

Guidelines for Independent Observers

The requirement to provide an independent observer's report on the evaluation is mandatory for all EU co-funded joint calls including FP7 ERA-NET Plus projects, joint calls implemented under Article 185 initiatives and the main [co-funded] joint call of Horizon 2020 ERA-NET Co-fund projects.

These guidelines cover:

1. The purpose of the independent observer
2. The process of carrying out the independent observer task (for EU co-funded joint calls)
3. A typical template for the observer's report

Whilst they are intended as guidelines for the independent observers they may also be useful for networks in preparing the generic terms of reference for, and/or briefing of, the selected observer.

Purpose of the independent observer

The main purpose of the independent observer is to report on the evaluation process to ensure the rules that govern the EU Co-funding (i.e. FP7, Horizon 2020) are being adhered to. In particular, this covers the way that the expert evaluators apply the evaluation criteria and the process of arriving at a fair and transparent consensus on the single ranked list of proposals. In carrying out this function, the independent observer must not express any opinions on the proposals or the expert's opinions but may (in their report) offer observations and suggestions on how the procedures could be improved.

The process of carrying out the independent observer task

Whilst the main task of the observer is to attend the central evaluation and prepare an independent report it is important to consider, and make a judgement on, the whole evaluation process. This will normally include:

- Appointment of the independent observer

It would be normal for the observer to be appointed several months prior to the central evaluation. This is the responsibility of the consortium that is organising the joint call, including the appropriate reimbursement. The EC project officer shall be contacted regarding the selection of the independent observer.

- Review of the publications associated with the Call

The conclusion on compliance with EU co-funding rules and observations on the efficiency/quality of the evaluation process are the main requirements of the independent observer. An initial judgement on these can be made by reviewing the information and documents that are provided to guide the applicants. A useful tactic for the observer is to consider these from the perspective of a prospective applicant.

- Review of the selection process for evaluators and briefing materials

The competence and balance of expert evaluators is absolutely critical to the quality and fairness of the evaluation and selection of proposals. It is important, therefore, that the observer fully understands the process and is provided with the necessary evidence to verify it. Of course, this can also be assessed further by asking evaluators for feedback during the central evaluation (see below).

- Participation in the central evaluation as an observer

The central evaluation is the main opportunity for the observer to formulate his or her conclusions on compliance with the EU co-funding rules and scope for process improvement. Normally, the central evaluation consists of three main activities: a plenary briefing for the evaluators, individual consensus meetings and final plenary meeting to approve the single ranking list. The detailed organisation of these may vary quite a bit between different networks but these are the generic three steps.

The plenary briefing for the evaluators is an opportunity for the observer to form an opinion on how well they understand their role and the rules that govern the evaluation. This can be further checked and any emerging opinions tested through individual discussions.

One of the key challenges for the observer is how to deal with the parallel consensus meetings. Clearly, it is impossible for one observer to follow all of the consensus meetings. It is therefore necessary to be selective in a way that enables an understanding of whether the moderators of the

consensus meetings are following a harmonised procedure. Their role in ensuring consistency of the scoring against the evaluation criteria is absolutely critical to the eventual single ranked list of proposals. The more experienced moderators can be quite challenging if they believe that evaluators are not scoring in a way that is consistent with the evaluation criteria or are biasing their overall scores towards one criterion. If the moderators do not have sufficient experience then there is high risk that the single ranked list will be flawed and open to challenge. The observer may sometimes feel a sense of frustration that he or she cannot intervene if they observe clearly inappropriate scoring but this must be avoided. The only option open to the observer in this situation is to make their feelings known after the consensus meeting to the Evaluation Manager and/or the representative of the Commission (if present).

The process of arriving at the single ranked list also needs to be understood by the observer. Normally the synthesis of individual scores is tabulated and presented to a plenary meeting of the evaluators. This is the point where it becomes apparent which proposals are in the funding cut-off zone and where decisions taken will have an impact on whether specific proposals are funded, or not. The moderator's nightmare is tied scores that span the funding cut-off line and it is then necessary to 'negotiate' the final ranking order with those evaluators who scored the relevant projects. This is difficult enough with real common pot funding models such as in an Article 185 call or the central calls of FP7 and Horizon 2020. With the more typical mixed-mode funding calls this can be an even more complex and challenging process. The observer needs to be satisfied that the outcome is both fair and transparent.

- Preparation of the independent observer's report

The final stage of the observer's task is to prepare the report. It is good practice to prepare a draft and allow the consortium representative to check for any factual errors before finalising. An example template for the report is provided below.

Example of a template for the observer's report

1. Introduction
 - a. Overview of the Call (e.g. objectives and scope)
 - b. Terms of Reference for the independent observer
 - c. Approach to the task

2. Observations on the Evaluation Process
 - a. Stage 1 evaluation
 - b. Selection and briefing of evaluators for Stage 2
 - c. Remote evaluation
 - d. Central evaluation
 - i. Organisation & logistics
 - ii. Briefing of the evaluators
 - iii. Consensus meetings
 - iv. Ranking of the evaluated proposals

3. Overall Impressions
 - a. Compliance with the rules for EU co-funding
 - b. Conformity of the evaluation process witnessed with the published evaluation procedures
 - c. Transparency, fairness and confidentiality of the selection process
 - d. Efficiency and speed of the call/evaluation process
 - e. Quality of the overall call/evaluation process

4. Summary of Recommendations
 - a. Major issues
 - b. Minor issues