Invitation to Tender

Evaluation of the Selection Process
FWF Clusters of Excellence (CoE)

14 December 2021
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1. Client and Awarding Office

Austrian Science Fund (FWF)
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Phone: +43-1-5056740 Fax: +43-1-5056739
www.fwf.ac.at

Contact person: Dr. Elisabeth Nindl, +43-1-5056740-8664, elisabeth.nindl@fwf.ac.at

This invitation to tender 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 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 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/.

2. Objectives of the Contract

The purpose of the contract to be awarded is to concurrently evaluate the ongoing selection process of the FWF’s first call for Clusters of Excellence (CoE). Specifically, the evaluation team is expected to

- critically review a) the application guidelines, b) the application process, and c) the functioning of the decision-making process from the perspective of researchers, the universities / research institutes, the reviewers and panel / jury members, and the FWF;
- identify strengths and weaknesses; and
- provide evidence-based recommendations to the FWF and its supervisory bodies on how to improve the processes for the second CoE call (2023).

The final evaluation report is expected to be delivered after the final funding decision in the first quarter of 2023. The budget for the study is limited to approximately €80,000.
3. Background

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. Thanks to joint funding with the research institutions (60% FWF, 40% research institutions), a total of €250 million in funding is available to researchers for the first three years of the excellent=austria programme. 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.

excellent=austria will be implemented in three stages to ensure its optimal integration into the Austrian research landscape. The programme starts with the Clusters of Excellence (CoE), a funding scheme for the development of large national and international projects. Submissions for this track opened in summer 2021. This will be followed by the programme line Emerging Fields, a funding track designed to support basic research in fields with particularly high future potential. The third option, the Austria Chairs of Excellence, will provide universities and other research institutions with more means to recruit and retain leading international researchers in Austria.

Goals of excellent=austria

- Support outstanding basic research—open topic, in line with the highest international standards, and with plenty of freedom for unconventional approaches
- Promote gender equality and diversity to a greater extent, and create attractive career opportunities for excellent junior researchers
- Expand long-term collaborations (national and international) to leverage synergies
- Strengthen Austrian universities, universities of applied sciences, and non-university research institutions in the international competition
- Enhance the international reputation of Austrian research institutions
- Boost the transfer of research results to business and society

Clusters of Excellence: Programme Details and Objectives

In the first funding track, the Clusters of Excellence, a total of up to €70 million (over ten years) is available for research teams to conduct large-scale projects in basic research. The volume exceeds all previous FWF funding programmes. As in other FWF programmes, the call is thematically open and follows a strict bottom-up principle.

A CoE consists of a lead research institution and at least two but no more than seven Austrian collaborating research institutions. It is led by a coordinator who also acts as the Director of Research and is thus responsible for the entire research programme of the cluster. The Director of Research is an outstanding researcher who works at the lead research institution.

The annual budget of a CoE must be between €2 and €7 million per year. 60% of the total costs can be requested from the FWF, while 40% must be provided by the lead and
collaborating research institutions. The duration of a cluster is five years, and after a positive interim evaluation, a continuation for an additional five years is possible.

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 programme provides groups of researchers at Austrian research institutions with the opportunity to achieve outstanding cooperative research results in one field or interdisciplinarily. 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.

The application process started with the submission of a Letter of Intent (LOI) to the FWF, which took place between 1 June and 16 August 2021. After the LOIs had been checked for eligibility by the FWF, the applicants were invited to submit pre-proposals to the FWF from 1 September to 15 December 2021. Four written reviews by international experts will be collected by mid of May 2022. In May/June 2022, an international jury will propose a shortlist of ten projects that will be invited to submit a full proposal. The jury's decision will be based on the written reviews of the international reviewers, and the FWF Board will decide on the shortlist. The deadline for full proposals is 17 October 2022, and applicants will be invited to a hearing before an international jury in February 2023. The jury will make a funding recommendation to the FWF Board, which will take the final decision in March 2023.

4. Focus of the Evaluation

The focus of the present evaluation tender lies on a concurrent evaluation of the selection process of proposals for the Clusters of Excellence programme. The FWF would like the tender bids to include considerations regarding the questions listed below and encourages prospective evaluators to suggest additional areas that might be important to consider. The FWF will work with the successful bidder to shape and prioritise these questions during a kick-off meeting.

The evaluation is expected to reflect the stakeholders’ perceptions of the tendering procedure. Specifically, it should focus on

- Researchers / applicants
- University representatives (heads of institutions, grant offices)
- Jury / panel members
- FWF members
- Research policy (e.g., Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research (BMBWF), the Austrian Council for Research and Technology Development, Austrian Science Council)
The following points should be addressed with an appropriate set of qualitative and quantitative methods and should reflect the perspective of the relevant stakeholders:

**LOIs / proposals**
- Satisfaction with requirements, methods, and timeline
- Quality of the proposals
- Characteristics of the proposals in terms of disciplines, interdisciplinarity, gender, academic age, etc.

**Review and selection process**
- Objectivity and quality of the reviews as experienced by the applicants
- Composition of the jury (applicants’ perspectives)
- Satisfaction with the timeline (all stakeholders)
- Quality and usefulness of different materials provided to the jury
- Ease / difficulty in finding reviewers and jury members
- Appropriateness of decision-making procedures and criteria
- Assessment of the hearings

**CoE programme**
- Satisfaction with the design
- Programme implementation and management
- Grant preparation (coaching, information events, and consultation services)
- Cost and efficiency of the selection process
- Evaluation of the selection criteria

5. **Evaluation Methods**

The successful bidder should employ methods that are able to draw a comprehensive picture of the selection process from the perspectives of all relevant agents involved. The evaluation report is expected to deliver sound recommendations built on a set of suitable qualitative and quantitative methods. Specifically, the contractor should conduct a survey among applicants as well as reviewers / panel members, interviews or focus groups with university representatives, and should employ appropriate and sensitive research methods to investigate the perception of the programme management, the FWF, and representatives of the BMBWF (and, if necessary, also other research policy actors). The FWF also encourages the contractor to propose other specific methods.
6. Availability of Data and Relevant Documents

The evaluation team will be provided with all information and data available to the FWF regarding the CoE programme and the applicants. Information on the selection procedure (review and decision-making) will also be made available.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Documents</th>
<th>Availability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guidelines for the Applicants</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Guidelines for Letters of Intent (11 pages) + checklist (2 pages)</td>
<td>Available at Clusters of Excellence (COE) (fwf.ac.at)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guidelines for pre-proposals (21 pages)</td>
<td>At the beginning of the evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guidelines for full proposals (approx. 25 pages)</td>
<td>1 July 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal Programme Documents</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Logic chart (6 pages)</td>
<td>At the beginning of the evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Programme document (17 pages)</td>
<td>At the beginning of the evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metadata on Applications and Reviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37 LOIs (approx. 8 pages)</td>
<td>At the beginning of the evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approx. 36 pre-proposals, 25 pages + CVs</td>
<td>At the beginning of the evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approx. 144 reviews of pre-proposals (1-2 pages, 4 reviews for each proposal)</td>
<td>Mid-May 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 full proposals</td>
<td>Mid-October 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approx. 40 reviews of full proposals (2-3 pages, 4 reviews for each proposal)</td>
<td>January 2023</td>
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Other sources

Links to other sources (e.g., FWF 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 published.

Reports:

1) A mid-term report
2) A final evaluation report
3) An executive summary of no more than five pages
4) A one-page summary
5) A research publication in a peer-reviewed venue on a topic of choice (related to the evaluation) by the evaluators after the evaluation is finalised

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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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date/Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invitation to tender</td>
<td>14 December 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deadline for tenders</td>
<td>4 February 2022, 4:00 PM CET</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invitation for hearings</td>
<td>25 February 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hearings</td>
<td>Mid-March 2022</td>
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<td>Decision</td>
<td>End of March 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kick-off workshop</td>
<td>Mid-April 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-term report and presentation</td>
<td>October 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final report (draft) and presentation</td>
<td>January 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public presentation of final report</td>
<td>Spring 2023</td>
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9. Price and Payments

Prices must be fixed amounts which are not subject to change and which include reimbursement for 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 approximately **€80,000 excluding VAT**.

Payments: Three payments will be made under the contract. The first payment (corresponding to 20% of the contractually agreed price) will be effected 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 4:00 PM CET 4 February 2022 at the latest to Dr. Elisabeth Nindl, elisabeth.nindl@fwf.ac.at.

The FWF expressly welcomes submissions from international consortia. Hearings will take place in Vienna with shortlisted tenderers. Decisions will be made by the FWF based on the suggestion of a panel. The members of this panel are Christof Gattringer (FWF), Tina Olteanu (FWF), Elisabeth Nindl (FWF), Uwe von Ahsen (FWF), and Falk Reckling (FWF).

Criteria are (i) competences of the evaluation team: knowledge of the Austrian science system, and experience and knowledge in research assessments; (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 bidders with recent activities in international research, research management, or research funding in Austria and/or bidders 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 which appear as host or partner institutions of CoE applications cannot be accepted due to potential conflicts of interest.

**Contact person**  
*For details regarding the tender:*  
Dr. Elisabeth Nindl  
Phone: +43 1 505 67 40 8864  
elisabeth.nindl@fwf.ac.at
11. Transparency of the Tender

The tender is published on the FWF website and distributed via the FWF newsletter and fteval. Furthermore, an invitation has been sent to the following institutions:

- **Convelop** Cooperative Knowledge Design GmbH
  Karin Grasenick, Markus Gruber
  Bürgergasse 8-10/I, A-8010 Graz

- **Fraunhofer ISI**
  Susanne Bührer, Niclas Meyer
  Breslauer Straße 48, D-76139 Karlsruhe

- **DZHW – Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung**
  Sabine Hinze
  Goseriede 9, D-30159 Hannover

- **IGES Institut GmbH**
  Dr. Friederike Haaß
  Friedrichstraße 180, D-10117 Berlin

- **IHS – Institute for Advanced Studies**
  Martin Unger
  Josefstädter Straße 39, A-1080 Vienna

- **KMU Forschung Austria**
  Mario Steyer
  Gusshausstraße 8, A-1040 Vienna

- **National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM)**
  Gabriele Durrant
  University of Southampton
  Southampton SO17 1BJ, United Kingdom

- **NIFU –Quest**
  Liv Langfeldt
  P. O. Box 2815 Tøyen, NOR - 0608 Oslo

- **Prognos AG**
  Thomas Stehken
  Goethestraße 55, D-10623 Berlin

- **RAND Europe**
  Steven Wooding
  Westbrook Centre/Milton Rd, Cambridge CB4 1YG, UK

- **SPRU - Science and Technology Policy Research**
  Ben Martin
  University of Sussex, Sussex House
  Jubilee Building Jub-363
  Brighton, BN1 9RH, UK

- **Technopolis Group**
  Katharina Warta
  Technopolis Group Limited
  3 Pavilion Buildings,
  Brighton, BN1 1EE, UK

- **The University of Manchester**
  Jakob Eder, John Rigby
  Harold Hankins Building-9.08
  Manchester Business School
  Manchester, M13 9PL, UK

- **University of Twente**
  Science, Technology, and Policy Studies (STePS)
  Stefan Kuhlmann
  MB- STePS
  PO Box 217, NL-7500 AE Enschede

- **VDI/VDE IT**
  Institut für Innovation und Technik
  Ernst Andreas Hartmann
  Steinplatz 1, DE-10623 Berlin

- **WPZ Research GmbH**
  Brigitte Ecker
  Mariahilfer Straße 115/16, 1060 Vienna

- **ZSI – Centre for Social Innovation**
  Klaus Schuch
  Linke Wienzeile 246, A-1150 Vienna
12. Suggestions for Further Reading

Austrian Research System

Bundesgesetz zur Förderung der Forschung und Technologieentwicklung (Forschungs- und Technologieförderungsgesetz - FTFG)

Austrian Research and Technology Report 2021

The Austrian Research and Technology Reports are status reports 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 programmes. In certain programmes, 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 programme evaluations, studies on FWF ex ante peer review, on outcomes of FWF projects, and many more interesting topics in the publications section of its website.

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2 The FWF does NOT expect the evaluators to consider all of these suggestions in their report.