Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment

CoARA Boost Cascade Funding Programme

Evaluation Guidelines – Second Round

Opening: 21 February 2025

Closing: 21 April 2025 at 17:00 CEST

Funding Call information, documents and templates:
https://coara.eu/second-call-for-cascade-funding/

Funding Call Application Platform:
https://esf.smartsimple.ie/s_signup.jsp?token=XVtQC1oGYV5ZSxtZXxJXR1JWYUl1H3Rt

Evaluation guidelines for the second round of the CoARA Boost Cascade Funding Programme

Contents

1. Evaluators

Evaluation of the proposals will be carried out by external reviewers, acting as panel members, who are experts in research assessment. Reviewers are selected from the contact database of CoARA, from the contact database associated with CoARA's collaboration history with experts and expert groups in research assessment as well as from a pool referrals from the CoARA Boost consortium and the Steering Board. In addition to relevance of topical expertise, the CoARA Secretariat will also adhere to diversity measures in terms of geographical coverage. The CoARA Steering Board may suggest names, but the selection and decision will be taken by the CoARA Boost consortium. At the end of the evaluation process, their names will be published on the CoARA website. In addition, their insights from the first call will be taken into account in the design of the second round of the cascade funding programme.

The pool of evaluators will exhibit diversity in terms of gender, geographical and disciplinary background as well as career stages.

Gender balance

CoARA Secretariat will do their best to ensure a gender-balanced panel, however no more than 2/3 of the pool of selected reviewers should represent the same gender.

Geographical balance

During the compilation of the pool of reviewers, a balanced geographical representation within European regions will be ensured and at least 5% of the reviewers will represent regions outside of Europe.

Career stage

During the compilation of the pool of reviewers, a balanced representation of all career stages will be ensured and at least 25% of the pool of selected reviewers will be early career researchers).

Conflicts of Interest

An interest may be defined as where a person may benefit either financially, professionally or personally by the success or failure of a proposal.

In that sense, each reviewer will be requested to check whether a circumstance exists that could be interpreted as a conflict of interest.

The following reasons are considered conflict for reviewers:

- When reviewers are directly involved in an application, either in their individual or institutional capacities
- Reviewers employed by the applicant in the last three years
- Reviewers from the same institution(s)
- Applicants to this call
- Relatives (either first- or second-degree) of or personal tie to the project coordinator (main contact point)
- Close scientific collaboration, e.g. implementation of joint projects or joint publications within the past five years
- Personal economic interest in the funding decision.

Handling Conflicts of Interests

The call coordinator (CoARA Secretariat) will do their best to avoid possible conflicts of interest among the reviewers. In addition to that, reviewers are encouraged to thoroughly and conscientiously reflect upon their own situations and biases regarding a submission and, when in doubt, decline to review. As a guidance, bias criteria for declining review are specified in document 4: GUIDELINES FOR REVIEWERS.

Experts should inform the CoARA Secretariat immediately of any possible reservations so that the coordinator of the programme can determine whether participation in the review process is appropriate.

2. Evaluation and selection process

All applications will be assessed by a review panel composed of experts in research assessment, set up by the European Science Foundation (ESF). The review panels will assess applications submitted to the type of project that fall within their policy and/or research expertise. Each submission will be reviewed by one Lead Reviewer panellist and one Secondary Reviewer panellist who will provide written pre-assessments of each application. The Lead Reviewer panellist will present these pre-assessments when introducing the application during the panel.

Following the three themes of the call specified in the call for proposals, one thematic panel will be dedicated to each, namely:

P01 –Teaming projects

P02 – Institutional change project

P03 –Institutional pilot projects.

The evaluation procedure consists of the following stages:

Phase	Process	Timeline
Formal eligibility check	Performed by the CoARA Secretariat	End of April 2025
Pre-assessment	All applications will be made available to the review panel prior to the panel meetings, for each application to be pre-assessed by two panel members and read by all panel members. Each submission will be reviewed by one Lead Reviewer panellist and one Secondary Reviewer panellist. They will have access to each other's reviews.	May 2025
Review panels	During the review panel meetings (teleconference), each application will be presented by their reviewers and discussed by the full panel. Each application will be presented by Lead Reviewer panellists who will introduce both pre-assessments alongside the application. The review panel will then agree on an overall mark for each application and produce	June 2025

	a ranked list of applications.	
Panel chairs' meeting	During the panel chairs meeting (teleconference), chairs of the topical panels bring results of their respective topical panels together. They agree on the overall ranking (i.e. rankings from each panel) and make final selection decisions.	End of June 2025
Panel meeting outcomes – consensus reports	The panel members will then produce a consensus report for each application, summarising the panel discussions. Narrative comments (not scores) from the consensus reports will be communicated to the applicants.	Mid-July 2025

2.1. Reviewer assignment

After the call coordinator (CoARA Secretariat) checked the eligibility of all proposals received through the submission portal, the eligible proposals will be forwarded to the reviewers. Assignment of proposals to reviewers is done by the CoARA Secretariat based on ruling out Conflicts of Interest, random assignment or in accordance with areas of member expertise. Each submission will be reviewed by one Lead Reviewer panellist and one Secondary Reviewer panellist. Pre-assessment of the proposals by two-panel members will be followed by the review of the assessments and ranking of the applications by the review panel.

2.2. Pre-assessments

During the pre-assessment phase, panellists fill in their scoring sheets (see Annex 3) and send them back to the CoARA Secretariat who compiles the scoring results. These results will form the base of the panel discussions.

To ensure equal treatment of applications, all panel members will read the proposals discussed in the panel. Each proposal will be presented by their Lead Reviewer and discussed by the entire panel. Decision will be made in the light of the evaluation criteria (see below). At the end of each panel, recommendations for funding allocation (i.e. 'to be funded', 'to be funded if funding available', 'not to be funded') will be collectively agreed by the panellists.

2.3. Panel discussions

The panel discussions will be based on the evaluation sheets filled in by Lead and Secondary Reviewers. All evaluation sheets' content will be available to the Review Panel before the Review Panel meeting. This compilation will enable to distinguish lowest ranked proposals from medium ranked and highest ranked and to give a starting point for discussion.

Panel discussion will be focused and always related to the evaluation criteria and to the quality of proposals. The Lead Reviewer will present the proposal and their evaluation, and the Secondary Reviewer will be asked to complete with their comments; discussion will then open to the entire panel. Based on discussion, scores from the reviewers will either move up or move down. Comments made along this line during the review panel will be recorded by the Operational Support panel member. Scores are an internal tool to facilitate the Review Panel discussion and will not be disclosed to applicants.

In the end of panel discussion, the panels identify the high/medium/low ranking proposals. The selection will be carried out based on how the portfolio of projects support achieving CoARA's mission and make the biggest possible impact towards a systemic reform of research assessment in a given institution.

Panellists will collectively decide on funding recommendations and panel level rankings. In case of non-agreement, an average of individual suggestions will be assigned.

2.4. Final selection

As a final step of the process, Lead Reviewers and the Secondary Reviewers will then produce a consensus report for each application, which will consist of a joint assessment of the application taking into account the panel discussions. Narrative assessment from the consensus reports will be communicated to the applicants, together with information on which evaluation brackets/quadrium the project fell into:

1. To be funded with strong consensus
2. To be funded – close to the cut-off line
3. Not to be funded – close to the cut-off line
4. Not to be funded.

At the end of the evaluation process all proposals will be ranked based on their scores and funding recommendations. In case of necessary, the overall ranking (i.e. rankings from each panel) will be discussed by the panel chairs (Chair and Vice-Chair) and the final selection decisions will be made by them. In this final decision, panel chairs will strive for having a balanced portfolio of selected projects in terms of geographical diversity, diversity of organisations and types of projects.

2.5. Communicating selection results to applicants

The CoARA Secretariat will then formally approve a list of proposals within the limits of the available funding, the project will communicate the results simultaneously to all applicants, and every applicant will receive via email: An Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) and a letter informing of the grant decision and following steps, or rejection decision.

Applicants will receive via email: a letter informing them of the decision and the following steps (if applicable) and an Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) in case of successful and evaluated but not successful proposals.

2.6. Confidentiality

The evaluators will sign a declaration of confidentiality concerning the contents of the proposals they read. The form they use in the evaluation includes a declaration of absence of conflict of interest, which they agree to by signing them. All evaluators will receive the evaluation guidelines, and templates, and will be duly informed about the timing for an agile process and conflict of interest issues.

3. Evaluation criteria

Panellists will evaluate the proposals considering three criteria. Criteria will bear an equal weight in the assessment and each criterion will be qualitatively assessed following the scales provided in the table below. Scoring is complemented by comments from reviewers (min. 80 words per criterion).

Reviewers will score each award criterion on a scale from 0 to 5:

Score	Definition
0	Proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.
1	Poor – criterion is inadequately addressed or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
2	Fair – proposal broadly addresses the criterion, but there are significant weaknesses
3	Good – proposal addresses the criterion well, but a number of shortcomings are present.
4	Very good - proposal addresses the criterion very well, but a small number of shortcomings are present.
5	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any shortcomings are minor.

The total score will be calculated as the sum of the scores of the three criteria. The threshold for each criterion will be three (3), while the overall score threshold will be ten (10). That means if a proposal receives less than 3 in one criterion or less than 10 overall score, it will not be recommended for funding by the independent evaluators and will be automatically rejected.

The scoring sheet and detailed evaluation criteria can be found in Annex 3**.** In the final decision, panel chairs will strive for having a balanced portfolio of selected projects in terms of geographical diversity (no more than 4 projects should be funded from the same country, diversity of organisations (see the list of eligible organisation types above, allocating funding to only one type of organisation e.g. universities will be avoided in case the pool of applicants allow for it) and types of

projects (at least 3 projects from each project type: Teaming projects, Institutional change projects and Institutional pilot projects).

Scoring guide

The sheet guides Reviewers to assess the quality of each proposal against the evaluation criteria specified in section 3. Evaluation criteria. Reviewers express their evaluation in terms of scores for the three evaluation criteria as well as in short written comments (min. 80 words). Reviewers are encouraged to first draft the comments and then score, in order to ensure that the comments match the score explanation in the scale. Reviewers should use the large spectrum of ranking scale (0-5) to make a clear distinction of high quality, average and low-quality proposals. The role of reviewers is vital in keeping the standards of the selection high. It includes:

1. Assessing the proposals based on their soundness, integrity, feasibility, possible impact and relevance to CoARA's mission of facilitating a systemic change in research assessment practices in a given organisation, or in the case of teaming calls, organisations.
2. Contributing to the development of the proposals by sharing their remarks and maintaining a constructive tone.

Keeping an awareness of one's possible cultural, disciplinary etc. biases, implicit or explicit, can help avoid having them negatively affect reviewers' judgements.

For more information on the scoring sheet and detailed evaluation criteria, please see Annex 3.