

Special Research Programmes (SFB)

Differences from the General Principles of Decision-making Procedures

Introductory remarks: the review process for SFB takes place in two stages, in which the quality of the consortium and of the application are evaluated. The “concept” (first stage) is submitted by the Speaker and subjected to a written review. The “full application” (second stage) is reviewed by means of a hearing with international experts. Applications for an SFB must contain a pre-contract between the Speaker and the research institution in addition to the written application. Among other things this pre-contract should specify the financial support to be offered by the research institution or university. The review procedure – from submission of concept to decision on the full application – lasts a minimum of 13 months.

Handling of the “concept”

Submission of applications:

Fundamentally as described in “General principles of the decision-making procedure”.

Applications for support by means of the programmes listed above must conform to the current “Guidelines for submitting concepts to the FWF”. The FWF guarantees that all applications placed by 2 November (the date of the postmark) will be considered for funding by November of the following year. It is not permitted to make changes to the content of an application once it has been submitted. Nevertheless, with the prior agreement of the FWF office it is possible to send “formal” supporting documents (e.g. original signatures) after the deadline for submission of applications.

Applications will be assigned to one “Reporter in Charge” and two additional Reporters. In some cases more than three members of the Board may be involved with an application.

Initiation of international review:

Fundamentally as described in “General principles of the decision-making procedure”.

Minimum number of reviews:

For a positive decision on a particular application a minimum of 4-6 reviews are required. If it is clear from the reviews that the decision will be negative, a decision may be based on fewer reviews. If an application impinges on several scientific disciplines the number of reviews required may be increased.

Structure of a review:

A number of questions are addressed to the referees, relating to the quality of the consortium and of the application (see Annex 1). The referees answer by means of a written statement but do not assign any formal numerical rating.

Funding decision:

Fundamentally as described in “General principles of the decision-making procedure”.

Speakers of concepts that are “approved” as a result of the referees’ reports are invited to submit full applications. They are given information relating to the content of the full application during the subsequent “Proposers’ Day”.

Remark: the standardized justifications for a rejection, which are stated in the “General Principles of the decision making procedure”, are not applied to this programme.

Resubmissions:

Concepts that are not approved may be revised and resubmitted. In the case of a resubmission it is the general practice to contact some of the referees of the rejected version as well as new referees. It is thus important to draw attention to any changes made in response to explicit suggestions from the referees.

Handling of the “full application”**Submission of applications:**

Submission of a full application is only possible after approval of a concept. Applications for support by means of the programmes listed above must conform to the current “Guidelines for submitting full applications to the FWF”. Applicants are generally allowed 10-12 weeks to prepare a full application.

Full applications are assigned to the same “Reporter in Charge” and additional Reporters who were responsible for handling the concept.

Initiation of international review:

The referees will represent a mixture of referees who reviewed the concept and additional experts. The review will take the form of a hearing in Vienna.

Minimum number of reviews:

A minimum of six referees are generally required before the Board may make a positive decision on funding. The referees assess the quality of the application by means of a one-day hearing. If an application impinges on several disciplines, the number of referees may be increased. For each hearing the FWF will attempt to invite at least 2-3 female referees to participate.

Structure of a review:

Before a hearing, the referees are requested to provide the FWF with written statements on the full application. These statements will be made available to the FWF representatives but not to the applicants and permit the Reporters handling the application to form a preliminary impression of the application’s quality.

Within the hearing the referees have the opportunity to discuss the application with the applicants and to resolve any open questions and in this way to assess the application and to

evaluate the applicants' scientific qualifications. The extent of scientific collaboration, in other words the so-called "added value" of the large-scale project, will be taken into consideration.

After the hearing the FWF representatives discuss individual aspects of the project together with the referees in a "closed session". The referees' comments will be noted by the FWF and will be summarized – without attributing particular comments to individual referees – in the form of the hearing's minutes. After the FWF's Board reaches its decision, the minutes will be transmitted to the applicants. In addition, the referees assign numerical ratings to the overall application and to various aspects of it. These ratings are not forwarded to the applicants.

Funding decision:

Funding decisions for these projects are taken in the final Board meeting of each calendar year. The decisions are based on the contents of the minutes of the "closed session" and the numerical ratings assigned by the referees. The FWF Reporters summarize the referees' views, describing the referees' overall opinion as reflected in the minutes of the "closed session".

A positive funding decision on an SFB is always subject to a condition: the pre-contract concluded between the Speaker and the research institution and submitted together with the full application must be converted to a valid contract and sent to the FWF before any financial support may be provided.

Remark: the standardized justifications for a rejection, which are stated in the "General Principles of the decision making procedure", are not applied to this programme.

Resubmissions:

If a full application is rejected, the applicants may generally restart the procedure by submitting a fresh concept. In such cases, the FWF normally contacts referees who were involved with the previous versions as well as involving new referees. It is thus important to draw attention to any changes made in response to explicit suggestions from the referees.

Annex 1: Example of questions addressed to referees in relation to an application for an SFB

Guidelines for Reviewers of a SFB Draft Proposal Objectives of the preliminary review process

All those wishing to apply for a Special Research Programme (SFB) must provide a draft proposal prior to submitting a comprehensive application proposal (this final proposal will be reviewed in the framework of a hearing).

The draft is sent to independent experts who are asked to critically review the specific area of research and basic structural features of the planned SFB.

The preliminary consideration of the draft SFB proposal by the FWF is designed to enable us to assess:

- whether the planned SFB is feasible
- whether the proposed research program itself requires modification, or
- whether the participating scientists are sufficiently qualified (in an international context) to meet the high quality standards required to conduct a project like an SFB
- whether other forms of funded research (e.g., carrying out the proposed research as a set of individual projects, or submitting an application for a national research network) might be more appropriate to achieve the prospective applicant's desired scientific aims.

Based on the result of this preliminary evaluation, the board of the FWF decides

- whether a comprehensive application proposal should be prepared on the basis of the submitted draft
- whether the SFB-initiative should be cancelled

Guidelines for the evaluation of a full proposal for Special Research Programmes (SFB) submitted to the Austrian Science Fund (FWF)

Evaluators of Special Research Programs in Austria are kindly requested to pay particular attention to the following aspects of the proposal. A final overall evaluation form, as well as an evaluation form for each Sub-Project will be provided at the hearing.

1. THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL AS A WHOLE

A) The scientific quality of the proposed program of research

- What is the relevance of the proposed program of research as whole to the current level of international research in the field?
What significant additions to scientific knowledge may be expected from the research to be carried out within the framework of an SFB?
Does the proposed SFB research program make sufficient allowance for foreseeable developments in its field of inquiry over the next ten years?
- Ranked according to scientific criteria, would the proposed SFB be among the top 10 % of all ongoing or planned international research projects in this area known to you?
- Which research institutions are currently engaged in the most intensive research in the area of the proposed SFB? Where are the research groups located that are in the most direct competition with the proposed SFB?
- What would you estimate are the chances of the present research proposal in comparison to these competitors?
How would you compare the scientific quality and potential of the proposed SFB research team to its international competitors?
How would it be possible to improve the projects for success of the proposed SFB?
- Would it be possible to avoid areas overlapping with existing or planned research institutions or larger research projects?
- Judged by the objectives of the entire SFB program in Austria as you understand them, would the proposed research be suited to the SFB format? Does the scientific quality of the proposed research justify funding as a Special Research Program?

B) Structural Aspects

- Has the proposed research program been conceived in such a way that accords sufficient weight to multidisciplinary approaches, synergetic effects and the question involved training future scientists?
What other sorts of FWF funding (see information enclosed), or funds from other sources might be sought in addition to those of the SFB proper?
- How would you evaluate the internal structural coherence of the proposed SFB? Does the proposed research represent a compact unit built upon a solid common foundation?
Have the inter-connections, cooperation, and the interface between various parts of the research project been adequately defined?
- How would you evaluate the coherence of the proposed research team? How would you evaluate the existing forms of cooperation? To what extent has preliminary collective work been carried out and would this in your view be sufficient preparation to enable those involved to undertake a cooperative research effort on the scale of an SFB?
- Does the structure of the proposed SFB correspond to the organizational demands necessary to achieve its stated objectives? Which of the proposed internal SFB decision-making bodies might be eliminated, which additional such bodies not foreseen in the proposal might be created?
- Have both the overall composition of the SFB-team (in terms of the specific qualifications of the respective individual team members, etc.) and the structure of the

proposed team as a whole (in terms of the ratio between scientific and non-scientific personnel, etc.) been designed optimally to achieve the immediate objectives of the proposed research?

If not, which changes in the proposed team itself and/or the assignment (s) of its individual members should in your view be undertaken immediately? Which changes would be desirable to insure that the long-term goals of the SFB are achieved?

C) Location

- How would you evaluate the suitability of the proposed location for the planned SFB? Specifically, is the existing local technical and scientific infrastructure (the extent and quality of the scientific equipment, personnel, office and lab space, equipment and furnishings, libraries, etc.) capable of supporting the proposed SFB-based research adequately?
- Which changes and/or improvements should be considered? Which of these changes and/or improvements should be undertaken immediately, which will be necessary - insofar as it is possible to judge - only in the middle-term, over the course of the proposed SFB's existence?
- Would you favour initiating cooperation with research institutions beyond those foreseen in the SFB research proposal? If so, which one(s)?
- Is there a justifiable and reasonable relationship between the additional equipment, etc., requested for the proposed SFB and that already existing in the designated hosting institution(s)?
- How would you evaluate the potential extent and quality of integration of the planned SFB into structures of the designated hosting institution(s)? To what extent does the research planned by the SFB correspond to concentrations of scientific research in the participating institution(s)?