



start **at** best

Workplace Innovation for Business Competitiveness

CALL FOR FUNDING PROPOSALS

Open procedure N° 20200302/EU

GUIDE FOR EXPERTS

**STARTUP
EUROPE** 
REGIONS NETWORK



The organisations coordinating this open call procedure have received funding from the European Union's H2020 INNOSUP programme – project Start at Best (Grant agreement N. 860318), coordinated by Startup Europe Regions Network (SERN). The content of this document is the sole responsibility of the organiser and it does not represent the opinion of the European Commission (EC), and the EC is not responsible for any use that might be made of the information contained.

Table of CONTENTS

1.	INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND	3
	1.1 Introduction	3
2.	OBJECTIVES	3
3.	EXPERTS.....	4
	3.1 Role of experts	4
	3.2 Appointment of experts, code of conduct and conflict of interest.....	4
4.	ASSESSMENT OF APPLICATIONS	4
	4.1 Preparation for assessment	4
	4.2 Assessment forms	5
	4.3 Assessment of award criteria and scoring	5
	4.4 Possible problems with applications.....	7
	4.5 Panel of experts and consolidated assessment and final score	8
5.	Feedback to applicants	8

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

The Startup Europe Regions Network (henceforth “the Network”) as a beneficiary of the European Commission (henceforth “the Commission”) under the European Union’s H2020 INNOSUP programme – project Start at Best (Grant agreement N. 860318), is in charge of the selection of projects to be funded. It will assess projects with the assistance of independent experts to ensure that only those of the highest quality are selected for funding. Thus, the final decision on the selection or rejection of applications is taken by the Network.

This Guide for Experts provides instructions and guidance for experts when assessing applications, in order to ensure a standardised and high-quality assessment. Specifically, on:

- The role and appointment of experts
- The principles of the assessment
- The assessment process in practice
- Information on how to assess the award criteria for each action and field

2. OBJECTIVES

The primary goal of Start at Best is to contribute to the development of a European-led global new wave of workplace innovation amongst SMEs; particularly micro-firms and small and medium companies¹ that can take advantage of the disruption in this area being created by startups and adopting their innovative behaviour and attitude.

The present project comes at a critical time: it is widely recognised that workplace innovation can enhance business competitiveness. EU companies, especially SMEs, need to get ready for the next wave of industrial change, digital transformation and new ways of working. In the face of these challenges, Start at Best specifically aims to:

- Raise the visibility and awareness of SMEs and micro-firms towards the relevance of workplace innovation for business competitiveness
- Provide an added-value set of startup-inspired cases of workplace innovation, to help SMEs and micro-firms to conceive, develop and concretize their ideas and concepts
- Communicate the results at a wide level and towards other sectors and regions, thus promoting the replication of successful initiatives across other industries and European countries

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition_en

3. EXPERTS

3.1 Role of experts

The assessment and selection of applications are organised on the basis of impartiality and equal treatment of all applicants. The role of experts allows providing a fair, impartial, and consistent assessment of project applications according to the objectives and the policy priorities of the call for funding proposals.

The assessment is a key part of the selection procedure. Based on the experts' assessment, a list of applications ranked in quality order is established, which serves as a basis for the Network to take the award decision, following the proposal of the Evaluation Committee.

Based on the experts' comments, the Network provides feedback to the applicants on the quality of their application (cf. section 4).

3.2 Appointment of experts, code of conduct and conflict of interest

Experts are appointed on the basis of their skills and knowledge in the areas and the specific field(s) of the workplace innovation sector in which they are asked to assess applications.

To ensure their independence, the names of the experts are not made public.

Experts are required to perform the assessment to the highest professional standards and within the deadline agreed with the Network.

Through the appointment by the Network experts are bound to a code of conduct as set out in the appointment letter or contract with the expert.

All information related to the assessment process is strictly confidential. Therefore, experts are not allowed to disclose any information about the applications submitted and results of the assessment and selection to the public. They must not have a conflict of interest² in relation to the proposals on which they are requested to give their opinion. To this end, they sign a confidentiality and conflict of interest declaration prior to beginning their work and adhere to it during and after the evaluation.

4. ASSESSMENT OF APPLICATIONS

4.1 Preparation for assessment

Before the start of the assessment, the experts are briefed by the Network on the Call for Funding Proposals and the actions under assessment, as well as on the assessment process.

² Financial Regulation Art. 57(2): « ... a conflict of interests exists where the impartial and objective exercise of the functions of a financial actor or other person, ..., is compromised for reasons involving family, emotional life, political or national affinity, economic interest or any other shared interest with a recipient.»

Experts are provided with the reference documents for the assessment and get access to the Evaluation Form, in which they perform the assessment. Before starting the assessment of applications, experts must:

- have a sound knowledge of the Call for Funding Proposal Guidelines³ which provides all necessary information to potential applicants on the action for which they can apply for a grant
- have an in-depth understanding of the award criteria applicable to the applications under assessment
- be familiar with all the reference documents and tools provided by the Network

Experts have to read the whole application carefully before completing the assessment form. It is recommended to read several applications before assessing any one of them in full: this allows experts to benchmark answers in different sections of the applications.

Each expert works individually and independently, gives scores and comments for each criterion and summarises his/her assessment in the quality assessment form.

The eligibility criteria are assessed by the Network in the first phase of the selection process. Only eligible projects are sent to experts for evaluation. Each eligible project is sent to three experts for an independent evaluation.

4.2 Assessment forms

Experts carry out their assessment in English, using the evaluation form provided. The applications to be assessed as well as the evaluation forms are to be sent via email.

Experts examine the issues to be considered under each award criterion, enter their scores for each applicable criterion and provide comments on each award criterion and on the application as a whole.

On completion of the assessment, experts validate the individual assessment, thereby confirming that they have no conflict of interest with respect to the assessment of that particular proposal.

4.3 Assessment of award criteria and scoring

Experts assess applications only against the award criteria defined in the Guidelines. These award criteria are listed and further explained in Annex 1 of this Guide.

Each of the award criteria is defined through several elements which must be taken into account by experts when analysing an application. These elements form a list of points to be considered before giving a score for the given criterion. They are intended to help experts arrive at the final assessment of the criterion in question. In order to give clear

³ <https://startatbest.eu/open-calls/>

guidance to experts as to how individual elements of analysis should be assessed, further information is provided in the above-mentioned annex.

When assessing applications against award criteria experts make a judgement on the extent to which applications meet the defined criteria. This judgement must be based on the information provided in the application. Experts cannot assume information that is not explicitly provided. Information relevant for a specific award criterion may appear in different parts of the application and experts take all of them into account when scoring the award criterion.

An application can receive a maximum of 15 points for all criteria relevant for the action. The table below shows the relative marks of each criterion:

Criteria		Definitions	Score (Threshold)
1	Excellence	This criterion assesses the adequacy of the methodology to the objectives including the alignment with the challenge/actions defined by the START-AT-BEST open calls and with the general objectives of the InnoSup-04-2019 Call.	3/5; Weight 1
2	Impact	Proposals must define a clear set of deliverables aligned with the objectives of the open call and the specific category to which the proposal relates	3/5; Weight 1
3	Implementation	This criterion assesses the potential of the team, communication strategy and sustainability vis-à-vis the objective of the action.	3/5; Weight 1
Remarks		Overall Score: (Threshold 10/15)	

Within the maximum number of points per award criterion, ranges of scores are defined that correspond to a fixed definition of the expected quality standard so that an as coherent approach as possible is implemented, across experts as well as across actions. The standards on a 5 points scale are as follows:

- **0 Points** - The proposal fails to address the criterion under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information
- **1 Point - Poor:** The criterion is addressed in an inadequate manner, or there are serious inherent weaknesses
- **2 Points - Fair:** While the proposal broadly addresses the criterion, there are significant weaknesses
- **3 Points - Good:** The proposal addresses the criterion well, although improvements would be necessary
- **4 Points - Very good:** The proposal addresses the criterion very well, although certain improvements are still possible
- **5 Points – Excellent:** The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion in question. Any shortcomings are minor

If necessary, the panel will determine a priority order for proposals which have been awarded the **same score within a ranked list**. The following approach will be applied successively for every group of *ex aequo* proposals requiring prioritisation, starting with the highest scored group, and continuing in descending order:

- a) Proposals that address topics, or sub-topics, not otherwise covered by more highly-ranked proposals, will be considered to have the highest priority.
- b) The proposals identified under (a), if any, will themselves be prioritised according to the scores they have been awarded for the criterion excellence. When these scores are equal, priority will be based on scores for the criterion impact.
- c) If necessary, any further prioritisation will be based on the following factors, in order: gender balance among the personnel named in the proposal who will be primarily responsible for carrying out the activities.
- d) If a distinction still cannot be made, the panel may decide to further prioritise by considering how to enhance the quality of the project portfolio through synergies between projects, or other factors related to the objectives of the call or to Horizon 2020 in general. These factors will be documented in the report of the Panel.
- e) The method described in (a), (b), (c) and (d) will then be applied to the remaining *ex aequos* in the group.

Experts are expected to give comments on each award criterion and, in their comments, refer explicitly to the elements of analysis under the relevant criterion. The comments on each award criterion have to reflect and justify the score given for it. Experts are advised to translate their assessment into a list of explicit "bullet points" (or equivalent) instead of complete sentences in order to save time and facilitate the consolidation with the other expert. This will allow easy rephrasing of opinions in the consolidated assessment. At the end of the assessment, experts give overall comments on the application as a whole. In the comments, experts must provide a thorough analysis of the application highlighting its relative strengths and weaknesses.

As their comments will be used by the Network to provide feedback to applicants, experts must pay attention to clarity, consistency and appropriate level of detail. All evaluation reports are to be written in English.

The Network monitors the quality of expert assessments and can require the expert to revise the assessment should the necessary quality standard not be met. Experts must assess all applications in full, regardless of the score given to any award criterion.

4.4 Possible problems with applications

Experts are under no circumstances allowed to contact applicants directly. In case of any problems arising during the assessment, experts contact the Network. The Network decides whether the applicant will be asked to provide additional information or clarifications or if the application should be assessed in the form it was submitted. Also, if experts notice during the assessment that the same or similar text appears in two or more applications submitted, as well as any other indications of possible double submissions and overlaps, they inform the Network about that immediately.

4.5 Panel of experts and consolidated assessment and final score

Once all applications have been assessed by three experts, the experts meet in Brussels or online to fulfil the following further evaluation steps:

- The first phase of the Expert panel: Individual assessment of projects by the three experts.
- The second phase of the Expert panel: In this phase, and after having assessed the projects, quality and quantitative review will be done to reach an agreement for a consolidated score. Quality control measures may be put in place. In case the consolidation score fails, the project will be discussed collectively by the expert panel in the third phase.
- The third phase of the Expert panel: During the third phase of the Expert panel, the following evaluation steps will be carried out by all experts:
 - to discuss the projects for which the consolidation has failed, and that needs to be discussed further;
 - to validate scores of all projects that have been subject to the consolidation process;
 - to discuss any issues/questions related to projects;
 - confirm the ranking of all projects.

The consolidated assessment is considered to be the final assessment of a given application. The consolidated assessment forms the basis for ranking the application on the list of eligible grant applications.

5. FEEDBACK TO APPLICANTS

As explained in the Guidelines, the Network notifies the applicant in writing of the selection result once the grant award decision is taken, providing the relevant information on the assessment scores and comments. In case of a request for further information or appeal by an applicant, the Network may request the expert involved in the assessment to provide additional elements of information on the assessment as necessary.

Annexes:

1. Call for Funding Proposals - Award criteria
2. Template for the Declaration of absence of conflict of interests and of confidentiality

Excellence Criteria (5 points)

This criterion will take into account:

- Clarity and consistency of the action with regards to the objectives of the call and adequacy to the needs identified (self-assessment tool “survey” of START-AT-BEST) (3 points)
- Alignment between the proposed actions and the proposed budget “value for money”, with the START-AT-BEST call objectives as described in section 2 and with the general objectives of the InnoSup-04-2019 Call4 proposed by the European Commission (2 points)

Impact Criteria (5 points)

This criterion will take into account:

- Suitability of the methodology to the objectives considering the expected targets to be achieved by the end of the implementation period (2 points)
- The innovative character of the project (1,5 points)
- The potential replicability to other organisations or entities (1,5 points)

Implementation Criteria (5 points)

This criterion will take into account:

- Indication of management skills required to effectively implement the proposed actions (1 point)
- To maximise impact, projects should have a clear and strong strategy for communication and dissemination of their activities and results (1 point).
- Cost efficiency of the action considering the budget and the lump-sum strategy in relation to the number of staff members, actions and days affected (1 point)
- Concrete and realistic time plan for the implementation of the proposed activities (1 point)
- Sustainability of the proposed actions for the applicant organisation (1 point)

⁴ See topic 2.1 “Call for proposals objectives”

Individual evaluation/Consensus (delete as appropriate)⁵

Proposal No. :	Project Title :
-----------------------	------------------------

<p>1. Award criterion 1 <i>Note: when a proposal only partially addresses the topics, this condition will be reflected in the scoring of this criterion</i></p>	<p>Score: (Threshold 3/5; Weight 1)</p>
<p>2. Award criterion 2</p>	<p>Score: (Threshold 3/5; Weight 1)</p>

⁵ 0 The proposal fails to address the criterion under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information; 1 Poor The criterion is addressed in an inadequate manner, or there are serious inherent weaknesses; 2 Fair While the proposal broadly addresses the criterion, there are significant weaknesses; 3 Good The proposal addresses the criterion well, although improvements would be necessary; 4 Very good The proposal addresses the criterion very well, although certain improvements are still possible; 5 Excellent The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion in question. Any shortcomings are minor.

ANNEX 2 EVALUATION FORM

3. Award criterion 3	Score: (Threshold 3/5; Weight 1)
Remarks	Overall score: (Threshold 10/15)

I declare that, to the best of my knowledge, I have no direct or indirect conflict of interest and of confidentiality in the evaluation of this proposal

Name	
Signature	
Date	

0 The proposal fails to address the criterion under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information; 1 Poor The criterion is addressed in an inadequate manner, or there are serious inherent weaknesses; 2 Fair While the proposal broadly addresses the criterion, there are significant weaknesses; 3 Good The proposal addresses the criterion well, although improvements would be necessary; 4 Very good The proposal addresses the criterion very well, although certain improvements are still possible; 5 Excellent The proposal successfully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion in question. Any shortcomings are minor.



DECLARATION OF ABSENCE OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS
AND OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Title of Call for proposals:

Reference: Call for funding proposals

I the undersigned declare that, in participating as an independent expert in the evaluation of proposals received in the open call of the action XXX

I undertake to treat as confidential all information contained in the proposals which I am asked to evaluate, both during the evaluation and afterwards.

I will not reveal to any third party the identity or any details of the views of my fellow evaluator(s), neither during the evaluation nor afterwards

I do not, to the best of my knowledge, have any interest in any of the proposals submitted in this call, I have not been involved in their preparation and I do not benefit either directly or indirectly from the eventual selection. Should I discover a conflict of interest during the evaluation, I undertake to declare this and to withdraw from the evaluation.

Name	
Signature	
Date	