

POLISH-NORWEGIAN RESEARCH PROGRAMME

PEER REVIEW GUIDELINES CCS 2013 CALL

These guidelines for reviewers explain how to evaluate proposals in the CCS 2013 Call of the Polish-Norwegian Research Programme. The guidelines are based on Annex 12 to the Regulation on the implementation of the EEA and Norwegian Financial Mechanisms 2009-2014.

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Further call information, forms and guidelines are available on:
www.ncbir.pl/en/norwaygrants.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Objective of the ProgrammeThe objective *the Polish-Norwegian Research Programme* is enhanced research-based knowledge development in Poland through enhanced research cooperation between Poland and Norway. The cooperation is to be based on equal partnerships between Norwegian and Polish research institutions, with the leading role of the latter. Mechanisms implemented to intensify this cooperation include the mobility component, allowing the Polish and Norwegian project partners to take advantage of research expertise of the other partner.

2. PEER REVIEW PROCESS

2.1. ELIGIBILITY OF PROPOSALS

In order to be retained, the proposals must fulfil all of the following administrative eligibility criteria:

- Proposals must be submitted by an entity eligible according to the Programme
- Proposals must be submitted before the deadline
- Proposal must meet the criterion concerning the number of participants (at least 1 entity from Poland and 1 from Norway); the project partners must be entities eligible according to the Programme
- Proposals must be complete (i.e. all of the requested components and forms must be included). Proposals must respect the requested format.

Eligibility check is carried out by the NCBR. The provision of false information as well as plagiarism may result in a rejection of the proposal. The proposal which contravenes fundamental ethical principles may be excluded at any time from the process of evaluation, selection and award.

2.2. PEER REVIEWS

Before the evaluation process, the Programme Operator briefs the reviewers on the evaluation process and procedures as well as the evaluation criteria to be applied, and the content and expected impacts of the research topics concerned.

In the first stage, each proposal is sent to **three reviewers** who are asked to complete a written evaluation (using the ‘Review Form’). The reviewers also indicate if the proposal:

- falls entirely out of scope of the call for proposals; and
- deals with sensitive ethical issues.

After the **individual evaluation of a proposal**, the reviewer completes an individual review form confirming their individual reading and assessment.

If the proposal is considered to be out of scope by all reviewers, it may be considered to be ineligible and may not be passed on to the second stage.

In the second stage (called ‘**consensus stage**’) the evaluation progresses to a consensus assessment performed by the three reviewers. Scores and comments of this stage are set out in the evaluation summary report approved by reviewers. Comments are presented in a way to be suitable for feedback to the proposal Project Promoter.

If during the consensus discussion it is found to be impossible to bring reviewers to a common point of view on any particular aspect of the proposal, the Programme Operator may ask additional experts to examine the proposal. In such a case the report sets out the majority view of the reviewers but also records any dissenting views.

Based on the outcomes of the consensus stage from all reviewers, the Programme Operator draws up and presents to the Programme Committee (PC), a ranking list of all the proposals after the evaluation process. Due account is taken of the scores received and any advice from the experts. Based on an overview of all the proposals, the consensus reports and the individual reviews, the Programme Committee decides upon the final ranking list. The final ranking list approved by the Programme Committee contains the proposals which have passed all threshold (with a final score), those which have failed one or more thresholds and those found ineligible during the evaluation process.

The Programme Committee while making its recommendation takes into account the available budget, strategic objectives of the Programme, as well as the overall balance of the proposals to be funded. Also, the suggested grant amount is determined for each proposal.

The mode of deciding upon the final ranking list is described in Chapter 8.

After the final approval of the ranking list by the Programme Committee, the NCBR issues the funding decision for each proposal recommended for funding.

After the funding decision has been issued, the Programme Operator sends electronically a letter, together with an evaluation summary report, to the Project Promoter of each of the evaluated proposals.

2.3. ROLE OF PERSONS INVOLVED IN THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS

2.3.1. Role of Reviewers

Reviewers are **international, independent experts in a specific subject** who are invited to evaluate a research proposal closely related to their field of expertise and to submit a written review. Reviewers are briefed by the Programme Operator on the evaluation procedure before they start the assessment of the proposals.

They are requested to:

- Carefully read the ‘Programme Description’ and the present ‘Peer Review Guidelines’.
- Sign in advance a ‘Confidentiality Agreement’.
- Thoroughly read the assigned proposal.
- Complete and submit a ‘Review Form’ providing comments and individual scoring of the proposal.
- Complete and submit a ‘Consensus Report Form’ providing comments and consensus scoring of the proposal assigned to them.

The Programme Operator concludes an ‘appointment letter’ with each expert. The appointment letter binds the expert to a code of conduct, establishes the essential provisions regarding confidentiality, and specifies in particular, the description of work and conditions of payment.

When evaluating research proposals, reviewers should comment briefly on each selection criterion to the best of his/her abilities, his/her professional skills, knowledge and ethics. The proposals are evaluated impartially on their merits, irrespective of their origin or the identity of the applicants.

Please refer to chapter 6 (Guidelines for Reviewers).

2.3.2. Role of the Programme Committee

The Programme Committee consists of five persons representing Norway and Poland – members of the research community and main research users. In particular, the Programme Committee is to support the Programme Operator and to monitor the implementation of the programme. The tasks of the Programme Committee include:

- approving the selection criteria and the texts of the calls for proposals
- recommending to the NCBR which proposals to select for funding and final awarding of grants
- reviewing progress made towards achieving the objectives of the programme
- monitoring of the implementation of the programme by the NCBR
- reviewing annual programme reports
- proposing revisions of the programme likely to facilitate the achievement of the programme’s objectives
- adopting the Guide for Applicants and the Peer Review Guidelines.

2.3.3. Role of NCBR Programme Management Staff

The NCBR Programme Management Staff will support all involved experts during the evaluation process. They will take care that the Programme rules and procedures are respected. The Programme staff do not provide any information regarding the status of the applications to the applicants while the evaluation procedure is in progress and until the funding decision has been taken.

3. CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

3.1. CONFIDENTIALITY

All research plans and evaluation statements are confidential documents. Application documents should therefore be handled with care and treated as confidential before, during and after the evaluation process.

Reviewers, Programme Committee members and observers must not disclose any information concerning application documents or evaluations to outsiders, nor should they use confidential information to their own or any other party’s benefit or disadvantage.

Reviewers, Programme Committee members and observers must not communicate with applicants on topics related to applications. Reviewers and Programme Committee members’ advice to the NCBR on any proposal may not be communicated by them to the applicants or to any other person. The reviewers will be held personally responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of any documents or electronic files sent, and for returning, erasing or destroying all confidential documents or files upon completing the evaluation as instructed. Reviewers and Programme Committee members and observers may not show the contents of proposals or information on applicants to third parties.

3.2. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All persons involved in the review process are required to declare any personal interests according to the following criteria.

3.2.1. Circumstances in which a conflict of interest may exist¹

A disqualifying conflict of interest exists if a person:

- was involved in the preparation of the proposal
- has had close collaboration with the applicant(s) (e.g. has co-authored and published an article with the applicant during the past three years)
- stands to benefit directly should the proposal be accepted (e.g. is involved in the publication or exploitation of the potential results of the proposal)
- has a close family relationship with any person representing an applicant organisation in the proposal.
- is a director, trustee or partner of an applicant organisation
- is employed by one of the applicant organisations in a proposal
- is in any other situation that compromises his or her ability to evaluate the proposal impartially.

A potential conflict of interest may exist, even in cases not covered by the clear disqualifying conflicts indicated above, if a person:

- was employed by one of the applicant organisations in a proposal within the previous three years
- is involved in a contract or research collaboration with an applicant organisation, or has been so in the previous three years
- 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.

Persons involved in the peer review process must also declare a conflict of interest at any time during the process.

3.2.2. Inability to perform obligations and termination

If for some reason the reviewers are not able to fulfil their obligations for a given work, the NCBR should be informed immediately. The work cannot be delegated to another person without the prior written agreement of the NCBR.

4. GUIDELINES FOR WRITING EVALUATIONS

The following style recommendations² should guide reviewers during the composition of their evaluations:

- The assessment should be more than just a rating and needs good justification for the arguments.

¹ Inspired form POLLUX Peer Review Guidelines

² Inspired from « Reviewers Handbook », 2007 – 2008, MRC.

- 1,5 pages of substantive comments may be sufficient – not too long but enough to be able to back up the assessment and funding recommendation.
- The overall rating should match the comments – otherwise the applicants might not have confidence in the assessment.
- Generalists in the field should be able to understand the comments - care has to be taken not to adopt a bias in favour of work in the expert's own specialism i.e. "x is a vitally important area / scarce discipline etc."
- References to other key papers in the field are useful.
- Set out the strengths and weaknesses of each criterion and of the whole proposal in a structured way.
- Feedback should be balanced with constructive criticism and supported with examples.
- Where appropriate, suggest alternative approaches to improve the proposal.
- Particular concerns should be highlighted about the assessment or aspects of the proposal.

5. SELECTION CRITERIA

Reviewers are requested to evaluate the proposals according to the selection criteria specified in Annex 12 of the Regulation.

The criteria are shown in the following table:

Table 1: Selection Criteria of the CCS Call

Criteria	Description
1. Coherence with the call topic	Relevance in relation to the objectives and areas of the programme
2. Scientific and/or technical excellence	Innovativeness of idea
	Appropriateness of approach
3. Quality and efficiency of the implementation and management	Competence and expertise of applicant team
	Feasibility and efficiency of project plan
4. Impact of the project	Contribution to capacity and competence building
	Intended short-term outcomes
	Intended long-term application of outcomes

All proposals are assessed whether they **fit the description of the 'Thematic Research Priorities'** presented in the 'Programme Description' (chapter 3). If a proposal is not coherent with the programme theme it will be rejected from further evaluation.

The provision of false information as well as plagiarism may result in a rejection of the proposal. The NCBR reserves the right to pursue further steps according to the respective regulations.

5.1. COHERENCE WITH CALL TOPIC

This criterion is considered an elimination criterion. The project proposal should be assessed if it fits the call topic that is if it fits the research areas and objectives of the programme. If the answer is “no”, the project is rejected and there is no need for further evaluation. Please note that answer “no” should be given only in clear-cut cases. If your case is not clear-cut, write your comments, evaluate the proposal and leave it for the consensus assessment stage.

5.2. SCIENTIFIC AND/OR TECHNICAL EXCELLENCE

The scientific quality and/or technical excellence of the research is the most important criterion in evaluating the proposal. The following aspects will be evaluated:

- Innovativeness of idea - originality of project idea, state-of-the-art knowledge of literature and references, ambition and challenge to address scientific or technological problems of current interest and their relevance to an international level of expertise
- Appropriateness of approach - methods proposed have to be sound, rigorous, state-of-the-art and appropriate to the proposed investigation, proposed goals are achieved using a methodology/approach presenting the level of risk that is inherent to a challenging research project.

5.3. QUALITY AND EFFICIENCY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION AND MANAGEMENT

The quality and efficiency of the implementation and management are an important criterion in evaluating the proposal. The following aspects will be evaluated:

- Competence and expertise of the applicant team - Principal Investigator’s knowledge and experience in the field of research and his/her general qualifications to lead the project, relevance and strengths of partners (including resources and infrastructure), quality of previous work of the researchers involved and the level of previous and current (financial) support in the field, results of previous projects.
- Feasibility and efficiency of the project plan - schedule and milestones, compatible with resources, either available or requested, appropriateness of human resources (number of personnel and their qualifications) per partner, appropriateness of budget with respect to planned work.

Projects should be ambitious and feasible at the same time. The project plan has to be evaluated according to the level of competences of the project team and the efficiency of the work plan.

Collaborations with partners from the private sector (small and medium-sized enterprises) are encouraged, depending on the nature of the project.

Moreover, the proposals must make clear why they should be developed cooperatively between participating countries/ institutions and what added value will be created through this collaboration. It is expected that the collaborations developed between Polish and Norwegian entities will deliver significant synergy effects.

The project’s budget should reflect the actual contribution made by each party and should be the subject of negotiation between the project promoter and the project partners. It is expected that the eligible costs claimed by the Norwegian entities participating in the project shall normally not exceed 40% of the total eligible costs of the project.

5.4. IMPACT OF THE PROJECT

The potential impact of research activities is an important criterion in evaluating the proposal. The following aspects will be taken into account:

- Contribution to capacity and competence building - how the project will build the experience and competence of the researchers/organisations involved, how the project will influence a long-term collaboration among the partners concerned, how the acquired competence and capacity will be used in the future projects/programmes (European, international, etc.)
- Intended short-term outcomes - doctoral or post-doc training, ambition and balance of acquisition of expertise, actual research work and dissemination of results, dissemination of the research results among the wider public, foreseen number of publications
- Intended long-term application of outcomes - planned strategies for disseminating and using results during and after the project as well as the description of how potential users are to be involved in the project in view of exploitation of the results i.e. exploitation of intellectual property generated, technical innovations, spin-offs, raising of scientific awareness, improvement of quality of life; intended technical, economic, environmental and societal impacts.

6. GUIDELINES FOR REVIEWERS

This chapter describes the tasks of the reviewers, defined as international, independent experts in a specific subject.

You have been invited to evaluate a research proposal because it is closely related to your field of expertise. Each proposal will be submitted to 3 reviewers.

Before you may access the proposal, you have to sign a 'Confidentiality Agreement'.

Please read the following documents that will be sent to you:

- The 'Programme Description' explains the objectives of the programme.
- The present 'Peer Review Guidelines'.
- The assigned Proposal.

6.1. REVIEW FORM

You are invited to complete and submit the '**Review Form**' sent to you by email. Please provide a written evaluation and a scoring for each criterion as requested in the form.

The 'Review Form' contains 3 parts:

- Part 1: Ethical considerations
- Part 2: Evaluation of the proposal
- Part 3: Overall assessment

6.1.1. Ethical considerations

Please comment if the proposal gives rise to any ethical issues.

6.1.2. Evaluation of the proposal

Please carefully read the descriptions of the criteria in chapter 5 '**Selection Criteria**' and comment concisely on each selection criterion to the best of your abilities, professional skills, knowledge and ethics.

Please also consult the style recommendations in chapter 4 '**Guidelines for Writing Evaluations**' as it is very important that the review is based on coherent comments or arguments that will subsequently help to formulate a consensus report which will be forwarded to applicants, and help the NCBR to reach a decision. It is therefore essential that the NCBR receives sufficiently detailed and coherent assessments for each selection criterion.

6.1.3. Scoring of the proposal

Experts examine the issues to be considered comprising each evaluation criterion, and score these on a scale from 0 to 5. Half points may be given. For each criterion under examination, score values indicate the following assessments:

Table 2: Scoring of the proposal

Score	Explanation
0	The proposal fails to address the criterion under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information.
1 (poor)	The criterion is addressed in an inadequate manner, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
2 (fair)	While the proposal broadly addresses the criterion, there are significant weaknesses.
3 (good)	The proposal addresses the criterion well, although improvements would be necessary.
4 (very good)	The proposal addresses the criterion very well, although certain improvements are still possible.
5 (excellent)	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion in question. Any shortcomings are minor.

Top scores should only be awarded to proposals of exceptionally high quality (high international calibre and major scientific impact).

6.1.4. Overall assessment

Please provide an overall assessment of the proposal and **justify your funding recommendation** (see Table 3: Funding Recommendation based on the Overall Assessment). Make sure that your final recommendation is coherent with the thresholds established for each selection criterion in p. 7 of this 'Peer Review Guidelines'.

Indicate the most important **strengths and weaknesses** of the project proposal and provide any necessary supplementary comments. Please clearly indicate any **modifications** to the proposal that are necessary in your opinion (i.e. budget cuts).

Table 3: Funding Recommendation based on the Overall Assessment

Funding recommendation	Explanation
Not recommended for funding	<p>Project of too low calibre to warrant funding. Major and essential modifications need to be made to achieve an international standard of quality and efficiency of the proposal, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abolition of large portions of a (or entire) work package (unless project can be conducted well without said work package) or need to add important work packages. • Substantial modification of the proposed methodology. • Additional scientific/ technical expertise required for the project.
Recommended for funding	<p>Project of very good quality. Minor modifications to the project plan may improve the quality and efficiency of the proposal, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget cuts (and resources) suggested because of slight overestimation which do not jeopardise the successful completion of work packages and the project while achieving the full range of proposed • Modifications of the work-packages which do not necessitate large changes to the project description. • Minor alterations and considerations that should be accounted for on the level of the methodology.
Strongly recommended for funding	Project of excellent quality that should be funded as proposed.

6.2. CONSENSUS REPORT FORM

After the individual evaluation of a proposal, the three experts assigned to the proposal proceed to a common evaluation and complete 'Consensus Report Form'.

The '**Consensus Report Form**' contains 3 parts:

- Part 1: Ethical considerations
- Part 2: Evaluation of the proposal
- Part 3: Overall assessment

Before drafting the consensus report please consult the style recommendations in chapter 4 '**Guidelines for Writing Evaluations**'.

In order to improve the comprehensibility of the funding decisions, the consensus report needs to fulfil additional quality requirements:

- The arguments in the consensus should be based on the arguments provided in the written reviews. Do not only reiterate individual comments by reviewers but clearly state how the significant individual comments of the reviewers lead to the overall conclusion
- Any new positive or negative argument raised (which does not appear within any of the written reviews) needs to be clearly highlighted and justified with evidence

- The report needs to be coherent throughout the text
- Resolve major conflicting arguments stated within different reviews by proposing a justified opinion/solution
- Factual information which has a major influence on the funding decision needs to be checked on validity
- Criticism should be supported with examples
- Indicate possible modifications or recommendations to improve the quality of the project
- Clearly explain the impact of each statement for the overall assessment. The proposed funding decision should be comprehensible and duly justified. The main argument(s) which lead to a positive or negative funding decision need to be unambiguously highlighted.

Please respect these recommendations as the consensus reports will be forwarded to the Projects Promoters.

6.2.1. Ethical considerations

If there are ethical considerations, please state if they have been sufficiently addressed or if they need to be addressed more specifically.

6.2.2. Evaluation of the proposal

Please carefully read the descriptions of the criteria in chapter 5 ‘**Selection Criteria**’ before providing a written evaluation and a rating for each criterion as requested in the form.

Please also consult the style recommendations in chapter 4 “**Guidelines for Writing Evaluations**” and guidelines for writing a consensus report presented in p. 6.2.

Write a **short assessment and justify your statements** for each criterion:

- Based on strengths and weaknesses of the proposal.
- Resolving conflicting assessments of the reviewers.

6.2.3. Scoring of the proposal

The reviewers examines the issues to be considered comprising each evaluation criterion, and score these on a scale from 0 to 5. Half points may be given. For each criterion under examination, score values indicate the following assessments:

Table 4: Scoring of the proposal

Score	Explanation
0	The proposal fails to address the criterion under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information.
1 (poor)	The criterion is addressed in an inadequate manner, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
2 (fair)	While the proposal broadly addresses the criterion, there are significant weaknesses.
3 (good)	The proposal addresses the criterion well, although improvements would be necessary.
4 (very good)	The proposal addresses the criterion very well, although certain improvements are still possible.

5 (excellent)	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion in question. Any shortcomings are minor.
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Top scores should only be awarded to proposals of exceptionally high quality (high international calibre and major scientific impact).

6.2.4. Overall assessment

Please provide an overall assessment of the proposal without repeating detailed comments provided already in the preceding sections and unmistakably **justify your funding recommendation**. Select your funding recommendation in ‘Part 3: Overall assessment of the proposal’ (see Table 5: Funding Recommendation based on the Overall Assessment). Make sure that your finding recommendation is coherent with the thresholds established for each selection criterion in p. 7 of this ‘Peer Review Guidelines’.

Indicate the most important **strengths and weaknesses** of the project proposal and provide any necessary supplementary comments. Please clearly indicate any **modifications** to the proposal that are necessary in your opinion.

Table 5: Funding Recommendation based on the Overall Assessment

Funding recommendation	Explanation
Not recommended for funding	Project of too low calibre to warrant funding. Major and essential modifications need to be made to achieve an international standard of quality and efficiency of the proposal: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abolition of large portions of a (or entire) work package (unless project can be conducted well without said work package) or need to add important work packages. • Substantial modification of the proposed methodology. • Additional scientific/ technical expertise required for the project.
Inclined not to fund	Project of good to very good quality. Minor modifications to the project plan may improve the quality and efficiency of the proposal: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget cuts (and resources) necessary because of slight overestimation which do not jeopardise the successful completion of work packages and the project while achieving the full range of proposed results. • Modifications of the work-packages which do not necessitate large changes to the project description. • Minor alterations and considerations that should be accounted for on the level of the methodology.
Inclined to fund	
Recommended for funding	Project of excellent quality that should be funded as proposed.

7. THRESHOLDS AND THE RANKING LISTS

The proposal can receive a total number of 25 points in the evaluation procedure. To be recommended for funding, the proposal must receive at least 15 points and pass all the thresholds according to the values presented in the table below.

Table 6: Thresholds

Criteria	Thresholds	Weight
1. Coherence with the call topic	YES	N/A
2. Scientific and/or technical excellence	3/5	x3
3. Quality and efficiency of the implementation and management	3/5	x1
4. Impact of the project	3/5	x1

Based on the evaluation outcomes (evaluation summary reports), the NCBR draws up a ranking list of the proposals submitted under the CCS 2013 Call to be discussed by the Programme Committee.

8. PROGRAMME COMMITTEE MEETING

Prior to the meeting, the NCBR Programme Staff will provide the Programme Committee members with a ranking list, individual reviews, consensus reports and evaluated proposals.

While discussing the ranking list and making recommendation for funding, the Committee takes into consideration the overall quality of the evaluated proposals, indicative budget of the programme area and number of proposals to be funded.

The Programme Committee will also examine and compare the consensus reports and confirm consistency of the scores. Ultimately, the task of the review meeting is to decide about the final ranking order of the proposals on the basis of the total consensus scores assigned to the projects. Within the groups of equally scored proposals, the criteria for ranking are applied in the following order:

- 1) proposals are prioritised according to the scores they have been awarded for the criterion Scientific and/or technical excellence,
- 2) proposals are prioritised according to the scores they have been awarded for the criterion Impact of the project,
- 3) proposals are prioritised according to the scores they have been awarded for the criterion Quality and efficiency of the implementation and the management.

Notwithstanding the above, the PC may decide to change the final score of the proposal received in the consensus report. This right shall be reserved only to cases in which the PC unanimously agrees that there is an unjustified discrepancy between the numerical score and written evaluation of the proposal in the consensus report or unjustified discrepancy between the consensus report and individual reviews.

In such a case the PC awards points for each of the evaluation criteria. The points awarded by the Committee for each evaluation criterion cannot exceed the highest and the lowest score given for that criterion in the individual reviews of the proposal. The score awarded by the PC is final and is taken into account while deciding upon the final ranking list. The weights presented in Table 6: Thresholds are applied.

Each such case shall be decided unanimously and justified in writing by the PC.

Finally, the Programme Committee will approve the ranking list and recommend the proposals for funding to the Programme Operator.