

COST Open Call -Independent External Experts' Guide

COST Open Call 2025-1 Evaluation

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Document Change History

Version	Release date	Summary of changes
1.0	November 2023	Version for OC-2023-1
1.1	November 2024	OC-2024-1 updates: Inserted Document Change History Changed the title of the document Minor linguistic and formatting changes, including the text reduction for Chapter 1 Update in the Terms and Conditions Updated the examples in Error! Reference source not found. regarding eligible vs. non-eligible statements Introduced the section on the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Changed procedure for any change of marks approval requested by the Review Panel
	November 2025	OC-2025-1 updates Introduction of new evaluation grid Introduction of new experts platform (new screen shots)



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INTRODUCTION

This guide provides essential information for Independent External Experts (IEEs) to carry out their task and ensure a high-quality and consistent assessment of COST Action proposals. It focuses on the role of IEEs in the Open Call process, including the requirements of confidentiality and absence of conflict of interest, and it illustrates the evaluation process in practice.

Assigned IEEs must be familiar with the COST framework. To learn about COST, COST Actions and the COST Open Call, IEEs are invited to read the following documents:

- COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (COST 101/21)
- COST Open Call Proposers' Guidelines Level C

Finally, general information about COST and its activities is available at https://www.cost.eu/who-we-are/about-cost/.

1. OVERVIEW OF COST FRAMEWORK, COST ACTION AND OPEN CALL PROCESS

The COST Association is the legal entity in charge of the management and implementation of the COST strategy, policy and activities towards the achievement of the COST Mission. The overview of the COST structure and its intergovernmental dimension can be found at https://www.cost.eu/who-we-are/about-cost/.

1.1. The COST framework: mission and policy

COST is a pan-European intergovernmental framework¹ dedicated to supporting European-based Science and Technology (S&T) networking activities, enabling collaboration between researchers, innovators, and other relevant stakeholders. COST participants can jointly develop ideas and new initiatives across all scientific disciplines through trans-European coordination of nationally or otherwise funded research activities. Since its creation in 1971, COST has significantly contributed to reducing the gap between science, policy makers and society in Europe and beyond.

The COST **Mission** is to strengthen Europe's capacity to address scientific, technological and societal challenges, by funding bottom-up, excellence-driven, open and inclusive networks (COST Actions) in all areas of science and technology.

COST funds networking activities and not research itself, and no budget forecast is requested at the proposal stage. The research and development activities needed for the achievement of the Action objectives rely on nationally or otherwise funded research projects and resources (e.g., employees' time, infrastructures and equipment).

COST is also implementing a **Policy** towards **Excellence and Inclusiveness**, built upon two pillars:

- strengthening the excellence through the creation of cross-border networking of researchers;
- promoting geographical and gender balance and fostering the participation of Young Researchers and Innovators², throughout its activities and operations.

The main strategic objectives of COST are the following:

¹ See the list of countries and organisations in COST 088/21 Rules and Principles for COST Activities, Annex I.

² See COST Glossary - https://www.cost.eu/Glossary)



- encouraging and enabling researchers from less research-intensive countries across Europe to set up or join COST Actions. These countries are denominated Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC) (see Annex I – Level A: Country and Organisations table);
- counterbalancing research communities' unequal access to knowledge, infrastructures, funding and resources;
- providing strong means to increase the visibility and integration of researchers to the leading knowledge hubs of Europe, as well as to acquire their necessary leadership skills, regardless of their location, age or gender;
- smoothly contributing to trigger structural changes in the national research systems of COST Members;
- identifying excellence across Europe to contribute to ERA widening objectives.

Through global networking, COST also encourages the participation of researchers and innovators affiliated in non-COST Members³ and Specific Organisations⁴ in COST activities on the basis of mutual benefit. The participation of researchers from Near Neighbour Countries (NNCs) is particularly welcome, according to the provisions on eligibility for participation and reimbursement established in the Annotated Rules for COST Actions.

1.2. COST Actions

COST Actions are:

- a) **Pan-European**: the COST inter-governmental framework spans over 41 Full Members, one Cooperating Member, and one Partner Member;
- b) **Bottom-up**: the priorities are defined by the research community and the scientific management decisions are entrusted to the Action Management Committees. The COST framework is especially well-suited to promote **Multi-, Inter- and Trans-disciplinary collaborations**;
- c) **Open** throughout their lifetime to new members and are **adaptable** in terms of internal organisation and strategy. They shall promote actively the participation of the next generation of researchers and innovators;
- d) **Output and Impact-Oriented**: COST Actions are set up to achieve specific objectives within their four-year duration based upon the sharing, creation, dissemination and application of knowledge. COST Actions are monitored against their expected output and impact.

N.B.: When assessing a) and b), it is important to consider that these features may not be yet fully accomplished at proposal level. It is therefore fundamental to assess whether the proposal describes appropriate strategies to address them.

The research and development activities needed for the achievement of the Action objectives are not funded by COST and rely on nationally or otherwise funded research projects and resources (e.g., employees' time, infrastructures and equipment).

COST Actions have a four-year duration and the <u>networking tools</u> funded by COST are the following:

- Meetings (e.g., Management Committee (MC) meetings, Working Group meetings);
- Training Schools;
- Mobility of Researchers and Innovators (Short-Term Scientific Missions STSMs; Virtual Mobility - VM);
- Presentations at conferences organised by third parties (ITC Conference Grants, YRI Conference Grants, and Dissemination Conference Grants).

³ States that are not COST Members. They can be Near Neighbour Countries or Third States (also called International Partner Countries)

⁴ http://www.cost.eu/Country Organisations Table



COST Actions can also receive funding for other expenses:

- Dissemination and Communication Products:
- Expenses incurred for the benefit of the network.

The Action's activities are decided by the Action MC and approved by the COST Association. The rules applying to their funding are defined in the <u>Annotated Rules for COST Actions</u>.

1.2.1. COST ACTION STRUCTURE

The intergovernmental dimension of COST is reflected in the structure of a COST Action.

The **Action Management Committee** is the decision-making body and is responsible for the coordination, implementation and management of the Action activities and for supervising the appropriate allocation of the grant in view to achieving the Action objectives.

The MC is composed of:

MC Members: up to two representatives of the COST Full or Cooperating Member. Nomination of MC Members is a national prerogative, follows national procedures, and is performed by the COST National Coordinator's (CNCs)⁵.

MC Observers:

- up to two representatives of the COST Partner Member. Action MC Observers from the Partner Member are nominated by the respective COST National Coordinator (CNC);
- up to one representative of the Specific Organisation that joined the Action. Action MC Observers from Specific Organisations are nominated by the Specific Organisation.

Working Groups (WGs) are in charge of developing the scientific and networking activities needed to achieve the Action objectives, in line with the Action strategy defined by the Action MC.

1.2.2. PARTICIPANTS

COST Actions are open throughout their lifetime to anyone with a legal affiliation located in a COST Member or in any NNC or Third State (IPC⁶). Action Participants are defined as any individual being an Action MC Member, an Action MC Observer, a Working Group member or an *ad hoc* participant:

- Action MC Members and Observers: their role is to pro-actively participate in the implementation of coordination and management decisions in the Action and be a gateway to their national community;
- **WG members**: any individual affiliated to a legal entity in any Country in the world may become a WG member. Their participation shall be approved by the Action MC, based on an application submitted through the Action page on the COST website. Their role is to contribute to the achievement of the Action objectives through their participation in WG(s);
- Ad hoc Participants: Individuals who are not MC or WG members and are selected by the
 Action MC for a specific contribution towards the achievement of the COST Action Objectives.
 Examples of ad hoc participants can be STSM grantees, trainees and trainers in Training
 Schools, or invited speakers at COST Action Workshops and Conferences.

The rules to participate in a COST Action may be found in the Annotated Rules for COST Actions.

⁵ Before the start of the Action (date of the first Management Committee meeting), persons nominated by the CNC will automatically be able to accept their nomination and become Action MC Members. After the Action's first MC meeting, new Action MC Members need to be validated by the Action MC.

⁶ International Partner Countries (IPC) – Third States: States that are neither COST Members nor COST Near Neighbour Countries (e.g., Argentina, Japan, US, etc.).



1.3. The COST Open Call

The COST Open Call is implemented via the Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) procedure. COST publishes the official announcement of the Open Call on <u>Funding Documents & Guidelines</u> with the Collection Date, the schedule, the description of the procedure and reference to the evaluation criteria. Further information including an Open Call infographic is available on the <u>Open Call page</u> on the COST website.

The Open Call involves a one-stage submission process. Proposals shall be submitted through a dedicated secured online tool, <u>e-COST</u>. Proposals are evaluated and selected on a competitive basis, taking into account the available funds for the particular Open Call Collection.

The proposal evaluation, selection and approval comprise the following phases, with being the focus of this guide:

- 1. Evaluation by Independent External Experts
- 2. Revision and Quality Check of Consensus Evaluation Reports by ad hoc Review Panels
- 3. Proposals' Selection by COST Scientific Committee (SC)
- 4. Approval of the shortlisted proposals by the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO)

Further details about the process are provided in the rules on <u>COST Action Proposal Submission</u>, <u>Evaluation</u>, <u>Selection and Approval (COST 101/21)</u>.

2. THE EVALUATION PROCESS IN PRACTICE

This Chapter provides practical guidance on the whole evaluation process.

Independent External Experts (IEEs) carry out the remote peer-review evaluation. They are identified and assigned to proposals on the basis of their scientific and technological expertise necessary for the evaluation of proposals, taking into account the Research Areas and keywords selected by the network of proposers. This step uses a double-blind peer review approach, which means the identity of both IEEs and proposers is kept confidential.

The evaluation is performed remotely on the e-COST platform. The IEE needs to select the link "My evaluations for (Call number)", after logging into the e-COST platform.

Each proposal is evaluated by three IEEs, and each IEE submits an Individual Evaluation Report (IER) for each proposal they evaluate. One of the IEEs is appointed Rapporteur, with the responsibility to coordinate the preparation and submission of the Consensus Evaluation Report (CER).

Following the submission of the IERs, the remote consensus phase starts. The appointed Rapporteur may present a first draft of the consensus report, including comments from the two other IEEs and launch a discussion involving also the Review Panel Member to agree on the common points, elicit differences of opinions and moderate the discussion to try to reach a common, shared view on the proposal to be presented in the Consensus Evaluation Report (CER). Alternatively, the Rapporteur may first trigger a discussion with the other IEEs <u>and the</u> Review Panel Member (RPM) in order to prepare the draft consensus report based on this discussion.

As stated above, a RPM per proposal is also involved in the phase of CER drafting. Their task is to ensure the quality of the CER according to COST standards. The involvement of the RPM is crucial at this stage, so Rapporteurs are invited to keep the RPM in the loop and take their suggestions into account as much as possible. Their role is described more in detail in Section 2.4.

N.B.: The Consensus shall not be imposed, and IEEs may maintain their diverging views on the proposal. Where no consensus is reached, a second RPM will then be involved, at the phase of Quality



Check (in which IEEs are no longer involved). The two RPM will prepare a CER based on the three IERs, resolving the discrepancies.

Particular attention should be paid to how comments are drafted and scored. <u>It is of utmost importance</u> that the evaluation is carried out in the fairest, most accurate and consistent way, as it determines the final selection of proposals.

2.1. Evaluation Schedule

The foreseen schedule for the evaluation of proposals submitted to the COST Open Call is communicated in the automated notifications addressed to IEEs.

The COST Association reserves the right to slightly modify the foreseen schedule. Assigned IEEs and RP members will be informed in a timely manner in case of any modification.

2.2. Acceptance of Terms and Conditions

To access the assigned proposal(s) and the documentation needed for performing the evaluation task, the IEE has to previously accept the Evaluation Terms and Conditions (T&C), including:

- Declaration of no Conflict of Interest (CoI) (Section 3.1);
- Declaration of confidentiality agreement (Section 3.2);
- Agreement on terms of participation to Actions stemming from proposals being evaluated by the concerned IEE. This entails not to become either a WG or MC member. Ad hoc contribution may be envisaged;
- Consent to sharing contact details and the Individual Evaluation Report with other IEEs assigned to the proposal for the purpose of preparing its Consensus Evaluation Report.

N.B.: in case Col arises (real, potential or perceived - see chapter 3.1 for definitions) <u>during the evaluation</u>, the IEE must <u>immediately</u>:

- inform the COST Association (via email to opencall@cost.eu or via the link "contact COST" on the e-COST page with the list of proposals);
- stop evaluating all assigned proposals.

Should the CoI be confirmed by the COST Association, any of the provided comments and scores will be discarded.

In case that Col arises <u>after the evaluation</u>, the COST Association will examine the potential impact and consequences of the Col and will respond appropriately.

2.3. Preparation and Submission of the Individual Evaluation Report (IER)

For each proposal, the assigned IEE shall carry out an eligibility check and fill in the Individual Evaluation Report (IER). The submission of the IER is possible only once all its mandatory sections are complete.

The IEE has access to the assigned proposal(s) in e-COST. As shown in Figure 1, there are three icons for each proposal:



- The left icon gives access to the proposal (PDF file) to be evaluated.
- The middle icon gives access to the evaluation form, to be completed online on e-COST. By clicking on it, the IEE can start the evaluation of the proposal.
- The icon under the tab Evaluation generates the evaluation form in a PDF format.



Figure 1: Screenshot of e-COST showing how to access the proposal and the evaluation pages.

2.3.1. PROPOSAL ELIGIBILITY CHECK BY IEE

To be eligible for a COST Action, the proposal shall fulfil several criteria of eligibility and acceptability. For a full list of these criteria please refer to the <u>COST Open Call – Proposers' Guidelines– Level C</u>.

For each assigned proposal, IEEs are requested to check the following eligibility criteria, as specified in Table 1:

Table 1: Questions in the "Eligibility" section of the evaluation form.

Does the proposal breach fundamental ethical principles, including originality of findings and ideas, and peaceful purposes? Please note that only the content of the proposal should be considered.

Yes/No

Justification (mandatory in case of Yes). Please provide the explanation why the proposal does not comply with this criterion and indicate the text excerpts and/or the page numbers where this can be identified.

Is there in the proposal a direct reference to a name and/or institutions of affiliation of any of the proposers ?

Yes/No

Justification (mandatory in case of Yes). Please provide the explanation why the proposal does not comply with this criterion and indicate the text excerpts and/or the page(s) numbers where this can be identified.

Is any of the proposers identifiable through an explicit reference to participation in previous or ongoing grants, grant applications, EU projects, Networks, or any other endeavour, including publications?

Yes/No

Justification (mandatory in case of Yes). Please provide the explanation why the proposal does not comply with this criterion and indicate the text excerpts and/or the page numbers where this can be identified.

When accessing the evaluation form of a proposal, by clicking the box titled "Eligibility" (Figure 2), the Eligibility section of the evaluation form opens.

COST Open Call – Independent External Expert's Guide 🗹													
Eligibility	Excellence in S&T and Networking				lmp	act		Implem	entation	Total (0 - 13)			
O <u>Pending</u>	<u>Q1</u>	<u>Q2</u>	<u>Q3</u>	<u>Q4</u>	<u>Q5</u>	Mark tbd.	<u>Q6</u>	<u>Q7</u>	<u>Q8</u>	Mark tbd.	<u>Q9</u>	Mark tbd.	0

Figure 2: Screenshot of e-COST showing the evaluation panel.

The IEE must answer each question related to eligibility, providing a justification when required. Please note that even if the IEE flags potential eligibility breach (by answering "Yes" to any of the questions), they shall nonetheless continue evaluation, complete it and submit it.

The COST Association will assess in due time each alleged eligibility breach reported in due time and will take a decision.

Error! Reference source not found. illustrates examples of eligible and non-eligible statements related to anonymity, to guide the IEE in assessing the cases.



Table 2: Non-exclusive list of statements resulting in ineligibility due to the breach of the anonymity criterion and statements that are eligible.

Examples of statements resulting in ineligibility	Examples of eligible statements
"Prof. Smith" will coordinate the Action activities within WG5 (direct reference).	"The coordinator of WG5 activities will be appointed by the Action's Management Committee."
"Several members of the proposers' network have been involved in previous FP7 projects, like ATTPS and ADAPTIWALL, and institutions/organisations/networks/COST Actions, such as FP0901" (indirect reference).	"The Action will seek contact with / reach out to / draw on the expertise of / build on / previous FP7 projects, like ATTPS and ADAPTIWALL, and institutions/organisations/networks/COST Actions/, such as FP0901."
"Among government-run public services we have the Department of Health of Catalonia on board" (direct reference).	"The Network of Proposers already includes a / several government-run public service(s)."
"The Network of Proposers has already generated some output", with in the footnote a link to a YouTube video or webpage in which Secondary Proposers can be identified (indirect reference, potentially identifiable).	"The Network of Proposers has already generated some output", without links to a YouTube video or webpage in which Secondary Proposers can be identified.

2.3.2. PROPOSAL EVALUATION

2.3.2.1. Evaluation criteria and questions

Table 3 summarises the **three evaluation criteria**, the respective maximum mark and the threshold in criterion 1 and criterion 2 required to access to the Selection stage.

Table 3: Evaluation criteria and range of mark per criterion.

EXCELLENCE IN S&T AND NETWORKING	IMPACT	IMPLEMENTATION
Range of marks: 0 – 5 Threshold: 3	Range of marks: 0 – 5 Threshold: 3	Range of marks: 0 - 3
RANGE OF MARKS AWARDED: 0 – 13		

Proposals failing to achieve the threshold either in "Excellence in S&T and Networking" or "Impact" shall not be funded.

The scoring uses a scale for the criterion 1 and criterion 2 as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Scale for the evaluation criteria 1 & 2.

Mark	Label	Description
5	Excellent	The proposal fully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. Any detected shortcoming is not affecting the excellence of the proposal under this criterion
4	Very Good	The proposal addresses the criterion very well. Minor improvements are however needed to fully address the criterion.
3	Good	The proposal addresses the criterion well. Considerable improvements are necessary to fully address the criterion.



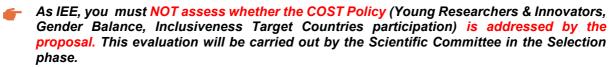
2	Fair	The proposal generally addresses the criterion. Weaknesses are significant and major improvements are necessary.
1	Poor	The proposal inadequately addresses the criterion. Weaknesses are inherently serious and would need fundamental reconsideration.
0	Empty section	The proposal does not address the criterion at all This section is either empty or the criterion has not been addressed either in the relevant section or anywhere else in the proposal.

The scoring for criterion 3 is different from the previous criteria above, and is shown in Table 5, below:

Table 5: Scale for the evaluation criterion 3:

Mark	Label	Description
3	Outstanding	The proposal fully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion. The proposal goes beyond the standard management structure defined by COST Rules, and the workplan is thoroughly presented, appropriate for the main challenge, and tailored to the achievement of the objectives.
2	Standard	The proposal addresses the criterion fulfilling COST standards. The proposal does not go beyond the standard management structure defined by COST Rules, and the workplan is acceptable but needs further elaboration to thoroughly address the main challenge and the objectives.
1	Insufficient	The proposal inadequately addresses the criterion. The proposal does not comply with the standard management structure defined by COST Rules and significantly lacks details on the workplan.
0	Empty section	The proposal does not address the criterion at all This section is either empty or the criterion has not been addressed either in the relevant section or anywhere else in the proposal.

IMPORTANT:



You must address each criterion answering all guiding questions presented below.

Criterion 1: Excellence in S&T and Networking

- A. Describe to what extent the main scientific, technological and/or societal challenge is relevant and timely.
- B. Explain how the objectives are relevant to the main challenge, achievable within the lifetime of the proposed Action, concrete, and ambitious.
- C. Describe to what extent the proposal builds on the state of the art and explain to what extent its approach and methodologies will advance the state of the art.
- D. Describe to what extent the proposal demonstrates that establishing a pan-European network is the most appropriate approach in relation to the main challenge and objectives.
- E. Describe to what extent the proposed network has the critical mass and the range of expertise needed to address the main challenge and objectives. If not, describe to what extent the



proposal presents a credible plan to grow the network and ensure meaningful engagement by relevant participants.

Threshold: Good (3)

Marks: empty section (0), poor (1), fair (2), good (3), very good (4), excellent (5)

Criterion 2: Impact

- A. Describe to what extent the proposal aims to achieve realistic and innovative impacts. Impacts can be on science, society, policy, or any other relevant area, and short-, medium- or long term.
- B. Describe to what extent the proposal identifies the relevant stakeholders and presents a clear and tailored plan to engage them in the Action activities.
- C. Describe to what extent plans for the communication, dissemination and valorisation of the results of the proposed Action are clear, attainable, and targeted to relevant audiences (research community, policymakers, civil society, etc.).

Threshold: Good (3)

Marks: empty section (0), poor (1), fair (2), good (3), very good (4), excellent (5)

Criterion 3: Implementation

A. Describe to what extent the work plan and the structure of the proposed Action (WGs, leadership structure, tasks, activities, timeframe, deliverables, and internal communication) appropriately address the main challenge and ensures achievement of objectives.

No threshold

Please note that for this criterion there are only four possible marks: empty section (0), insufficient (1), standard (2), outstanding (3)

Below you can find the proposal technical annex template with guidance provided to the proposers for each section.

1.EXCELLENCE IN S&T AND NETWORKING

A. Main challenge

Describe clearly and concisely the issue or need that the proposal aims at addressing. The main challenge can be of different nature: e.g., scientific, technological and/or societal. Describe also why and how it is relevant and timely.

B. Objectives

Describe the objectives addressing the main challenge presented above and elaborate how they are relevant, concrete and achievable within the lifetime of the proposed Action.

The objectives shall entail both research coordination and capacity building objectives.

Hereafter, we provide a <u>non-exhaustive</u> list of examples of research coordination and capacity building objectives.

Research coordination:

- Development of a common understanding/definition of the subject matter;
- Coordination of research methodologies;
- Coordination of experimentation or testing;
- Comparative analysis of data;



- Development of knowledge needing international coordination;
- Ftc

Capacity building:

- Fostering knowledge exchange;
- Bridging separate fields of science/disciplines;
- Enabling collaboration from different stakeholders, e.g., academia, industry, policy makers, NGOs:
- Etc.

C. State-of-the-art

Describe how the proposal builds on the state-of-the-art and to what extent its approach and methodologies will advance the state of the art, including former and existing efforts (research projects, other networks, etc.) at European and/or international level.

D. Rationale for choosing networking to address the main challenge

Demonstrate clearly and concisely why a pan-European network is the most appropriate approach to tackle the main challenge as opposed to e.g., a research project. This is important because COST funds networking activities and not research.

E. Critical mass of the network

Elaborate how the proposed network has the critical mass and the range of expertise needed to address the main challenge and objectives. if this is not yet achieved at proposal level, describe a credible plan to grow the network and ensure meaningful engagement by all relevant participants, Please note that the COST Policy (Country coverage, gender balance and involvement of Young Researchers and Innovators) must not be addressed in this criterion - see Section 2.4.4 of these Guidelines.

2.IMPACT

A. Impact related to objectives

Describe how the proposal aims to achieve realistic and innovative impacts. Impacts can be on science, society, policy, or any other relevant area, and short-, medium- or long-term.

Also describe how the proposed Action will produce impact on research coordination and capacity building.

B. Involvement of stakeholders

Describe the stakeholders targeted by the proposed Action and the tailored plans to involve the identified categories. Specify the role in which they will be engaged in the proposed Action, their added-value and the challenges you may face to include them.

C. Communication, dissemination and valorisation

Describe the plans for communication, dissemination and valorisation of results and how they target the relevant audience (research community, policymakers, civil society, etc.).

If relevant, please describe the exploitation plan and the targeted audience, including IPR.

3.IMPLEMENTATION

A. Action Structure

Describe the different Working Groups, their interrelation and how they address the main challenge and contribute to achieve the objectives.

If the management structure entails additional roles beyond the mandatory COST Action ones, (i.e., Management Committee, Working Group Leaders, Action Chair, Vice Chair, Science Communication



Coordinator, Grant Awarding Coordinator), please describe them here and explain how they are intended to address the main challenge and contribute to achieve the objectives.

B. Work plan (tasks, activities and timeframe)

Describe the work plan (e.g., tasks, activities, milestones and timeframe) to address the main challenge and ensure the achievement of the objectives.

Please note that you do not need to provide a budget breakdown at this stage, since the budget is allocated to the approved Actions by the COST Association on the basis of specific parameters and subject to budget availability (see Section 1.2 of these Guidelines).

C. Deliverables

Describe the proposed Action's major deliverables and their timeframe.

Deliverables are tangible outputs of the Action such as: reports, documents, technical diagrams, papers, publications, content for training schools, input to standards, best practices, white papers, etc.

COST Action networking activities (e.g., meetings, training schools, etc.) are not deliverables but means to achieve the objectives.

D. Gantt chart

Provide a Gantt chart of the time schedule for the different activities, tasks, milestones and deliverables according to the management structure of the proposed Action.

2.3.2.2. IER completion in e-COST

You must address all criteria (nine evaluation questions in total) to complete the evaluation form for each proposal assigned. To fill in a specific question, you can click the corresponding question such as Q1, Q2 to Q9, as shown in Figure 3.

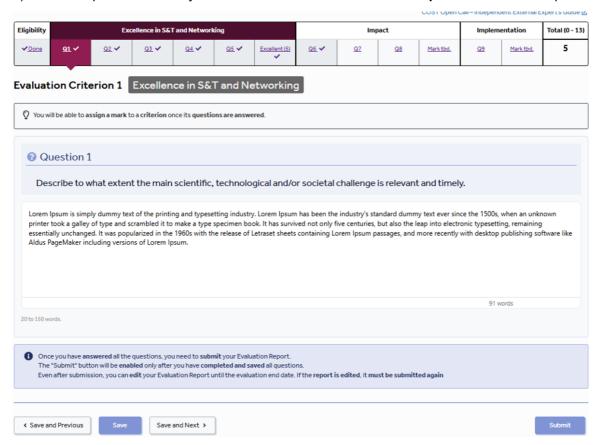


Figure 3: Screenshot of e-COST showing the evaluation panel.

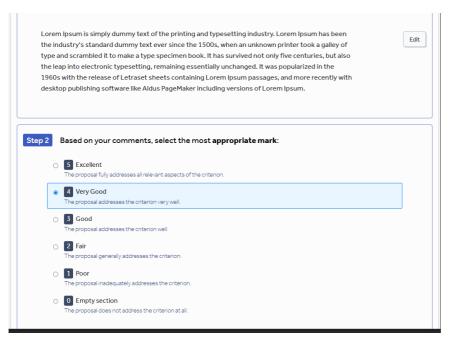


You must:

1) For each question : Fill in your comments. Save the comment and proceed to the next question.



2) For each criterion: **Attribute** a mark to that criterion, once **all** the comments related to the questions of that criterion have been finalised.





Please note that you will be able to submit only when the IER is complete: **he "Submit" button is available only upon completion of the eligibility, nine questions and scoring of all criteria** (Figure 6).

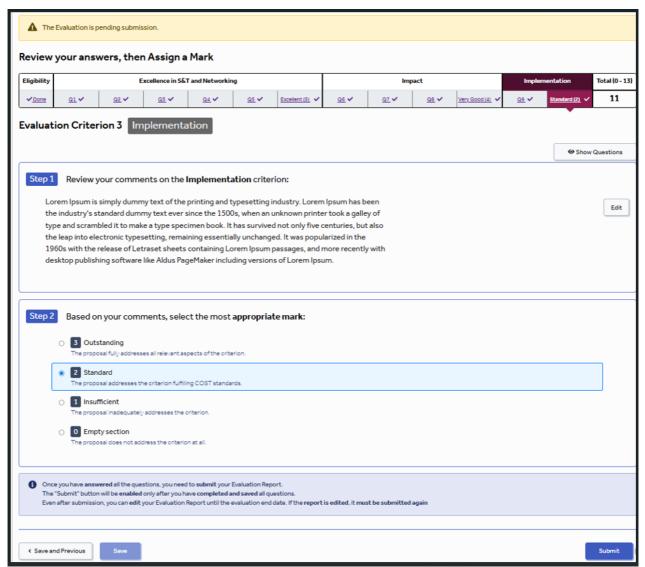


Figure 4: Screenshot of e-COST showing the submission pane active once all questions and marks have been addressed.

It is possible to change the submitted IER multiple times before the deadline. After the deadline, the IER is locked and can no longer be modified.

Case of no deadline compliance: if an IER is not submitted before the deadline, the involved IEE might be removed from the evaluation process of this specific proposal, losing the entitlement to the honorarium for that evaluation.

2.4. Preparation and Submission of the Consensus Evaluation Report (CER)

One of the three IEEs is assigned as the proposal Rapporteur by the COST Association. By accepting the Evaluation Terms and Conditions, the IEE also accepts this potential role as it is part of the consensus evaluation process. If the appointed Rapporteur encounters any difficulty in taking on this role, IEEs shall **immediately** inform the COST Association by contacting **opencall@cost.eu**.



The Rapporteur coordinates the preparation of the remote Consensus Evaluation Report (CER) taking into account the submitted Individual Evaluation Reports (IERs) and proposing a first draft either before or after discussing it with the other IEEs. A Review Panel (RP) Member is assigned by the COST Association to each proposal to ensure the consistency between comments and marks in the CER, its completeness and clarity. The Rapporteur is requested to take into consideration the input of the RPM.

The CER must address all the evaluation questions. The purpose of this phase is, whenever possible, to reach consensus among the three IEEs and reflect this consolidated version in the CER.

N.B.: The RP Member shall be notified when the Rapporteur starts the process and be involved in all pertinent discussions with the IEEs during the preparation of the CER.

For this reason, the names and e-mail addresses of the RP Member and the IEEs assigned to a proposal are visible to each other only during the consensus phase and must be kept **confidential** (please see Chapter 3.2 for more information).

All the IEEs and RP member should be put in the condition to review and provide input on the CER before its submission so that the Rapporteur can take into account their comments in the final edit of the CER before it is submitted.

For each proposal, the IEEs and the RP member will receive:

- i. access to IERs submitted by all IEEs in a *read-only* format and;
- ii. an e-COST notification by email with the following:
 - · contact details of the other two IEEs
 - contact details of the appointed Rapporteur
 - contact details of the assigned RP Member
 - · deadline for submitting the final CER for voting.

2.4.1. CONSENSUS TIMELINE AND COLLABORATION MODALITY

During the consensus phase, the Rapporteur coordinates the preparation of the CER. This is a collaborative process involving the three IEEs and the RP member. For a smooth consensus process, it is important to establish and communicate clearly an internal timeline and collaboration modality for each of the activities as soon as the Rapporteur is notified of being assigned this role: the drafting and submission of the CER by the Rapporteur, how will be implemented the feedback from the IEEs and RP member on the draft (e.g., email exchanges, dedicated call/meeting), as well as and the voting process.

A "Request feedback" function is available on the evaluation overview page and can be used to facilitate the communication during the consensus between the IEEs and RP Member.

The choice for the most suitable collaboration mode may be considered whether IERs comments and marks are aligned or not. When comments and marks are not aligned and discrepancies in opinions cannot be easily solved, a dedicated call/meeting is typically more effective than an email exchange: during the call/meeting, the involved IEEs and RPs may collaboratively agree on a proper formulation of the comment and mark for the affected evaluation question(s).

In presence of discrepancies of opinions for specific questions, it is NOT recommended to average the respective IER marks and include all IER comments into the CER. This may result in inconsistencies between comments and marks throughout the CER. Therefore, the Rapporteur shall pay particular attention to these cases and ensure consistency between comments and marks.



2.4.2. CER PREPARATION AND SUBMISSION BY THE RAPPORTEUR

For the preparation of the draft CER, the Rapporteur shall complete and save all mandatory comment boxes of the nine evaluation questions (see also Section 2.5 and Figure 7).

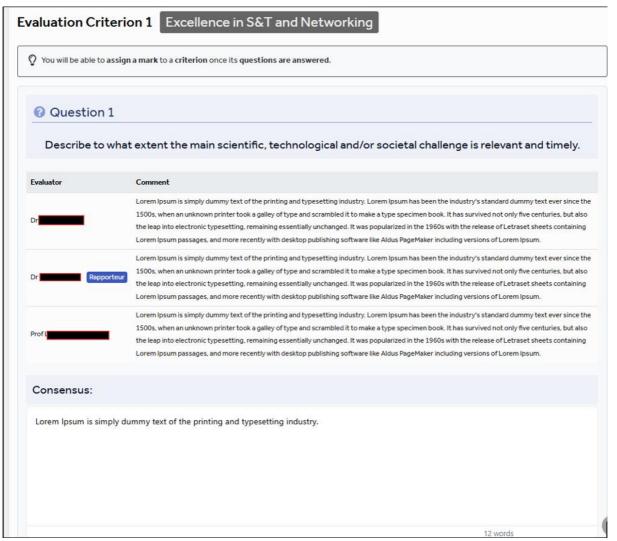


Figure 7: Screenshot of e-COST showing the Rapporteur's view on each question.

While completing the comments for each question related to a criterion, the Rapporteur shall pay attention to the word limits (minimum and maximum), of each question.



The Rapporteur will be able to select an appropriate mark to the comment, related to the criterion (see Figure 8).

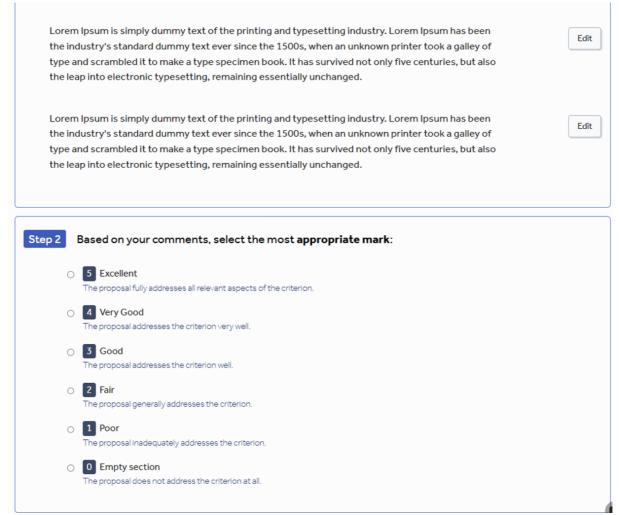


Figure 8: Screenshot of e-COST showing the mark range.

To share the draft CER with the two other IEEs and the RP Member for their revision and feedback, the Rapporteur shall click on the "Request Feedback" button (see Figure).



Figure 9: Screenshot of e-COST showing how to request feedback on the draft from the other evaluators and the RP Member.



The button "Request feedback" and "Submit" are displayed all the time, but the "Request feedback" button becomes active only once all the questions are answered (and saved) and for each criterion a mark has been provided.

N.B: The "Submit" button becomes active only after the "Request feedback" button has been used (see Figure 10). Before submitting, the Rapporteur shall allow for sufficient time for the IEEs and the RP Member to send their feedback and incorporate their suggestions, as needed.

Before the deadline for voting, the Rapporteur can revise the CER and consequently notify as many times as necessary the two other IEEs and the RP Member. Once the discussions are finalised, and prior to the deadline for voting, the Rapporteur must submit the final version of the CER for its voting in e-COST by the other IEEs and the RP member.

N.B.: Once submitted, the CER on the e-COST platform is final and can no longer be edited.

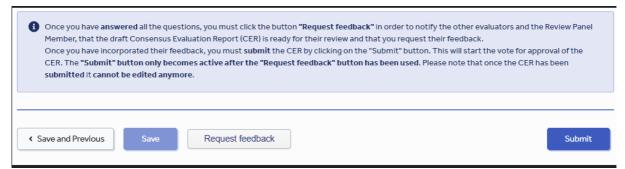


Figure 10: Active 'Submit' button for the CER submission.

2.4.3. VOTING ON THE CER

Following the CER submission, the IEEs and the RP Member need to vote on the CER by selecting one of the two options as shown in Figure 11 (approve or NOT approve). It is not mandatory to reach consensus. In case of non-approval of the CER by either an IEE or the RP Member, a justification shall be provided.



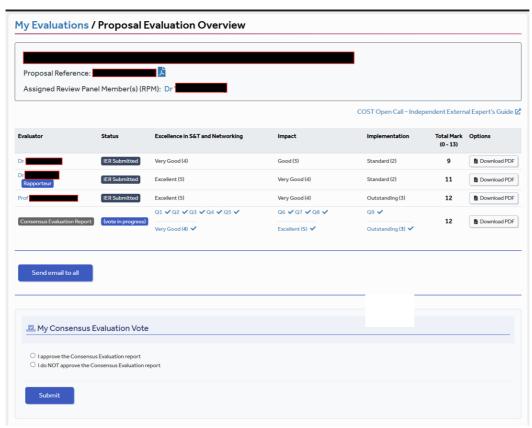


Figure 11: Screenshot of e-COST showing the voting pane for the submitted CER.

After voting, the IEE will receive a confirmation email to their email account registered in e-COST.

Allow sufficient time (at least 2 days) for the IEEs and RP Member to vote on the CER, thus avoiding non-approval of the CER. The time needed from launch to finalising the voting can be minimised in case the CER submission is done during a call/meeting to collaborative finalise the CER. In this case, the IEEs and RP Member have the chance to immediately vote upon the CER submission.

If an IEE does not vote on a CER, this CER will be considered non-approved, and IEE may lose his/her entitlement to the honorarium.

In case the CER is not submitted by the Rapporteur, the CER status is considered non-approved.

2.5. Individual and Consensus Evaluation Reports: examples of good and bad practices

Please carefully read this section and follow the recommendations.

Each proposal must be evaluated on the basis of the proposal content only.

CERs are communicated to the proposers and must therefore be accurate, complete and clear. As per COST rules, a Main Proposer has the possibility to submit a request to the COST Association for redress in case of factual error(s) and / or procedural shortcoming, i.e., whenever:

- The evaluation of the proposal has not been carried out in accordance with the procedures set out in COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (COST 101/21; http://www.cost.eu/proposal_sesa)
- The Consensus Evaluation Report contains a factual error(s) that is verifiable by a non-expert.
 - An example of a factual error is the following: the CER states: "The state-of-the-art section in the proposal does not mention the new developments in Black hole theory", while in fact on p. 3 of the proposal there is a section called "Black hole theory - new developments".



An example of what is *not* considered a factual error is the following: the CER states: "The
proposal does not sufficiently discuss new developments in Black hole theory". Such a
statement is considered as scientific judgement of the assessment for which the redress
procedure is *not* admissible.

Therefore comments shall:

- Be consistent with the selected mark.
- Be strictly related to each specific evaluation question;
- Be substantial (no hollow statement);
- Not contain any factual error;
- Be adequately argued, providing enough feedback to the proposers, concise and to the point.
- Using factual evidence, and not formulated as subjective opinions: "This proposal is..." and not "I think that...", "I feel that...";
- Be written having in mind the proposer as recipient (avoid discriminatory language, be polite, be fair, etc.);
- Be clear and avoid obscure acronyms or technical terms;
- Be an objective assessment of the quality of the proposal with respect to the specific question;
- Avoid using quotes from the proposal.

Descriptions of clear or unclear comment are provided in Table 5.

Table 5: Comparison of clear and unclear comments.

Clear comments	Unclear comments			
Clear comments are precise and highlight strengths and weaknesses	Unclear comments are ambiguous			
Clear comments explain the score	Unclear comments merely echo the score			
Clear comments are consistent	Unclear comments are contradictory			
Clear comments express an analysis based on evidence	Unclear comments are descriptive			
Clear comments are based on facts	Unclear comments make assumptions			
Clear comments include words like: because, specifically, for example	Unclear comments include words like <i>perhaps, think,</i> seems, assume, probably			

The whole range of marks should be considered when assessing a proposal.

Table 6 shows examples of adequate versus <u>inadequate</u> comments.

Table 6: Comparison of adequate and inadequate comments.

Adequate comments	Inadequate comments
The proposal presents ambitious plans. However, the methodology is not adequately explained and fails to address the two key aspects of A and B	I find the proposal far too ambitious.
This proposal fails to advance the state of art in X or Y and it does not take Z sufficiently into account	The proposal does not show a good understanding of the state of the art.
The stakeholders' involvement is not adequately addressed. In particular, X and Y are not sufficiently targeted by	There is no indication of stakeholders' involvement.

Before submitting your report, you should check thoroughly the following:

• Is the Evaluation Report adequately argued?



- Do the justifications provided match the comments and marks selected? For instance: what is the severity of the weaknesses listed? Does it appropriately fit the selection of the statement and the mark?
- Are the proposals' strengths and weaknesses carefully explained?
- Has any statement, which you have quoted, been double-checked? (Please be aware that factual errors may lead to a redress procedure).
- Does the report contain any contradictory statements or references such as "see External Expert 1 report" or "not applicable"?
- If you were the Main Proposer, would you find this report fair, accurate, clear and complete?

2.6. Responsibilities, guiding Principles and use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

The IEE is responsible for carrying out the evaluation of the proposals themselves and is not allowed to delegate the work to another person. The IEEs do not represent either their employers or their countries.

The IEE must treat all proposals equally and evaluate them impartially on their merits.

The IEE must submit reports on the platform (e-COST) within the given deadline. This is part of their contractual obligations. In case of non-compliance with the latter, the honorarium of the IEE could be cancelled.

The IEE must pay particular attention to:

- the eligibility criteria as described in Section 2.3.1.;
- the content of their evaluation, based on which significant funding decisions will be made.

Regarding the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI):

- Evaluators must be human experts;
- Evaluators should assess the proposal solely on the content submitted, independently of how it was authored;
- Evaluators must not upload any parts of the proposal to any online service or unauthorised third party, including Generative AI tools;
- Evaluators should form their own opinion about the proposal according to each individual assessment criteria:
- Evaluators must make all efforts to protect confidentiality of proposals and evaluations;
- Evaluators must not use Generative AI tools for any assessment of the scientific content of the proposal. They may only make use of Generative AI tools for improving the readability of their reviews while ensuring no loss of confidentiality.

3. CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Open Call Evaluation, Selection and Approval procedure fulfils three core principles: excellence, fairness and transparency. COST strives to avoid any Conflict of Interest (CoI) and all those involved in the Evaluation, Selection and Approval process must commit to confidentiality.

3.1. Conflict of Interest

COST expects an ethical behaviour from all the participants in COST activities.

The Conflict of Interest rules apply to all those concerned by the SESA process (CNCs, Independent External Experts, Review Panel Members, Scientific Committee Members, and CSO members). Each individual involved in the evaluation, selection and approval of proposals shall have only one role in the evaluation, selection and approval of a COST Action and may not take any benefit from any Action approved under that specific Collection. In particular:



- Independent External Experts having evaluated a proposal may not become either WG member or MC member, nor actively participate in the Action deriving from that proposal; ad-hoc contribution may be possible or become Action Rapporteur;
- Review Panel Members having reviewed a proposal may not become either WG member or MC member, nor actively participate in the Action deriving from that proposal; ad-hoc contribution may be possible or become Action Rapporteur;
- CNCs and Scientific Committee Members may not join any Action in any way during their mandate;
- CSO members may not join any Action in any way during their mandate.

A Conflict of Interest can be real, potential or perceived.

1. Cases of Real Conflict of Interest

The person involved in the evaluation or selection procedures (Independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, and Scientific Committee Member):

- has been involved in the preparation of the proposal;
- has been involved in any previous evaluation step in the same Collection.

2. Cases of Potential Conflict of Interest

The person involved in the evaluation or selection procedures (Independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, and Scientific Committee Member):

- was aware of the preparation of the proposal;
- has a professional or personal relationship with a proposer;
- stands to benefit directly or indirectly if the proposal shall be accepted or rejected.

3. Cases of Perceived Conflict of Interest

The person involved in the evaluation or selection procedures (Independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, Scientific Committee Member):

feels for any reason unable to provide an impartial review of the proposal.

Table 7 provides an overview of the possible cases of Conflict of Interest in the evaluation of COST Action proposals.

Table 7: Summary of the cases of Conflict of Interest (CoI), marked with X.

Position	Main Proposer and Network of Proposers	Independent External Expert	Review Panel Member	Scientific Committee Member	CNC	cso
Main Proposer and Network of Proposers (Submission)	~	×	×	×	×	×
Independent External Experts (Evaluation)	×	~	×	×	×	×
Review Panel Members (Revision)	×	×	~	×	×	×



COST Scientific Committee Members (Selection)	×	×	×	>	×	×
CSO (Final approval)	×	×	×	×	×	~

- 1. If the Conflict of Interest is confirmed/identified before the evaluation starts:
 - the evaluator may not participate in the evaluation/selection procedure in the ongoing collection and shall be replaced.
- 2. If the Conflict of Interest is confirmed/identified during the evaluation:
 - the evaluator shall stop evaluating/selecting in the ongoing collection and shall be replaced;
 - any comments and marks already given by the evaluator shall be discarded.
- 3. If the Conflict of Interest is confirmed/identified after the evaluation has taken place, the COST Association shall examine:
 - the potential impact and consequences of the Conflict of Interest and take appropriate measures.

The COST Association has the right to take the lead in any resolution process of a CoI situation at any moment of the evaluation and selection.

All cases of CoI are recorded by the COST Association. All those related to nationally nominated actors (Review Panel Members and COST Scientific Committee Members) are reported to the COST National Coordinator.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

Any person involved in the evaluation or selection procedures (Independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, and Scientific Committee Member) shall sign a declaration stating/accepting he/she:

- is not aware of any conflict of interest regarding the proposal(s) to be evaluated/selected;
- shall inform immediately the COST Association of any conflict of interest discovered during the evaluation process;
- shall maintain the confidentiality of the procedure.

Failure to declare the Col may have the following consequences:

- notification to the COST Association Director:
- notification to the respective CNC for Review Panel Members;
- notification to the CSO for Scientific Committee Members;
- removal from the COST Expert Database.

3.2. Confidentiality

COST expects that each person involved in the SESA process (Independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, Scientific Committee Member, CNC and CSO member):

- treats confidentially any information, including personal data of any natural person concerned by or involved in the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of the proposals process, and document, in any form (i.e., paper or electronic), disclosed in writing or orally in relation to the performance of the evaluation:
- processes any confidential information or documents as described above only for the purposes and for the duration of the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of proposals process;
- does not, either directly or indirectly, disclose any confidential information or document related to proposals or applicants, without prior written approval of the COST Association;



- does not discuss any proposal with others, including other evaluators or staff not directly involved in evaluating the proposal, except during formal discussions at dedicated ad hoc Review Panels and Scientific Committee meetings;
- does not disclose any detail of the evaluation process and its outcomes, nor of any proposal submitted, for any purpose other than fulfilling their tasks as evaluator;
- does not disclose the names of other experts participating in the evaluation;
- does not communicate with proposers on any proposal during or after the evaluation until the approval of CSO.

Under no circumstances should the proposers contact any of the actors involved in the SESA process regarding their proposal. Any attempt to do so may lead to immediate exclusion of the proposal from the process.

4. HONORARIA AND CERTIFICATE

Honoraria⁷ shall be paid to the Independent External Experts and ad-hoc Review Panels' Members involved in the SESA procedure as follows:

- 1. Independent External Experts: EUR 50 per proposal, based on submitted Individual Evaluation Report (IER) and voting on the Consensus Evaluation Report (CER). The proposal Rapporteur is entitled to an additional EUR 50 per proposal, based on the submitted CER.
 - N.B.: in case a proposal is declared as non-eligible, the IEE having submitted an IER for that proposal is still entitled to the payment of the honorarium as described under point 1 above, even in the absence of a CER vote or CER being submitted.
- 2. Review Panel members: EUR 400 per Collection Date, based on the active involvement in the consensus process and quality check of the proposals (remotely and at the dedicated RP meeting).

IEEs having completed the assigned evaluation(s) can download a participation certificate (PDF document) from e-COST Evaluations page.

⁷ See COST 101/21 COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) – (Level B)