

Evaluation in the FWF

Evaluation is the main instrument for an institution such as the FWF, which is required to justify its decisions to many different people: first, to the scientific community, which the FWF was established to support; secondly to the Ministry and to politicians who “commission“ the FWF’s work and make money available; and finally to the public: the taxpayer has the right to learn what is done with the money that ultimately comes from his or her pocket and he or she should also expect to have this information communicated in an understandable way. Since its establishment, the FWF has set benchmarks for Austria in regard to the evaluation and decision-making procedures it employs. Together with ministries and funding institutions and as a member of the Austrian Platform for the Evaluation of Research and Technology¹ the FWF is actively contributing to promoting the widespread application of these standards in the Austrian system for research support.

The FWF’s approaches to evaluation

The FWF is both the user and the commissioner of evaluation procedures and is itself subject to evaluation.

Evaluation of projects – the FWF as an evaluation user

The evaluation of projects forms the backbone of the FWF’s work. It represents the basis for quality assurance in all the FWF’s funding programmes. Since the FWF’s establishment, international peer-review has been the instrument of choice. Proven scientists with relevant experience and qualifications (scientists whose work is closely related to that of the applicant, or their “peers”) are consulted and their opinions sought on

- applications for project support (*ex ante* – before the funding decision is taken)²,
- the project’s progress (interim evaluation for quality assurance during the duration of the project, e.g. for large-scale projects in the Priority Research Areas or Graduate Schools programmes) or
- the project’s results (*ex post* – after conclusion of the project).

The FWF does not have a fixed “pool” of referees. Instead, referees are selected for each individual project application, based on their expertise in the relevant subject area. The FWF’s peer-review procedure is highly international in nature: for the past decade and more all referees’ reports come from outside Austria. A third of them come from non-German speaking countries in Europe and a further third from further afield. Furthermore, the FWF attempts to ensure that at least 25% of reports come from female referees. Selection of referees is highly efficient: about 40% of those contacted agree to review applications for the FWF. The vast majority of reports are submitted in writing. However, panel hearings are

¹ <http://www.fteval.at/>

² Details are given in “General Principles of the Decision-making Procedure”.

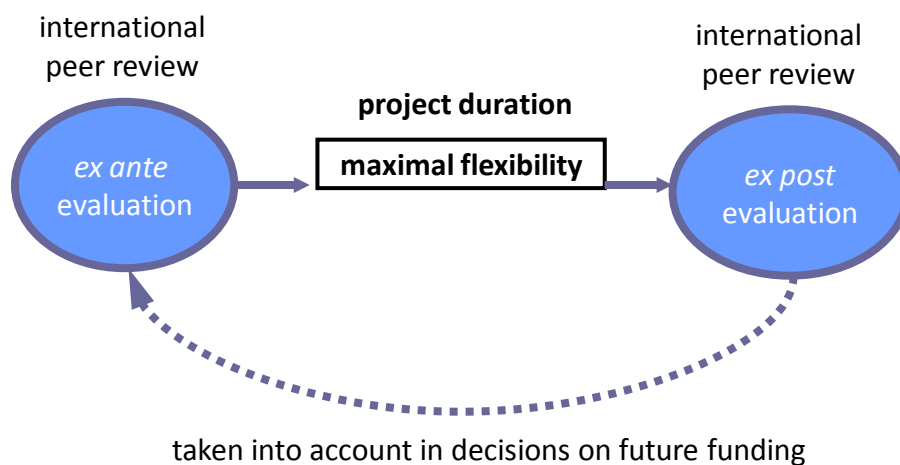
used in the evaluation of complex large-scale research projects and of excellence programmes: in these, experts interact with applicants.

In all stages of the procedure the FWF relies on a finely tuned system to avoid conflicts of interest and to ensure that all operations are checked (using the “many eyes” principle).

The *ex post* evaluation of projects is the FWF’s most recent procedure. Since 2003, all projects are evaluated after completion. The procedure is significant for several reasons:

- It represents an important element in association with the “global budget” the FWF provides to support projects. The introduction of the global budget was one of the most significant steps in the development of the FWF’s procedures and considerably reduced the administrative complexity and “bureaucracy” scientists faced in carrying out their projects. The term “global budget” is used to mean that project leaders may use the money granted for the project in the manner they think best for the project’s performance and likely to produce the best results in the most efficient way. In other words, deviations from the original planning are permitted without the necessity for consulting the FWF before every change. The FWF’s “philosophy” with regard to the controlling and quality assurance of the projects it funds is simple and clear:

Quality Assurance in the FWF



strict examination before funding, then maximum flexibility for the scientists in carrying out the project; check of the results after completion of the project by international experts. This *ex post* evaluation is taken into account when considering funding in the future.

- The *ex post* evaluation gives information on the project’s performance and its success as well as for the FWF’s PR work. Key data from the project are stored in the FWF’s database. Scientific publications and contributions to conferences, the career development of project co-workers (especially young scientists), awards and prizes resulting from the project as well as application-oriented results such as patents and licenses are all recorded, in addition to measures for science

communication. The FWF is placing increasing importance on the use of “open access” to disseminate scientific results.

- All of these data form an essential basis for further evaluations and for illustrating the impact of the FWF’s research funding, both in the national and in an international context.

Programme evaluation – the FWF as evaluation commissioner

Cutting-edge funding work requires that the design, the procedures and the effectiveness of funding programmes be regularly examined. In this way, a solid foundation for testing the efficiency and impact of each funding activity is created, which can also be used to ensure they are set in an appropriate national and international context. The FWF applies the standards of the Austrian Platform for the Evaluation of Research and Technology, which stipulate that funding programmes that dispose of more than 1 million € per year should be evaluated every five years³. Such evaluations are complex and their performance imposes high demands in terms of logistics and know-how. For this reason, the FWF contracts evaluations to external institutions with the appropriate experience and expertise. All of the FWF’s most important funding programmes have been evaluated by international, independent and expert institutions (or companies). The programmes for which such evaluations have not yet been completed are either currently subject to evaluation (programmes to promote female scientists, the Translational Research Programme) or will be evaluated when the appropriate time has elapsed (e.g. Graduate Schools).

The results of all evaluations are made publically available on the FWF Home Page:

http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/public_relations/publikationen/publikationen.html,
under “Evaluations”.

These are:

the Priority Research Programmes

(http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/networks_evaluation.pdf);

the programmes to promote international mobility

http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/fwf_mobility_report.pdf;

and the stand-alone projects

<http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/InTeReg%20RR%20Nr%2042.pdf>.

Reports from the evaluation of “commissioned” programmes that were not commissioned by the FWF but by the Federal Ministry for which the FWF administers the programme are:

the “excellence” programmes for the START Prize and the Wittgenstein Award

<http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/stawi-evaluierung.pdf>;

and the Impulse Projects Programme

http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/impulsprojekte_evaluierungsbericht_technopolis2007.pdf.

³ <http://www.fteval.at/standards/>

The evaluation of the FWF – the FWF as the object of evaluation

Political considerations make it imperative that a funding institution such as the FWF is itself the object of evaluation, in which its operation, its portfolio of programmes and its position in the national and international system for promoting scientific innovation are subjected to scrutiny. The evaluation of projects and programmes form an essential basis for such an evaluation.

The evaluation of the FWF and the FFF (as it was known at the time; it is now the Base Programme of the FFG) was undertaken between May 2003 and February 2004 and represented the first comprehensive evaluation of the two institutions since their establishment in 1967. The study was carried out to an internationally high standard by an international consortium under the leadership of Technopolis and combined the work of professional evaluators from within Austria and abroad with reviews obtained from international peers. These bodies not only analysed the structure, working practices and strategic direction of the two organizations but in their consideration of the impacts and positioning they also included large sections of the national system for science and innovation.

The reports of this evaluation are available under the following links:

http://www.fteval.at/files/evstudien/FWF_Evaluation.pdf

http://www.fteval.at/files/evstudien/FWF_Evaluation.pdf

http://www.fteval.at/files/evstudien/FFF_FWF_Synthesis_Report.pdf

The results of the evaluation gave important information on the condition and the organization of the overall system for supporting research in Austria. With regard to the governance and organization of the two institutions that were evaluated, the results were implemented and have also been taken into account in the reorganization of the funding system and in the Advisory Board for the Development of Research and Technology's (RFTE's) strategic considerations, as published in its 2005 paper "Strategy 2010".⁴ Furthermore, the results were taken into account in the FWF's mid-term plans, as required by the FFG in 2004⁵, and in the annual work programmes. Together with the RFTE's recommendations and the results of the FWF's own evaluations of its projects and programmes, they represent a key basis for strategic planning.

The implementation of the results from the evaluation is an ongoing process. In the light of current developments, the FWF is making many key contributions, as far as it is able. At a national level, the Austrian research dialogue, the RFTE's Strategy for Excellence and the systematic evaluation of research promotion and funding, which is scheduled for completion in March 2009, are the main initiatives. On the international level, the activities of the EuroHORCS and the ESF and the development of the European higher education system and the ERC represent the major developments.

The good contacts to other international partner organizations ensure that the FWF's evaluation activities are carried out in accordance with current international practice. Since October 2007 the FWF has been working with about twenty other funding organizations within Europe in the framework of a forum initiated by the European Science Foundation on the topic "Evaluation of Funding Schemes and Research Programmes – Expectations,

⁴ RFTE 2005: "Strategy 2010: Perspectives for Research, Technology and Innovation in Austria [Strategie 2010 - Perspektiven für Forschung, Technologie und Innovation in Österreich]"; <http://www.rat-fte.at/UserFiles/File/Strategie2010.pdf>

⁵ See the FWF Home Page

<http://www.fwf.ac.at/de/downloads/pdf/Mehrjahresplan%202005%20-%202008.pdf>

Practices and Experiences”. The work is concentrating on exchange of experience and on further developments in the area.

A central theme of the Austrian Platform for the Evaluation of Research and Technology is that *“a well developed culture of evaluation is a central part of a learning and strategically oriented policy for research and technology. At the same time, a good evaluation culture is a precondition and a consequence of good practices, i.e. efficient, transparent and fair procedures”*⁶. The FWF has no hesitation whatsoever in subscribing to this view.

⁶ See the Platform’s “Evaluation Standards [Standards der Evaluierung]“ at <http://www.fteval.at/standards/>