

Open Up – New Research Spaces for the Humanities and Cultural Studies

Distributed Peer Review – Rules and Guidelines

These guidelines were put together based on the experience gained at the European Southern Observatory¹

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¹ <https://www.eso.org/sci/observing/phase1/distributed-peer-review.html>

1 Introduction

With the latest call 'Open Up – New Research Spaces for the Humanities and Cultural Studies' the Volkswagen Foundation continues its commitment to trialling and evaluating innovations in research funding. Supported by researchers from The Research on Research Institute, the Foundation will run an experiment in Distributed Peer Review (DPR) in parallel to the conventional Panel Review Procedure (PRP) which is standard for selection of proposals to the Foundation.

In DPR, applicants for funding review each other's proposals. Such schemes have the potential to improve the speed and quality of feedback available to applicants, as well as increasing the stability and expertise of reviews, since a larger pool of reviewers are available, and each proposal is reviewed a greater number of times.

The Foundation has made funds available to fund proposals selected by both the conventional Panel Review and DPR mechanisms. This ensures that no applicant or discipline will be disadvantaged by the trial. The parallel tracks also allow a formal comparison of the two mechanisms in terms of quality, efficiency and consistency. The process and outcomes will be formally evaluated, with the support of researchers from [The Research on Research Institute](#), to enable comparisons and provide evidence on how research funding can be made more efficient, effective and equitable. A full report of the evaluation will be published.

2 Timeline and important deadlines

23 February 2024,
10:00 to 11:30 CET

Online consultation (German)

1 March 2024,
10:00 to 11:30 CET

Online consultation (English)

9 April 2024, 14:00 CEST **Submission deadline**

All submitted proposals are reviewed by the Foundation's funding department.

July

DPR:

- All proposals that are formally correct will be sent to reviewers,
- disclosure of conflicts of interest,
- at least 6 weeks to complete the reviews.

PRP:

- The shortlist for the jury is compiled and the proposals are made available to the jury members.

15 August 2024

DPR: VWS receives assessment reports.

- QA's are submitted, reviewed and scored.
- A final ranking is prepared resulting in funding recommendations.

September	PRP: Panel review meeting resulting in funding recommendations.
November	Board of Trustees makes final decision.
Mid December	Decisions are communicated. DPR: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback provided to applicants, • Reporting and dissemination.
January 2025 onwards	Follow-up interviews with participants and qualitative analysis.
11 - 12 March 2025	Kick-Off Meeting for grant recipients.

Due to the DPR trial and associated unforeseen issues, there may be delays in processing. If this happens, you will be notified separately. Please do not make individual enquiries.

3 Rules and guidelines for applicants

3.1 General

All proposals will undergo DPR and PRP. By submitting a proposal, **the applicants (main and all co-applicants)** accept the following terms and conditions:

- All applicants (main and co-applicants) will receive on average 5 proposals to review.
- Failing to provide the reviews by the deadline will lead to the automatic rejection of the proposal submitted by the given applicant/co-applicant;
- The reviewer is expected to carefully read all the assigned proposals, rate them and provide feedback to the applicants following the rules and guidelines.

3.2 Submission of a proposal

- In order for the application to be considered, the "[Template Short Proposal \(PDF\)](#)" available on the [Open Up Website](#) must be used. When you write your proposal, you must adhere to the questions stated on this form. You must also adhere to the conditions for the maximum number of words and pages.
- Your complete application form must have been received before the deadline via the electronic application system. After this deadline, you can no longer submit a proposal. After submitting the proposal, the applicant will receive a confirmation of receipt.
- The "[Individual Consent and Application Form](#)" (PDF)" must be completed and submitted by each applicant.
- Proposals are assigned to reviewers according to the [DFG subject area structure](#). Therefore, it is very important that all applicants (i) specify the subject area in which they can review proposals based on their expertise (in the "Individual Consent and Application Form") and (ii) specify the subject area of their proposal (in the "Template Short Proposal").

- Please note that you cannot submit more than one proposal as main or co-applicant.

3.3 Assessment criteria

The following review criteria apply:

- Opening of a new research space (exploratory nature and novelty of the topic),
- Added value of the constellation for exploring the research object,
- Originality of the research project,
- Scientific quality of the project.

Proposals must be written with a wide audience in mind, to enable assessors from outside the field to properly evaluate the research plan and the above assessment aspects.

3.4 Anonymized application

When preparing a proposal, be sure to make it anonymous:

- Applicants should include neither their own name nor those of any individuals in their research group.
- Applicants should not include details of any affiliations with institutes or knowledge institutions.
- It is permitted to cite your own publications in the proposal. However, as with any other publication, the name of the author must be stated without any reference to the fact that it is the applicant himself/herself.
- Applicants should not include the names of any partners (or potential partners).

4 Review system

The review is performed using LimeSurvey, a simple, quick and anonymous online survey tool. This is a very simple, self-explanatory, web-based interface, which does not require any installation. Further information and instructions on how to use LimeSurvey will be made available once the proposals have been distributed for review.

5 Rules and guidelines for reviewers

5.1 General

- By submitting a proposal you have accepted to review on average 5 proposals submitted by your peers. **As such, you are expected to deliver the evaluations and the comments by the deadline (see timetable).** You will have at least 6 weeks to complete your reviews. **Failing to submit the assigned reviews on time will lead to the automatic rejection of the proposal in which you are applicant/co-applicant.**
- During the whole review process you are expected to behave ethically. This covers confidentiality matters but also the feedback you will be providing for each of the proposals you are assigned.

- As a reviewer, you are supposed to provide constructive feedback, using appropriate, factual, and non-offensive language. In doing this, keep in mind that your comments will be passed unedited to the applicants. The Volkswagen Foundation will take very seriously possible cases of offensive and inappropriate language used by the reviewers.
- We will consider obvious conflicts of interest when matching proposals to reviewers. During the initial phase of the DPR you will have the possibility of declaring conflicts of interest. Note that you should restrict yourself to those where you feel you are not in a position to express an objective opinion. Conflict flagging must not be used to reduce the number of reviews you have to deliver by the given deadline.
- During the review you should keep in mind the spirit of the anonymization: focus on the science and not on the scientists. Do not try to double-guess the team's identity. Also, be aware of the fact that in some cases it is practically impossible for certain teams to conceal their identities, even in the case they have thoroughly followed the anonymization guidelines. Conversely, experience shows that, in many cases, the guesses are wrong.
- As a reviewer, you must provide your feedback in a completely anonymous way. The phrasing must be neutral and must not disclose, directly or indirectly, your identity.
- The use of generative models (ChatGPT, CoPilot, Bard etc.) in the preparation of reviews is not permitted in view of the confidentiality of the review process. Documents provided for review are confidential and may not be used as input for generative models.
- No filtering will be applied during the proposal-reviewer assignment. The level of expertise and seniority distribution of the reviewers will reflect that of the underlying applicant/co-applicant population.
- Note that you will be asked to categorize your expertise level with respect to each single proposal you review. This information will not be shared with the applicants, but may help us evaluate and improve the process of peer review.

Important note on confidentiality

As a reviewer you will have access to information which is covered by intellectual property. None of that information can be disseminated, copied or plagiarised. Should you have downloaded on your disk or printed the proposals which were assigned to you, you must remove/destroy them at the end of the review, once the process is completed. The Volkswagen Foundation will take violations of the non-disclosure agreement very seriously and reserves the right to claim damages should it be held liable in this respect.

5.2 Proposal review and grading

The evaluation of each proposal will take the form of a structured query (quick assessment). In addition to the rating, you will also be asked to provide a comment summarising your assessment. Remember that your feedback will be passed on to the candidates unedited and that you are solely responsible for the content and integrity of your comments. Please note that the Volkswagen Foundation encourages reviewers to give full consideration to well-designed, high-risk/high-impact proposals even if there is no guarantee of a positive outcome or definite detection.

You will be asked to assess the following aspects:

- Opening of a new research space (exploratory nature and novelty of the topic): The project does not only offer new perspectives on already known research subjects, but also explores entirely new research spaces and topics.
- Added value of the constellations for exploring the research object: The constellation of researchers is suitable for exploring the scientific challenge addressed. The constellation of (sub)disciplines is new and original.
- Originality of the research project: The idea shows unorthodox thinking and introduces a unique approach and, if applicable, a novel hypothesis, a non-standard methodology, etc.
- Scientific quality of the project: Based on a well defined research question, awareness of the standard knowledge in the domain, conclusiveness of the intended approach, feasibility.

For each proposal and each of the above mentioned aspects, you will give a grade (between A+ “outstanding” and C- “unsuitable”). The four components reflect the criteria for the call and should therefore inform your overall vote. The full grade scale should be used so as to ensure that the resulting ranking of the proposals is as meaningful as possible.

The meaning of the scale is as follows:

- A+ outstanding: breakthrough science
- A excellent: definitely above average
- A- very good: no significant weaknesses
- B+ good: minor deficiencies do not detract from strong scientific case
- B fair: good scientific case, but with definite weaknesses
- B- rather weak: limited science return prospects
- C+ weak: little scientific value and/or questionable scientific strategy
- C very weak: deficiencies outweigh strengths
- C- unsuitable

5.3 Decision making

The final ranking of proposals will be determined by the average of the **overall rating**. In the unlikely event of a tie in the final ranking of two or more proposals, a lottery will be used. Please note that there are no quotas for subject areas. The grants will be awarded to the best proposals from all submissions.

5.4 Feedback to applicants

As the DPR is intended to provide feedback, it is particularly important that you, as a reviewer, provide comprehensive and constructive feedback to your peers. In this process, it greatly helps keeping in mind that you should provide feedback of the same quality you are expecting from your peers. Also, consider that the main purpose of the feedback is to describe the weaknesses of the proposals, possibly suggesting ways of improving both quality and clarity.

The following points should help you to complete the final task of the review process:

- Summarize both the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal.
 - A summary of both the strengths and weaknesses can help applicants understand what aspects of the project are strong, and which aspects need to be improved.
 - Reviews should focus on the major strengths and major weaknesses. Avoid giving the impression that a minor weakness was the cause of a poor ranking. Many proposals do not have obvious weaknesses but are just less compelling than others; in such a case, acknowledge that the considered proposal is good but that there were others that were more compelling.
 - Take care to ensure that the strengths and weaknesses do not contradict each other.
- Be objective
 - Be as specific as possible when commenting on the proposal. Avoid generic statements that could apply to most proposals.
 - If necessary, provide references to support your critique.
 - All reviews should be impersonal, critiquing the proposal and not the proposal team. For example, do not write "The applicant did not [...].", but instead write "The proposal did not [...]".
 - At the time of writing your feedback, you will not know whether the proposal will be funded. Therefore, the reviews should be phrased in such a way that they are meaningful regardless of the final outcome.
- Be concise
 - It is not necessary to write a lengthy comment. An informative review can be only a few sentences in length if it is concise and informative. But, please avoid writing only a single, generic sentence.
- Be professional and constructive
 - Do not use inappropriate, offensive, sarcastic and/or insulting language, even if you think a proposal could be greatly improved.
 - Use complete sentences when writing your reviews. Try to use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
 - Keep in mind that your feedback is going to be passed unedited to the applicants, and that you are the only responsible for the content of the comments and their integrity.
- Other best practices
 - Do not summarize the proposal: the applicants know it very well. If you reckon it is useful, start with a brief outline of the application.
 - Do not include explicit references to other proposals that you are reviewing.
 - Do not ask questions: this is not an iterative process. If the question stems from a weakness, state the weakness explicitly.
- Re-read your reviews and scientific rankings
 - Once you have completed your assessments, re-read your comments as if you were the recipient. If they do not sound useful and/or constructive, edit them.

- Check that strengths and weaknesses are consistent with the scientific merit implied by the grade. Definitely avoid cases in which you do not list any weakness although you gave a poor grade.
- Example of bad feedback
 - Poorly written proposal, not making a sufficiently compelling case.