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Guidelines for referees on the assessment of grant applications

Commercialisation Project – Verification

Content

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About the processing of applications

The purpose of the Research Council's commercialisation support is to contribute to the use of publicly funded research through increased commercial exploitation and/or societal innovation.

The purpose of verification support is to mature and validate new technologies from the laboratory to relevant application environments. A verification project shall reduce the project's uncertainty relating to technology and the market. The goal of the completed verification project is to clarify the most critical questions and uncertainties so that the next step in the commercialisation process is triggered.

To be eligible for funding, the project must be based on research results from publicly funded research by approved research organisations. In addition, the project must represent a technological breakthrough or significant improvements, compared to existing knowledge or state-of-the-art. It must have the potential to form the basis for new products, processes or services in a market.

The call is aimed at a limited group of applicants, and primarily at new projects that have not previously received commercialisation funding from the Research Council. The following exceptions apply to this:

- projects that have received qualification funding in the past
- projects that have previously received verification support and can demonstrate good progress, but still require additional verification beyond the scope of the earlier project

Any new application is assessed against the previously granted project and whether further funding is considered justified.

The call is open to all thematic areas, and the project may be at TRL level 2–7 (Technology Readiness Level), in line with the scale used in the EU.

For further information, see:

- The call for Verification Projects 2025
- The Commercialisation Project webpage

We accept and process applications on a continuous basis. The portfolio board will make decisions at regular intervals, and applicants will be notified as soon as possible.

About the experts' assessment

The applications are assessed individually by experts. The experts enter into an agreement with the Research Council of Norway to conduct assessments and declare their impartiality for each application that is evaluated. The document "Impartiality in Administrative Proceedings" provides more information.

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Individual referee assessments are submitted via the Research Council's web solution "My RCN web". Referees have approximately 1-2 weeks to assess the application. Your assessment will only be shared with the applicant in anonymised form to highlight the application's strengths and weaknesses. A mathematical average per application is determined based on the individual referee assessments.

If an expert has limited capacity and wishes to review a limited number of applications during a certain period, please let us know.

Administrative procedures (c.f. call text)

"Applications will be assessed by external experts in accordance with the criteria 'Excellence', 'Impact' and 'Implementation', and applications with an average mark of 5.0 or higher will be considered eligible for funding. The applications are ranked and recommended based on the overall average mark.

In the event of equal marks, priority is given to projects that are most sustainable in terms of effects on climate, the environment and society. Secondly, in the event of equal mark, projects that collectively provide a spread across industry, thematic and challenge areas, as well as research institutions and regions, are recommended. The Research Council's general policy for the allocation of funding is also used, including a good gender balance with regard to the project manager among applications with equal quality assessment.

The portfolio board for innovation will make periodic decisions. This means that applications that have been processed at the time each decision is made will compete against each other.

Applications that have been rejected within the last 12 months, and which are resubmitted without significant changes, will retain the original marks given in the previous expert`s assessment. Changes that are considered to affect the expert`s previous assessment are considered significant. Minor adjustments, such as changing dates, are not considered significant."
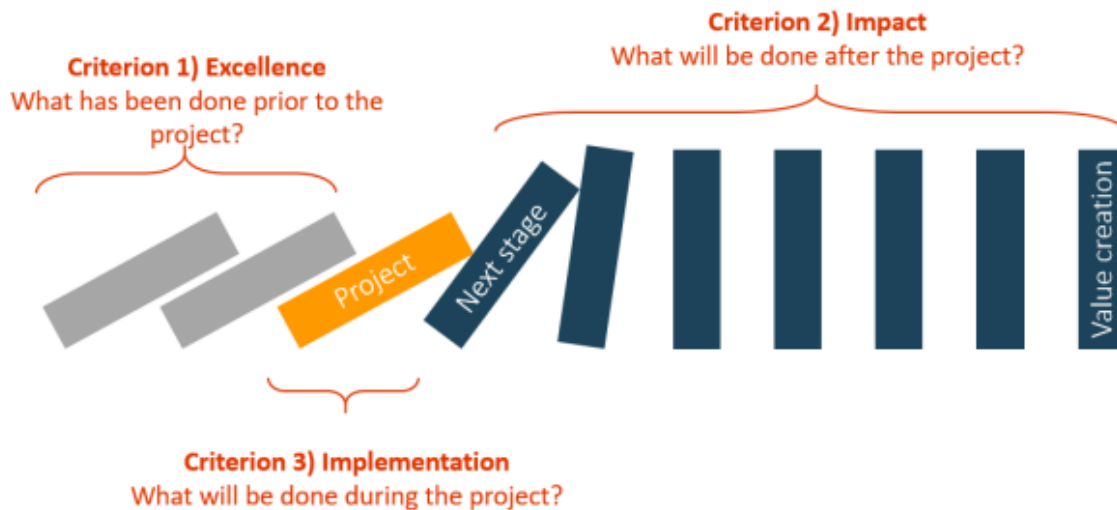
Guide to the assessment criteria

The experts assess each application based on the content of the application form and approved attachments. It is your professional judgment, based on your academic background, experience, industry, and market understanding, that should form the basis for the evaluations. Information that is only provided via links in the application is not part of the project description and should not be given weight in your assessment. If there is information missing, you can point this out in your evaluation.

Applications are assessed on the basis of the application form and approved attachments seen in relation to the criteria 1) Excellence, 2) Impact and 3) Implementation. A mark and the grounds on which it is awarded must be given for each of the criteria. Each criterion must be assessed on the basis of the following scale of marks:

7	Exceptional	Addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion exceptionally well. Shortcomings are not present, or only very minor.
6	Excellent	The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Only minor shortcomings are present.
5	Very good	The proposal addresses the criterion very well. A small number of shortcomings are present.
4	Good	The proposal addresses the criterion well. A number of shortcomings are present.
3	Fair	Addresses parts of the criterion. It broadly addresses the criterion, but there are a number of significant weaknesses.
2	Weak	The criterion is inadequately addressed, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
1	Poor	The proposal fails to address the criterion or cannot be assessed due to missing or incomplete information.

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The application must clearly specify what has been done previously, and what will be done during and after the project. This is reflected in the assessment criteria and can be illustrated as dominoes. Criterion 1 is an assessment of whether the project has a robust starting point. Criterion 2 is an assessment of whether this is of commercial interest and can contribute to value creation. Criterion 3 is an assessment of whether the project activities will contribute to triggering the next stage of the commercialisation process.

Criterion 2) Impact
What will be done after the project?

Criterion 1) Excellence
What has been done prior to the project?

Project

Next stage

Value creation

Criterion 3) Implementation
What will be done during the project?

1) Excellence

In this section, the reasoning behind the application and any work carried out prior to the project are assessed.

    i.   Research results:
- To what extent is the underlying research base adequately described, including who is behind the research and how it originates from a publicly funded research organisation?
- What is novel, why is the research interesting and where is the project on the TRL scale?

    ii.   Degree of innovation:
- To what extent is the need or problem to be solved in a new or better way accounted for and how does it differ from existing solutions (state-of-the-art)?

What are the potential shortcomings for this criterion?
There can be many types of shortcomings for this criterion, for example:
- inadequate description of concrete research results;
- inadequate knowledge of the state-of-the-art and the needs situation of potential customers;
- inadequate description of how the product/process/service represents significant improvements vis-à-vis the state-of-the-art;
- inadequate documentation (e.g. references to claims from potential customers).

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2) Impact

In this section, the long-term plan must be assessed, in addition to the plans for what will happen after the project.

i.   Market insight and areas of application:
- To what extent have market insight, areas of use, and the reasons why the results are commercially interesting been accounted for? To what extent does the applicant refer to dialogue with relevant actors?
- To what extent is the competition situation identified and accounted for?

ii.   Strategy for realisation:
- To what extent have the main aspects concerning what will happen after the project been accounted for, including any hypotheses addressing choice of strategy, challenges, risks and rights, expected income and investments and staffing needs?

iii.   Benefit to society and sustainability:
- How well are the important societal challenges that the project seeks to solve described?

What are the potential shortcomings for this criterion?
There can be many types of shortcomings for this criterion, for example:
- lack of a realistic understanding of the market and value chain;
- inadequate description of potential customer segments and needs situation;
- inadequate realisation strategy and risk analysis;
- inadequate calculation of market sizes and income potential based on realistic assumptions;
- inadequate description of future investment and resource needs;
- Sustainable Development Goals are listed without an explanation being provided of how the project plans to help to achieve them;
- inadequate documentation (e.g. introductory dialogue with potential customers/relevant market players).

3) Implementation

In this section, the short-term plan is assessed, as well as what the project will do to trigger the next phase.

i.   Project plan:
- To what extent does the project explain what will be done, why the activities are important, what is considered a successful outcome, and what the results will trigger?
- To what extent does the project present a realistic implementation plan with measurable milestones and associated activities?

ii.   Management, team and expertise:
- To what extent does the project have access to the necessary resources and expertise to implement the project?
- To what extent does the project have a plan for involving relevant external actors (investors, partners, clients, stakeholders, mentors, public and societal actors, etc.)?

iii.   Budget:
- To what extent are the budget and the financing plans realistic, cost-effective, and clearly rooted in the project's plans and resource needs?

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What are the potential shortcomings for this criterion?
There can be many types of shortcomings for this criterion, for example:
- it is unclear what will be achieved by the end of the project/what must be obtained to trigger the next phase;
- the project plan entails little involvement by/alignment with relevant market players;
- the milestones are not measurable nor based on critical decision-making elements;
- the project team is not sufficiently dedicated or lacks critical expertise;
- the planned use of support is insufficiently cost-efficient.

Expectations of the application assessments

The Research Council of Norway conducts a thorough assessment of all applications. The assessments carried out by external referees are an essential part of the processing of applications and will be shared with the applicants in anonymous form to contribute to learning. This includes marks and comments from the individual referee assessments and the referee panel's final marks and comments for applications that move on to the panel assessment stage.

Prior to the panel assessment, if relevant, the referees will be given access to the complete individual referee assessments (not anonymised). This means that the panel referees:
- gain insight into the other referees' grounds for assessment;
- become aware of new aspects and gain insight into complementary expertise;
- will be better equipped to prepare critical questions concerning projects where there is a need to clarify any disagreements.

It is therefore important that any information that is lacking in the application is pointed out in the comment's fields for the respective criteria. Each criterion should be given a mark on the basis of how well the application addresses the criterion's main question and the various sub-questions. If a poor mark is awarded due to a weakness or lack of clarity in the application, it must be explained why this is a shortcoming and how significant it is. Grounds must also be provided for good marks, with references to the content of the application. There must be a logical connection between the grounds provided, the mark and the descriptions given in the scale of marks.

Any shortcomings and ambiguities highlighted in the comment's fields form the basis for:

1) what must be improved in a new application if the current application is rejected, or
2) what must be elaborated on in a revised application before the project can begin if the current application is granted funding.

The assessment process itself is meant to be of value to the applicant, regardless of whether the project is granted funding. Assessments and feedback provided by individual referees should not be considered the only correct interpretation. They are intended to give the applicant insight into what they have succeeded in communicating and how the project is perceived from a commercial and market perspective. Referees should therefore also include the following in the comment's fields for the different criteria:
- proposals for critical questions that the applicants should look into in more detail;
- proposals for potential partners or mentors, and competitors they should keep an eye on;
- good advice relating to the specific market, or planned project activities.

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To ensure that the feedback to the applicant is as useful as possible, we ask that you follow the following principles when justifying your ratings:

- The rating should be justified with text that is clearly linked to what is asked for in the criterion.
- Use neutral, analytical, and unambiguous language. Write the feedback in Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, or English.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, and clear sentences without jargon, special terms, or abbreviations.
- Avoid expressing reservations about your own competence or making claims that the application is not credible.
- Avoid referring to a person's age, nationality, gender, or other personal characteristics.
- Avoid comparing or referring to other applications you are currently reviewing or have reviewed previously.
- Use objective language and avoid condescending or critical comments about the project leader, the proposed research and development, or the fields of study addressed in the application.
- Double-check that your comments are consistent with the rating, according to the description of the grading scale.

By following these principles, the feedback to the applicant will be constructive, regardless of whether the application receives high or low ratings.