



“Looking the evaluators over the shoulder” – Danish experts in H2020 and their views and work

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Introduction

Our aims:

- The H2020 evaluation system as seen from the evaluators' perspective
- To give Research Support Officers an understanding of the serendipitous nature of proposal evaluations

Basis for this session:

- 114 replies to an online survey among all Danish H2020 evaluators active in the 2014-15 calls
- 27 in-depth interviews with evaluators, following a semi-structured guide

Worth noting – the take-home message you can tell ‘your’

H2020 proposers

Evaluators find impact a hard nut to crack, and present conflicting points of view on how to evaluate impact

- 51% are “very confident” when evaluating impact, 44% are “somewhat confident” and 5% are “uncertain”
- “I think the focus on quantified impact measures is very hyped” vs
- “Impact must be concrete; must have KPIs, how else can you measure effect?”

Diagrams/illustrations/charts showing the ‘flow’ of the project or the idea behind it, mean a lot

- “Have been to consensus meetings where our discussions were based on the flow charts”
- “A good diagram can really help you understand the concept, especially if you are not a specialist”

Evaluators are a varied lot, and group dynamics play a role during consensus meetings

- “The diversity is a take-home message, all aspects covered. Always somebody looking over your shoulder and spot the things you yourself missed”
- “Hard for a single evaluator to talk a project ‘up’, more easy to try and kill it...it is typically a male evaluator who tries”
- “So easy to talk a proposal up or down, we all have our own favourites”
- “ A single evaluator can talk a proposal to a higher score, not a lower”

What stood out – our observations

- Remote consensus meetings / remote evaluation: no fans
- There are huge differences in how evaluators perceived/remembered the briefings ahead of the evaluations
- Some said they could spot applications written by “consultants” (some did not like it, some did)
- A number of the evaluators felt that many newcomers did not live up to standard when compared with e.g. FP7
- Very heavy emphasis from most evaluators on the importance of **CLEAR** objectives – must not be processes, not task, but “goals, and on the first page so I can see what they aim at” (as one said)

“Oh, we knew that” says the proposer and keep on getting rejected

Evaluators do really hate verbosity, unclear language, bad lay-out, meaningless illustrations, small print, platitudes etc.

- 46% state that verbosity/hard to understand language “significantly” or “critically” influence the evaluation
- 25% state that spelling mistakes “significantly” or “critically” influence the evaluation

Evaluators read proposal in many ways

- Only 24% indicated they spend more than 4 hours reading a proposal
- 46% spend between 2 and 4 hours per proposal
- 30% spend less than 2 hours

The first two pages are critically important – if you lose the evaluators attention there, you are lost

- “The first page means everything, if it do not ‘catch’ me and show me the idea behind the proposal, my expectations will plummet drastically. No use if you have to search for the punchline”

Second guessing the evaluators...is it worth the try?

- what should an RSO do when all seems ok?

- Focus on what is generic, no matter who is evaluating your proposal
- No. of objectives, flow of the project
- The first two pages
- Check spelling, check language
- Attention to detail
- Budget

Reflections on the process and the results

- All interviewed showed and expressed real dedication to the role as evaluator
- Impressive response rate
- Interviewees were all eager to talk with us, many giving us far more time than they had planned
- We got confirmation of some old 'truths' about proposal writing, but were also surprised (e.g. the contradiction of views about how to deal with impact, the negligent role RRI played)

Reflections on the process and the results

- Worrying that 28% answered that the competences present in expert groups only partly meet the needs for a proper evaluation
- Only 51% stated they were briefed on gender issues, only 49% that they were briefed of interdisciplinary research – are the mainstreamed issues not remembered or are they absent from the briefings?
- Interpretation of results is difficult
- Both the numerical data (limited numbers) and the interviews gives insights, but must be used with care.