

GUIDELINES ON PROPOSAL EVALUATION AND SELECTION PROCEDURES

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide in one place the guidelines of the Commission on the evaluation and selection of proposals for indirect actions¹ under the sixth framework programmes of the European Community² and the European Atomic Energy Community³ (hereafter “FP6”), as foreseen by Article 10.7 of their respective “Rules for participation”⁴. It describes the basic procedures that the Commission will follow in accordance with the above-mentioned Rules, the Financial Regulation of the European Community⁵ and its Internal Rules of Procedure⁶.

In FP6, the mix of the “new” funding instruments inspired by the concepts of the European Research Area and of the more “traditional” instruments similar to those in the fifth Framework Programme (FP5) has led to a re-examination of proposal evaluation and selection procedures from first principles and an evolution in the practices. That said, the processes for evaluating proposals submitted for funding to research, technological development and demonstration (RTD) programmes of the European Communities continue to rest on a number of well-established principles:

- (i) **Quality.** Projects selected for funding must demonstrate a high scientific, technical and managerial quality in the context of the objectives of the RTD programme in question.
- (ii) **Transparency.** In order to provide a clear framework for researchers preparing proposals for funding and for evaluators evaluating proposals the process of reaching those funding decisions must be clearly described and available to any interested party. In addition, adequate feedback must be provided to proposers on the outcome of the evaluation of their proposals.
- (iii) **Equality of treatment.** A fundamental principle of EU RTD support is that all proposals should be treated alike, irrespective of where they originate or the identity of the proposers.

¹ For measures submitted through public procurement procedures, the Commission’s rules for evaluating such measures apply.

² Decision No. 1513/2002/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 June 2002 concerning the sixth framework programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities, contributing to the creation of the European Research Area and to innovation (2002 to 2006), OJ L 232 of 29.8.2002 p.1

³ Decision No. 2002/668/Euratom of the Council of 3 June 2002 concerning the sixth framework programme of the European Atomic Energy Community for nuclear research and training activities, also contributing to the creation of the European Research Area (2002 to 2006), OJ L 232 of 29.8.2002 p.34

⁴ Regulation (EC) No. 2321/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2002 concerning the rules for participation of undertakings, research centres and universities in, and for the dissemination of research results for the implementation of the European Community Sixth Framework Programme (2002-2006). OJ L 355 of 30.12.2002 p.23

Council Regulation No. 2322/2002 (Euratom) of 5 November 2002 concerning the rules for the participation of undertakings, research centres and universities in the implementation of the sixth Framework Programme of the European Atomic Energy Community (2002-2006) (OJ L 355 of 30.12.2002 p.35)

⁵ Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No. 1605/2002 of 25 June 2002 on the Financial Regulation applicable to the general budget of the European Communities, OJ L 248 of 16.9.2002, p.1

⁶ Rules of Procedure of the Commission, OJ L 308, 08.12.2000, p. 26.

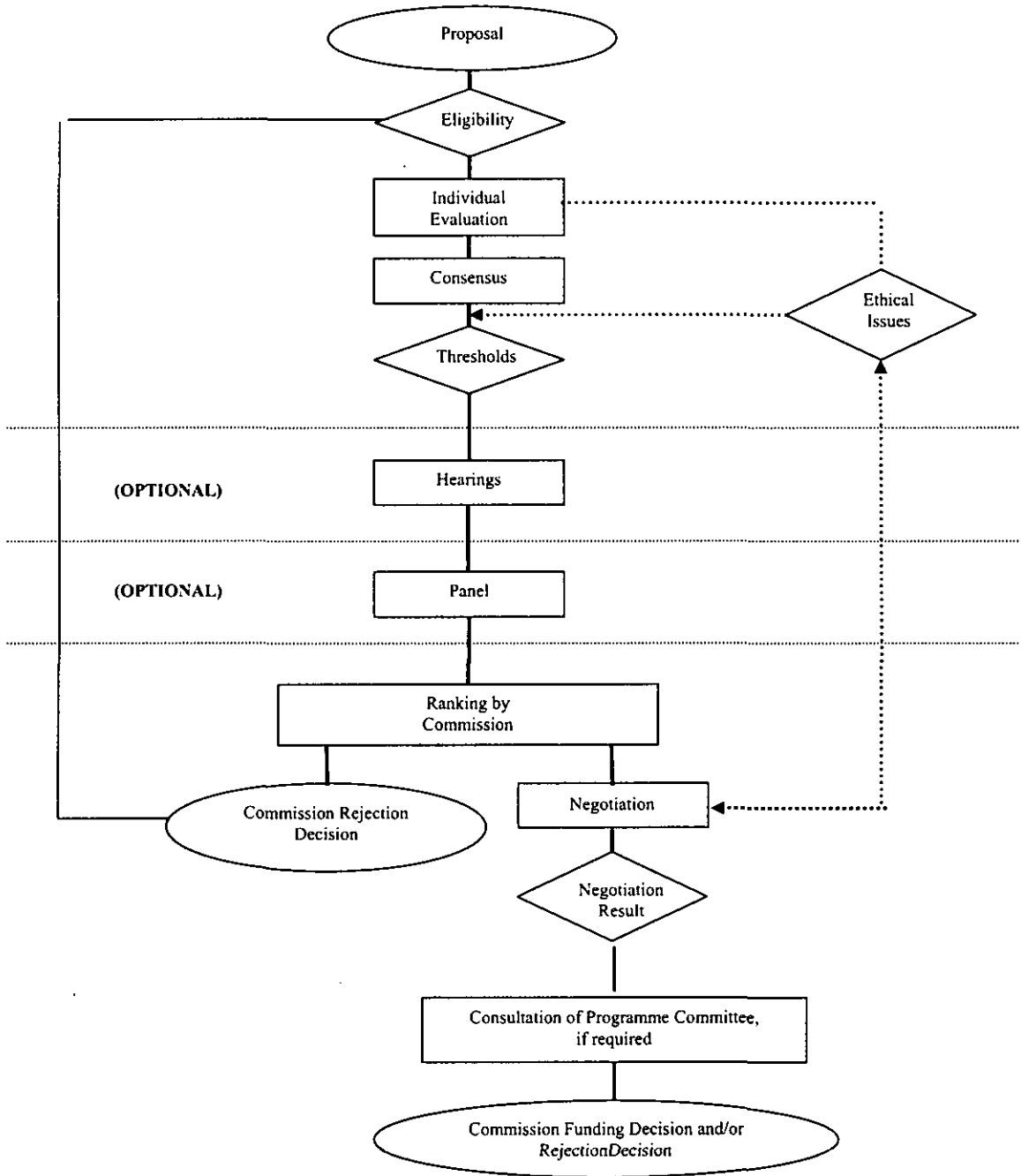
- (iv) **Impartiality.** All proposals are treated impartially on their merits.
- (v) **Efficiency and speed.** The procedures have been designed to be as rapid as possible, commensurate with maintaining the quality of the evaluation, appropriate use of public money and respecting the legal framework within which the specific programme is managed.
- (vi) **Ethical considerations.** Any proposal which contravenes fundamental ethical principles may be excluded from being evaluated or selected at any time.

The major changes between FP6 and FP5 are as follows:

- increasing of the quality of the evaluation process by widening the use of **remote evaluation** and by **widening the pool** from which **evaluators** can be selected.
- strengthening the evaluation system in order to reflect the ambitious goals of the new instruments by allowing for a **more systematic use of two-stage submission, remote evaluation and hearings of proposers** by the evaluation panel.
- codification of **ethical review procedures**.

The Rules for Participation establish that individual programmes/activities will have special needs in some circumstances. This document therefore provides flexibility within a harmonised framework to adapt procedures to particular needs when this is appropriate. The work programmes/calls set out how it is intended to apply the options offered within the above-mentioned Rules, in particular the choices made (where choices exist) and details of each programme's priorities through a description of the marking and weighting system to be used, and the evaluation criteria to be used for the particular area/call.

The various steps involved in the proposal evaluation and selection process are summarised in the following diagram:



2. Evaluators

2.1. Role of evaluators

In accordance with Article 10.6 of the Rules for Participation, the Commission appoints independent⁷ experts to assist in the evaluation of proposals in accordance with the provisions of Article 11 of the above-mentioned Rules, except for some specific support actions where independent experts are appointed if the Commission deems it appropriate. When officials or other servants of the Commission act as evaluators, this is done in accordance with the Financial Regulation of the Community and its rules for implementation.

All proposals that fulfil the eligibility criteria (see section 3.4 below) are evaluated to determine their quality. A minimum of three evaluators examine each eligible proposal submitted to the Commission⁸. Due to the more ambitious nature of Integrated Projects (IPs) and Networks of Excellence (NoEs) it is expected, as a general rule, that at least five evaluators evaluate these proposals.

2.2. Appointment of independent experts⁹

The independent experts appointed by the Commission to assist in the evaluation of proposals for networks of excellence and integrated projects are individuals from the fields of science, industry and/or with experience in the field of innovation with the highest level of knowledge and who are internationally recognised authorities in the relevant specialist area.

For all the other instruments of FP6, the Commission appoints independent experts with skills and knowledge appropriate to the tasks assigned to them. To this end, it relies on:

- (i) Calls for applications from individuals published in the Official Journal of the European Communities; or
- (ii) Calls addressed to research institutions with a view to establishing lists of suitable candidates.

The Commission may at any time select, if it deems appropriate, any individual with the appropriate skills from outside the lists obtained through the above-mentioned calls.

In general, independent experts are expected to have skills and knowledge appropriate to the areas of activities in which they are asked to assist. All independent experts must also have a high level of professional experience in the public or private sector in one or more of the

⁷ An independent expert is an expert who is working in a personal capacity and in performing the work, does not represent any organisation.

⁸ For measures submitted through public procurement procedures, the Commission's normal rules for evaluating such measures apply.

⁹ Article 11.2 (b) and (d) of the Rules for Participation.

following areas or activities: research in the relevant scientific and technological fields; administration, management or evaluation of projects; use of the results of research and technological development projects; technology transfer and innovation; international cooperation in science and technology; development of human resources. In appointing independent experts, the Commission also takes account of their abilities to appreciate the challenges and industrial and/or societal dimension of the proposed work. Experts must also have the appropriate language skills required for the proposals to be evaluated. Experts may come from countries other than the Member States or Associated States.

Details of potential independent experts, including those selected from outside the lists mentioned above, are maintained in a central database. This database may be made available, on request, to national authorities in the Member States and countries associated to the Framework Programmes.

To evaluate the proposals submitted in response to a call, the Commission draws up a list of appropriate independent experts (including if necessary a reserve list). The lists of individuals from which panels of experts may be chosen, are drawn up by the Commission using the following selection criteria:

- an appropriate range of competencies;
- an appropriate balance between academic and industrial expertise and users;
- a reasonable gender balance¹⁰;
- a reasonable distribution of geographical origins of independent experts;
- regular rotation of independent experts.

The list of independent experts to be used for evaluation sessions is decided by the relevant Director(s) or duly appointed delegates. The names of the independent experts assigned to individual proposals are not made public, however, at regular intervals, the Commission publishes on the Internet the list of independent experts used per activity/research area.

An 'appointment letter' (*see annex A*) is addressed to each independent expert containing a description of their duties. This appointment letter establishes the contract with the expert and is the basis for the standard contract for experts during the Sixth Framework Programmes. The attached declaration of Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality (*see annex C*) must also be signed before the expert starts work.

2.3. Rotation principles for independent experts

In general, the Commission will ensure a renewal of at least a quarter of the independent experts used by an activity/research area per calendar year starting from 2004.

2.4. Conflict of interest

In accordance with Article 11.3 of the Rules for Participation, when appointing an independent expert, the Commission must take all reasonable steps to ensure that he/she is not faced with a conflict of interest in relation to the proposals on which he/she is required to give

¹⁰ The European Communities pursue an equal opportunities policy as set out in the Communication "Women and Science: Mobilising women to enrich European research" of 17.02.1999 (COM (1999) 76 final).

an opinion. To this end, the Commission requires experts to sign a declaration that no such conflict of interest exists at the time of their appointment and that they undertake to inform the Commission if one should arise in the course of their duties. When so informed, the Commission takes all necessary actions to remove the conflict of interest.

2.5. Confidentiality

In accordance with Article 10.6 of the Rules for Participation, the Commission is required to ensure the confidentiality of the evaluation process.

To this end, a code of conduct for independent experts is sent to them with the appointment letter before the evaluation of the proposals (see *Annex B*). The experts are obliged to maintain the confidentiality of the information contained within the proposals they evaluate and of the evaluation process and its outcomes and to act with strict impartiality. As mentioned in section 2.2, a *conflict of interest and confidentiality declaration is signed by independent experts (see Annex C)*.

2.6. Independent observers

Independent experts may be appointed as observers to examine the evaluation process from the point of view of its working and execution. The role of the observers is to give independent advice to the Commission on the conduct, fairness and equity of the evaluation sessions, ways in which the procedures could be improved, the evaluation criteria used in the sessions and the way in which the evaluators apply these criteria. They do not express views on the proposals under examination or the evaluators' opinions on the proposals.

The observers are invited to be present from the beginning of the evaluation sessions when the independent experts are briefed by the Commission and observe all phases of the evaluation session, whether carried out at a fixed location or remotely. The observers also observe the process of reaching a consensus whether this is done in meetings or through electronic means.

Observers will not be appointed if they have direct links with the Commission or any other EU institution or body.

The code of conduct for Independent Observers of the evaluation process, describing the selection process, their profile, role and tasks is attached at *Annex D*.

3. Before the evaluation of proposals

3.1. Calls for Expression of interest

The Commission may consult the research community on the readiness to prepare proposals and the likely objectives and relevance of research actions by way of an invitation to submit expressions of interest. Expressions of interest may be used by the Commission in preparing and setting the objectives of work programmes, as well as defining the scope of calls of proposals to implement it.

The submission of an expression of interest is neither a pre-requisite for participation in any future calls, nor a guarantee that a future proposal derived from it shall be selected.

3.2. Calls for proposals

With the exception of specific support actions referred to in Article 9.2 of the Rules for Participation, proposals are submitted under the terms of calls for proposals, provided for in the work programmes and published in the Official Journal of the European Union. A call for proposals may involve a single stage submission and evaluation procedure or a two-stage submission and evaluation procedure. For the latter case, only coordinators of outline proposals evaluated positively in a first stage are invited to submit complete proposals in a second stage (see *Annex E* for details).

3.3. Pre-proposal checks

An informal advisory pre-proposal check service may be offered in some areas (notably for measures for SMEs) by the Commission to researchers. The purpose is to advise potential proposers on whether proposals appear to be eligible and within the scope of the call. Details of the procedure for pre-proposal checks is set out in the relevant Guide for Proposers.

3.4. Submission of proposals

As referred to in the calls published in the Official Journal of the European Union, proposals are submitted in accordance with the following procedures:

- as an electronic proposal via the web-based Electronic Proposal Submission System (EPSS¹¹);
- or on CD or diskette (with a paper 'backup');
- or on the paper forms distributed with information packages.

¹¹ The EPSS is a tool to assist proposers to develop and submit their proposals electronically.

Proposals on CD, diskette or paper may be submitted by mail, courier or hand delivery. Proposals submitted by fax or e-mail will be excluded. Further details of the various proposal submission procedures are given in *Annex J*.

A web-based pre-registration facility is available for all calls. Pre-registration does not commit the proposer to submission of a proposal on the pre-registered topic. The pre-registration information, which is available to the Commission before the deadline for the submission of the proposals, is only used as an aid to the planning of the evaluation sessions.

Packages containing proposals may be opened, on arrival, by the Commission¹² for the purposes of registering the administrative details in databases and to permit the return of an acknowledgement of receipt. For proposals submitted on-line via the EPSS, file contents are entered into the databases after the call closure. No evaluation or analysis of the proposal contents may take place before the call deadline has passed (however, see *Annex F* concerning continuously open calls).

All proposals are archived under secure conditions at all times. When no longer needed, all copies are destroyed except for the original and any copies required for archiving and/or auditing purposes.

With the exception of proposals which are subject to hearings (see section 4.5), there is no further contact between the Commission and proposers on the content of their proposal until after completion of the evaluation.

3.5. Acknowledgement of proposal receipt

Upon receipt of the proposal, the Commission records the date and time of receipt. Subsequently, an acknowledgement of receipt is sent to the proposal coordinator by e-mail, fax, or post containing:

- proposal title, acronym and unique proposal identifier (proposal number);
- name of the programme and/or activity/research area and call identifier to which the proposal was addressed;
- date and time of receipt.

In the case of continuously open calls for proposals with fixed dates for evaluation sessions, special arrangements for the receipt of proposals are set out in *Annex F*.

3.6. Eligibility check

The Commission verifies that proposals meet the eligibility criteria referred to in the call. These criteria are rigorously applied and any proposal found to be ineligible is excluded from evaluation. The eligibility check is carried out after receipt of the proposals. In the case of two-stage proposal submission, each stage is subject to an eligibility check.

¹² Or any contractor retained by the Commission for the purpose of providing administrative services for evaluation sessions.

An eligibility form is filled out for each proposal on the basis of the information contained in the proposal. If it becomes clear before, during or after the evaluation phase that one or more of the eligibility criteria have not been fulfilled, the proposal is declared ineligible and withdrawn from any further examination. Where there is a doubt on the eligibility of a proposal, the Commission reserves the right to proceed with the evaluation, pending a final decision on eligibility. The fact that a proposal is evaluated in such circumstances does not constitute proof of its eligibility.

The following eligibility criteria are checked for all proposals submitted under a call. Where a proposal is received complete in both electronic and paper formats, only the electronic copy is treated as valid and used to make further copies for evaluation purposes.

Only proposals that fulfil all of the following criteria are retained for evaluation^{13,14}:

- receipt of proposal by the Commission on or before the deadline date and time established in the call, if applicable. (See Annex J for further requirements concerning proposal submission).
- minimum number of participants, as referred to in the call for proposals.
- completeness of the proposal, i.e. the presence of all requested administrative forms and the proposal description (N.B. the completeness of the information contained in the proposal will be for the experts to evaluate; the eligibility checks only apply to the presence of the appropriate parts of the proposal).

If more than one copy of the same proposal is received, only the last complete eligible version sent is evaluated. Proposals submitted by fax or e-mail are not eligible.

The decision to exclude a proposal for failing one or more eligibility criteria is taken by the Commission. This decision may be taken at any appropriate moment before, during or after the evaluation sessions, when ineligibility has been proven.

¹³ These criteria may be complemented by additional eligibility criteria provided for in the specific programme decision and/or the work programme.

¹⁴ In accordance with Articles 3, 8 and 10.5 of the Rules for Participation and Article 114 of the Financial Regulation of the Community, each participant may not fall under any of the exclusion criteria referred to therein. These criteria will be assessed, normally at the negotiation stage (see section 6).

4. The Evaluation by independent experts

All eligible proposals are evaluated by the Commission¹⁵, assisted by independent experts where provided for, to examine their conformity with the evaluation criteria relevant for the call.

4.1. Overview of the evaluation by independent experts

Each evaluation session consists of a number of steps, independently of whether the process involves a single stage or a two-stage submission procedure¹⁶.

Step 1: Briefing of the independent experts

All independent experts are briefed orally or in writing before the evaluation by representatives of the Commission's service in charge of the call, in order to inform them of the general evaluation guidelines and the objectives of the research area under consideration.

Step 2: Individual evaluation of proposals

Each proposal is evaluated against the applicable criteria independently by several experts who fill in individual evaluation forms giving marks and providing comments.

Step 3: Consensus

For each proposal a consensus report is prepared. The report faithfully reflects the views of the independent experts referred to in Step 2.

Step 4: Panel evaluation

A panel discussion may be convened, if necessary, to examine and compare the consensus reports and marks in a given area, to review the proposals with respect to each other and, in specific cases (e.g. equal scores) to make recommendations on a priority order and/or on possible clustering or combination of proposals. The panel discussion may include hearings with the proposers.

4.2. Evaluation criteria

A number of evaluation criteria are common to all the programmes of the Sixth Framework Programmes and are set out in the Rules for Participation (Article 10). Work programmes and

¹⁵ Unless the proposal coordinator explicitly requests withdrawal of the proposal in writing.

¹⁶ Due to the variety of specific actions under the Human Resources and Mobility activity and due to the wide scientific range and multi-disciplinary character of the New and Emerging Science and Technologies Activity, the evaluation of proposals under these activities may deviate from the procedures described here - further details are given in Annex H.

calls for proposals determine, in accordance with the type of instruments deployed or the objectives of the RTD activity, how these criteria are applied by the Commission.

Any particular interpretations of the criteria to be used for evaluation are set out in the work programme, in particular the way in which they translate into the issues to be examined. As the Sixth Framework Programmes contain a differentiated set of instruments, these issues may in particular be grouped into blocks as the basis for marking¹⁷ intended to be universal for each type of instrument. Each call will set out the applicable blocks and their respective weights and thresholds.

In all circumstances, proposals are evaluated against the criteria for the instrument for which they are submitted.

In clear-cut cases (for example, a proposal which addresses a research task which is not open in the particular call), a proposal may be ruled out of scope by the Commission without referring it to experts.

Any proposal for an indirect action which contravenes fundamental ethical principles or which does not fulfil any conditions set out in the call shall not be selected and may be excluded from the evaluation and selection procedure at any time. In addition, any participant who has committed an irregularity in the implementation of an indirect action may be excluded from the evaluation and selection procedure at any time.

Special procedures are applied for all proposals that involve an ethical dimension to the research. These are set out in *Annex G*.

4.3. Proposal marking

Evaluators examine the individual issues comprising each block of evaluation criteria and in general mark the blocks on a six-point scale from 0 to 5. In this scheme, the scores indicate the following with respect to the block under examination:

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 0 - | <i>the proposal fails to address the issue under examination or can not be judged against the criterion due to missing or incomplete information</i> |
| 1 - | <i>poor</i> |
| 2 - | <i>fair</i> |
| 3 - | <i>good</i> |
| 4 - | <i>very good</i> |
| 5 - | <i>excellent</i> |

Where appropriate, half marks may be given. If appropriate, evaluators may also be asked to give a mark to each of the individual issues comprising the blocks of criteria. Only the marks for the blocks of criteria are taken into account (after applying any weightings) for the overall score for the proposal.

¹⁷ "Block of criteria" refers to the main numbered headings in the work programme annex under which several issues are grouped

A feature of the procedure as described is to allow the evaluators to reflect on the individual issues comprising the blocks of criteria. By only taking the marks for the blocks of criteria into consideration in the final evaluation of the proposals, evaluators are encouraged to “look at the larger picture” and score the proposal against these important blocks of criteria as a whole, rather than applying a “mechanical” process of adding any marks given on individual issues.

4.4. Thresholds and weightings

- *thresholds*

Thresholds may be set for some or all of the blocks of criteria, such that any proposal failing to achieve the threshold marks will be rejected. In addition, an overall threshold may also be set. The thresholds to be applied to each block of criteria as well as any overall threshold are set out in the call.

If the proposal fails to achieve a threshold for a block of criteria, the evaluation of the proposal may be stopped. The reasons will be detailed in the consensus report.

It may be decided to divide the evaluation into several steps with the possibility of different experts examining different aspects. Where the evaluation is carried out in several successive steps, any proposal failing a threshold mark may not progress to the next step. Such proposals may immediately be categorised as rejected.

- *weightings*

According to the specific nature of the instruments and the call, it may be decided to weight the blocks of criteria. The weightings to be applied to each block of criteria are set out in the call.

4.5. Detailed description of proposal evaluation by independent experts

Independent experts may be invited to carry out the evaluation fully or partially at their home or place of work (remote evaluation) or on Commission premises. In general, remote assessment of proposals is used for the reading and evaluation of proposals by individual experts. *Annex I* covers the procedures to be applied in the case of remote evaluation. In addition, the Commission may opt for a two-stage submission and evaluation procedure. *Annex E* gives details of the procedures to be followed in such a case.

Step 1: Briefing of the independent experts

The Commission is responsible for the briefing of independent experts before evaluation sessions. Guidance notes for evaluators are made available to this end and are sent to the experts in advance of the evaluation and made available on the web. The briefing of the experts covers the evaluation processes and procedures as well as the evaluation criteria to be applied and the objectives of the research area under consideration. In the case of remote evaluation, close contact is maintained with the individual experts to assist them on any query. Particular attention is given to the handling of the horizontal issues (e.g. gender, education, societal implications, etc) in the evaluation of proposals.

Step 2: Individual evaluation of proposals

In the initial phase of the evaluation, each expert works independently and gives marks and comments for each block of criteria and addresses the horizontal issues as described in the work programme/call.

- *justification of marking*

Experts are required to provide comments to accompany each of their marks in a form suitable for providing feedback to the proposers. These comments must be consistent with any marks awarded. These comments may serve as input to any consensus discussion and related consensus report.

- *outcome of the individual evaluation*

The submission of the individual evaluation form signed by an independent expert closes his/her individual reading and assessment. In the case of remote evaluation the results are communicated to the Commission by post or electronically. In general, throughout the evaluation process, appropriate electronic codes may substitute for the signature of the expert. His/her evaluation form may not subsequently be changed.

In some instances, experts may be asked to perform only the remote individual evaluation. In this case, their individual evaluation forms are forwarded to the experts involved in the consensus phase (see below) to be taken into account in the preparation of the consensus report.

Step 3: Consensus

Once all the evaluators to whom a proposal has been assigned have completed their individual assessment, a consensus discussion may be convened to discuss the marks awarded. In certain cases (e.g. overall consensus between all evaluators) it may be that convening a consensus meeting is not needed. In the case of remote evaluation, arriving at a consensus may be carried out remotely (e.g. electronically).

- *consensus marks*

The experts attempt to agree on a consensus mark for each of the blocks of criteria. They justify their marks with comments suitable for feedback to the proposal coordinator and agree on an overall consensus report, which is signed by them.

When appropriate and in order to facilitate the discussion among the experts, a Commission official acting as moderator for the group may designate an expert as “rapporteur” for the proposal. The proposal rapporteur is responsible for amalgamating the individual experts' views, for initiating the discussion and drafting the consensus report.

If during the consensus discussion it is found to be impossible to bring all the experts to a common point of view on any particular aspect of the proposal, the Commission officials in

charge of the evaluation may ask up to 3 additional independent experts to examine the proposal.

- *outcome of consensus*

The outcome of the consensus step is the consensus report signed by all independent experts or as a minimum by the rapporteur or another independent expert and the moderator. The moderating Commission official is responsible for ensuring that the consensus report faithfully reflects the individual assessments and/or consensus reached. In the case that it is impossible to reach a consensus, the report sets out the majority view of the independent experts but also records any dissenting views from any particular expert(s).

The submission of the signed consensus report closes the consensus discussion.

- *evaluation of a resubmitted proposal*

In the case of proposals that have been submitted previously and rejected by the Commission, the experts may be given the previous evaluation summary reports by the moderating Commission official after the consensus discussion and agreement on the global comments for the consensus report. If necessary, they may be asked to provide additional justifications for any divergences between the comments and/or marks in the two reports.

Step 4: Panel evaluation

Depending on the nature of the call and the number of proposals submitted in response to it, it may be possible to arrange that all the experts for a particular area examine all the proposals submitted for this area and carry out their final examination at the same time as they prepare the consensus reports. Alternatively, it may be necessary to convene an additional panel for this task. The practical arrangements to arrive at the experts' final recommendations are determined in the light of the particular circumstances. The final score for the proposal is derived from the weighted consensus marks for each block of criteria.

- *role of the panel*

If a panel is convened following the drafting of the consensus reports, its tasks may include hearings with the proposers of those proposals that have passed thresholds, examining and comparing the consensus reports in a given area and making recommendations on possible clustering or combination of proposals and/or a priority order. To this end, the Commission may appoint an expert as chairperson of the panel to assist in the preparation of the work of the panel and to chair the discussions. A panel rapporteur (who may also be the panel chairperson) may be appointed to draft the panel's advice. A Commission official may act as moderator of the panel. The role of the Commission moderator is to ensure fair and equal treatment of the proposals in the panel discussions.

- *hearings with proposers*

Hearings or interviews with proposers may be organised, in particular for proposals for Networks of Excellence and Integrated Projects, as part of the panel deliberations. Where this possibility is used, representatives of the proposers in all those proposals for a particular instrument having passed the required thresholds are invited to a hearing. Hearings provide

input to clarify further the proposals and to help the panel to establish their final rating and marks for the proposals. They are intended to improve the understanding of the independent experts of the proposal but not to modify or improve in any way the proposal itself. The proposers will, thus, not be invited to present their proposal, but to provide explanations and clarifications to questions submitted to them in advance.

Any particular issues raised by individual proposals requiring specific expertise may be dealt with by inviting appropriate extra experts to the hearings for those proposals. In this case, the extra experts are only invited to comment on the particular issue on which they have expertise and not on the proposal as a whole.

If a consortium submitting a proposal does not attend the hearing, but replies in written form to the questions which were sent, their written responses will be taken into account. If a consortium both fails to reply to the questions and also to attend the hearing, the panel will arrive at a final score and comments for the proposal on the basis of the originally submitted material only.

- *comparison of consensus reports*

The panel may examine and compare the proposal consensus reports in order to check on the consistency of the marks applied during the individual consensus discussions and, where necessary, propose a new set of marks.

In particular, those proposals receiving the same marks following the initial examination are re-examined with a view to recommending a priority order, if possible and relevant.

- *grouping of proposals*

A further task of the panel(s) of experts carrying out the final examination may be to review those proposals considered to be of the highest quality and, where relevant, to make recommendations as to any possible grouping or combination of proposals into larger projects or into project clusters.

- *outcome of the panel meeting*

The outcome of the panel meeting (taking into account - if appropriate - the hearing of proposers) is the panel report recording the deliberations of the panel containing:

- An evaluation summary report for each proposal;
- A list of proposals passing thresholds, if any, along with a final mark for each proposal passing the thresholds and the panel recommendations for priority order.

The panel report signed off, as a minimum, by three experts including the panel rapporteur and panel chairperson closes the panel.

The panel report must be in a form that represents the advice of the independent experts to the Commission. In particular, the panel report must identify proposals requiring a special attention due to either the importance of any ethical issues raised or the inadequacy of the way ethical issues are addressed.

4.6. Feedback to proposers

The coordinator of each proposal receives the evaluation summary report (ESR). The ESR reflects the consensus reached between the independent experts as well as the panel results (via comments and marks) on each block of criteria as well as providing overall comments (including proposals for modifications and, in exceptional cases, possibilities for clustering/fusion with other proposals) and a final overall score for the proposal. The comments recorded must give sufficient and clear reasons for the scores and in the case of proposals with high scores, any recommendations for modifications to the proposal should the proposal be retained for negotiation.

For those proposals rejected after failing an evaluation threshold, the comments contained in the ESR may only be complete for those criteria examined up to the point when the threshold was failed.

5. Finalisation of the evaluation

At this stage, the Commission services review the results of the evaluation by independent experts, make their assessment of the proposals based on the advice from these experts and prepare the final evaluation results.

5.1. Commission ranked list

The Commission services draw up (a) final list(s) ranked, if appropriate, in priority order of all the proposals evaluated and which pass the required thresholds. Due account is taken of the marks received and of any advice from the independent experts concerning the priority order for proposals.

In drawing up the final ranked list, the Commission services also take into account the programme priorities (for example, coverage of the programme objectives), compatibility of the proposals with stated Community policy objectives and the available budget.

In all instances, the reasons for arriving at the final ranking are fully set out in writing by the Commission services at the moment of preparing the final ranked list. The ranking of a proposal may foresee conditions for its negotiation, such as i.a. the adjustment of budget, content, merging with other proposals, or funding up to a certain milestone with the possibility to grant complementary funding following a subsequent call for proposals.

5.2. Commission reserve list

The list of proposals to be retained for negotiation takes into account the budget available (which is set out in the call for proposals). If necessary, a number of proposals are kept in reserve to allow for the failure of negotiations on projects, withdrawal of proposals and/or savings to be made during contract negotiation.

The coordinators of any proposals held in reserve receive confirmation that negotiations with a view to preparing a contract may be offered, but only if further funding becomes available. This confirmation may also indicate a date after which no further offers of negotiations are likely to be made.

When the budget for the particular call has been used up, any proposals remaining from the "reserve" which it has not been possible to fund are rejected by a decision of the Commission as set out below and the coordinators informed.

5.3. Commission rejection decisions

The Commission rejection decision(s) concern(s) those proposals found to be ineligible (if not already subject to a rejection decision – see section 3.6), out of scope, failing any of the individual thresholds for evaluation criteria or the overall threshold required to be passed by a proposal to be taken into consideration and those which, because they fall below a certain ranking, cannot be funded for budgetary reasons. The Commission also reserves the right to reject proposals below a given rank when it is considered that the level of quality (regardless

of threshold or budget availability) is not adequate, notwithstanding the independent experts' recommendations.

Immediately after the rejection decision, coordinators of rejected proposals are informed in writing of the Commission's decision. The letter informing them also includes an explanation of the reasons for rejection.

5.5. Reporting on the evaluation process

Following each evaluation session, an overall report is prepared by the Commission and made available to the programme committee. The report gives general statistical details on the proposals received (number, priority themes covered, categories of proposers and budget requested), on the evaluation procedure and on the independent experts - number, disciplines represented, nationality and gender.