is provided in section 3.6, with the intention to standardise the grading system.

Experts must possess the required skills and knowledge in the fields in which they are expected to intervene, as well as a high level of professional experience. There is no nationality criterion required for this role.

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<sup>6</sup> Instruments intended for young researchers who expect to obtain a doctoral thesis do not provide for the participation of individual reviewers (step 1). Indeed, for such instruments, the proposal is assigned to two “rapporteurs”, both members of the Scientific Commission selected by the applicant.

Moreover, for instruments which are not related to calls for proposals, or in case of a request for an extension or a renewal of a proposal that has already been reviewed in a previous session, the Board of Trustees of the FNRS bases the funding decision on opinions, which recommend or not the continuation of the funding for a new period. Depending on the instruments, opinions may come from referees, academic authorities, a dedicated Commission, etc.

The Presidents of the Scientific Commissions, before whom the proposals are submitted, shall validate the selection of individual experts who should assess those proposals.

In order to build a pool of experts, the FNRS constitutes a database, from which the individual experts considered for a given call for proposals are selected. The call for experts is open permanently. The Board of Trustees of the FNRS is responsible for their appointments.

## **3.2 THE SCIENTIFIC COMMISSIONS (STEP 2)**

### *3.2.1 NUMBER AND THEMES OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMISSIONS*

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Fourteen [Scientific Commissions](#) are established. Their respective expertise is defined by descriptor fields available on the FNRS website.

([http://www.fnrs.be/docs/Reglement-et-documents/FRS-FNRS\\_Champs\\_descripteurs.pdf](http://www.fnrs.be/docs/Reglement-et-documents/FRS-FNRS_Champs_descripteurs.pdf)).

These Scientific Commissions are divided as follows: 13 thematic Scientific Commissions, mainly built up from the ERC's (European Research Council) domains: 4 dedicated to Exact and Natural Sciences (SEN-1 to SEN-4), 4 dedicated to Health and Life Sciences (SVS-1 to SVS-4) and 5 to Social Sciences and Humanities (SHS-1 to SHS-5).

A 14<sup>th</sup> Scientific Commission is competent to deal with the strategic and interdisciplinary field of sustainable development (FORESIGHT).

### *3.2.2 COMPOSITION OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMISSIONS<sup>7</sup>*

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Each Scientific Commission is made up of 9 members selected from outside the CFB, including the President, and 6 members chosen among the members of the academic institutions of the CFB, or among Research Associates, Senior Research Associates, and Research Directors of the FNRS.

### *3.2.3 MISSIONS OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMISSIONS*

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The Scientific Commissions shall meet at the FNRS (Rue d'Egmont, 5 – 1000 Brussels) to establish a consolidated ranking of the proposals that will be suggested to the Board of Trustees of the FNRS. They also validate the final evaluation report to be sent to the applicant and to the possible promoter ("Researcher" instrument), along with the notification of the decision of the Board of Trustees of the FNRS.

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<sup>7</sup> In case of candidacy for promotion, only Research Directors among FNRS researchers are allowed to sit on the Scientific Commission.

In order to carry out their work, the Scientific Commissions have the application files (on [SEMAPHORE](#)), individual evaluation reports (if applicable) and consolidated draft reports prepared by the “rapporteurs” at their disposal. The Scientific Commissions base their decisions on the evaluation criteria, which are provided both to the applicants and the first-step reviewers.

#### 3.2.4 ROLE OF THE PRESIDENTS

The President of a Scientific Commission is in charge of:

- Validating step 1 experts to whom the administrative staff of the FNRS has assigned the submitted application files (fellowships and projects);
- Nominating “rapporteurs” and “co-rapporteurs” from among the members, and assigning them proposals related to their fields of expertise while making sure to equally distribute the workload;
- Leading the work of the Scientific Commission, in an independent way;
- Organising a vote in which all members participate, if the “consensus” procedure is unsuccessful;
- Signing the final evaluation reports to be addressed to the applicants.

#### 3.2.5 ROLE OF THE “RAPPORTEURS” AND “CO-RAPPORTEURS”

For instruments aiming at obtaining a doctoral thesis, given that individual experts (step 1) are not involved, the weight of the “rapporteur” is thus crucial within the evaluation procedure. Therefore, a second “rapporteur” is designated. The “rapporteurs”, both members of the Scientific Commission selected by the applicant, shall draw up a preliminary evaluation report individually in order to prepare the work and the debates of the Scientific Commission.

For the other instruments, each proposal is assigned to a single “rapporteur”, who is assisted by a “co-rapporteur” for the task. Both are members of the Scientific Commission selected by the applicant.

- The “rapporteur” shall prepare the work and the debates of the Scientific Commission, through the elaboration of a consolidated evaluation draft report, based on individual evaluations. The draft report will afterwards be reviewed by the Scientific Commission.
- The “co-rapporteur” is not required to draw up any evaluation report but will be invited to express his/her opinion on the proposal during the meeting of the Scientific Commission. The “co-rapporteur” is expected to bring a complementary perspective or a different point of view.

If the instrument provides for the participation of individual experts (step 1), and if a major disagreement arises concerning their reports, the “rapporteur” can organise a debate (by email) before the meeting of the Scientific Commission to reach a consensus, in which s/he will act as a moderator.

At the end of the meeting, the designated “rapporteur” shall draw up the final evaluation report intended for the applicant on the basis of preliminary reports and considering the discussions held by the Scientific Commission.

### 3.3 EXPERTS APPOINTMENT CONDITIONS

The FNRS shall send a letter of appointment to each selected expert, whether they are an individual reviewer or a member of a Scientific Commission. This letter constitutes an agreement between the FNRS and the expert, specifying the precise terms and conditions for the expert: it imposes respect of a code of conduct and lays down essential regulations in terms of confidentiality. It includes the description of tasks s/he is entrusted with, as well as the conditions for the remuneration and reimbursement of expenses.

Upon information provided by the experts, the FNRS has put in place a mechanism that ensures they do not face a conflict of interest regarding the proposals they are invited to evaluate. To that end, experts must sign a declaration stating that there is no conflict of interest at the time of the appointment and that they commit to informing the FNRS in case where such a conflict would arise during the fulfilment of their tasks.

### 3.4 POSSIBLE CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

Experts must cease their work when they might, in any way, benefit from the acceptance or the rejection of a proposal.

Experts shall also disqualify themselves from being an expert in the following circumstances:

- they have an active collaboration with the applicant<sup>8</sup> (i.e. being co-author of a publication with the applicant, having participated in the writing of the proposal, or being involved in the publication or implementation of the possible results of the proposal during the last 3 years);
- they hold (or have held during the last 3 years) a hierarchic or directly subordinate position with regard to the applicant;
- they are currently competing with the applicant for the same position;
- they have introduced a funding application to the FNRS under the same call and as part of the same instrument;
- the applicant is a close person; the notion of closeness will be explained at the time of the appointment;
- they are cited as a referee<sup>9</sup> in an application file submitted by the applicant;
- they have been a member of the applicant's thesis jury and belong to the same university.

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<sup>8</sup> Depending on the call in question, the term "applicant" shall be understood to mean:

- An applicant to a fellowship or the applicant's promoter/co-promoter,
- A promoter/co-promoter or the project leader of a funding request.

<sup>9</sup> A referee is a scientific scholar who has been chosen as a reference person by an applicant (solely for applications to Research Associate "CQ", Senior Research Associate "MR", Research Director "DR", Incentive Grant for Scientific Research "MIS" and Ulysse Incentive Grant for Mobility in Scientific Research "MISU" fellowships). The FNRS will send an email to referees inviting them to provide a support letter.

Opinion letters are confidential and intended to be for the use of members of the Scientific Commissions only.

Experts shall cease their work in case where they face any other situation that may raise doubts as to their ability and impartiality to evaluate the proposal, or that could reasonably give an external third party this impression.

### 3.5 EVALUATION CRITERIA

The objectives of each instrument and their related evaluation criteria and possible weightings are explained in detail and for each call in the guide for reviewers destined to help the reviewers in different practical aspects of their work and more particularly to provide clear rules and contribute to consistency among individual reviewers and the Scientific Commissions.

### 3.6 PROPOSALS GRADING SYSTEM

The experts (individual experts as well as members of the Scientific Commissions) shall review the aspects to be considered for each evaluation criterion and classify the proposals into three categories:

Categories	Grades	
<b>A</b> <sup>10</sup>	A+	outstanding
	A	excellent
	A-	very good
<b>B</b>	B+	good
	B	average
	B-	weak
<b>C</b>	C	insufficient

Experts must provide comments - preferably in the language chosen by the applicant - (stressing on the strengths / the weaknesses / providing general comments) consistent with the categories assigned and that can be used to sustain the work of the "rapporteurs" of the Scientific Commissions and the final evaluation report to be sent to the applicant.

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<sup>10</sup>Proposals to be funded, depending on the budget available.

## **4. FUNDING DECISION AND FINALISATION**

The funding decision (granting or rejection) is within the competence of the Board of Trustees of the FNRS.

### **4.1 FUNDING DECISION**

At the end of the evaluation, the decision on the funding will be made by the Board of Trustees of the FNRS, depending on the budget available, and on the basis of the final grading and final consolidated reports elaborated by each Scientific Commission. The Board of Trustees shall decide on the granting or rejection, as well as on the granted amounts, if necessary.

### **4.2 COMMUNICATION TO THE APPLICANTS**

The administrative staff of the FNRS shall inform the applicant(s) about the funding decision related to their proposal and communicate to the applicant(s), and to the promoter(s) if applicable:

- the final evaluation report, and
- the evaluation reports by the first-step individual experts on an anonymous basis as provided for in the instrument process.