



SLOVAK RESEARCH
AND DEVELOPMENT
AGENCY



Handbook for Members of International Expert Panels

Detailed handbook for the SRDA international expert panels
project assessment



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SRDA International Expert Panel Assessment Process

The Slovak Research and Development Agency (SRDA) applies a two-step assessment process to assess the quality project proposals. Complete proposals are assessed by international expert panels.¹

For basic research projects and applied research and development projects, the Chair of the Panel shall appoint two reviewers from the members of the Panel, based on their expertise for each project to be assessed. Before the panel meeting, these reviewers draft an Individual Report (IR). From the pair of appointed reviewers, the Chair of the Panel designates a rapporteur, who will be responsible for producing a Consensus Report (CR) of the project under assessment.

The CR is the result of the discussion that takes place at the panel meeting, where attention is paid in particular to projects with different scores from the two reviewers.

The panel meeting is facilitated by the Chair. The discussions are conducted in English and governed by the Rules of Procedure.

In the next step, the panels will rank the applications according to their quality on the basis of a CR made up of the IRs.

Where a single panel is established under the Agency Council, the Agency Council draws up a list of projects recommended for funding and a list of projects not recommended for financial support. In doing so, the Council shall proceed solely on the basis of the agreed weighted final panel assessment. Sometimes it is not possible to support all projects with the same final score due to the insufficient amount of available funds. In such a case, the relevant Agency Council shall base its decision on the score for the Excellence.

Where more than one panel is set up under an Agency Council, the relevant Agency Council draws up a joint ranking of projects based solely on the agreed weighted final panel assessment. If it is not possible to support all projects with the same final score due the insufficient amount of available funds, the relevant Agency Council shall base its decision on the score for the Excellence.

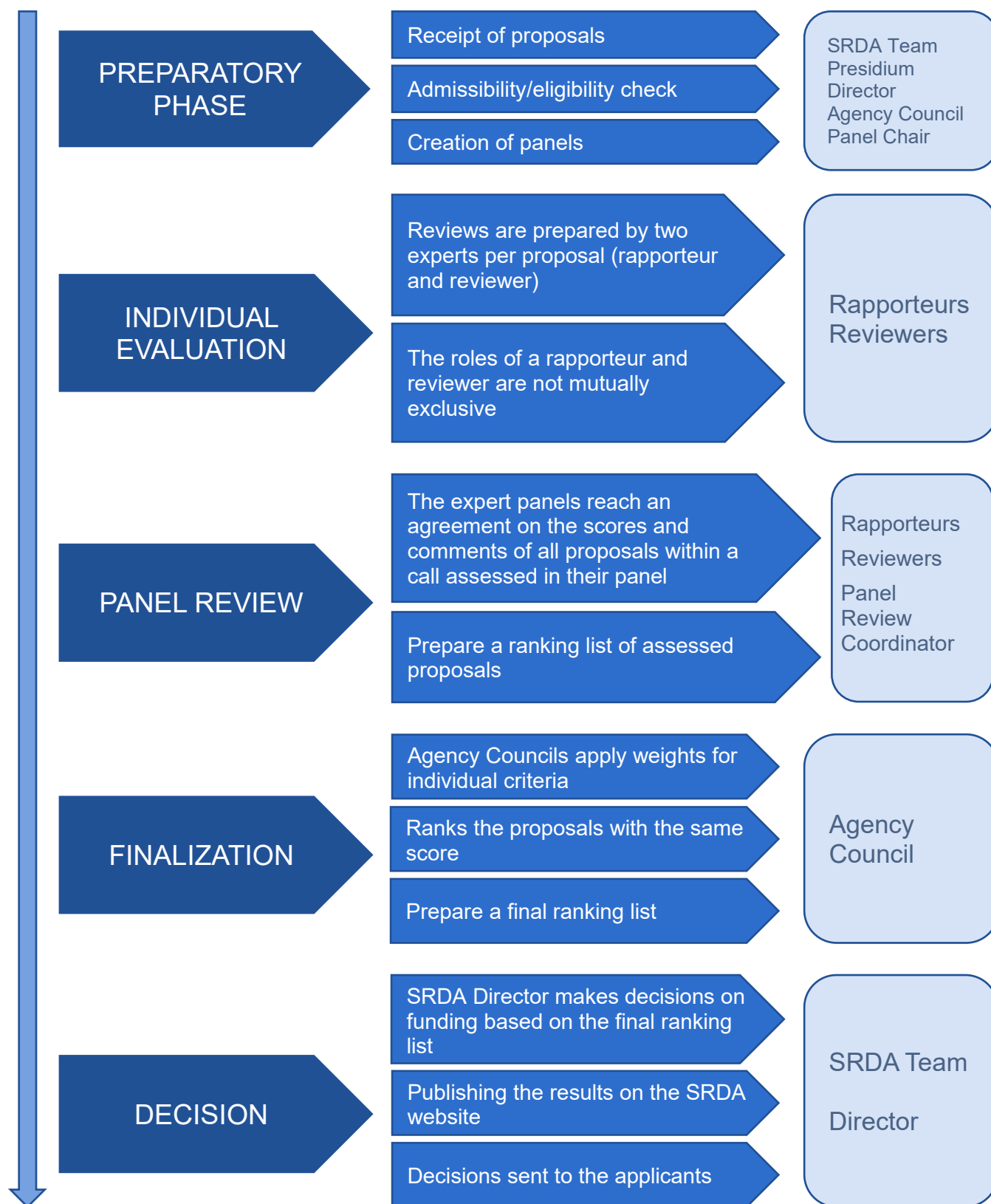
In the next step, the Agency Councils draw up both a list of projects recommended for funding and a list of projects not recommended for funding. Based on these documents, the Director of the SRDA will issue decisions funding.

¹ The International Expert Panel shall have at least five members, who are recognised experts in the field of competence of the International Expert Panel concerned. The Chair and the other members shall be appointed and dismissed by the Director of the Agency upon approval by the Presidium based on a proposal by the Agency Council. The Chair of the International Expert Panel does not have the right to vote.

The Council is the Agency's expert body established for a designated field of science and technology to consider and approve project proposals and to review the ongoing funded projects.

An Agency Council is set up either for fields of science and technology or for each programme or for international activities. The Council shall have at least seven members who are recognised experts in the Council's field of competence. At least three internationally recognised foreign experts shall be members of the Council.

Diagram 1 Scheme of the SRDA Assessment Process





Principles of the Assessment Process

A member of the international expert panel is obliged to observe the following principles when preparing the expert report:

- Independence
- Impartiality
- Objectivity
- Non-discrimination and equal treatment
- Confidentiality
- Avoidance of conflicts of interest

Independence, impartiality, objectivity, non-discrimination and equal treatment

The members of the international expert panel act as independent experts in the field and do not represent third party interests in the expert assessment process. Projects are assessed on the basis of the information provided in the proposal. The members of the international expert panel are obliged to assess the project according to the defined assessment criteria and the terms of the call and do not communicate with the applicants.

Confidentiality

The members of the international expert panel are obliged to maintain the confidentiality of all facts relating to the assessment process and will use all information solely in accordance with the purpose of the assessment process. At the same time, the members of the international expert panels shall refrain from publishing, forwarding or otherwise disclosing to any third party such information, even after the completion of the expert assessment process.

Members of the international expert panel are authorised to discuss the projects and the information contained in them with other panel members assigned to the project evaluation only in the case of a joint assessment, during the preparation of a joint assessment or as a part of a panel discussion.

The SRDA does not disclose the names of the reviewers of individual projects.

Conflict of interests

A conflict of interest is a situation where a member of an international expert panel has a direct or indirect financial, economic or other personal interest that may be considered as compromising their impartiality and independence in relation to the expert review process.

A member of an international expert panel has a conflict of interest in particular if they:



- participated directly or indirectly in the preparation of the project or in the preparation of another project proposal under the same Call (e.g. proposal preparation, procurement process, etc.)
- are involved in the project under review as a research team member, partner or contractor
- have direct or indirect benefit in the event of (non-)approval of the application assigned to them for assessment
- are in a family relationship (e.g. parent, spouse, partner, child, person living in the same household, etc.) with the applicant/partner of the applicant (in case of a natural person-entrepreneur), principal investigator, statutory representative/holder of procuration, member of the supervisory or administrative boards of the applicant or their partner
- are or have been an employee of the applicant or the applicant's partner for the last 3 years
- has, or has had in the last 3 years, a commercial interest in the management bodies (statutory representative/holder of procuration, membership of supervisory and administrative boards, etc.) of the applicant or the applicant's partner
- is or has been in the last 3 years a business partner of the applicant or their partner (e.g. property relations in a third company, co-owners of a third company, etc.)
- any other reason or relationship or attitude towards the applicant prevents them from making an impartial professional assessment of the proposal (e.g. personal, professional or other conflict or competitive position vis-à-vis the applicant, etc.)

The provisions relating to conflict of interest shall not apply to the chair of the panel who is not involved in the project assessment. The chair of the panel is subject to the provision under Section 27(1) of Act No.172/2005 Coll.

Obligations the International Expert Panel Members

As a member of an international expert panel, you undertake to prepare an assessment following the principles of the assessment process and within the given deadline.

In order to ensure effective discussion, prior to the meeting, members of the international expert panel are required to familiarize themselves with the following documents:

- Rules of Procedure of the Agency Councils
- Handbook for Members of International Expert Panels
- SRDA Information System User Manual



- All reports prepared by the members of the respective panel
- Declaration on Honour of a member of an international expert panel
- Declaration of professional competence in project assessment (in SRDA Information System)

The coordinator of the panel will e-mail the Rules of Procedure, the Handbook for Members of International Expert Panels as well as the SRDA Information System User Manual prior to the assessment.

If, for serious reasons, a member of the international expert panel is unable to participate in the assessment, they must immediately communicate this fact to the coordinator of the respective international expert panel.

Reports with formal deficiencies are returned for revision.

General Guidelines for the International Expert Panel Members

The basic principle of the evaluation is to assess the overall quality of the project in the following three criteria:

1. Excellence
2. Impact
3. Implementation

The assessment consists of two parts: scores and comments.

The numerical part is scored on a scale of 10 (excellent) to 0 (fail). Please use the steps of 1.

One project may be awarded 30 points maximum.

Please respect the following principles in your assessment:

- Provide substantial, explanatory comments; avoid comments that merely give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Use dispassionate, analytical, and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Ensure that critical comments are constructive.
- Make sure that comments are in line with the marks/funding recommendation given and avoid referring to them in the comment's narrative.
The inconsistency between the individual parts of the assessment is considered a formal deficiency of the report.
- Avoid self-declaration of insufficient expertise (personal or panel) in the proposal.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the applicant, the proposed science, or the scientific field concerned.



- Avoid reference to the applicant's age, nationality, gender, or personal matters.
- Be aware of unconscious bias in aspects such as gender and diversity.
- When assessing the research achievements of the applicants, focus on the scientific content and refrain from using surrogate measures of the quality of research outputs, such as Journal Impact Factors. Throughout the evaluation the qualitative judgement of the panels should be paramount and quantitative indicators should be used responsibly.
- Avoid copy-paste from the proposal and/or from IRs of other experts

Please consider the age and length of the professional career of the principal investigator and the project team members, as well as duration of their maternity/paternity and parental leave.

Interpretation of Scores

Table 1 Interpretation of Scores

Score	Interpretation of scores
10	Excellent. The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.
9	Very Good. The proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
8	Good. The proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
7	Fair. The proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses.
6	Poor. The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
5-0	The proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.



Definitions for Score Descriptors

- A '**minor shortcoming**' is an issue that relates only to a marginal aspect of the proposal with respect to the criterion and/or can easily be rectified (it will not impact the scoring).
- A '**shortcoming**' is a problem that relates to an important aspect of the proposal. It impacts the scoring but does not render the proposal inappropriate for funding, i.e. the proposal is still expected to lead to useful results with positive impact.
- A '**significant weakness**' means that the proposal addresses the criterion in a limited and/or not sufficiently effective way (will lower the score below threshold). This can also be the case when the proposal includes a large number of shortcomings, each one of them not rendering the proposal inappropriate for funding, though all together make the proposal not addressing the criterion sufficiently in an effective way.

Thresholds

Projects that, due to lack of quality, do not meet any of the following thresholds will not proceed to the next stage of assessment:

- a) the individual threshold is 6 points in each criterion
- b) the total threshold is 22 points

Projects that do not meet any of the above thresholds will not be funded due to insufficient quality.



Assessment Criteria

Basic research project assessment criteria

Criterion	What to assess	Maximum weighted score
Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluate the project concept, the proposed methods of implementation, and the relevance of the expected results.• Assess the significance of preliminary results relevant to the project and the connection of the proposed solution to the applicant's own published results.• Evaluate the degree of timeliness and relevance of the addressed problem in the given field of science and technology, the originality of the project idea, and the originality of its solution.• Assess to what extent the project objectives are clearly defined and realistically achievable.• Evaluate the appropriateness and justification of the proposed project methodology in relation to the achievement of the declared objectives.• Assess the quality of outputs from the principal investigator (including publications, completed projects, and their results, etc.).• Evaluate the expertise of the principal investigator in the given research field, their qualifications, and vision for building a research team, further development of the research, and career progression.• Evaluate the level of expertise of the research team (including individual members) and the participating research organizations in relation to the implementation of the proposed project.• Assess the complementarity, cooperation, and potential substitutability of team members in terms of their expertise and professional contribution to the project.• Evaluate the degree of involvement of young research and development personnel in the project.• Assess whether the project constitutes basic research.	15
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluate the measurable indicators and expected outputs of the project.• Evaluate the contribution and usability of the project for the advancement of knowledge and society.• Evaluate the measures for maximizing results and impact, as well as the proposed communication of project outcomes.	8
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluate the quality of the project documentation, the clarity and logical consistency of the proposed procedures and declared goals.• Assess the project plan and outputs – the realization of the project in terms of the timeline, taking into account the established scientific objectives, the individual steps of the work plan with milestones, and their division into work packages.• Assess project management and processes within the framework of project management.• Assess the risks of project implementation in relation to the expected outputs and the strategies for their mitigation.• Assess the project from a financial perspective.• Evaluate the existing infrastructure of the workplace(s) and its/their ability to ensure high-quality project implementation.• Evaluate the quality of the project documentation, the clarity and logical consistency of the proposed procedures and declared goals.• Assess the project plan and outputs – the realization of the project in terms of the timeline, taking into account the established scientific objectives, the individual steps of the work plan with milestones, and their division into work packages.	7
		30



Applied research and development project assessment criteria

Criterion	What to assess	Range of scores
Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluate the project concept, the proposed procedures for implementation, and the application level of the expected results.• Evaluate the significance of preliminary results relevant to the project and the connection of the proposed solution to the applicant's previously published results.• Assess the timeliness and relevance of the addressed problem in the specific field of science and technology, the originality of the project idea, and the originality of its solution.• Evaluate to what extent the project objectives are clearly defined and realistically achievable.• Assess the appropriateness and justification of the proposed methodology in relation to fulfilling the declared objectives.• Evaluate the quality of applied research outputs from the principal investigator.• Assess the expertise of the principal investigator in the given area of applied research or experimental development and the application of their research solutions.• Evaluate the expertise, competence, and vision for building a research team, further research, and career development.• Assess the level of competence of the involved research and implementation organizations in solving the proposed project.• Evaluate the competence of individual members of the research team in solving the proposed project.• Assess the level of involvement of young research and development workers in the project.• Evaluate whether the project qualifies as applied research or development.	0 – 10
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assess the project's contributions to the advancement of knowledge, applied research and development, and innovations (new products or procedures, improved products or procedures, new functional materials, new technologies, new services, social innovations, etc.).• Evaluate the applicability and extent of usability of the declared project results for the applicant/user in Slovakia and abroad.• Assess the level of economic benefit (increase in added value, resource savings, impact on employment, use of domestic raw materials, improvement of human resources, enhancement of quality of life and/or health, environmental protection).• Evaluate the measures planned to maximize project results and impact, and the planned communication of project outcomes.• Assess the measurable indicators of the project.	0 – 10
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluate the quality of the project documentation, the clarity and logical coherence of the procedures and declared objectives.• Assess the project plan and outputs – the implementation of the project in terms of timeline, considering the set scientific goals, the individual steps of the work plan with milestones, and their division into work packages.• Evaluate project management and processes within the framework of project management.• Assess the risks of project implementation in relation to the expected outputs and the strategies for their mitigation.• Assess the project from a financial perspective.• Evaluate the existing infrastructure of the workplace(s) and its/their guarantee of high-quality project implementation and the achievement of its goals.	0 – 10
		0 – 30



How to Prepare a Report?

The IRs and CRs must be submitted in the electronic form only.

A member of the international expert panel is required to confirm their agreement to assess the assigned projects within 7 days of the e-mail notification. In case a member of the international expert panel does not agree with the assignment, they must inform the coordinator of their panel without any delay.

If you have any questions or uncertainties regarding the assessment, please contact the coordinator of your panel. Contact point for further communication will be provided.

If you are facing technical problems with the preparation of your IR or CR, please contact info@apvv.sk.