



In the framework of the scientific assessment of research proposals submitted to the Universities of Napoli, Piemonte Orientale and Torino under the *Excellent (Younger) P.I.* Calls (UniTO, UniPo and UniNa) and *Addressing H2020* call (UNITO), the European Science Foundation (ESF) set up four disciplinary Review Panels that met 11-12 December 2014 and 9-10 April 2015. The four chairs wish to highlight the following points:

GENERAL STATEMENT

1. The panel chairs confirm the integrated outcome of the review process as presented by i) the ranked list of proposal and their category, and ii) the consensus reports produced by review panels (complemented by external assessment reports). This consensual outcome results from a well-balanced, coherent, consistent and independent process involving open and free discussions - first at panel level (with the support of external evaluations) and then at the overarching cross-panel level.
2. With a bit more than 30% of the applications shortlisted (12% of overall applications) being classified 'top priority' or 'high priority', panels were pleased to assess some very good and very promising research proposals. It has to be noted that the points listed below mostly focus on points of improvement.
3. In order to put applications in context, the panels would have benefited from information on the universities and their research environment. Applicants should be encouraged to describe how their proposals will be supported by, and contribute to, the work of their department.
4. Panel chairs strongly regret that the applicants shortlisted after stage 1 evaluation did not have the possibility to update and improve their (full) proposals based on the feedback of the first phase evaluation reports. In effect, these reports were of very little use to the candidate and producing them eventually represented a waste of time and effort. While allowing to update the full proposal would require some additional time in the assessment process, the value of allowing applicants to adapt their full proposals following comments received is very high; as applicants could react and adapt swiftly, this would also improve and optimise the educational aspect of the calls (applicants would not have to wait another year before providing an improved full proposal).
5. In a significant number of cases, while putting forward interesting and sometimes innovative ideas, the application documents often gave insufficient details about the work that would actually be done within the research plan proposed, including workplans and project management. Establishing and/or reinforcing the proposal writing training effort, including

mentoring, is strongly recommended as it would allow promising scientists to present and structure their ambition in a more effective manner.

6. As to budget requested, it has been noted that in some cases a significant share of the funding requested was targeted to activities subsidiary to the investigations (e.g. organisation of workshops); a clear policy on this type of expenditure(s) would certainly help candidates to set up their budgets and panels to evaluate them.

Excellent (Younger) P.I. Calls

7. The panel chairs (and panel members in general) emphasise their strong support to a funding concept and approach that intends to provide seed funding to young researchers, it is acknowledged that supporting early career scientists and confronting them with international standards in scientific assessment is an efficient stepping stone towards being awarded bigger grants at national and international levels.
8. In numerous instances, the differences between the start-up phase proposals and the full ERC proposals were not significant, it was then difficult to assess how the ERC proposal preparation would benefit from the start-up phase.
9. More generally it can be stated that since a very significant number of full ERC proposals were not at the appropriate level of maturity. The panel chairs recommend that more emphasise is given to the start-up phase proposal and that an extended summary of the ERC proposals is provided rather than requiring applicants to write a full ERC proposal that would eventually need to be re-written to competitive in the ERC framework.

Addressing H2020 call

10. Panel chairs acknowledge the value of the approach taken by this call in helping UNITO's academic staff to be competitive in the frame of EC Horizon 2020 programme.
11. The panels regretted that the first phase of the evaluation did not allow to have some details about the applicants and to consider their profile during the shortlisting.
12. The panels strongly emphasise that the term '*Impact*' –at the core of one of the evaluation criteria– should be more clearly defined and explained in general but also for each scientific domain (e.g. impact on the discipline, on the society).
13. Moreover, the panels question the fact that the 'Impact' criterion at stage 1 and 2 and the 'Implementation' criterion both outweigh the 'Excellence' Criterion. At stage 1 the 'Excellence' Criterion only represents 1/3 of the total mark of an application, it only represents 20% at stage 2.

Specific Comments on Humanities and social sciences projects

14. The humanities panel had a very significant number of resource creation or infrastructure development projects. While some of these demonstrated their potential contribution to the field(s) they address, others needed to be more clearly linked to specifically defined research questions or hypotheses.
15. More generally, it was considered rather challenging to assess research proposals and resource creation proposals on the same grounds. Differentiating research activities and infrastructure development through two different calls may represent a way to circumvent this difficulty.
16. The panel noted that a number of proposals addressed local issues, this may call for a stimulus to address research topics with a broader international scope.
17. In Social sciences, the panel noted that while presenting valid and good ideas, a number of applications failed to position them within a strong conceptual framework. This naturally impacted their scientific assessment.