General principles of the FWF decision-making procedure

20/03/2023, Version 1
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1 General principles

All applications submitted to the FWF are subjected to a **peer review procedure**. For this procedure, only scholars and scientists working outside Austria are asked to review proposals. These reviews form the basis for all funding decisions, which ensures that the quality of the research funded is on par with international standards.

The FWF treats all scientific disciplines equally and has **no quota system** regulating the distribution of funds among the various disciplines.

**Decision process flow chart**

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Some exceptions to the review process shown above (such as a multi-stage procedure, international jury, etc.) apply in individual programs (e.g., special research programs and doctoral programs). These are indicated on the FWF website under the respective programs. Especially in the case of international programs, submission, review, and decision-making procedures need to comply with the specific structures and procedures of those programs and may differ from the general principles outlined in this document.
1.1 Submission

The application and decision-making procedure are illustrated in the above diagram. Some exceptions to this procedure may apply in individual programs, for example the involvement of an additional, program-specific jury. Once an application has been submitted to the FWF online portal (incl. the fully completed cover sheet required for ad personam funding programs), the application is checked for completeness and any formal errors and the applicant receives an acknowledgement of receipt. The application is assigned to a reporter and an alternate. The research area (or research areas for interdisciplinary projects) plays a major role in this assignment, but the FWF keeps a close watch for any possible conflicts of interest on the part of reporters, alternates, and FWF employees.

§4b of the Research and Technology Funding Act (Forschungs- und Technologieförderungsgesetz, FTFG) requires all FWF employees and board members to perform their duties conscientiously and in an impartial, unbiased manner. Where conflicts of interest arise, those persons are excluded entirely from participating in the procedure, particularly from voting, pursuant to § 7 of the Austrian General Administrative Procedure Act (Allgemeines Verwaltungsverfahrensgesetz, AVG). In addition to the direct relationships mentioned in § 7 of the AVG, other important factors may exist that could give rise to doubts about complete impartiality, e.g. when a member of the FWF Board has a personal connection to the matter under discussion or to the applicant that might jeopardise their impartiality. Where even the appearance of bias or a conflict of interest could arise, it must be avoided.

When the FWF Board discusses applications submitted by individuals, institutions, or working groups to which an individual board member has a specific professional or personal relationship, that board member is not permitted to take part in the deliberations and is required to leave the meeting room for the duration of the relevant discussion.

The following rules apply to institutional conflicts of interest:

If an organisational unit has fewer than 900 academic staff members (including professors), employees of this organisation are automatically subject to an institutional conflict of interest.

Specifically, this rule applies to the following universities (each in their entirety):

- University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna
- Montanuniversität Leoben
- University of Applied Arts Vienna
- University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna
- Mozarteum University Salzburg
- University of Music and Performing Arts Graz
- University of Art and Industrial Design Linz
- Academy of Fine Arts Vienna

There are hardly any organisational units at Austrian universities with the required size of 900 academic staff members; currently only two faculties fulfil this criterium:
In addition to institutional conflicts of interest, the same rules regarding conflicts of interest apply to FWF Board members as to reviewers (see section 3).

If an FWF Board member submits an application, it is not to be handled by the scientific and administrative project officers who would normally be in charge of it. The member must leave the meeting room while the application is being considered by the FWF Board. All reviews received are generally made available to all FWF Board members not subject to a conflict of interest (grounds must be provided for any exceptions to this rule).

1.2 Initiation of international review

Applicants have the right to exclude up to three researchers from the review process. In close collaboration with the FWF Office, the reporters and alternates suggest suitable reviewers from outside of Austria to the FWF Executive Board according to the many-eyes principle. When selecting reviewers, the utmost care is taken to prevent either real or assumed negative or positive conflicts of interest.

The criteria for the selection of reviewers as well as the rules regarding conflicts of interest and the composition of juries and boards are specified in section 4.

The FWF Executive Board decides whether a review procedure is to be initiated and formally appoints reviewers based on the recommendations of the reporters and/or alternates. This is an ongoing process, and does not depend on specific meeting dates.

Funding applications which are outside the scope of the FWF’s funding activities or which involve applicants who do not possess the professional qualifications or research experience necessary to carry out the project are rejected without initiating a review procedure. The same applies for funding applications which cannot be reviewed in their current form because they contain major errors; unless these errors are corrected within a reasonable period of time (generally no more than three weeks), the application is rejected. This rule applies for programs without specific submission deadlines; for programs with specific submission deadlines, applicants must correct the errors in their applications within ten working days of being notified of the errors.

1.3 Minimum number of reviews

The number of reviews\(^2\) required for a proposal to be approved depends on the funding program:

\(^2\) If it is already clearly foreseeable on the basis of one or more reviews that a proposal is ineligible for funding, a motion can be made to reject the application, even if fewer reviews are available than the respective program requires for approval. The reporter and alternate assigned to the case as well as the Vice-President responsible for the discipline in question must agree to the rejection.
• Min. one review: Stand-Alone Publications

• Min. two reviews: Principal Investigator Projects incl. Weiss Award, Herzfelder projects, netidee SCIENCE (IPA), ASMET Research Award, Alternative Methods to Animal Testing, Funding Initiative Quantum Austria and AI Mission Austria, bilateral and trilateral international projects, Clinical Research Program, Arts-Based Research Program (PEEK), Schrödinger Program, ESPRIT Program, and Richter Grants (incl. Richter PEEK)

• Min. three reviews: START Program, Special Research Program pre-proposals, Research Groups (three each for Research Group pre-proposals and Research Group full proposals), #ConnectingMinds, doc.funds and doc.funds.connect, Emerging Field proposals, Special Research Programs and graduate school final reviews

• Min. four reviews: Wittgenstein Award, COE pre-proposals and full proposals

• Min. five reviews: Special Research Programs full proposals, follow-up applications for Special Research Program

For some programs, the number of reviewers depends on program-specific agreements, but a minimum of two reviews are always required for these programs. For more detailed information, please see the application guidelines for the respective program.

The number of reviews required may be increased for proposals that cover several fields of research.

1.4 Review structure

A review must consist of a written statement, in which the reviewers are asked to address specific questions with regard to the proposal. Reviewers are also asked to provide an overall formal assessment (i.e. rating) for each specific question using the five-point scale shown below. Each review consists of three sections: Sections one and two will be forwarded to the applicant in their entirety (including the overall ratings). In the third section, reviewers can provide additional, confidential comments to the FWF.

The FWF provides reviewers with a brief explanation of the quality standards the formal ratings should be based on:

**Excellent = Funding is highly recommended.**

The proposed research project is among the best 5% in its field worldwide. It has the potential to break new ground and make a major contribution to generating new knowledge. The applicant and the researchers involved have outstanding qualifications by international standards.

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3 There are no summarised evaluations for Wittgenstein nominations, only a written review.

4 The questions for reviewers may vary depending on the program and its objectives and can usually be found in the appendix of the relevant application guidelines.
Very Good = Funding is recommended.
The proposed research project is among the best 15% in its field worldwide. It is at international forefront in its field of research, but minor improvements could be made. The applicant and the researchers involved are very well qualified by international standards.

Good = Resubmission is recommended after revisions.
The proposed research project is internationally competitive but has some weaknesses, and/or the applicant and the researchers involved have good qualifications by international standards.

Average = Major revisions required before resubmission.
The proposed research project will provide some new insights but has significant weaknesses and/or the applicant and the researchers involved have adequate qualifications by international standards.

Poor = Rejection is recommended.
The proposed research project is weak, and/or the applicant and the researchers involved are insufficiently qualified by international standards.

If a review is not sufficiently persuasive, it is not considered in the decision-making procedure. Reviewers are required to declare any possible conflicts of interest. If bias or a conflict of interest is identified at a later date, the review is not taken into account in the decision-making procedure.

1.5 Funding decisions

All applications that have the required number of reviews are brought forward for a decision at a meeting of the FWF Board. Five meetings of the FWF Board are scheduled per year. At Board meetings, the Board discusses the proposals and the key statements of the reviews received and makes funding decisions based on the statements submitted by the respective reporters and their alternates. The conflict of interest rules described in section 1.1 apply. In most cases, decisions are made unanimously and (where necessary) often after a detailed discussion and comparison of the proposals submitted. In the course of this discussion, bonuses for early-stage applicants (up to 8 years after earning their doctorate) and/or if it is planned to finance at least 50% of the applicant's salary from the project funds may be considered.

After the FWF Board meeting, decision letters are prepared by the FWF Office and sent to the applicants. The first and second parts of the reviews are included with the decision letters in anonymised form.
For each rejection, the FWF Board or the responsible decision-making body specifies one of the following standardised reasons for rejection in order to ensure maximum transparency and comparability in all its decisions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Reason Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C 1</td>
<td>All reviews of your application were positive with regard to the research project itself as well as your research qualifications. However, the reviewers expressed even greater support for other applications. For budget-related reasons, the FWF can currently only approve those applications which receive the most favourable reviews and ratings; this means that unfortunately, your application could not be approved. If you choose to resubmit your application, please place greater emphasis on the strengths of the project in order to improve your chances of approval.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 2</td>
<td>Most of the reviews of your application were positive with regard to the research project itself as well as your research qualifications. However, there were several minor points of criticism in the reviews, and the reviewers expressed greater support for other applications. For budget-related reasons, the FWF can currently only approve those applications which receive the most favorable reviews and ratings; this means that unfortunately, your application could not be approved. If you choose to resubmit your application, please place greater emphasis on the strengths of the project and take the reviewers’ suggestions into account in order to improve your chances of approval.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 3</td>
<td>The reviews of your application were largely positive with regard to the research project itself and/or your research qualifications. However, there were a number of points of criticism in the review, meaning that unfortunately, your application cannot be approved in its current form. If you choose to resubmit your application, please focus on the strengths of the project and take the reviewers’ comments and suggestions into account visibly and transparently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 4</td>
<td>The reviews of your application were only partly positive with regard to the research project itself and/or your research qualifications. There were numerous points of criticism and suggestions for improvement in the reviews, meaning that the application would have to be substantially revised and possibly re-oriented in order to be eligible for funding. If you choose to resubmit your application, please take the reviewers’ comments and suggestions into account visibly and transparently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 5</td>
<td>The reviews of your application were predominantly very critical. To give you enough time to re-plan and to remedy the weaknesses in your application, the FWF Board has decided that it cannot be resubmitted for this funding program for a period of 12 months from the decision date.</td>
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The FWF Office provides support to FWF's reporters, their alternates, and the Vice-Presidents of Research. In all project-related matters, the FWF office serves as the direct point of contact for applicants.

1.6 Resubmissions and follow-up applications

In the case of previously rejected applications which are revised and resubmitted by the applicant as well as follow-up applications (applications for funding to continue research which is thematically related to a previous project), the FWF makes every effort to call upon previous and new reviewers in order to ensure a balance between continuity and new perspectives. For this reason, it is important to clearly mark any changes made in response to explicit suggestions from (previous) reviewers in these applications, so that these changes are visible to new reviewers as well.

1.7 Proposal bans

Applications that are rejected for reason C5 will be barred for 12 months (from the date of the decision) and cannot be resubmitted during that period. Applications that have been submitted three times and rejected for reasons C3 or C4 (i.e., the original application and the respective resubmissions) are also barred for 12 months (from the date of decision); rejections for reasons C1 or C2 do not count towards this total.

In general, only topics are banned, not applicants.

2 Reviewer profile

- Reviewers must be internationally established experts who are currently active in their respective research fields, and they should possess at least the same level of qualification (in relation to their academic age) as the applicants.

- Direct competitors of the applicant are excluded from acting as reviewers for that proposal.

- The FWF only contacts reviewers who are based outside of Austria. If the expert has worked in Austria in the past, he/she should only be nominated after at least five years of absence from Austria. The respective Vice-President of Research must agree to any exceptions to this principle.

- The reviewers of a given application must not be from the same institution as the applicant.
• Reviewers should not be nominated more than twice a year; this applies to all programs. When selecting reviewers, every effort should be made to ensure diversity in terms of sex, academic age, regions, and (where applicable) areas of expertise.

a) A suitable mix of younger and older reviewers is desirable.

b) On average over the course of a year, the percentage of nominated reviewers from Germany/Switzerland should not exceed 15% (max. 25% in the humanities). Similarly, it is also important to avoid an excessive concentration of reviewers from any one region or country.

c) For disciplines with very small research communities, at least one reviewer from a related field or one reviewer more with general expertise should be contacted.

d) When nominating reviewers, all efforts should be made to include a balanced mix of genders; over the course of a year, at least 30% of all reviewers should be women.

e) In addition, panel hearings for special research programs and doctoral programs should include at least two women per panel.

3 Reviewers and conflicts of interest

3.1 Basic principles

The FWF assumes that, in the interest of good scientific practice, reviewers will also refrain from reviewing applications and notify the FWF in cases which are not explicitly covered by the FWF’s rules regarding conflicts of interest. When in doubt or if the situation is not entirely clear, reviewers should always refrain from accepting a request to review an application.

Reviewers are considered positively or negatively biased if:

• They are in a position to benefit professionally, financially, or personally from the approval or rejection of the application (including direct competitive relationships)

• Within the last five years, they have published or collaborated with the applicant or with other key project participants, worked with them in profession-specific committees that meet on a frequent and regular basis, or worked with them at the same research

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5 Key project participants in a project are:
- Individuals who will be using funds from the project (e.g. project-funded staff, national research partners, etc.)
- Individuals whose scientific CV was included in the application
- Key program-specific project participants such as mentors for the ESPRIT program or hosts for the Schrödinger program

COE exceptions:
- Due to the large number of individuals and institutions involved, contact with Key Researchers and Associated Researchers does not immediately constitute a conflict of interest for reviewers unless they declare such a conflict themselves.
- This ensures that reviewers with the necessary expertise can be consulted.
institution (see also the conditions under which reviewers are considered free of a conflict of interest below)

- They have fundamental differences of scientific or scholarly opinion with the applicant or other designated key project participants
- There are other close professional and/or personal relationships between the reviewers and/or other designated key project participants that could give the appearance of a conflict of interest to uninvolved third parties

3.2 Further provisions

Reviewers will generally not be considered to have a conflict of interest under the following conditions:

- In cases of joint publications with more than 20 authors, unless the applicants (including other key project participants) or reviewers are the first/lead or last author of the publication, except in cases where publications list authors in alphabetical order (= authors are listed as equally contributing)
- They have published works in the same edited volumes or proceedings; this does not apply to scholarly tributes (Festschriften) in which the applicants (including other key project participants) or reviewers were editors or laureates.
- In cases of joint publications with national or international cooperation partners of the applicants (including other key project participants)

In cases where an application has been revised and is being resubmitted, those reviewers from the previous round who provided substantial and constructive suggestions and criticism should generally be contacted again. New reviewers are, however, also required for resubmissions.

Applicants are not asked to name reviewers for their applications. If they do so, these suggestions will be disregarded.

A list of undesired reviewers (“negative list”) can be attached to an application. In this list, applicants may name a maximum of three potential reviewers who are believed to have possible conflicts of interest and who should be excluded from the review process. The FWF Executive Board will generally fulfil such requests. In cases where an application is resubmitted after an initial rejection, the negative list may include reviewers of the previous version of the application. (In exceptional cases, reporters may have the FWF Office request a list of desirable reviewers from the applicant. In cases where reviewers from this “positive list” do review an application, this must be noted in the meeting documents. In any case, only one review may be obtained from a reviewer on this list.)
Institutions which handle the review process on behalf of the FWF (such as publishers in the Stand-Alone Publications program) are to consult the FWF when in doubt or if the situation is not entirely clear.

4 Composition of juries and similar bodies

Juries, review panels, etc. are committees established for specific programs (including the START Program, Wittgenstein Award, PEEK, Richter-PEEK, doc.funds, doc.funds.connect, Special Research Program, 1000 Ideas Program, Clusters of Excellence, #ConnectingMinds, Emerging Fields), consisting of high-ranking international experts who submit a decision proposal in the form of a ranking of competing applications to the FWF Board, based on external reviews and, in some cases, hearings (including the START Program, doc.funds, doc.funds.connect, Special Research Program, Research Groups, Clusters of Excellence). For these bodies, the following applies:

- Jury/review panel members must be internationally renowned, leading scholars/scientists and researchers in their respective fields who also (a) have a broader perspective beyond the boundaries of their field and (b) have suitable experience with similar competitive selection procedures.

- In principle, juries/review panels consist of scholars and scientists from research institutions outside Austria. Persons who have worked in Austria in the past may not become jury members until they have been based outside of Austria for at least five consecutive years.

- At least one third of the members of these bodies should be women, and every effort should be made to ensure a maximum of diversity in terms of regions and institutions.

- When handling applications, jury members are subject to the same rules regarding bias and conflicts of interest as FWF Board members and reviewers. Any jury member with a conflict of interest is not to participate in the discussion of the application in question and is required to leave the meeting room while the jury deliberates on the case.

- Jury members are generally appointed for a term of three years, after which their term may be extended twice (maximum total: 9 years). At the same time, it is important to make sure that the composition of a jury does not remain the same for more than six years.