

Call for Tenders

Evaluation of the Review and Decision- Making Procedure of the program Specialized Research Groups

Vienna, March 5th, 2026

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Definition of terms

Term	Definition
SFG	Specialized Research Groups (German: Spezialforschungsgruppen)

1 Client and Awarding Office

Austrian Science Fund (FWF)
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www.fwf.ac.at

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This call for tenders has been prepared in accordance with (i) the [FWF Rules](#) on Quality and Transparency for Evaluations and (ii) the [Evaluation Standards](#) in Research and Technology Policy developed by the Austrian Platform for Research and Technology Policy Evaluation ([fteval](#)). These standards are to be observed by all companies and organisations submitting tenders.

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 doing so, the FWF makes a significant contribution to cultural development, to the advancement of our knowledge-based society, and to prosperity and the creation of value 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/>.

2 Contract Objectives

The purpose of the contract to be awarded is to conduct an accompanying evaluation of the review and decision-making procedure of the FWF's first and, in part, second call for Specialized Research Groups (SFG), running in parallel to the process itself. Specifically, the evaluation team is expected to

1. critically assess the SFG proposals, the application guidelines and the application process,
2. critically assess the SFG review and decision-making procedure from the perspective of different stakeholders, and identify strength and weaknesses,
3. evaluate the embedding of the SFG program within the FWF program portfolio in particular as a merger of the FWF [Special Research Areas \(SFBs\)](#) and [Research Groups](#), and the complementarity of the program with other cooperative funding programs, including potential overlaps, synergies, and opportunities for consolidation (see [#ConnectingMinds](#), [Emerging Fields](#), and [doc.funds](#)),

4. provide evidence-based recommendations to the FWF and its supervisory bodies on how to improve the review and decision-making procedures for the fourth SFG call (Spring 2028).

The final evaluation report is expected to be delivered in May 2027. The budget for the study is limited to **€ 90,000** excluding VAT. The deadline for tenders is 23th of April 2026 (10am CET).

3 Background

Since May 2025, the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) offers researchers a new funding opportunity to consolidate their expertise with others and deepen their collaboration. The highly funded yet flexibly adaptable “Specialized Research Groups” grants allow both small and larger teams to implement cooperative research projects at Austria’s research institutions. This program arose from a merger and the accompanying realignment of the existing Special Research Areas (since 1993) and Research Groups (since 2018).

Specialized Research Groups: Program Details and Objectives

Collaborations between researchers often result in the most outstanding research. In fact, many research questions can only be adequately investigated by teams. For this reason, the main objective of the Specialized Research Groups program is to fund excellent research in collaborative research formats, where multiple participating researchers working in one or more locations pursue a common research goal. The aim is to strengthen cooperation between researchers, research institutions, and different disciplines.

Thanks to its flexible format, the program is open to both larger and smaller groups of researchers. A consortium of three to twelve outstanding researchers (including the coordinator) at one or more Austrian research institutions is responsible for a Specialized Research Group project. Additional project staff and national or international cooperation partners may also be involved. The gender distribution in the consortium should be balanced; at least one third of the consortium should be made up of the underrepresented gender. Another aim of the program is the advancement and career development of junior researchers (R2 and R3). The active involvement of academically younger consortium members gives talented junior researchers the opportunity to gain valuable experience working in teams and to take on responsibility within the consortia. The inclusion of junior researchers (R2 and R3) as consortium members is therefore explicitly permitted and encouraged.

The program is open to all scientific disciplines as well as interdisciplinary consortia. Researchers from the field of arts-based basic research are also invited to apply.

Funding can be requested for project-specific costs, i.e. personnel and material resources required to carry out the project (min. €3 and max. €9 million for 5 years) that exceed the resources provided by the infrastructure of the research institution. Three to six projects can be approved with the available funding.

The application process started with the call issued on 27 May 2025. The deadline for submitting a pre-proposal was 16 September 2025. All pre-proposals meeting the FWF's formal criteria were sent out for review. The FWF Scientific Board is expected to decide on the pre-proposals in March 2026 on the basis of the reviews obtained. If the Board's decision is positive, the respective applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal and to attend a hearing. All consortia invited to submit a full proposal must attend a hearing before a panel of experts after the written reviews of the full proposal have been processed. Hearings are held before three panels of experts, which are reconstituted on an annual basis depending on the consortia invited to submit full proposals and attend a hearing. The three panels correspond to the FWF's specialist departments (Biology and Medicine, Humanities and Social Sciences, Natural Sciences and Technology). The dates for the hearings are set by the FWF and are generally between mid-September and early November. The Scientific Board makes its funding decisions based on the overall results of the review process.

The entire decision-making process for Specialized Research Groups usually takes about 14 months.

Further calls for proposals are planned once a year.

4 Focus of the Evaluation

The focus of the accompanying evaluation lies on the review and decision-making procedure of the SFG program and the assessment of the embedding of the SFG program within the FWF program portfolio (see point 2. Contract Objective)

The evaluation is expected to focus on stakeholders' perceptions of the SFG review and decision-making procedure. In particular, it should address the perspectives of the following stakeholders:

- Funding Applicants (including group-specific characteristics such as age, gender, disciplinary and institutional background)
- Representatives of the research institutions (e.g. Grant offices, Vice-Rectorates for Research)
- Panel of Experts
- FWF
- Research policy (e.g., Federal Ministry Women, Science and Research [BMFWF], Austrian Council for Sciences, Technology, and Innovation)

In particular, the following points should be addressed in the evaluation:

SFG Proposals

- Stakeholder satisfaction with requirements in the application guidelines and application timeline
- Originality and innovativeness of the submitted proposals

- Characteristics of the proposals in terms of gender and diversity (e.g. Composition of the teams in terms of gender, academic age, institutions, disciplines etc.)
- Characteristics of the proposals in terms of disciplinary and socio-demographic aspects

Review and decision-making procedure

- Complexity and transparency of the overall review and decision-making procedure
- Perceived objectivity and quality of the peer reviews from the applicants' perspective
- Adequacy and composition of the expert panel, as perceived by applicants
- Stakeholder satisfaction with the overall timeline and process duration
- Quality, clarity and usefulness of the materials provided to expert panel members
- Feasibility and effort required to recruit suitable reviewers and expert panel members
- Appropriateness and consistency of the decision-making criteria and procedures
- Assessment of the hearings and the associated FWF Board meetings

SFG Program

- Stakeholder satisfaction with the program design
- Stakeholder satisfaction with the program implementation and management (e.g. support during the development and submission of funding applications)
- Cost and efficiency of the review and decision-making procedure
- Assessment of the review criteria

Program level

- Assessment of the embedding within the FWF program portfolio
- Assessment of complementarities with other cooperative funding programs (see #ConnectingMinds, Emerging Fields, and doc.funds) and exploration of opportunities for program consolidation

The FWF will work with the successful bidder to refine and prioritize the points of evaluation during a kick-off meeting (see timetable below).

5 Evaluation Methods

The successful contractor should employ methods to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the review and decision-making procedure from the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders.

The evaluation report is expected to deliver robust, evidence-based recommendations. To this end, the contractor should:

- Conduct a survey among funding applicants as well as reviewers / panel members

- employ appropriate and carefully targeted research methods to investigate the perceptions of university representatives, the program management, the FWF staff members, and representatives of the BMFWF (and, if necessary, also other parties involved with research policy).

The FWF encourages the contractor to propose specific methods to engage and capture the perspectives of different stakeholder groups.

6 Availability of Data and Relevant Documents

The evaluation team will be provided with all relevant documents on the SFG program, including all information on the SFG review and decision-making procedure and all data available to the FWF on the SFG program. Furthermore, all relevant documents regarding the programs Special Research Areas, Research Groups, Emerging Fields, #ConnectingMinds and doc.funds will be provided for the purpose of comparison.

Documents	Availability
Public Program Documents	
Specialized Research Groups: 1. Overall program description, application guidelines (pre-proposal), checklist (pre-proposal) 2. application guidelines (full-proposal), checklist (full-proposal)	Available at Specialized Research Groups (fwf.ac.at) At the start of the evaluation
Special Research Areas: 1. Overall program description, application guidelines, checklist 2. Evaluation FWF Special Research Programmes and FWF Statement	Available at Special Research Areas Available at SFB Evaluation (fwf.ac.at)
Research Groups: Overall program description, application guidelines, checklist	Available at Research Groups - FWF
Emerging Fields: 1. Overall program description, application guidelines, checklist 2. Accompanying Process Evaluation of Emerging Fields	Available at Emerging Fields - FWF Available at Accompanying process evaluation of FWF's Emerging Fields
doc.funds: Overall program description, application guidelines, checklist	Available at doc.funds
#ConnectingMinds: Overall program description, application guidelines, checklist	Available at #ConnectingMinds (fwf.ac.at)
Internal Program Documents (Specialized Research Groups)	
Logic chart (in German only)	At the start of the evaluation
Programme document (in German only)	At the start of the evaluation
List of panel members	As soon as available
List of all relevant meetings (Panel, FWF Board, hearings)	As soon as available
Minutes of all relevant meetings (Panel, FWF Board, hearings)	As soon as available

Internal Documents of Relevant Programs for Comparison	
Special Research Areas: Logic chart, SFB history, SFB procedure, SFB decision making, SFB background information, application guidelines	At the start of the evaluation
Research Groups: Program document, logic chart, application guidelines	At the start of the evaluation
Emerging Fields: Program document, logic chart	At the start of the evaluation
doc.funds: Program document, logic chart	At the start of the evaluation
#ConnectingMinds: Program document, logic chart, application guidelines for full proposals, information on the genesis of the programme name	At the start of the evaluation
Summary information on applications + decisions of the above-mentioned programs (short overviews of applications, reviews, and decisions)	At the start of the evaluation
Metadata on Applications and Reviews (Specialized Research Groups)	
All incoming pre-proposals	At the start of the evaluation
Full Proposals	As soon as available
Reviews of all pre-proposals admitted to the second round	At the start of the evaluation
Reviews of all full-proposals	As soon as available

Other sources

Links to other sources (e.g., Annual Reports) are listed at the end of this document ('Suggestions for Further Reading').

7 Deliverables, Meetings, and Presentations

All deliverables and reports must be provided in English. The final reports will be made publicly available.

Reports:¹

- 1) A mid-term report (presentation)
- 2) A final evaluation report (written report max. 30 pages)
- 3) An executive summary of no more than three pages
- 4) If possible, a research publication in a peer-reviewed journal on a topic of the evaluators' choice (related to the evaluation) after the evaluation is finalised

¹ All reports as well as the underlying materials resulting from the evaluations should be published using a [CC BY licence](#).

Meetings and presentations:

- 1) Kick-off workshop
- 2) Mid-term presentation
- 3) Discussion of final report (draft version)
- 4) Presentation of the final report

8 Schedule

Call for tenders:	March 5 th , 2026
Deadline for tenders:	April 23 rd , 2026, 10:00 AM CET
Invitation to hearings:	Mid May 2026
Hearings:	Late May and/or early June 2026
Decision:	Mid June 2026
Kick-off workshop:	Early July 2026
Mid-term report and presentation:	Early January 2027
Final report (draft) and presentation:	Early May 2027
Public presentation of final report:	Late June 2027

9 Price and Payments

Prices must be fixed amounts which are not subject to change and which include reimbursement of all costs including travel and subsistence expenses. The price must be presented as a lump sum; separately reimbursable expenses will not be accepted. The estimated travel and subsistence expenses considered necessary by the tenderer in order to carry out the study must be indicated separately (for information purposes only).

The price quoted in the tender must be in euros. Tenderers from countries outside the euro zone are also subject to this requirement. The price quoted may not be adjusted for exchange rate fluctuations at any time. It is up to the tenderer to select an exchange rate and to bear the potential risks or benefits arising from any variations.

The total price for the services offered (including travel and subsistence expenses) is expected to be no more than **€90,000** *excluding* VAT.

Payments: Three payments will be made under the terms of the contract. The first payment (corresponding to 20% of the contractually agreed price) will be made after conclusion of the contract. The second (interim) payment (corresponding to 50% of the contractually agreed price) will be released after approval of the interim presentation and made within 30 days of the approval date. Should the interim presentation not be approved, the contractor shall have 20 days to respond to suggested changes and to submit a revised document. Once the FWF approves the final deliverables, the contractor may request the final balance due (30%).

10 Deadline for Tenders / Communication of Decisions

Tenders must be submitted as a PDF document by 23.04.2026, 10:00 AM CET to Katharina Rieck, katharina.rieck@fwf.ac.at.

Tender document format: 1) 10 pages, in 11 pt. font with 1.5 line (15-20 pt.) spacing and at least 2 cm margins, no further attachments apart from references; 2) one-page CV for each person involved. Exceeding the specifications will result in rejection.

If the authors of the proposal have used artificial intelligence or machine learning tools that have made a significant contribution to the proposal, the models used and their contribution must be disclosed in the proposal (excluding tools for minor support services such as literature research, translations, linguistic adaptations).

The FWF expressly welcomes submissions from international teams. Hearings will either take place in person in Vienna or video conference with the shortlisted tenderers. The final decision will be made by the FWF based on the suggestion of a panel. The panel will be made up of members of the FWF Executive Board and staff members from the departments “Collaborative Funding Programs“ and “Strategy, Policy, Evaluation, Analysis”.

Criteria are (i) competences of the evaluation team: knowledge of the Austrian Research system, and experience and knowledge in research evaluations; (ii) utility (to which extent will the evaluation outputs and recommendations help the FWF to meet its needs); (iii) feasibility and appropriateness of the approach with respect to the aims of the evaluation; and (iv) appropriateness of the costs.

Important note: The FWF requests tenderers with recent activities in international research, research management, or research funding in Austria and/or tenderers recently commissioned by Austrian national ministries or other stakeholders in supporting the shaping of Austria’s Research, Technology, and Innovation policy to declare potential conflicts of interest.

Conflict of interest: Tenders from institutions that serve as host or partner institutions of SFG applications cannot be accepted due to potential conflicts of interest.

Contact person

For details regarding the tender:

Katharina Rieck

Phone: +43 1 505 67 40 8314 / Email: katharina.rieck@fwf.ac.at.

11 Transparency of the Tender

This tender document will be published on the FWF website and distributed via the FWF newsletter and via the Austrian Platform for Research and Technology Policy (fteval). Invitations to tender have been sent to the following institutions:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Convelop Cooperative Knowledge Design GmbH</u> Hilbergasse 1/I, A-8010 Graz • <u>DZHW – Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung</u> Lange Laube 12, D-30159 Hannover • <u>Fraunhofer ISI</u> Breslauer Straße 48, D-76139 Karlsruhe • <u>IGES Institut GmbH</u> Friedrichstraße 180, D-10117 Berlin • <u>IHS – Institute for Advanced Studies</u> Josefstädter Straße 39, A-1080 Vienna • <u>Joanneum Research</u> Sensengasse 1, A-1090 Wien • <u>KMU Forschung Austria</u> Gusshausstraße 8, A-1040 Vienna • <u>NIFU</u> P. O. Box 2815 Tøyen, NOR - 0608 Oslo • <u>Prognos AG</u> Goethestraße 55, D-10623 Berlin • <u>RAND Europe</u> Eastbrook, Shaftesbury Rd, Cambridge CB2 8BF, UK • <u>Rathenau Instituut</u> Anna van Saksenlaan 51 2593 HW Den Haag 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Research Consulting Limited</u> The Ingenuity Centre, University of Nottingham Innovation Park, Triumph Road, Nottingham, NG7 2TU, UK • <u>SPRU - Science and Technology Policy Research</u> University of Sussex. Sussex House, Falmer Brighton, BN1 9RH, UK • <u>Technopolis Group</u> Technopolis Group Limited 3 Pavilion Buildings, Brighton, BN1 1EE, UK • <u>The University of Manchester</u> Alliance Manchester Business School Booth Street West, Manchester, M15 6PB, UK • <u>University of Twente</u> Science, Technology, and Policy Studies (STePS) PO Box 217, NL-7500 AE Enschede • <u>VDI/VDE IT</u> Institut für Innovation und Technik Steinplatz 1, DE-10623 Berlin • <u>WIFO - Austrian Institute of Economic Research</u> Arsenal, Objekt 20, A-1103 Vienna • <u>WPZ Research GmbH</u> Mariahilfer Straße 115/16, A-1060 Vienna • <u>ZSI – Centre for Social Innovation</u> Linke Wienzeile 246, A-1150 Vienna
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12 Suggestions for Further Reading²

Austrian Research System

Bundesgesetz zur Förderung der Forschung und Technologieentwicklung (Forschungs- und Technologieförderungsgesetz – [FTFG](#))

Austrian Research and Technology Report [2025](#) (The Austrian Research and Technology Reports are status reports provided to the Austrian parliament on the nation's federally funded research, technology, and innovation. These reports draw on current data to present an overview of specific trends in research, technology, and innovation (RTI) and show how Austria ranks internationally in selected categories.)

FWF Annual Reports

Including mission statement, overview of grants, numbers of applications and approvals, funding requested/approved; [German](#) or [English](#) from 2010 onwards.

Principles of the FWF Decision-Making Procedure

The document [General Principles of the FWF Decision-Making Procedure](#) provides a brief overview of the application process, from the submission of proposals to the peer review process and the final funding decision. The process described in the document forms the basis for all FWF programs. In certain programs, exceptions to the general decision-making principles are possible; these exceptions are described in separate documents.

Evaluation Reports and Studies

The FWF provides access to all program evaluations, studies on FWF ex-ante peer review, outcomes of FWF projects, and many more interesting topics in the [publications section](#) of its website. Of specific interest is the [Accompanying process evaluation of FWF's Emerging Fields](#)

FWF Guidelines on Equal Opportunities and Diversity

The Austrian Science Fund (FWF) contributes to greater equal opportunities and diversity in top-level research with a wide range of activities and measures. These include specific funding offers for researchers as well as the implementation of an equality plan, the creation of a staff unit for equal opportunities in research funding, and consistent monitoring of the funding statistics. The goal is to ensure the equality of all genders and recognize the diversity among scientists and their research projects.

² The FWF does NOT expect evaluators to consider all of these suggestions in their report. Some of the listed documents are available only in German.

Statistics

- [FWF Research Radar](#)
- [FWF Dashboard](#)