

# Statement of FWF on the evaluation report – Clusters of Excellence

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# 1 Context of evaluation

## The FWF

The Austrian Science Fund (FWF) is Austria's leading organisation for the funding of basic research. The purpose of the FWF is to support the ongoing development of Austrian science and basic research at a high international level. In this way, the FWF makes a significant contribution to cultural development, to the advancement of our knowledge-based society, and thus to the creation of value and wealth in Austria. Further information on the FWF's responsibilities, and the values to which it is committed, can be found on the FWF's website at <https://www.fwf.ac.at/en/>.

## 1.1 Purpose of the evaluation

In 2021, the Austrian federal government has provided the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) with €150 million in funding over the next three years as part of the excellent=austria programme to support universities and other research institutions to further develop their research strengths. Research institutions can enhance their reputation as internationally successful research stakeholders, and this in turn increases Austria's chances of attracting the best researchers from around the world.

In the first funding track, the Clusters of Excellence program has been implemented. A Cluster of Excellence is characterised by the successful combination of top-level research, research-oriented training and promotion of young researchers, and the national and international exchange of knowledge. The funding program provides groups of researchers at Austrian research institutions with the opportunity to achieve outstanding cooperative research results in one field or interdisciplinary. The goal is to establish this research field in Austria in the long term at a top international level. The promotion of young researchers and research-oriented training are integral parts of the programme, and particular emphasis is placed on equal opportunities and diversity. In addition, special importance is given to the transfer of knowledge and technology in the form of collaborations with business and society. A CoE is expected to take a leading role internationally in the development and expansion of its chosen research field.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this concurrent evaluation is to monitor the selection process of the FWF's first call for Clusters of Excellence (CoE) in order to improve the second call of the CoE.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The background for the initiative included the results of the evaluation of the FWF's special research areas (SFB). There, it was criticised that the funding volume of the SFBs was too low to priority setting at the research institutions, see: Dinges, M. et al (2020). Evaluation FWF Special Research Programmes (SFB). Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3889307>

<sup>2</sup> In the past, the FWF has used the instrument of ex-post evaluation for funding programmes. This means that programmes were evaluated externally after a certain period of time and adapted accordingly. This instrument is unsuitable for the Excellence Initiative programmes due to a) the limited number of calls for proposals, b) the comparatively small number of funded projects and c) the long project duration.

<sup>3</sup> The concurrent evaluation was put out to international tender in accordance with FWF rules. Three bids were received, with [NIFU](#) (Nordic Institute for Studies of Innovation, Research and Education) being awarded the contract after a comparative evaluation.

## 1.2 Key Findings

*„The overall conclusions of the evaluation are positive. Review and selection procedures have generally been adequate and efficient, and stakeholders' satisfaction at expected level or above. The FWF call for Clusters of Excellence attracted well qualified teams and proposals and appeared attractive especially to the natural sciences and multi-disciplinary fields. A majority of both applicants and reviewers find programme policies appropriate for creating synergies between research environments and for establishing long-term leading research fields. Main challenges and concerns identified relate to the timing of the call and timely and clear guidelines and requirements, transparency of the review and selection process, ensuring consistent use of review criteria, and defining the proper role for the FWF Board.”* (Liv Langfeldt, Siri Brorstad Borlaug, Silje Marie Svartefoss, Espen Solberg: FWF Clusters of Excellence. Evaluation of the selection process for the first call for proposals, Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education, 2023, p. 7 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8362566>).

## 1.3 Responses of the FWF to the recommendations from the evaluation

### 1. Balance between number and size of proposals and grants

The evaluation recommends to continue the restrict number of proposals per institution and to further restrict the number of full proposals, and to simplify full proposal requirements (p 69).

The FWF will continue to restrict the number of proposals per institution as it was in the first call. A further restriction of the number of applications might result in the fact that not all consortia from the first call could resubmit, if wished, and was therefore not enforced. Hence, the planning reliability for research institutions and consortia is guaranteed.

### 2. Clear and simple requirements and guidelines for proposals

The FWF has decided to skip the pre-proposal phase altogether and simplify the Letter of Interest (LoI) and the (full) proposal requirements. The description of the management unit is omitted without replacement; the presentation of the research institutions' own funds has to be prepared only by the consortia invited to the hearing. This way it is guaranteed that all elements relevant for making the funding decision are evaluated by reviewers from the start. In the first call, the focus on the pre-proposal evaluation was on the research plan and the team members while other units were described in the proposals but not evaluated. Only in the full proposal, additional units such as training, transfer and communication as well as organization unit were evaluated by the reviewers.

Even if a (full) proposal is more lengthy in terms of the number of pages, the FWF assumes that the overall effort will remain the same and that the quality of the review process will also increase as no asymmetries are expected (see also recommendations 5 and 6 below).

In sum, it leads to a reduced workload for researchers and research institutions and to a clearer and more transparent evaluation process.

### **3. Timing of the call and deadlines and timely information**

The first CoE call was subject to a very challenging time schedule for researchers as well as for the FWF, so that a lot of information could not be provided in advance. A large amount of work had to be done by the consortia during the summer.

The FWF is planning on publishing the Lol guidelines and the application guidelines for the (full) proposal at the same time in fall 2023 so that the consortia are informed about the whole process from the beginning. The deadlines do not collide with the summer break.

### **4. Transparency of the proposal review process**

The FWF will describe the decision-making process for CoEs in detail in the application guidelines so that no misunderstandings can arise among applicants. The Lol phase is used for the purely formal review of applications and to assemble a multidisciplinary jury. The evaluation of the Lol is therefore not carried out by expert panels.

In the (full) application phase, written expert reviews are obtained and the multidisciplinary jury will decide on the invitation to the hearing on the basis of the expert reviews. Those consortia invited to the hearing will be provided with the reviews and given the opportunity to rebuttal before the final decision is made. The consortia should be given the space to respond to any detailed questions from the reviews. It is precisely from the hearing onwards that the particularly competitive phase of the selection process begins, where such details could become crucial to the decision.

### **5. Guiding external reviewers and ensuring consistent use of criteria**

Part of the problem is remedied by the quasi single-stage procedure (no pre-proposal) and by simplifying the application guidelines. Only those elements should be presented in the proposal that are also reviewed by the experts. Although the FWF, together with the European Science Foundation <sup>4</sup>( ESF) who conducted the process of identifying reviewers and collecting reviews, has provided clear guidance for reviewers, the FWF will endeavor to test other communication formats to avoid potential misunderstandings.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.esf.org/about-esf-science-connect/about-esf/>

## **6. Organising assessments in a multidisciplinary jury**

The FWF will continue to hold initial discussions in subpanels, as suggested in the evaluation, and will clearly communicate in the jury briefings what kind of preparation is expected from the jury members.

In the second step of the assessment, coming together as a multidisciplinary jury, in contrast to expert panels, the jury has to weigh up all the proposals and the hearing, and a final discussion in plenary is mandatory. Nevertheless, several adaptations will be made so that there is no asymmetric information between the jury members, e.g. the jury of the shortlist and the hearing will be identical, assignments of tasks within the jury will be communicated more clearly. There will be more reading time in the disciplinary subpanels before the jury meets in full plenum, and access to all documents (considering potential conflicts of interests). The jury members who are primarily assigned to the application on a disciplinary basis will also prepare written statements on the most important strengths and weaknesses of the application, which will be made available to the other jury members.

## **7. Disadvantages for interdisciplinarity research when competing against disciplinary research**

The CoE program is open to mono- and interdisciplinary applications. In this respect, equal treatment of these applications is a matter of concern to the FWF. Interdisciplinary applications should therefore neither receive a bonus nor be structurally disadvantaged in the decision-making process. Based on the decision-making process and the review findings, as well as the small number of cases, we cannot identify any systematic disadvantage in the first call.

The jury will be composed in such a way that the jury can well cover and review the entire disciplinary spectrum and the potential linkages between the disciplines.

## **8. Defining the proper role for the FWF Board – given extensive conflicts of interest**

The FWF will continue to be able to grant the FWF Board only a limited role in the review of clusters in order to approach any conflicts of interest with due caution. As the evaluation shows, clear communication with the FWF Board is important. This will take place right at the beginning of the 2nd call in the FWF Board, where explicit approval will be obtained for the procedure as a whole. This has already proven successful in the final funding decision for full proposals in the first call.

## **2 Closing Remarks on the FWF's Cooperation with the Evaluators**

The FWF is committed to the standards of evaluation developed by the Austrian Platform for Research and Technology Policy Evaluation (fteval)<sup>5</sup>. In addition, the FWF has adopted its own quality and transparency rules that formed the basis of this evaluation.<sup>6</sup> These sets of rules provide a clear line with regard to the relationship between the evaluators and the client. The cooperation with the NIFU team led by Liv Langfeldt, was characterized by professional distance, accepting and adhering to these different roles. In a kick-off meeting we elaborated together the details and focus points of the evaluation, and the mid-term presentation served as a countercheck for the evaluators and the FWF. This meeting gave the evaluators the opportunity to gain an even deeper understanding of the program, and the FWF to learn about the first preliminary results. Overall, the evaluation benefited from a productive and appreciative collaboration, which is the basis for the development of a common understanding.

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<sup>5</sup> [Standards - fteval](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Quality and transparency rules for evaluations \(fwf.ac.at\)](#)