

The University of Naples Federico II entrusted ESF-Science Connect with the scientific assessment of the 196 applications submitted to the 2020 EPIG (Established Principal Investigator Grant) call under Action 1 of the Star Plus programme.

1. Review panels

The ESF-SC set-up three Review Panels. In total 45 experts were contacted and 32 appointed to the panels. The overall gender distribution across panels was 44% females, 56% males, with two of the three panels having a 50% - 50% gender balance

The 196 eligible applications submitted to the call were assigned to the relevant panels and evaluated according to the breakdown below:

Panel	N° Panel Members	Females	Males	N° Applications
Panel 1 - Humanities and Social Sciences	8	4	4	41
Panel 2 - Life Science and Medicine	12	4	8	78
Panel 3 - Science and Technology	12	6	6	77
Total	32	14	18	196

Panel members (PMs) came from 16 different countries.

Distribution of PMs per country:

Country	N° PMs
Austria	3
Belgium	3
Croatia	1
Estonia	1
Finland	1
France	5
Germany	1
Greece	2
Italy	2
Lithuania	1
Netherlands	2
Portugal	1
Romania	1
Sweden	1
Turkey	1
United Kingdom	6

Distribution of PM countries per panel:

Country	Panel 1 HSS	Panel 2 LIFE-MED	Panel 3 SC-TECH
Austria		2	1
Belgium	2		1
Croatia		1	
Estonia		1	
Finland			1
France	1	2	2
Germany		1	
Greece		1	1
Italy		1	1
Lithuania		1	
Netherlands			2
Portugal		1	
Romania			1
Sweden	1		
Turkey			1
United Kingdom	4 ¹	1	1

2. Assessment process

The assessment process took place in 2 stages.

1. Stage 1 (sifting)

A. Pre-assessment phase by rapporteurs:

Each application was evaluated by two panel members (a lead and a secondary rapporteur). Rapporteurs were asked to consider the extensive synopsis, the PI's CV and the team's track record and assess the proposal based on the 3 criteria below:

- A) Project concept, objectives, progress beyond the state-of-the-art and impact
- B) Project Feasibility:
- C) Principal Investigator qualification and Research Team Composition

Each rapporteur provided a pre- assessment report ahead of the panel meeting. The reports were only made available to the panellists once both assessments had been submitted for a given project.

¹ Due to the unavailability of potential panel members from other countries, the UK was the most represented country on the HSS panel.

B. Consensus phase:

Rapporteurs met within their panels on 19th -20th July 2021 to discuss each application assigned to their panels and come to a decision regarding the projects that should be shortlisted for the second stage of the evaluation. In total 62 projects were shortlisted.

For each application **not shortlisted for the second stage**, rapporteurs wrote a consensus report summarising the panel's discussion on the 3 criteria above.

The integrated list of all applications across the three panels with the final panel recommendations was presented at the subsequent meeting of the panel chairs who reported on the discussions in their panels.

Distribution of (not) shortlisted projects

Decision	N° applications	Panel 1 HSS	Panel 2 LIFE-MED	Panel 3 SC-TECH
Shortlisted	62	12	25	25
Not shortlisted	134	29	53	52

The following deliverables were sent to UNINA at the end of Stage 1 on 6th August 2021:

- D1: Review Panel Membership list with the panel members title, name, surname, affiliation, and country
- D2: an Excel file containing the outcome of the sifting meeting – the list includes the shortlisted proposals and the non-shortlisted proposals and the PDF files of the consensus reports for the non-shortlisted proposals (134 PDFs)

2. **Stage 2 (consensus)**

A. External review phase:

Each of the 62 shortlisted applications were independently evaluated by two external reviewers, experts in the field of the application.

In total, ESF-Science Connect provided UNINA with 124 validated evaluations.

The assessment reports were checked for quality by ESF-Science Connect scientific staff.

Invitations

Number of invitations sent: 383, including 35% female, 61% male and 4% unspecified. On average 6 experts were invited per application. 2 (3.2%) applications for which more than 15 experts were invited. The maximum number of invitations sent for one application was 25.

- 8 (13%) applications required between 11 and 25 invitations to be sent.
- 11 (18%) applications required between 7 and 10 invitations to be sent.
- 43 (69%) applications required up to 6 invitations to be sent.

Experts involved

In total, 124 experts were involved in the provision of the 124 assessments.

Gender balance

31% of the reviews were provided by female experts, 69% were provided by male experts and 1% were unspecified.

Geographical balance

Reviewers involved in the assessment of the applications are affiliated with organisations located in 33 different countries, where close to 80% of the evaluations were provided by reviewers located in 12 countries (see below). The geographical balance target of not having more than 15% of expert reviewers from any single country was achieved.

Percentage assessments provided	Country of affiliation
12,9%	United Kingdom
12,9%	United States
10,5%	Spain
10,5%	France
5,6%	Netherlands
5,6%	Australia
4,8%	Sweden
4,0%	Canada
4,0%	Germany
3,2%	Portugal
2,4%	Belgium
2,4%	Greece
79,0%	Total

B. Assessment phase by rapporteurs

The same rapporteurs who had been assigned to a given application at the sifting stage were asked to provide an assessment of the whole application, taking into account the external reviews that had been provided by the external experts and made available to them on the online platform.

Both external reviewers and rapporteurs were asked to consider the whole application, incl. the start-up phase section and assess the applications based on the 6 criteria below:

Scientific project proposal

- A) Project concept, objectives, progress beyond the state-of-the-art and impact
- B) Project Feasibility:
- C) Principal Investigator qualification and Research Team Composition

Start-up phase

- A) Prospective strategy
- B) Pertinence of proposed scientific activities
- C) Budget of Start Up Phase Proposal

C. Consensus phase

Rapporteurs met within their panels on 28th October 2021 to discuss each shortlisted application and come to a decision regarding the projects that should be funded. They agreed on the final marks for both aspects of the application, scientific project proposal and start-up phase, the final ranking, and the funding recommendations: Top priority / Priority / Fundable / Not recommended for funding

For each shortlisted application, rapporteurs were asked to write a consensus report summarising the panel's discussion on the 6 criteria above.

Following the panel meetings, the panel chairs met to report on the discussions in their panels and to agree on a single, integrated list of ranked applications across the three panels together with funding recommendations.

Distribution of funding recommendations:

Funding recommendations	N° applications	Panel 1 HSS	Panel 2 LIFE-MED	Panel 3 SC-TECH
Top priority	21	5	8	8
Priority	8	1	4	3
Fundable	30	6	11	13
Not recommended for funding	3	0	2	1

The following deliverables were sent to UNINA at the end of Stage 2 on 17th November 2021:

- D3: table gathering external reviews for the shortlisted proposals, including dossier/proposal number and content of the evaluation report
- D4: external reviews in PDF format: two evaluation reports by two external reviewers for each of the shortlisted applications (anonymised).
- D5: consensus meeting outcome: ranking list with final marks and funding recommendations and one panel consensus report per application providing an overall comment summarising the panel discussions in PDF format.
- D6: final report on the evaluation process

3. Panellists' recommendations to UNINA

Rapporteurs remarked on the high number of very good and excellent proposals (also in relation to previous calls of the University of Naples they participated in) and made a set of recommendations:

1. The main recommendation relates to the evaluation of the project at sifting stage. At that stage, rapporteurs are given access to the whole proposal. Temptation is high to look for more information in the proposal when section 1 is not complete, raises questions, or is not well written, even though clear instructions are given to rapporteurs. Panellists should not have access to parts of the applications that are not to be assessed.

The recommendation for UNINA would be to have either a one-stage or two-stage evaluation process. In the first case, applicants submit the whole proposal and panellists provide consensus based on external reviews and their own assessments. In the second case, short

proposals are submitted first (only) and applicants going through to the next stage would then submit full proposals, possibly considering comments from the panel who had a look at short proposals. This would allow applicants to make the most of the panel work during stage 1. A two-stage process would be the best option.

2. The question was raised whether applicants had been informed by UNINA about the fact that Section 1 only would be taken into consideration when evaluating the proposal at sifting stage. It was noted by the HSS and Life-Med panels that some extensive synopses were rather badly written or extremely short and non-informative.

The recommendation for UNINA would be to ensure applicants are clearly informed of the evaluation process (guidelines, criteria) and of which parts of the applications are being assessed at which stage.

3. The Humanities and Social Sciences panel recommended that in future, two panels dedicated specifically to the Humanities and the Social Sciences be set up. Evaluating proposals very distant from one another, in terms of expertise required, had not been so easy.
4. The panels recommended that the start-up phase criteria be sharpened and more detailed.
5. Another suggestion for the consensus phase was to provide different weightings to the assessment of the main proposal and the start-up phase, with a greater weight assigned to the main proposal.