

**Guide for Experts**  
**evaluating grant proposals**  
**for the National Science Centre**

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## Introduction

This guide has been prepared for Experts involved in evaluating proposals submitted to the National Science Centre (NCN, Poland). It is intended to support you at every stage of the evaluation process, whether you are new to this role or already have relevant experience.

The document outlines the key principles, procedures, and responsibilities related to the evaluation. It also provides practical guidance to help you carry out your work effectively and in accordance with the applicable evaluation criteria. We encourage you to familiarize yourself with the content before starting the evaluation.

The [NCN](#) is a government agency, supervised by the Ministry of Education and Science, established in 2011 to support basic research in Poland. Basic research is defined as empirical or theoretical endeavours undertaken to gain new knowledge of the foundations of phenomena and observable facts, without any direct commercial use.

The NCN funds projects in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Life Sciences, and Physical Sciences and Engineering. The NCN launches [funding schemes](#) tailored to researchers at different stages of their careers. Your contribution as an Expert is crucial for maintaining the quality, fairness, and transparency of the NCN evaluation process. For more information, please refer to the relevant section on the NCN [website](#) or contact the Coordinator.

## 1. Definitions

**Expert** - an Expert Team member (researcher), appointed by the NCN Council.

Duties:

- participating in two panel meetings;
- drafting individual reviews of proposals assigned by the Chair or Coordinator at stage 1 of merit-based evaluation and presenting them during the 1<sup>st</sup> panel meeting;
- putting forward the candidacies of External Reviewers for each proposal they reviewed at stage 1 that has been approved for stage 2;
- presenting External Reviewers' individual reviews of the proposals they have been assigned during the 2<sup>nd</sup> panel meeting;
- drafting consensus reports for proposals not sent to stage 2 or not recommended for funding.

The Experts form an **Expert Team** responsible for evaluating proposals, compiling a list of proposals recommended for stage 2, and creating ranking lists indicating proposals recommended for funding.

**Chair** - an Expert Team member appointed by the NCN Council to manage the Expert Team's work.

Duties:

- indicating Experts to draft individual reviews at stage 1 of merit-based evaluation;
- selecting interdisciplinary proposals from the list presented by the Coordinator, for which (in well-justified cases) an auxiliary review will be drafted;
- chairing the Expert Team meetings;
- conducting voting and approving the minutes from the Expert Team meetings;
- cooperating with the Coordinator.

**External Reviewer** - an external expert (i.e., a researcher who is not a member of the Expert Team).

Duties:

- reviewing the stage 2 proposal, without participating in Expert Team meetings.

**Coordinator** - represents the NCN and oversees the proposal evaluation process.

Duties:

- organizing the work of the Experts and coordinating Expert Team meetings;
- coordinating the proposal evaluation process;
- cooperating with the Chair of the Expert Team;
- serving as the main contact for questions or issues related to the evaluation process;
- ensuring an impartial and fair proposal evaluation process.

**OSF - Funding Stream Support System** - a comprehensive system used to register and handle applications for financing research projects. Evaluation of proposals submitted to NCN is performed entirely on-line through the OSF system.

## 2. Overview of the evaluation process

### 2.1. NCN Panels

The NCN Council has established 26 subject-specific panels - [NCN panels](#) - as the basis for proposal qualification and evaluation. These panels cover the entire scope of scientific research and are grouped into three main areas:

- **HS - Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences**; 6 panels (HS1-HS6)
- **ST - Physical Sciences and Engineering**; 11 panels (ST1-ST11)
- **NZ - Life Sciences**; 9 panels (NZ1-NZ9)

Each panel title is accompanied by a list of descriptors (auxiliary identifiers) indicating the research areas covered by that specific panel. Applicants independently choose the panel to which they submit their proposal.

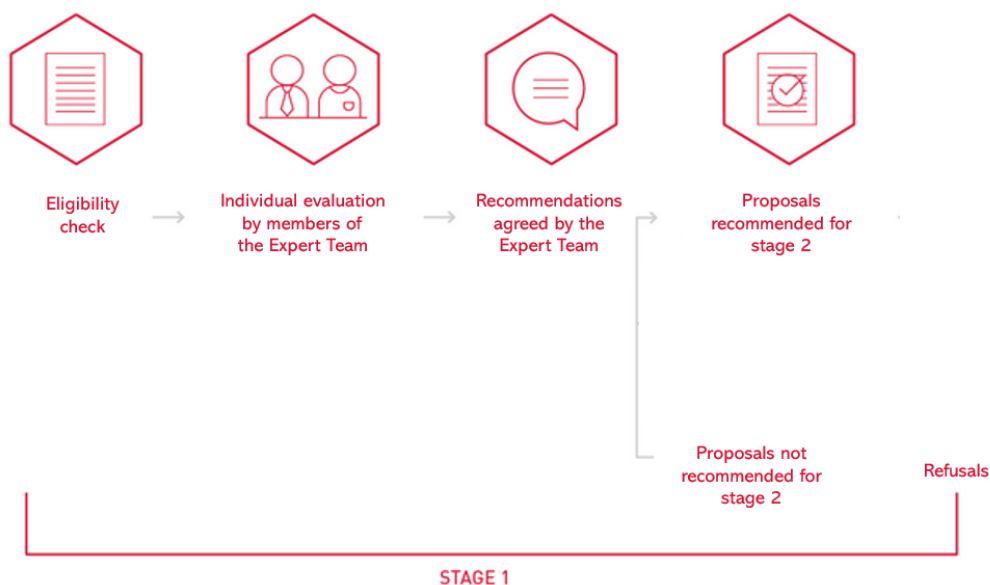
### 2.2. Evaluation process

The NCN has implemented a two-stage proposal evaluation process. Once the Expert Team is appointed by the NCN Council, the Chair – with the support of the Coordinator – allocates proposals to members of the Expert Team.

#### Stage 1 - evaluation of short project description

At **stage 1**, the proposal (short project description) and its annexes are evaluated:

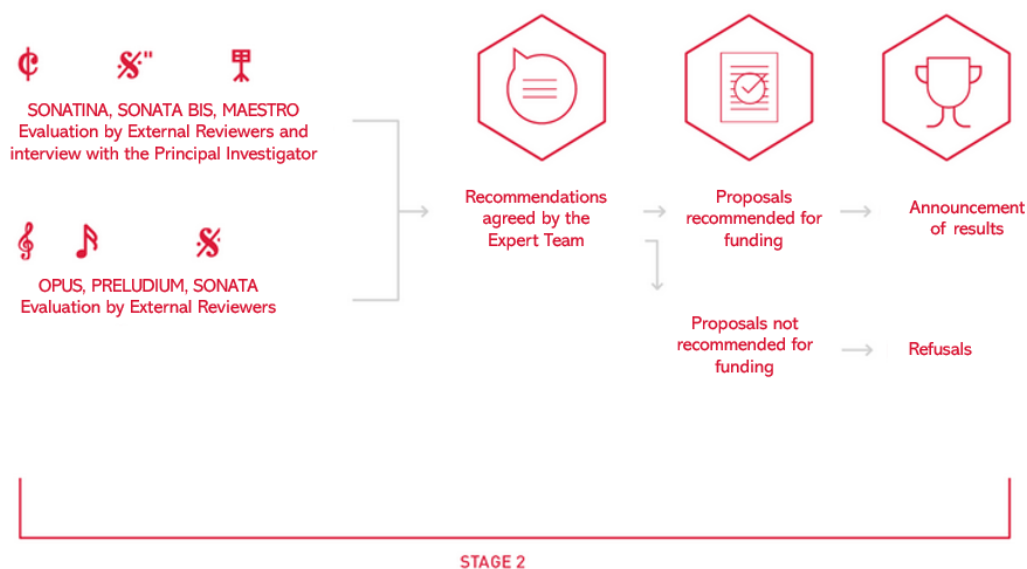
- each proposal is first reviewed independently by two Experts, who prepare individual reviews and present them at the 1<sup>st</sup> panel meeting;
- these individual reviews form the basis for the discussion during the meeting; if needed, the Expert Team agrees on a score, otherwise the average of the Experts' scores is used;
- the Expert Team then collectively decides whether to reject the proposal or recommend it for stage 2;
- for proposals not recommended for stage 2, a consensus report is prepared.



## Stage 2 - evaluation of detailed project description

At **stage 2**, the proposal (detailed project description) and its annexes are evaluated by at least two External Reviewers:

- External Reviewers are suggested by the Expert Team members;
- at the 2<sup>nd</sup> panel meeting, Experts discuss the individual reviews prepared by the External Reviewers;
- individual reviews serve only as a starting point for discussion; the Expert Team may fully agree, partially agree, or disagree with them;
- the final decision on each proposal is made by the Expert Team, taking into account both Experts' and External Reviewers' individual reviews;
- ranking lists must be approved by an absolute majority of the Expert Team;
- the ranking lists will show which proposals are recommended for funding; consensus reports are prepared for those not recommended.



## 3. Tasks and responsibilities of Experts

### 3.1. Before the 1<sup>st</sup> panel meeting

As an appointed Expert, certain responsibilities must be completed prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> panel meeting:

- **Monitoring official communication**

Experts are expected to regularly check for updates and instructions sent via email and through the [OSF](#) evaluation system. All essential information regarding tasks and timelines is communicated electronically.

- **Familiarising with training materials and call documentation**

Experts should review the training materials and all relevant call documentation before beginning their assessments. This includes guidelines, evaluation criteria, scoring rules, and any other resources provided by the Coordinator. Familiarity with these materials ensures a consistent and informed approach to proposal evaluation.

- **Accessing and accepting assigned proposals in the OSF system**

Experts log in to the OSF system to review the proposals allocated to them by the Chair for individual assessment. For each proposal, it is necessary to verify that no conflict of interest (Col) exists. Any potential Col must be reported to the Coordinator as soon as possible. Assigned proposals must be accepted in the OSF system within the deadline specified by the Coordinator. In case of any issues or doubts, the Coordinator should be contacted directly. **Important note:** At this stage, the evaluation is qualifying in nature. The Chair allocates proposals to Experts whose expertise most closely aligns with the subject of the proposal; however, being a specialist in the specific topic is not required at this point. Specialist evaluation requiring subject-specific expertise takes place only at stage 2.

- **Preparing individual reviews**

Experts prepare their individual reviews within the deadline specified by the Coordinator and in accordance with the principles outlined in the following section.

### 3.2. Evaluation guidelines

Individual reviews must be of high quality, objective, and clearly describe the main strengths and weaknesses of the evaluated proposal in relation to the established criteria. Experts are expected to provide a fair, consistent, and well-reasoned evaluation. If the Coordinator identifies any issues or shortcomings in a review, it may be returned for revision or completion. Written reviews will be shared with the Principal Investigator in their original form. The key principles below should be followed when preparing individual evaluations. These guidelines ensure clarity, fairness, and consistency across all expert reviews.

#### Evaluation scope and process

- evaluation should be focused only on the aspects relevant to each evaluation criterion; the descriptions provided for each criterion are to be followed; the same weakness must not be penalised under multiple criteria;
- reviews are expected to focus solely on the proposal under evaluation; comparisons with other proposals should be avoided;
- evaluation should be based solely on the content of the proposal; additional information about the Principal Investigator from external sources or databases is not considered;

- assessment should be focused only on the quality of the publications selected and presented by the Principal Investigator in the research track section as well as other scientific activities and achievements presented in this section;
- evaluation is expected to follow the [DORA](#) principles: bibliometric indicators such as Impact Factor, H-index, or total number of publications are not used when assessing research quality.

#### Writing style and tone

- language should be objective and analytical, with clear and unambiguous statements;
- comments should remain polite, professional, and focused on the scientific content of the proposal;
- reviews should focus on evaluation rather than summarizing or describing the proposal;
- potentially incorrect technical details (e.g., page numbers) and definitive statements such as “lack of...” or “x is missing” should be avoided;
- explicit funding recommendations (e.g., “should be funded / should not be funded”) are to be avoided;
- gender-neutral and inclusive language is recommended (e.g., “the applicant” or “they/their” instead of “he/she”).

#### Fairness and impartiality

- evaluation should be conducted impartially, without references to the applicant’s age, nationality, gender, or personal circumstances;
- evaluation of the Principal Investigator should consider declared career breaks, the stage of their academic career, and the research field;
- evaluation should be free from conscious or unconscious biases, ensuring that proposals are assessed solely on their scientific merits;
- equal treatment should be applied across all proposals, maintaining consistency in the application of evaluation criteria;
- comments should remain objective and professional, avoiding subjective judgments unrelated to the proposal’s content.

### 3.3. 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> panel meetings and follow-up responsibilities

#### Purpose of the panel meetings

- to discuss all proposals that were previously assessed independently by assigned Experts (members of the Expert Team) at stage 1 or by External Reviewers at stage 2;
- to exchange views and agree on a consolidated assessment;
- to ensure calibration of evaluations, i.e., by comparing proposals within the same panel in terms of both project quality and the PI’s achievements and qualifications;
- to clarify doubts and resolve any inconsistencies so that assessments are fair and standardized.

#### Participants involved

- Experts - appointed by the NCN Council to evaluate proposals;
- Chair - leads the meeting and moderates discussions;
- Coordinator - ensures impartiality, compliance with rules, and smooth organization of the meeting;

- NCN Officer - prepares the official minutes of the meeting.

#### Format and organization

- each proposal is discussed;
- discussions aim to resolve questions and harmonize scores;
- at the end of the meeting, a vote is taken to recommend proposals for stage 2 (at the 1<sup>st</sup> panel meeting) or funding (at the 2<sup>nd</sup> panel meeting);
- the format and duration of the meeting depend on the call, the number of proposals, and other circumstances; all necessary practical details (date, meeting format, technical arrangements) are provided by the Coordinator and responsible NCN Officers.

#### Responsibilities after the panel meeting

Following the panel meeting, specific tasks are expected at each stage:

- **nomination of External Reviewers (after 1<sup>st</sup> panel meeting only)** - for each proposal recommended to stage 2, potential External Reviewers in the relevant field are suggested by the Experts who were involved in the assessment of that proposal at stage 1;
- **preparation of consensus reports** - for proposals not recommended for further evaluation or funding, a brief explanation of the main reasons for non-admission is provided by one of the Experts involved in the assessment of that proposal; the consensus report serves as the official feedback to the Principal Investigator on why the proposal was not recommended for stage 2 or for funding; the exact format and required elements of the consensus report are provided by the Coordinator.

## 4. Code of Ethics and confidentiality

### 4.1. Confidentiality rules

By joining the Expert Team evaluating proposals submitted within an NCN call, each Expert agrees to the following principles:

- full confidentiality must be maintained regarding all information contained in the reviewed proposals, including the names of applicants, the proposal content, and any materials or discussions related to the evaluation process;
- information obtained from proposals may be used exclusively for the purposes of the evaluation process;
- withdrawal from the evaluation process does not release the Expert from the obligation to maintain confidentiality;
- proposals must not be discussed with anyone outside the Expert Team; discussion with other members of the Expert Team is permitted only during official panel meetings;
- the use of **generative AI tools** or any external systems to process, analyze, or otherwise handle proposal content is strictly prohibited;
- the evaluation is expected to represent the independent work of the Expert; a confidentiality declaration confirming adherence to these principles must be signed.



## 4.2. Conflict of interest (CoI)

The impartiality of NCN Experts must be beyond any doubt. By signing the declaration, each Expert confirms their commitment to the [Code of Ethics for Experts of the NCN](#).

Experts are expected to avoid situations in which previous relationships or experiences could, knowingly or unknowingly, influence their judgment and compromise an objective review. Any situation in which an Expert is unable to make an objective decision due to a real or perceived bias arising from personal or institutional connections with the Principal Investigator named in the proposal is considered a conflict of interest (CoI).

### CoI precluding participation in an Expert Team

Before accepting an invitation to join an Expert Team, CoI must be assessed. An Expert is not eligible to participate in the Expert Team if they have been involved in any capacity in the preparation of a proposal submitted to the call for which they have been invited to act as an Expert.

### CoI precluding participation in reviewing a specific proposal

Before accepting an invitation to review a proposal, potential CoI must be assessed. An Expert is required to disclose any CoI related to a proposal assigned to them and to withdraw from its evaluation. In such cases, the Expert does not take part in the discussion or in voting on the proposal and must leave the meeting room during the discussion. It is the Expert's responsibility to identify and declare any potential CoI. In case of doubt, consultation with the Coordinator is recommended.

An Expert will be excluded from the evaluation process if any circumstances exist that may affect impartiality or the reliability of their review. CoI may, in particular, arise from the following types of relationships:

- **personal relations**
  - the Expert is married to, or related by blood or affinity up to the second degree to, any Applicant;
  - the Expert has a legal relationship with the Applicant (e.g., custody, power of attorney);
  - the Expert has a personal conflict or a close personal relationship with the Applicant;
- **professional relations**
  - the Expert is, or has been within the last three years, employed at the same research unit or department from which the proposal originates or where the Applicant is employed;
  - the Expert is, or has been within the last three years, a line manager or direct supervisor of the Applicant;
  - the Expert is employed at an institution with which collaboration is envisaged under the evaluated proposal;
  - the Expert is an associate or regular collaborator of the entity submitting the proposal;
- **scientific relations**
  - the Expert has acted as the Applicant's supervisor or mentor;
  - the Expert has co-authored publications or participated in research cooperation or joint projects with the Applicant within the three years preceding the submission deadline;
  - the Expert is in direct research competition with the Applicant or has conflicting scientific interests;
- **economic or financial relations**

- the Expert could directly benefit financially from the acceptance or rejection of the proposal;
- the Expert may gain personal or institutional financial advantages, or suffer losses, as a result of the proposal outcome;
- **other situations**
  - the Expert has been involved in drafting the proposal;
  - the Expert is, or has been, involved in the implementation of a research project, doctoral scholarship, or postdoctoral fellowship related to the proposal;
  - other significant circumstances exist that may compromise the Expert's impartiality or credibility in evaluating the proposal.

The cases listed above do not exhaust all possible situations that may constitute a conflict of interest. If, during the evaluation process, any circumstance arises that may affect an Expert's impartiality or the reliability of their assessment, the Expert is expected to immediately inform the Coordinator.

## Panel meetings - quick checklist for Experts

### Before the meeting

#### 1<sup>st</sup> panel meeting

- familiarize with the call documentation, including evaluation criteria and scoring rules;
- review the training materials;
- accept the proposals assigned to you in the OSF system, ensuring at the same time that no Col prevents you from carrying out the evaluation;
- read all assigned proposals (short descriptions) and prepare your individual assessments; submit them to the OSF system within the specified deadline;
- review the evaluations provided by co-Experts who assessed the same proposals;
- identify any points requiring clarification or discussion during the panel meeting.

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> panel meeting

- read the detailed proposal descriptions and the reviews prepared by External Reviewers;
- highlight aspects that may need discussion or consensus during the panel meeting.

### During the meeting

- attend the full meeting and actively participate in discussions;
- contribute to reaching an agreed assessment of each proposal;
- ensure fair comparison and calibration across proposals.

### After the meeting

#### 1<sup>st</sup> panel meeting

- nominate External Reviewers for proposals you assessed that advanced to stage 2;
- prepare short consensus reports for proposals not recommended for further evaluation.

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> panel meeting

- prepare short consensus reports for proposals not recommended for funding.