SILESIAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY PUBLISHING HOUSE

SCIENTIFIC PAPERS OF SILESIAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY 2025
ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT SERIES NO. 239

DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESS IN EU FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME PROPOSALS: INSIGHTS FROM EVALUATORS' PERSPECTIVES

Sylwia KRZYŻEK-LIBURSKA

Krakow University of Economics; krzyzeks@uek.krakow.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-3079-0819

Purpose: This study investigates how evaluators in the European Union's Framework Programmes (Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe) conceptualise and operationalise success in research proposal assessment. It examines how formal criteria - Excellence, Impact, and Implementation - are interpreted in practice and how evaluative judgments are shaped by scientific, organisational, and human factors.
Design/methodology/approach: The research adopts a qualitative design based on sixteen semi-structured interviews with European Commission evaluators representing diverse scientific disciplines and institutional sectors. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurrent reasoning patterns and interpretive frameworks underpinning evaluation practices.
Findings: Seven interrelated determinants of success were identified: (1) scientific excellence understood as a composite of conceptual rigour, methodological integrity, and relevance; (2) credible innovation grounded in feasibility; (3) clarity and narrative coherence as mediators of evaluative perception; (4) organisational capacity and distributed leadership; (5) institutional and administrative support as enablers of proposal quality; (6) realistic and traceable societal impact pathways; and (7) the human and ethical dimension of peer review, where fairness and interpretive judgment coexist. Evaluation is thus shown to be a hybrid process - structured yet inherently interpretive.
Research limitations/implications: The study focuses on evaluators' perspectives and should be complemented by applicants' viewpoints and scoring data in future mixed-method research.
Practical implications: Findings provide actionable guidance for applicants, research managers, and policymakers on how to align scientific ambition with feasibility, enhance institutional support systems, and foster ethical and transparent evaluation practices.
Originality/value: This is one of the few qualitative studies to capture evaluators' interpretive reasoning within the EU funding system, revealing how excellence and impact are socially constructed in practice. The findings also provide a structured checklist for proposal authors and research managers to enhance alignment with EC evaluation criteria.
Keywords: Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe, proposal evaluation, research funding, success determinants.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The concept of peer review constitutes the cornerstone of modern systems of research evaluation and funding (Hillard, Baber, 2021). It functions simultaneously as a quality assurance mechanism, a process of knowledge legitimisation, and a gatekeeping tool that regulates access to limited scientific resources. Yet despite its central role, surprisingly little is known about how evaluators themselves define and operationalise success in competitive research funding (Arnold et al., 2005; Bornmann et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2016; Oztaysi et al., 2017; Pina et al., 2015; Rodriguez Rincon et al., 2022).

Existing literature on grant evaluation tends to focus on applicants' characteristics - such as institutional capacity, prior experience, or network centrality (Ajdarpašić, Qorraj, 2019; Bol et al., 2018; Boyack et al., 2018a; Smith et al., 2019; Wanzenböck et al., 2020) - rather than on the reasoning processes of evaluators. Studies addressing peer review have highlighted issues of bias, fairness, and cumulative advantage (Bol et al., 2018; Murray et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2019), but they rarely explore how reviewers translate formal criteria - excellence, impact, and implementation - into practical judgments under conditions of uncertainty (Lamont, 2015; Langfeldt, 2021; Langfeldt, Scordato, 2015).

The concept of *excellence*, which formally anchors European research policy, remains particularly elusive. While it is central to EU Framework Programmes, its operational meaning often varies across panels, disciplines, and contexts (Bornmann, Marewski, 2019). Similarly, evaluative dimensions such as *innovation* and *impact* have become policy imperatives, yet their assessment depends heavily on reviewers' interpretive frameworks and experience (Hunter et al., 2021; Sauer, Gabbi, 2019; Veugelers et al., 2015). As a result, the review process is not merely administrative but inherently interpretive - a human practice balancing rational criteria with tacit judgment (Whitley et al., 2010).

Despite the expansion of research on evaluation systems, there remains a notable lack of empirical studies analysing evaluators' perspectives directly. Most existing evidence derives from bibliometric data or applicant surveys (Hörlesberger et al., 2013; Seeber et al., 2022; Wanzenböck et al., 2020), while the reasoning of evaluators - their heuristics, values, and interpretations - remains largely invisible. Understanding these interpretive mechanisms is essential for designing fairer and more effective funding systems, and for strengthening institutional support structures that help researchers navigate evaluation processes.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how European Commission evaluators conceptualise and apply the notion of *success* in the assessment of research proposals under EU Framework Programmes. By examining their narratives, it seeks to identify the implicit determinants that shape positive evaluations - ranging from scientific quality and innovation to communication, feasibility, leadership, and institutional context. Building on an interpretive approach to

research evaluation, the following section outlines the theoretical framework that informs this analysis.

2. Theoretical background

The peer review process has long stood at the centre of modern science as both a mechanism of quality assurance and a gatekeeping system for the allocation of limited research resources. It is the principal means through which academic communities legitimise knowledge, distribute prestige, and define what counts as "excellent" research (Bornmann, 2011; Hillard, Baber, 2021; Lamont, 2015; Laudel, 2006; Whitley et al., 2010). Although peer review is formally framed as an objective and rule-based exercise, a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated that it also operates as an interpretive and socially embedded practice shaped by disciplinary norms, institutional routines, and tacit professional judgments (Bornmann, Marewski, 2019). Within this interpretive perspective, evaluators do not merely measure quality - they construct it. Decisions about which projects deserve funding are therefore not only administrative outcomes but also cultural artefacts of how scientific communities define credibility, feasibility, and innovation.

A central concept in this process is scientific excellence, which serves as the main evaluative currency of research funding systems. However, as multiple studies have shown, the meaning of excellence is fluid, negotiated, and context-dependent (Neufeld et al., 2013; Seeber et al., 2022; van Rijnsoever, Hessels, 2021). While the European Commission presents it as a universal criterion, reviewers interpret it through situated reasoning grounded in their own disciplinary expertise and experience. Excellence tends to be associated with a synthesis of methodological rigour, conceptual clarity, and the feasibility of implementation (Bornmann, Marewski, 2019; Groves et al., 2012). In practice, reviewers translate abstract criteria into concrete judgments - evaluating whether research questions are clearly formulated, whether the proposed methodology is credible, and whether the applicant or institution can realistically deliver on the plan. As Kwiek (2022) and Beaver (2013) argue, excellence in contemporary science has become a distributed attribute - emerging not from individual genius alone, but from the collective competence of teams and institutions. This understanding reflects a broader shift toward organisational models of excellence, in which scientific merit is inseparable from managerial capacity and institutional reliability.

Alongside excellence, innovation and impact have become defining pillars of modern research assessment. Yet both concepts remain notoriously difficult to operationalise. Reviewers are expected to reward originality and societal relevance, but they must also remain sceptical of exaggerated or speculative claims (Veugelers et al., 2015). In the context of EU Framework Programmes, innovation is often interpreted not as radical novelty but as

credible advancement - something that extends existing knowledge, methods, or applications demonstrably (Hunter et al., 2021). Evaluators therefore rely on heuristics that combine creativity with feasibility, judging whether the proposed work offers tangible intellectual or practical progress. Similarly, the notion of impact has evolved from a simple expectation of dissemination to a multidimensional category encompassing social, economic, and policy relevance (Wanzenböck et al., 2020). For reviewers, impact is convincing only when applicants articulate a plausible pathway from research to real-world benefit, supported by concrete actions and stakeholder engagement. As such, "impact" functions not only as a criterion of assessment but also as a rhetorical construct legitimising public investment in science - a way of connecting academic inquiry to societal accountability (D'Este et al., 2018).

Institutional and organisational contexts further shape how evaluation criteria are applied. Research evaluation does not occur in isolation but within institutional environments that structure both expectations and performance. Over the past decade, universities and research organisations have professionalised their support systems - establishing grant offices, pre-award teams, and internal review mechanisms - to enhance proposal quality and compliance (Langley, 2012). Empirical evidence indicates that applicants affiliated with well-resourced institutions benefit from administrative guidance, internal feedback, and language editing, all of which improve clarity and coherence (Vidmar et al., 2018). Moreover, prior experience in international projects or previous coordination roles enhances reviewers' confidence in feasibility and risk management (Agarwal et al., 2006). These patterns reveal that success in competitive funding environments depends not only on individual intellectual merit but also on collective organisational competence - a synergy between personal expertise and institutional infrastructure. Excellence, therefore, operates at multiple levels: individual, organisational, and systemic.

At the same time, evaluation remains an inherently (Seeber et al., 2022). While assessment procedures are codified through formal templates, scoring systems, and consensus meetings, decision-making ultimately relies on interpretation and judgment. Reviewers draw on professional intuition, empathy, and moral reasoning when faced with ambiguous cases (Lamont, 2015; Langfeldt, 2021). Rather than being sources of bias alone, these subjective dimensions are constitutive features of evaluative practice. They allow reviewers to balance rigour with fairness and to adapt formal rules to the diversity of research cultures and disciplines. describe this as a system of "organised trust", where credibility and expertise substitute for purely mechanical verification. Recognising this human dimension helps explain why evaluation outcomes cannot be fully predicted by measurable indicators alone: the process is interpretive, communicative, and embedded in social interaction.

Taken together, these insights highlight that peer review in the EU Framework Programmes should be understood as a *hybrid practice* - combining bureaucratic rationality with interpretive flexibility. Evaluators operate within an institutional framework that codifies criteria such as excellence, impact, and implementation, yet they constantly translate these criteria into situated

judgments informed by experience, disciplinary conventions, and contextual awareness. Understanding this interplay is essential for grasping how success is defined and rewarded in European research funding. Accordingly, the present study adopts an interpretive approach, exploring how evaluators themselves conceptualise and apply the notion of success in practice. By analysing their narratives, it reveals how formal evaluation categories are enacted, negotiated, and embodied in everyday decision-making processes (Arnold et al., 2005; Pina et al., 2015; Rodriguez Rincon et al., 2022; Seeber et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research philosophy and approach

This study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through human interaction and meaning-making (Denzin, Lincoln, 2018; Creswell, Poth, 2018). Within this epistemological orientation, the study seeks to uncover how evaluators of the European Commission perceive, interpret, and negotiate their professional judgments in assessing research proposals.

Interpretivism contrasts with positivist approaches by prioritising understanding over measurement. Rather than seeking causal relationships or statistical generalisations, this study aims for depth of insight - capturing the subjective reasoning, heuristics, and evaluative logics of experts operating within institutionalised assessment systems. The research is thus exploratory and inductive, allowing theoretical patterns to emerge from empirical evidence rather than imposing them a priori.

Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to this purpose. As Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, qualitative approaches enable the exploration of meanings, values, and experiences that cannot be reduced to numerical indicators. Thematic analysis, applied here, offers a systematic framework for identifying shared conceptual structures and the implicit norms underlying evaluators' judgments. It facilitates the interpretation of *how* formalised criteria such as "Excellence", "Impact", and "Implementation" are understood and operationalised in practice.

3.2. Research design

The study employed a qualitative, multi-case design focusing on sixteen evaluators of the European Commission who had participated in reviewing proposals within the Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe) programmes. Each evaluator represented an individual case, enabling both within-case depth and cross-case comparison. This design provided contextual richness while ensuring thematic coherence across cases (Yin, 2014). The aim was not to generalise

statistically but to generate analytical generalisations about evaluative reasoning in competitive funding environments.

Data collection took place in 2023, during the policy transition between Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe - a period marked by heightened debate over excellence, impact, and innovation. This timing offered a unique opportunity to capture evaluators' reflections on shifting expectations, procedural changes, and emerging challenges in EU research governance.

3.3. Sampling and participants

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure the inclusion of evaluators with direct and diverse experience in assessing EU research proposals. Two inclusion criteria were applied: (1) documented experience as a reviewer or panel member for EU Framework Programme proposals, and (2) active engagement in research or research management. The interviewed evaluators had experience assessing proposals submitted to various types of actions within the EU Framework Programmes, including Research and Innovation Actions (RIA), Innovation Actions (IA), Coordination and Support Actions (CSA), and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA).

The final sample comprised sixteen evaluators representing a wide range of scientific disciplines - engineering, natural sciences, life sciences, social sciences, and humanities - and affiliated with universities, research institutes, and private-sector organisations. The participants represented two countries: Spain and Poland. Spain was selected because, at the time of the interviews, it had the largest number of active evaluators registered in the European Commission's databases for the EU Framework Programmes (CORDIS, 2023). Poland was included as the country of residence of the author, which facilitated access to experts and the organization of the interviews. Experience levels ranged from three to over fifteen years of evaluation activity, with several participants having served as panel chairs or rapporteurs. Gender distribution was approximately balanced (nine women and seven men). This heterogeneity enhanced the analytical depth and allowed comparison of perspectives across career stages, disciplinary contexts, and evaluation cultures.

A summary of participants' profiles is provided in Table 1. Respondents' Profile (n = 16). The table provides contextual information on participants' academic degree, institutional affiliation, disciplinary background, type of evaluated action, number of assessed proposals, and average evaluation time per proposal. This profile underpins the interpretation of interview data by highlighting the diversity and representativeness of perspectives captured in the study.

3.4. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams between February and September 2023. The online format allowed for participation from multiple countries and ensured a consistent interview environment. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on the participant's availability and depth of discussion.

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed to explore evaluators' experiences and perspectives regarding the assessment of research proposals submitted to the EU Framework Programmes. The interview guide consisted of three core questions:

1. How do you usually approach the evaluation of a research proposal?
2. Which elements or sections of the proposal do you consider most critical in shaping your assessment?
3. In your opinion, what factors most strongly contribute to a proposal being recommended for funding?

The open-ended structure of the questions allowed participants to elaborate on their individual experiences and professional judgments. In line with the semi-structured design, the interviewer posed additional probing and follow-up questions to clarify specific aspects or to deepen understanding, depending on the natural flow of each conversation.

The interview guide was informed by previous research on peer review and grant evaluation processes (Bornmann, 2011; Carpenter et al., 2015; File et al., 2023.; Hillard, Baber, 2021; Langfeldt, 2021; Laudel, 2006; Pina et al., 2021; Recio-Saucedo et al., 2022) and by a systematic literature review of determinants of success in international research funding applications conducted by the author. The final version of the guide was tailored to capture evaluators' reasoning processes and their perceptions of success factors in EU-funded research proposals (Ajdarpašić, Qorraj, 2019, 2020; Bol et al., 2018; Boyack et al., 2018b; Pina et al., 2015, 2021; Seeber et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2019; Wanzenböck et al., 2020).

Interviews were conducted in English or Polish, depending on the participant's preference. Interviews were conducted in English or Polish according to the respondent's preference. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were subsequently cleaned linguistically to remove repetitions, filler expressions, and digressions while preserving tone and meaning. The semi-structured format ensured comparability across cases while allowing the interviewer flexibility to probe deeper into emerging insights.

3.5. Data analysis

Data analysis followed the six-phase model of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method enables the systematic identification, organisation, and interpretation of patterns within qualitative datasets. The analytical process proceeded through the following stages:

- familiarisation – repeated reading of transcripts to gain an overview of content and context,
- initial coding – generating descriptive and interpretive codes reflecting evaluators' statements,
- theme development – clustering codes into candidate themes based on conceptual similarity,
- reviewing themes – verifying internal consistency and distinctiveness,
- defining and naming themes – formulating the core meaning of each category,
- integrating results – producing the final thematic framework and narrative synthesis.

Coding was carried out manually and with MAXQDA 2022 software, which supported data organisation, memoing, and traceability of analytic decisions. Each transcript was independently coded by two researchers, and discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussion until consensus was achieved. This procedure enhanced inter-coder reliability and conceptual validity.

The final analytical structure consisted of seven overarching themes and twenty-three subthemes, encompassing evaluators' cognitive frameworks, decision-making heuristics, and perceptions of proposal success. These themes are presented in detail in Section 4 (Results).

3.6. Limitations of the methodology

As with any qualitative study, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size (16 evaluators) limits the generalisability of findings; however, the aim was depth rather than breadth. Second, interviews rely on self-reported perceptions, which may be affected by recall bias or self-presentation effects. Third, the study did not include direct observation of evaluation meetings or access to actual proposal documents, which could provide additional triangulation.

Nevertheless, these limitations are balanced by the richness of the interview data, the diversity of participants, and the methodological rigour of the analysis. The findings thus offer credible insights into evaluators' sense-making and the informal norms shaping EU research evaluation. In summary, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to explore how European Commission evaluators conceptualise and enact the criteria of excellence, impact, and implementation in the context of international research proposals. The combination of semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and rigorous validation techniques provides a robust empirical foundation for understanding the complex dynamics of peer review in EU research funding.

The next section presents the empirical results - the seven key themes that emerged from the analysis, illustrating the evaluators' reasoning and their perceptions of determinants of success.

Table 1.

Respondents' Profile (n = 16)

Code	Degree	Type of institution	Research field	Type of action	Number of evaluated proposals	Average evaluation time (per proposal)
E1	PhD	university	social science	RIA	100<	1 day
E2	PhD Eng.	university	social science	RIA	100<	1 day
E3	Professor	university	medicine and health science	RIA, MSCA	100<	1 day
E4	PhD Eng.	research institute	science and engineering	RIA, MSCA	100<	1/3 day
E5	PhD Eng.	university	science and engineering	CSA, MSCA	100<	2-2,5 hours
E6	Professor	university	science and engineering	MSCA	100<	4< hours
E7	M. Sc.	other	other	RIA, CSA, SME instrument, Teaming, Twining	100<	6-10 hours
E8	PhD	university	social science	RIA, MSCA	>100	3 hours
E9	PhD	research institute	science and engineering	MSCA	>100	1-2 days, at least 1 day, MSCA 1/2
E10	Professor	university	arts	CSA, MSCA	>100	2-3 hours
E11	PhD	university	science and engineering	RIA, MSCA	100<	2 days, 10 hours at least
E12	PhD	SME	social science	SME instrument	>100	4-6 hours
E13	M. Sc.	SME	social science	RIA	>100	2-3 hours
E14	Professor	university	biological sciences	SME instrument	100<	3-4 hours
E15	PhD Eng.	research institute	environmental science	SME instrument	100<	1 day
E16	PhD	university	biological sciences	RIA, MSCA	100<	1 day

4. Results

The thematic analysis of sixteen semi-structured interviews with European Commission evaluators revealed a multidimensional understanding of what constitutes success in the EU Framework Programme evaluation process. Rather than a single dominant factor, success was described as the outcome of seven interrelated determinants, encompassing scientific and conceptual excellence, credible innovation, clarity of communication, organisational capacity and leadership, institutional support, societal impact, and the human dimension of evaluation. The results presented below synthesise evaluators' own accounts, supported by illustrative quotations, and are structured around seven thematic determinants identified through thematic analysis.

Each determinant comprises several specific components - such as feasibility, interdisciplinarity, clarity of structure, and leadership quality - that together form a coherent evaluative framework. These components, along with representative quotations and analytical interpretations, are presented in Table 2, which provides a detailed breakdown of the elements underpinning the seven overarching determinants.

4.1. Scientific and conceptual excellence

Evaluators consistently identified scientific excellence as the foundation of any successful proposal. However, they rejected the notion of excellence as a purely abstract or quantitative measure. Instead, it was defined through methodological rigour, conceptual coherence, and clear articulation of research objectives. Proposals that convincingly demonstrated a critical gap in the state of the art, formulated testable hypotheses, and presented a logically structured research plan were seen as inherently strong (see Table 2: Scientific Excellence). As one evaluator noted, *Excellence is not only about the idea; it is about depth, logic, and a credible plan for how to get there* (E6). Another emphasised, *We reward clarity and rigour - not fashion or hype* (E12). This reflects a relational understanding of excellence, in which scientific merit is inseparable from precision, feasibility, and internal coherence - qualities that make complex ideas assessable under time constraints (Lamont, 2015).

4.2. Innovation and originality

A second determinant was innovation, understood not as rhetorical novelty but as credible advancement beyond the current state of knowledge. Evaluators made a clear distinction between *declared* and *demonstrated* innovation (see Table 2: Innovation and Originality). The most competitive proposals substantiated originality through comparative analysis, realistic pathways to implementation, and explicit explanation of why their approach constituted genuine advancement. *Every proposal claims to be innovative. Real innovation changes how we see the problem - not just the tools we use* (E9). Evaluators valued innovation that was bold yet grounded, aligning creative thinking with feasible methodology and relevance to societal or scientific needs. Overstated or speculative claims tended to reduce credibility: *You can feel when innovation is real and when it's just marketing* (E3).

4.3. Clarity, structure, and narrative coherence

A central theme emerging from the interviews was the decisive influence of language and communication quality on how evaluators perceived scientific excellence. Respondents consistently described successful proposals as *clear, concise, and intellectually engaging documents that tell a coherent story.* Beyond the intrinsic quality of ideas, reviewers valued the ability of applicants to present complex concepts in a way that was both *accessible* and *logically structured*.

Several evaluators emphasised that proposals "read like a coherent narrative," where each section naturally leads to the next, forming a seamless intellectual progression (E3, E8, E12). As one respondent explained, *If the evaluator has to guess what you mean, the proposal loses points* (E8). Clarity was repeatedly described not as a cosmetic virtue, but as a marker of professionalism and respect for the reviewer's cognitive effort.

Participants noted that the use of discipline-specific jargon should be carefully balanced: it demonstrates expertise but can also alienate reviewers from other fields, particularly in interdisciplinary calls. Overly technical or obscure formulations were perceived as defensive or exclusionary, whereas clear definitions and accessible explanations were associated with intellectual maturity. One evaluator summarised this tension succinctly: *Show that you know the field, but don't hide behind words.*

The visual organisation of the proposal—tables, diagrams, flowcharts, and Gantt charts—was also praised, not for aesthetic reasons but for their cognitive function. Such elements were said to "anchor" understanding, allowing evaluators to process large volumes of information efficiently under time pressure. Conversely, dense paragraphs, inconsistent formatting, or fragmented arguments generated confusion and undermined trust in the proposal's overall credibility.

Several interviewees stressed that linguistic and structural precision are integral to the perception of excellence itself, particularly within competitive programmes such as RIA and MSCA, where proposals often differ only marginally in scientific merit. As one evaluator put it: *At the end, all ideas are good, but only some are easy to read.*

4.4. Organizational capacity and leadership

Beyond intellectual merit, the evaluators assessed the consortium's ability to deliver. Strong proposals balanced expertise and complementarity within the consortium and demonstrated established collaboration. *A strong consortium is about fit, not size* (E1). Leadership emerged as a particularly critical factor: coordinators needed not only academic authority but also project management and interpersonal skills (see Table 2: Consortium and Leadership Quality). *It's not enough to be a professor - you have to be a communicator and organiser* (E2). Feasibility was interpreted as realism - calibrated objectives, transparent budgeting, and credible risk mitigation. *Better to promise less and deliver more* (E11). Evaluators were sensitive to disproportionate ambitions or vague resource allocations. Projects with clear internal governance structures and well-defined milestones were perceived as more trustworthy and fundable.

4.5. Institutional support and infrastructure

Evaluators consistently highlighted the hidden yet decisive role of institutional environments. Researchers backed by professional support structures - grant offices, project managers, internal reviewers, or legal advisors - tended to produce clearer, more compliant, and ultimately more competitive proposals (see Table 2: Institutional Support and Infrastructure). *Where the researcher stands alone, the proposal often fails. A good research office makes a visible difference* (E13). Such institutional scaffolding reduces administrative burdens, enhances linguistic and formal quality, and ensures internal coherence between sections. These insights suggest that institutional maturity and pre-award professionalisation contribute directly to perceived feasibility and excellence.

4.6. Societal Impact and Policy Relevance

While excellence remains central, evaluators recognised that success increasingly depends on how credibly a proposal articulates its expected societal or policy impact. Effective proposals presented realistic pathways to uptake - through stakeholder engagement, dissemination strategies, or alignment with EU strategic priorities such as the Green Deal and Digital Europe (see Table 2: Societal Impact and Policy Relevance). *Impact is convincing only when you can see the pathway from research to results* (E10).

Evaluators discouraged vague or inflated impact statements, preferring those that specify who benefits, how change occurs, and over what timeframe. Impact, in their view, was meaningful only when grounded in plausible mechanisms of translation from science to society.

4.7. The human and ethical dimension of evaluation

Finally, evaluators acknowledged that assessment is not purely mechanical. Human judgment, intuition, empathy, and professional ethics inevitably shape scoring decisions (see Table 2: Human and emotional factors). *We are humans, not algorithms. Our judgments are interpretive, but we try to be fair* (E15).

Consensus meetings mitigated individual biases but did not eliminate subjectivity. Reviewers described how emotional engagement, narrative persuasiveness, and credibility of tone influenced their perception of proposals. This human dimension, far from undermining objectivity, was seen as essential to interpretive fairness - allowing experts to navigate uncertainty through reflective reasoning and shared deliberation. Taken together, the seven determinants identified by evaluators - scientific and conceptual excellence, credible innovation, clarity of presentation, organisational and leadership capacity, institutional support, societal relevance, and the human dimension of judgment - constitute an integrated model of proposal success in EU Framework Programmes. Rather than isolated variables, these elements form a relational system in which intellectual quality, communication, organisational maturity,

and human interpretation interact to shape evaluative outcomes. The following discussion elaborates on how these dimensions intersect with existing theoretical frameworks and what they imply for research policy and management practice.

Table 2.
Key Determinants of Success in EU Framework Programme Proposals

Determinant (Category)	Illustrative quotes (evaluators' statements)	Analytical interpretation
Scientific excellence	"We do not assess just the idea but its scientific depth and clarity." "Excellence means clear hypotheses and a sound methodology."	Scientific excellence is defined by methodological rigor, coherence, and the ability to justify the project's relevance in its research context.
Innovative approach	"Every proposal claims innovation. Real innovation shows what actually changes." "Sometimes innovation lies not in technology but in a new perspective."	Innovation combines novelty with feasibility, linking creative thinking to concrete scientific or societal impact.
Clarity and logical consistency	"Good proposals read as a coherent story from start to finish." "If reviewers have to guess what the author means, the project loses points."	Logical clarity and well-structured argumentation enable evaluators to follow and trust the applicant's reasoning.
Feasibility and realism	"Most frequent mistake? Too many promises." "Better to promise less and deliver more."	Feasible projects align ambitions with realistic goals, timeframes, and resources.
Consortium quality	"A strong consortium is not the largest but the most complementary one." "Partners with prior collaboration perform better."	Effective consortia show balance, clear division of roles, and established trust.
Leadership competence	"The coordinator is the heart of the project." "It's not enough to be a professor - you must be a manager and a communicator."	Leadership requires not only expertise but also interpersonal and managerial skills essential for sustaining motivation and coherence.
Language and communication quality	"The best proposals read like a story - clear, logical, structured." "We prefer clarity over marketing language."	Clear, engaging language enhances readability and builds trust; writing style is part of scientific excellence.
Visual and structural clarity	"A well-structured proposal signals professionalism." "Visual logic - not decoration - helps us follow complex ideas."	Visual design supports comprehension and demonstrates organizational maturity.
Interdisciplinarity	"The best projects have interdisciplinarity in their DNA." "True integration happens when fields meet to solve a shared problem."	Successful interdisciplinarity emerges from genuine collaboration and integration of methods, not from formal inclusion.
Project management and budgeting	"We value realistic cost plans - not wishful thinking." "You can see immediately who thought through the logistics."	Management quality and realistic budgeting are signs of organizational credibility and maturity.
Institutional reputation	"Trust is a currency in this system." "Experienced institutions increase confidence in delivery."	Institutional reputation supports reliability, credibility, and successful implementation.
Institutional and administrative support	"Researchers in strong institutions are never alone." "Professional project offices make a huge difference."	Institutional assistance in proposal preparation and management improves overall proposal quality.
Human and emotional factors	"We are not machines - sometimes intuition plays a role." "If a proposal engages me, I score it higher."	Evaluation is never purely mechanical; emotional engagement and narrative persuasiveness matter.

5. Discussion

The interviews with sixteen European Commission evaluators revealed that proposal success in EU Framework Programmes results from the interplay of multiple, interdependent determinants. Seven key dimensions emerged from the analysis: scientific and conceptual excellence, innovation grounded in feasibility, clarity and narrative coherence, organisational capacity and leadership, institutional support, societal impact and policy relevance, and the human and ethical dimension of evaluation. These determinants collectively demonstrate that evaluative judgment is not merely technical but interpretive, combining cognitive, communicative, and organisational factors. The quotations presented throughout the section 4 illustrate how evaluators translate formal criteria into situated reasoning, balancing intellectual merit with credibility, feasibility, and fairness. The seven determinants identified in this study reveal that evaluative success in EU Framework Programmes emerges not from any single dimension of performance but from the interplay between intellectual quality, organisational credibility, and communicative effectiveness. These findings confirm that excellence, innovation, and impact - the formal pillars of the evaluation process - are enacted as interpretive practices rather than fixed standards. They also demonstrate that factors traditionally treated as peripheral, such as institutional support or narrative clarity, play a decisive role in shaping reviewers' perceptions of feasibility and trustworthiness.

The following discussion situates these empirical insights within the broader theoretical debates on peer review, research governance, and evaluative cultures. It explores how evaluators' reasoning practices reconfigure the meaning of excellence, impact, and fairness in a complex, transnational funding environment.

5.1. Scientific and Conceptual Excellence

In the context of EU Framework Programmes, the notion of scientific excellence operates less as an absolute benchmark and more as a relational construct, negotiated among evaluators within a multidimensional framework. Interviews revealed that excellence is assessed not as a singular attribute but as a synthesis of conceptual innovation, methodological soundness, and implementation feasibility. This interpretation aligns with research describing excellence as a socially mediated assessment of credibility and potential rather than a purely objective criterion (Bornmann, Marewski, 2019).

Evaluators consistently emphasised that excellent proposals are those which present a clear and significant research question, demonstrate solid theoretical and empirical grounding, and outline a methodologically coherent and achievable plan. In highly competitive EU calls - where success rates often fall below 15% (Horizon Europe - Statistics, 2023) - excellence is understood as readiness to deliver robust, verifiable knowledge within the proposed timeframe.

Accordingly, reviewers value projects that balance ambition with methodological discipline and that clearly articulate why *this project*, by *this team*, at *this time*, deserves to be funded.

A key element of excellence is the strength of the research question. Reviewers repeatedly identified the clarity, novelty, and testability of the central question as decisive. Proposals that framed questions too broadly or relied on speculative assumptions were perceived as weak, regardless of their technical detail. This mirrors evidence showing that flaws in design and hypothesis formulation are among the primary reasons for grant rejection (Gallo et al., 2021; Koppelman, Holloway, 2012). Conversely, a precise, theory-driven question - supported by relevant background data or pilot findings - signals intellectual maturity and increases credibility (Ainsbury et al., 2009; Kan et al., 2021).

Another critical component is methodological rigour. Evaluators viewed detailed, logically structured methods sections as strong predictors of success. They expected applicants to demonstrate familiarity with appropriate techniques, statistical design, and analytical strategies, but also to provide evidence that the proposed approach is feasible and proportionate to the project's aims. These views are also confirmed in the literature (Kaplan, 2012; Arthurs, 2014). Comprehensive risk assessment and contingency planning were particularly valued, as they conveyed preparedness and realism (Chung, Shauver, 2008; Suebtrakul et al., 2020). In contrast, vague descriptions of methodology or overly ambitious timelines were frequently cited as indicators of weak conceptual control.

Excellence also extends to the integration of objectives, methods, and expected outcomes. Evaluators described high-quality proposals as those where every section contributes to a coherent research logic. Well-formulated objectives must be specific, measurable, and achievable, while expected results should directly correspond to them. This structural integrity is seen as evidence of the applicant's analytical competence and their understanding of how the research contributes to wider scientific and societal needs. The inclusion of measurable milestones and realistic deliverables further enhances confidence that the project can achieve its stated aims.

An additional dimension of excellence lies in the scientific and societal relevance of the proposed work. Reviewers seek assurance that the project addresses a meaningful research gap and holds the potential to advance its field or inform policy and innovation agendas. According to the literature, proposals that articulate this dual relevance - scientific and practical - are perceived as more competitive (Hunter et al., 2021; Koppelman, Holloway, 2012). This reflects a broader shift in EU research policy, where excellence encompasses not only intellectual originality but also contribution to societal transformation.

Taken together, these findings point to a composite understanding of excellence built around four interdependent dimensions:

- conceptual innovation – a clear, relevant, and theoretically grounded research problem,
- methodological robustness – rigorous design, adequate data strategy, and realistic feasibility,

- coherence and integration – alignment between aims, methods, outputs, and resources,
- relevance and contribution – significance for both the scientific community and broader societal challenges.

In contemporary EU evaluation practice, excellence thus functions as a holistic indicator of research maturity - where intellectual originality must be matched by methodological integrity and strategic feasibility. It is less a static measure of prestige and more a demonstrated capability to produce credible, high-impact knowledge under real-world constraints.

5.2. Innovation and credibility

In EU Framework Programmes, innovation remains a central evaluative criterion, yet its meaning is far more complex than rhetorical claims of novelty suggest (Andrijauskiene et al., 2021; Europe's Framework Programmes, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2023). The findings indicate that evaluators interpret innovation as a demonstrable process rather than a declarative label - a synthesis of conceptual advancement, methodological precision, and operational feasibility. This understanding aligns with prior studies showing that reviewers reward *demonstrated* rather than *declared* novelty, valuing projects that clearly show how new approaches, technologies, or perspectives advance the state of the art (Brownson et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2019; Sauer, Gabbi, 2019; Veugelers et al., 2015).

The literature consistently emphasises that innovation must be both credible and feasible. As Groves et al. (2012) note, proposals that overstate novelty without substantive justification risk undermining their own legitimacy. Similarly, evaluators in this study cautioned against speculative claims lacking pilot evidence or methodological control. They distinguished between linguistic innovation - ideas that "sound new" - and empirical innovation - ideas that can be operationalised and verified. As one expert stated, "Innovation has to be visible in the work plan, not only in the rhetoric". High-scoring proposals embedded novelty throughout their logic: in the problem framing, methodological choices, and expected outcomes.

Innovation also functions as a heuristic of advancement. Reviewers assess whether a project challenges established paradigms, introduces new analytical perspectives, or expands methodological capacity. Proposals that merely extend existing approaches tend to be viewed as incremental, whereas those that shift conceptual or methodological boundaries are perceived as transformative. However, excessive radicalism may reduce credibility - "being too innovative without showing control", as one evaluator noted, signals risk rather than promise.

The findings confirm that evaluators reward what can be described as responsible innovation - novelty that is ambitious yet auditable, grounded in empirical reasoning, and aligned with broader policy objectives. Technical innovation (e.g., new tools or data techniques) and conceptual innovation (e.g., redefined theoretical frameworks or interdisciplinary syntheses) are equally valued, provided they demonstrate the capacity to reshape understanding rather than merely refine it (Kan et al., 2021). In this sense, innovation

represents a dual construct - epistemic and organisational - requiring both intellectual creativity and structured feasibility.

From a policy and management perspective, this interpretation carries clear implications. Institutional training and internal review systems should focus less on rhetorical "buzzword innovation" and more on helping researchers articulate the *mechanics of novelty*: what precisely is new, why it matters, and how it can be achieved within the project's scope. In contemporary EU evaluation, innovation has thus evolved from a symbolic marker of excellence into an operational indicator of credibility - convincing reviewers that change is not only desirable but also deliverable.

5.3. Communication and presentation quality

Among the most striking findings of this study is the extent to which evaluators emphasised clarity, coherence, and narrative flow as decisive factors in the success of EU Framework Programme proposals. While the formal evaluation criteria refer to *Excellence*, *Impact*, and *Implementation* (Eligibility and Evaluation Criteria, 2023), interviewees repeatedly underlined that the way in which these dimensions are communicated significantly shapes evaluative judgments. As one expert noted, "Sometimes the science is good, but I cannot follow the story". This comment encapsulates a central insight of the study: strong ideas can fail if they are not expressed through a coherent and accessible narrative.

The literature provides robust support for this observation. Clear, concise, and logically structured writing facilitates reviewers' understanding of a project's objectives, methods, and potential contributions (Groves et al., 2012; Kaplan, 2012; Kwekkeboom, 2014). Given the time constraints under which evaluators operate, linguistic clarity and structural order act as cognitive aids, allowing reviewers to assess complex proposals efficiently and fairly. Studies show that well-organised proposals, written in a professional and reader-oriented manner, tend to receive higher scores than equally strong but poorly communicated ones (Kaplan, 2012; Langille, Mackenzie, 2007).

From the evaluators' perspective, the most persuasive proposals are those that "tell a story" - explaining why the research matters and how it will achieve its aims. This finding echoes recent scholarship highlighting the rise of *performative writing* in competitive funding systems (van den Besselaar, Mom, 2021). As competition intensifies, applicants are increasingly expected to master rhetorical and structural strategies that make their scientific logic intelligible and compelling. In this context, textual performance becomes part of the evaluative landscape itself: linguistic precision, rhetorical balance, and readability function as indicators of credibility and professional competence.

Evaluators in this study confirmed that successful proposals combine conceptual sophistication with communicative discipline. They frequently described well-written proposals as "feeling professional" and noted that "clarity reflects control". This perception aligns with Kaplan's (2012) observation that clarity and confidence in scientific writing signal

mastery of both the research and the process of presenting it. Similarly, Groves et al. (2012) emphasised that visually legible and well-edited applications - with coherent formatting, concise headings, and appropriate graphical aids - enhance the reviewer's engagement and comprehension. By contrast, proposals overloaded with jargon, acronyms, or overly dense layouts were described as "mentally exhausting", often resulting in lower scores even when the scientific content was strong.

The relationship between style, readability, and credibility has also been documented empirically. Even minor linguistic flaws - such as inconsistent terminology or grammatical errors - can disrupt the flow of reading and create doubt about the applicant's attention to detail (Wisdom et al., 2015). Evaluators echoed this point, observing that such lapses "break the rhythm of reading" and "signal carelessness". Clarity thus operates not merely as an aesthetic quality but as an epistemic indicator - a proxy for rigour, organisation, and trustworthiness.

A convergence between empirical and theoretical evidence also emerges in relation to narrative design. Research shows that proposals using narrative techniques - structured sequencing, plain language, or rhetorical emphasis - are more memorable and persuasive to reviewers (Boyack et al., 2018a). Several evaluators expressed a preference for proposals that "read smoothly" and "explain complex concepts in simple terms". However, both literature and practice caution against excessive dramatization or informality. The most effective narrative, as Smith et al. (2019) argue, strikes a balance between technical precision and rhetorical clarity, enabling both specialist and non-specialist reviewers to follow the argument without oversimplification.

Conciseness emerged as another critical dimension of communicative success. Reviewers consistently valued applications that were well structured and free from unnecessary elaboration (Arthurs, 2014; Groves et al., 2012; Kaplan, 2012). Overly verbose or repetitive writing often obscured the core argument, while precise phrasing, short paragraphs, and clear transitions created a sense of focus and confidence. Evaluators highlighted that "less is often more", and that proposals which guide the reader logically - from a compelling abstract to a coherent methodology and realistic outcomes - convey intellectual maturity and professionalism.

Finally, both literature and interviews emphasise that clarity and coherence are not peripheral stylistic features but central determinants of success in competitive research funding. They mediate the relationship between intellectual merit and evaluative perception. A proposal is not merely a collection of sections but a persuasive narrative that must sustain attention and trust. Clarity, therefore, becomes an integral component of excellence itself - the bridge between scientific substance and evaluative understanding. For policy and practice, this implies that training in research communication and writing should be treated as a strategic investment in research quality, not as a supplementary skill.

5.4. Organisational capacity and leadership

The interviews make clear that proposal success in EU Framework Programmes depends not only on the intrinsic merit of the research idea but also - crucially - on the composition, complementarity, and governance of the consortium. This observation echoes a long tradition in research management literature, which shows that teams with the right mix of competencies, credible leadership, and prior collaborative experience are systematically advantaged in competitive evaluations (Groves et al., 2012; Hardavella et al., 2016; Wisdom et al., 2015).

Complementarity and interdisciplinarity were identified as key determinants of success. Evaluators favoured consortia that demonstrated a fit-for-purpose distribution of expertise rather than size or prestige. What convinced reviewers was a transparent mapping between objectives, tasks, and partner capacities - "not a collection of names, but a team that works together," as one expert put it. This aligns with evidence that interdisciplinary teams integrating diverse competencies - methods, domain knowledge, stakeholder access - are more capable of addressing complex challenges holistically (Turner et al., 2014). Evaluators in this study confirmed that the absence of specific expertise, such as statistical or clinical ownership, undermined credibility even in otherwise strong proposals (Expert 9).

Track record and prior collaboration further shaped evaluative perceptions. Both the literature and interview data indicate that a documented history of joint publications, completed grants, or pilot projects enhances credibility (Agarwal et al., 2006; Turner et al., 2014). Such evidence signals trust, feasibility, and established workflows. Evaluators contrasted ad hoc consortia with those built on prior cooperation, describing the latter as "executable" and "less risky". Empirical studies similarly show that prior participation in EU projects reduces coordination costs and enhances proposal quality through accumulated relational and procedural capital (Enger, 2018; Nokkala et al., 2011; Vidmar et al., 2018).

Leadership emerged as the second crucial pillar of organisational capacity. Evaluators viewed coordination as a dual competence - combining scientific authority with managerial skill. This finding resonates with policy frameworks (Enger, Castellacci, 2016). Reviewers valued evidence of prior coordination experience, robust communication structures, and internal quality assurance procedures. As one evaluator remarked, "It's not enough to be a professor; you must be a manager and a communicator".

Institutional scaffolding also played a decisive role. Strong institutional infrastructures - grant offices, financial units, and data stewardship systems - reinforced reviewers' trust in a consortium's ability to deliver (Agarwal et al., 2009). Evaluators noted that such organisational maturity was often visible in coherent budgets, realistic staffing, and clear governance structures. Conversely, when this backbone was missing, proposals were described as "ambitious but not executable".

Interestingly, both the literature and interviews reveal a nuanced stance toward prestige and reputation, often linked to the "Matthew effect" (Bol et al., 2018; Merton, 1968). While institutional reputation can act as an initial signal of reliability, evaluators emphasised that it is neither necessary nor sufficient for success. Panels reward proposals where excellence is distributed across roles, interfaces, and institutions - where coordination transforms individual brilliance into collective performance.

Finally, the choice of coordinator was recognised as a strategic decision. Acting as both leader and mediator, the coordinator must balance scientific vision with managerial discipline and resource mobilization (ESE, 2023; Valsecchi, 2019). Evaluators highlighted that the most competitive proposals came from institutions combining academic leadership with robust administrative support, sometimes through dual coordination models separating scientific and managerial roles.

Taken together, these insights demonstrate that organisational capacity and leadership constitute a systemic property rather than an individual attribute. Strong consortia are characterised by fit-for-purpose complementarity, prior collaboration, and transparent governance that make execution auditable on the page. For applicants, this implies designing teams around the work rather than prestige, and articulating coordination logic explicitly. For institutions, building leadership and management capacity - through training, mentoring, and procedural support - represents a strategic investment in competitiveness. For policymakers, recognising coordination as a skill and institutional function could enhance fairness and efficiency in EU research evaluation.

5.5. Feasibility and institutional support

Feasibility represents one of the most tangible yet frequently underestimated dimensions of proposal success. While the EU evaluation templates define it under the criterion of "implementation", evaluators in this study described feasibility as a *discipline of realism* - the ability to translate ambitious research objectives into a credible, manageable, and auditable plan. As one expert noted, "A good proposal is not the one that promises the most, but the one that delivers realistically." This understanding aligns with prior studies showing that realism in scheduling, budgeting, and risk management strongly predicts positive funding outcomes (Chung, Shauver, 2008; Kaplan, 2012; Suebtrakul et al., 2020).

Interviewees identified several recurring markers of feasibility. Proposals with clear work breakdown structures, traceable resource allocation, and proportionate risk registers were perceived as more trustworthy and professionally managed. Evaluators repeatedly emphasised the value of *traceability* - when every euro and person-month could be logically linked to a task or deliverable. Conversely, inflated cost lines, generic risk tables, or overambitious timelines often signalled weak project control. These insights mirror findings from research management studies that associate detailed planning with organisational credibility and evaluator confidence (Ainsbury et al., 2009; Arthurs, 2014).

Closely intertwined with feasibility is the dimension of institutional support, which evaluators identified as a structural determinant of success. The literature has long noted that competitive research funding depends not only on the applicant's intellectual capacity but also on the organisational ecosystem surrounding them (Holm, Kim, 2010; Langley, 2012). Professional research management and administrative support act as enabling infrastructures, mediating between scientific creativity and bureaucratic accountability (Vidal et al., 2015). Evaluators in this study confirmed that proposals originating from institutions with experienced grant offices and dedicated pre-award teams displayed a markedly higher level of internal consistency. As one evaluator summarised, "Where the researcher stands alone, the proposal often fails. A professional project office makes a visible difference".

Institutional maturity was visible not only in procedural compliance but also in cognitive coherence: well-supported proposals tended to articulate clearer objectives, feasible work plans, and realistic budgets. This reinforces earlier observations that administrative expertise forms part of the *epistemic infrastructure* of science - shaping how ideas are formatted, justified, and rendered credible for peer assessment (Green, Langley, 2009, 2012). However, both evaluators and prior studies acknowledged that such support remains unevenly distributed across Europe. Institutional asymmetries - particularly between long-established Western universities and emerging research centres in Central and Eastern Europe - continue to translate into differential success rates (Vidal et al., 2015).

Taken together, these findings illustrate that feasibility and institutional support function as two sides of the same coin: feasibility represents the project's internal realism, while institutional support provides the external scaffolding that makes realism executable. Success in EU funding competitions thus emerges not only from scientific excellence but also from *organisational literacy* - the ability to design, structure, and resource a project in a way that builds evaluator confidence. From a policy and management perspective, strengthening research offices, investing in training for proposal managers, and fostering knowledge exchange between institutions are essential strategies to reduce structural inequality and enhance overall competitiveness.

5.6. Societal impact and policy relevance

The increasing emphasis on societal impact in EU Framework Programmes reflects a policy shift toward demonstrating the public value of science. However, both the literature and the evaluators interviewed for this study indicate that *impact* remains one of the most ambiguously interpreted criteria in peer review (Bornmann, 2013; Wanzenböck et al., 2020). While formally codified as the second evaluation dimension, its practical assessment relies heavily on reviewers' interpretation of plausibility and credibility rather than rhetorical ambition. As one evaluator summarised, *Impact is convincing only when you can see the pathway from research to results.*

Evaluators consistently reported that the most persuasive impact sections articulated clear pathways connecting research outputs to societal or economic outcomes. They valued logical sequences showing *who benefits, how, and through what mechanisms*. Impact was judged convincing when applicants identified specific beneficiaries, realistic routes to uptake, and measurable indicators of change. This finding corresponds with empirical analyses of successful Horizon 2020 projects, which show that impact narratives grounded in actionable mechanisms - rather than abstract claims - receive higher scores (Wanzenböck et al., 2020; Veugelers et al., 2015).

Interviewees also emphasised that impact is not a one-dimensional construct. They distinguished between direct and indirect effects - for example, technological innovation, policy uptake, or capacity-building - and highlighted that proposals rarely succeed on the strength of visionary statements alone. Instead, evaluators look for credible engagement strategies: stakeholder mapping, co-creation workshops, dissemination plans, and exploitation routes. In their words, "Impact is not what you promise - it's what you plan to deliver". This aligns with the literature showing that stakeholder integration enhances not only legitimacy but also implementation success (Langille, Mackenzie, 2007; Bornmann, 2013).

A recurring concern in both the interviews and previous research was the tendency toward "impact inflation." Evaluators described a pattern where applicants overstate societal or economic benefits to satisfy programme expectations. Such overgeneralised claims, often unsupported by concrete pathways, were perceived as formulaic and unconvincing. As Veugelers et al. (2015) argue, the credibility of impact depends on balancing ambition with feasibility - demonstrating how scientific advances can realistically be translated into usable outcomes. Reviewers in this study confirmed that they reward precision over persuasion: "Better a modest impact that is achievable than a visionary one that cannot be traced".

Although the overall quality of impact sections has improved across recent Framework Programme cycles, several evaluators noted persistent disparities in how impact is articulated and operationalised across Europe. Proposals originating from less research-intensive regions - particularly Central and Eastern Europe - were sometimes characterised by generic or aspirational descriptions of impact, lacking concrete pathways or stakeholder engagement mechanisms. This observation echoes previous analyses highlighting structural inequalities in research management capacity and institutional support within the European Research Area (Vidal et al., 2015; Langley, 2012). Enhancing professional support and impact literacy in these contexts could therefore play a crucial role in levelling proposal competitiveness across the EU.

Another recurrent theme concerns the alignment of projects with EU strategic priorities (EU Priorities 2024-2029, 2025), including the Green Deal (Green Deal, 2025), Digital Europe (Digital Europe, 2025), and Horizon Europe's mission-oriented agenda (Horizon Europe, 2025). Evaluators acknowledged that alignment can strengthen a proposal, but only when it emerges organically from the research logic rather than being retrofitted into policy rhetoric. Successful proposals are those that genuinely connect their scientific objectives to European

societal challenges, demonstrating how the research contributes to sustainability, digital transformation, or social resilience.

From a policy and research management perspective, these findings carry several implications. First, impact literacy should become an integral component of researcher training, helping applicants to translate scientific results into societal narratives that are both ambitious and credible. Second, institutional support structures - impact officers, communication specialists, and knowledge brokers - should be embedded within pre-award services to assist researchers in identifying realistic pathways to uptake. Finally, funding agencies could improve transparency and consistency by clarifying evaluative expectations and offering exemplars of effective impact plans.

Taken together, the study shows that societal impact in EU research evaluation is neither purely a scientific nor a political construct - it is a *narrative of translation* connecting knowledge production with public value. Evaluators reward proposals that make this translation visible: those that specify beneficiaries, outline realistic mechanisms of change, and demonstrate alignment with collective priorities. In this sense, the assessment of impact becomes not a test of imagination but a test of plausibility - an appraisal of how convincingly science is positioned to make a difference.

5.7. Human and ethical dimension of evaluation

Peer review is commonly portrayed as a rational, rules-based process, yet evaluators themselves recognise that judgment in science is fundamentally interpretive and moral. As one expert noted, *We are humans, not algorithms. Our judgments are interpretive, but we try to be fair.* This statement encapsulates the central paradox of peer evaluation: while designed as an objective mechanism of quality assurance, it inevitably operates through human perception, experience, and ethical reasoning (Lamont, 2015; Langfeldt, 2021; Whitley et al., 2010).

Across interviews, reviewers openly acknowledged that intuition, empathy, and professional experience shape their decisions, especially in cases where proposals lie at the frontier of knowledge. Under such conditions, evaluators rely on tacit disciplinary understanding and interpretive heuristics - forms of expertise that cannot be fully codified (Bornmann, 2011; Bornmann et al., 2008; Reinhart, 2009). Far from being a flaw, this interpretive dimension enables evaluators to discern coherence, originality, and potential beyond what metrics alone can reveal. In this sense, judgment functions as an epistemic practice rather than a procedural bias.

At the same time, evaluators were acutely aware of the ethical tensions inherent in their role. They described constant efforts to balance fairness across disciplines, genders, and institutional hierarchies, while acknowledging that unconscious biases and social heuristics inevitably intrude. The *Matthew Effect* (Merton, 1968; Bol et al., 2018) - where prestige functions as a shortcut for trust - remains a subtle but persistent undercurrent. Established researchers and elite institutions may benefit from reputational momentum, while newcomers face higher scrutiny despite comparable merit (Enger, Castellacci, 2016; Viner et al., 2004). Such patterns illustrate how systemic inequality can reproduce itself within ostensibly meritocratic procedures.

To mitigate these risks, evaluators highlighted the importance of collective deliberation and transparency**.** Consensus meetings were seen as spaces where individual biases are moderated through open discussion and where competing interpretations are tested against shared standards. Yet these settings are also social arenas, characterised by persuasion, compromise, and emotion (Lamont, 2015). The process is thus neither purely technical nor fully subjective - it is dialogical. Ethical reflexivity, or the explicit recognition of uncertainty and value judgments, was described as a defining feature of mature evaluation cultures (Langfeldt, Scordato, 2016).

Several evaluators advocated for structured training in bias awareness and reflective judgment, arguing that ethical competence should be treated as part of evaluative professionalism. This view resonates with emerging calls for a "reflexive turn" in research governance, where fairness is pursued not through eliminating subjectivity but through making it visible and accountable (Bornmann, Marewski, 2019).

Ultimately, the findings affirm that the human dimension is both a vulnerability and a source of legitimacy within peer review. Perfect neutrality may be unattainable, but fairness is sustained through dialogue, transparency, and shared responsibility. Evaluation, in this light, becomes not merely a bureaucratic procedure but a moral practice - a collective exercise in maintaining integrity, trust, and justice within the scientific community. Recognising its interpretive and ethical nature does not weaken its authority; it strengthens it by humanising it.

5.8. Alignment of the Seven Determinants with the European Commission Evaluation Criteria

The European Commission formally evaluates proposals in EU Framework Programmes on the basis of three overarching criteria: Excellence, Impact, and Quality and Efficiency of the Implementation. These categories constitute the official architecture of evaluation, framing how proposals are scored and ranked. However, as revealed through the interviews conducted for this study, evaluators' reasoning extends well beyond the explicit form of these criteria. The seven determinants identified empirically reflect how evaluators *interpret* and *operationalise* the Commission's framework in practice.

While Excellence remains the most heavily weighted criterion, evaluators' accounts indicate that it is understood relationally rather than purely substantively. In their narratives, excellence is inseparable from *clarity, internal coherence, and communicative precision*. Evaluators emphasised that even a scientifically strong proposal can receive lower scores if it is poorly structured or difficult to follow. Determinants such as *scientific and conceptual excellence*, *credible innovation*, and *clarity and narrative coherence* therefore jointly constitute what evaluators consider a multidimensional form of excellence—one that integrates intellectual merit with readability and persuasiveness. This interpretation expands the traditional EC definition, which focuses primarily on scientific quality and innovation potential.

The second criterion, Impact, encompasses how the proposed research is expected to generate benefits beyond academia—social, economic, or policy-related. Yet, in the evaluators' reflections, impact was often assessed not only in terms of measurable outcomes but also as a *narrative of credibility and trustworthiness*. Successful proposals were those that clearly articulated *who benefits, how, and why it matters now*. Determinant six, *societal impact and policy relevance*, aligns with this logic but also reveals the growing demand for *traceable impact pathways* and for emotional resonance: evaluators described being convinced not only by data but by the proposal's sense of purpose. This points to a widening of the EC's official framework toward a more interpretive, human-centred understanding of impact.

The third official pillar, Implementation, focuses on feasibility, governance, and resource management. Evaluators viewed this as both a technical and a relational domain. Determinants such as *organisational capacity and leadership* and *institutional support and infrastructure* correspond directly to the implementation criterion but also highlight what evaluators called the "credibility of coordination". Beyond formal compliance, reviewers valued leadership clarity, prior collaboration experience, and institutional maturity as signals of reliability. In other words, implementation was judged not only on *what* was planned but on *who* would deliver it and *how trustful the system appeared*.

Finally, the seventh determinant—*the human and ethical dimension of evaluation*—does not fit neatly into any single EC criterion. Instead, it cuts across all three. Evaluators spoke of fairness, respect for diversity, and awareness of the ethical context of research as underlying their judgments. This dimension functions as a connective tissue of the evaluation process, shaping interpretive decisions even when not explicitly scored. It also reminds us that excellence and impact are not assessed in a moral vacuum: they are mediated by human perception, professional ethos, and the implicit norms of the scientific community.

Taken together, these findings suggest that evaluators operationalise the EC framework in a *relational and interpretive* manner. Formal criteria provide the scaffolding, but the meaning of excellence, impact, and implementation is co-constructed through communication quality, credibility, and ethical awareness. In this sense, the seven determinants identified in this study do not replace the EC framework; they *translate* it into the lived practice of peer review. Recognising this interpretive layer could help applicants align more effectively with evaluators'

expectations and promote a more transparent and human-centred understanding of research excellence in the European context.

The alignment between the seven determinants and the EC evaluation criteria also allows for the formulation of practical recommendations for future applicants. Drawing on evaluators' testimonies, these insights have been synthesised into a structured checklist that translates conceptual findings into actionable guidance. Table 3 presents this checklist, summarising how each determinant corresponds to the European Commission's evaluation framework and outlining concrete strategies to improve proposal quality and alignment with evaluators' expectations.

Table 3.
Practical implications and checklist for future applicants (based on the seven determinants)

Determinant	EC criterion link	What evaluators expect	Checklist
1. Scientific and conceptual excellence	Excellence	Conceptual rigour, clear objectives, methodological integrity	☐ Define a specific, testable research question ☐ Link objectives to methodology ☐ Include visual schema of the research logic
2. Credible innovation	Excellence / Impact	Novelty grounded in feasibility	☐ Explicitly state what is new and why it matters ☐ Provide evidence or pilot data ☐ Avoid overstatement – show control
3. Clarity, structure, and narrative coherence	Cross-cutting	Clear, concise, and coherent writing	☐ Write for a non-specialist reviewer ☐ Use consistent headings and transitions ☐ Ensure visual clarity and formatting consistency
4. Organisational capacity and leadership	Implementation	Complementarity of partners, coordination ability	☐ Define roles of each partner clearly ☐ Demonstrate previous collaboration ☐ Present governance structure and communication plan
5. Institutional support and infrastructure	Implementation	Administrative maturity and reliability	☐ Mention internal project office / EU support ☐ Show experience in managing EU funds ☐ Describe internal quality assurance procedures
6. Societal impact and policy relevance	Impact	Realistic and traceable pathways to uptake	☐ Identify specific beneficiaries and outcomes ☐ Present concrete dissemination / exploitation actions ☐ Align with EU missions (Green Deal, Digital Europe)
7. Human and ethical dimension of evaluation	Cross-cutting	Fairness, integrity, and interpretive judgment	☐ Maintain transparency and inclusivity ☐ Acknowledge ethical implications ☐ Use responsible research and innovation (RRI) principles

Source: Author's elaboration based on interviews with 16 evaluators and EC evaluation criteria (Horizon Europe, 2023).

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how evaluators within the EU Framework Programmes conceptualise and operationalise success in research proposal assessment. Drawing on sixteen semi-structured interviews, it has revealed that evaluation is not a mechanical exercise of applying formal criteria but a complex interpretive process in which meaning is constructed through professional reasoning, negotiation, and moral judgment. Success emerges from the interplay of intellectual merit, communicative clarity, organisational capacity, and the human dynamics of evaluation.

The findings show that *scientific excellence* is understood as a composite construct, integrating conceptual innovation, methodological rigour, and contextual relevance. *Innovation*, in turn, is valued not for rhetorical novelty but for credible feasibility - the ability to demonstrate change that is both desirable and achievable. Evaluators reward *clarity and coherence* as epistemic indicators of professionalism, viewing well-written and well-structured proposals as reflections of cognitive control. Meanwhile, *organisational capacity* and *institutional support* function as structural enablers of success: strong leadership, realistic planning, and professionalised pre-award services collectively transform good ideas into fundable projects. Finally, evaluators emphasise that *impact* and *ethical judgment* are inseparable from excellence - the former ensures societal legitimacy, while the latter sustains fairness and trust in peer review.

The practical framework proposed in this paper (Table 3) offers a tangible bridge between evaluators' interpretive reasoning and applicants' preparation strategies.

6.1. Theoretical implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of work on the sociology of evaluation and interpretive institutionalism (Lamont, 2009; Bevir, Rhodes, 2010). It advances three interrelated propositions. First, evaluation in the EU Framework context operates as a hybrid practice, combining bureaucratic rationality with interpretive flexibility. Reviewers translate abstract criteria into context-sensitive judgments informed by disciplinary norms and experiential heuristics. Second, *excellence* functions as a socially negotiated construct rather than a fixed metric - co-produced through dialogue between evaluators, institutions, and policy frameworks. Third, *impact* acts as both an epistemic and rhetorical category - a narrative device through which scientific work is legitimised in the public sphere. Together, these insights extend existing theories of peer review by situating evaluation within the broader ecosystem of European science policy, where knowledge production, governance, and legitimacy intersect.

6.2. Practical implications

From a policy and research management perspective, the study underscores the importance of developing systemic support for excellence as a distributed property. For institutions, this means professionalising research management, investing in pre-award offices, and training staff in both administrative compliance and narrative communication.

For researchers, the findings highlight the need to cultivate "evaluation literacy": the ability to articulate ideas clearly, align ambition with feasibility, and translate novelty into credible pathways for implementation and impact. As summarised in Table 3, the proposed checklist translates evaluators' insights into actionable guidance for future applicants.

For funders and policymakers, the results point to the value of clearer guidance on evaluative expectations, bias-awareness training for reviewers, and greater transparency in panel deliberations. Such measures would not only enhance proposal quality but also promote fairness, consistency, and inclusivity across the European Research Area.

6.3. Methodological reflection

Methodologically, this research demonstrates the value of qualitative inquiry in a domain dominated by quantitative metrics. By eliciting evaluators' own narratives, it uncovers the tacit reasoning that underpins peer review decisions - reasoning often invisible in scoring data. Future studies could build on this approach by combining textual analysis of proposals with panel observation or comparative studies across funding schemes, further illuminating how formal criteria are translated into interpretive practice.

In sum, evaluation in the EU Framework Programmes should be understood not merely as an administrative control mechanism but as a *social practice of judgment* - one that balances rigour with empathy, ambition with realism, and individual excellence with collective responsibility. Recognising this dual nature of evaluation offers a more human, transparent, and ultimately more just foundation for the governance of science.

Acknowledgements

The publication was financed from the subsidy granted to the Krakow University of Economics – Project no 72/SD/2023/PRO.

References

1. Agarwal, R., Chertow, G.M., Mehta, R.L. (2006). Strategies for successful patient oriented research: why did I (not) get funded? *Clinical Journal of the American Society of Nephrology, 1(2),* 340-343.
2. Ainsbury, E.A., Cassidy, A., Downey, F., Hartline, B.K., Lin, J.G., McCray, C., Dawson, S.P., Horton, R.K., Kaicher, C.M. (2009). Successful proposals, fund raising, and project leadership. *AIP Conference Proceedings*, 16-19.
3. Ajdarpašić, S., Qorraj, G. (2019). Does university performance matter for EU programmes in South East Europe: Case study Horizon 2020. *Management - Journal of Contemporary Management Issues, 24(2),* 1-10.
4. Ajdarpašić, S., Qorraj, G. (2020). The impact of the EU programs in the Western Balkans. *InterEULawEast, 7(1),* 65-88.
5. Andrijauskiene, M., Dumciuviene, D., Stundziene, A. (2021). EU framework programmes: positive and negative effects on member states' innovation performance. *Equilibrium. Quarterly Journal of Economics and Economic Policy, 16(3),* 471-502.
6. Arnold, E., Clark, J., Muscio, A. (2005). What the evaluation record tells us about European Union Framework Programme performance. *Science and Public Policy, 32(5),* 385-397.
7. Arthurs, O.J. (2014). Think it through first: questions to consider in writing a successful grant application. *Pediatric Radiology, 44(12),* 1507-1511.
8. Beaver, D. (2013). The many faces of collaboration and teamwork in scientific research: Updated reflections on scientific collaboration. *Collnet Journal of Scientometrics and Information Management, 7(1)*.
9. Bol, T., De Vaan, M., Van de Rijt, A. (2018). The Matthew effect in science funding. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 115(19),* 4887-4890.
10. Bornmann, L. (2011). Scientific peer review. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, 45(1)*, 197-245.
11. Bornmann, L., Marewski, J.N. (2019). Heuristics as conceptual lens for understanding and studying the usage of bibliometrics in research evaluation. *Scientometrics, 120(2),* 419-459.
12. Bornmann, L., Leydesdorff, L., Van den Besselaar, P. (2010). A meta-evaluation of scientific research proposals: Different ways of comparing rejected to awarded applications. *Journal of Informetrics, 4(3),* 211-220.
13. Bornmann, L., Wallon, G., Ledin, A. (2008). Does the committee peer review select the best applicants for funding? *PLoS ONE, 3(10).*
14. Boyack, K.W., Smith, C., Klavans, R. (2018). Toward predicting research proposal success. *Scientometrics, 114(2),* 449-461.

15. Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2),* 77-101.
16. Brownson, R.C., Colditz, G.A., Dobbins, M., Emmons, K.M., Kerner, J.F., Padek, M., Proctor, E.K., Stange, K.C. (2015). Concocting that magic elixir: Successful grant application writing in dissemination and implementation research. *Clinical and Translational Science, 8(6)*, 710-716.
17. Carpenter, A.S., Sullivan, J.H., Deshmukh, A., Glisson, S.R., Gallo, S.A. (2015). A retrospective analysis of the effect of discussion in teleconference and face-to-face scientific peer-review panels. *BMJ Open, 5(9).*
18. Chen, K., Zhang, Y., Fu, X. (2019). International research collaboration: An emerging domain of innovation studies? *Research Policy, 48(1),* 149-168.
19. Chung, K.C., Shauver, M.J. (2008). Fundamental principles of writing a successful grant proposal. *Journal of Hand Surgery, 33(4),* 566-572.
20. CORDIS, European Commission (2023). Retrieved from: https://cordis.europa.eu/, 09.2025.
21. Creswell, J.W., Poth, C.N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*. CA: SAGE Publications. Retrieved from: https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/qualitative-inquiry-and-research-design/book266033, 09.2025.
22. D'Este, P., Ramos-Vielba, I., Woolley, R., Amara, N. (2018). How do researchers generate scientific and societal impacts? Toward an analytical and operational framework. *Science and Public Policy, 45(6)*.
23. Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. (2018). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research [El manual SAGE de investigación cualitativa]*. CA: SAGE Publication.
24. *Eligibility and evaluation criteria - H2020 Online Manual* (2020). Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/from-evaluation-to-grant-signature/evaluation-of-proposals/elig_eval_criteria_en.htm, 09.2025.
25. Enger, S.G. (2018). Closed clubs: Network centrality and participation in Horizon 2020. *Science and Public Policy, 45(6),* 884-896.
26. Enger, S.G., Castellacci, F. (2016). Who gets Horizon 2020 research grants? Propensity to apply and probability to succeed in a two-step analysis. *Scientometrics, 109(3),* 1611-1638.
27. *EU Missions in Horizon Europe - Research and Innovation* (2025). Retrieved from: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/eu-missions-horizon-europe_en, 09.2025.
28. *Europe's Framework Programmes – a key element of research policy in Europe. Research and Innovation* (2023). Retrieved from: https://projects.research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/en/horizon-magazine/europes-framework-programmes-key-element-research-policy-europe, 09.2025.

29. *European Union priorities 2024-2029 - European Union* (2025). Retrieved from: https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/eu-priorities/european-union-priorities-2024-2029_en, 09.2025.
30. *Europejski Zielony Ład - Komisja Europejska* (2025). Retrieved from: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_pl, 09.2025.
31. File, J., Holm-Nielsen, L.B., Marklund, G., Melin, G., Naczinsky, C., Puukka, J., Winckler, G., Ziarko, W., (2023). *Poland's higher education and science system: Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility: peer review.* European Commission. Directorate-General for Research and Innovation.
32. Gallo, S.A., Schmaling, K.B., Thompson, L.A., Glisson, S.R. (2021). Grant review feedback: Appropriateness and usefulness. *Science and Engineering Ethics, 27(2).*
33. *Getting ready to apply for Horizon Europe. ESE* (2023). Retrieved from: https://www.ese-hormones.org/research/european-research-funding/your-funding-journey/getting-ready-to-apply-for-horizon-europe/, 09.2025.
34. Green, J., Langley, D. (2009). Professionalising research management. *Research Global, 6-7.* Retrieved from: https://arma.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Professionalising-research-management.pdf, 09.2025.
35. Groves, P.S., Rawl, S.M., Wurzbach, M.E., Fahrenwald, N., Cohen, M.Z., Beckett, D.O., Zerwic, J., Given, B., Algase, D.L., Alexander, G.L., Conn, V. (2012). Secrets of successful short grant applications. *Western Journal of Nursing Research, 34(1),* 6-23.
36. Hardavella, G., Karampini, E., Jacinto, T., Saad, N.J. (2016). Doing science: How to submit a successful funding application. *Breathe (Sheffield, England), 12(1),* 73-77.
37. Hillard, T., Baber, R. (2021). *Peer review: The cornerstone of scientific publishing integrity.* Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/13697137.2021.1882140, 09.2025.
38. Holm, K., Kim, M.J. (2010). Writing research grants: An overview of the process. *Journal of Nursing Regulation, 1(3),* 20-22. Retrieved from: www.journalofnursingregulation.com, 09.2025.
39. *Horizon 2020 – statistics* (2020). Retrieved from: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/dashboard/sense/app/93297a69-09fd-4ef5-889f-b83c4e21d33e, 09.2025.
40. Hörlesberger, M., Roche, I., Besagni, D., Scherngell, T., François, C., Cuxac, P., Schiebel, E., Zitt, M., Holste, D. (2013). A concept for inferring "frontier research" in grant proposals. *Scientometrics, 97(2),* 129-148.
41. Hunter, C.J., Goldstein, A.M., Locke, J., Cho, C.S., Gosain, A. (2021). Significance and innovation: Cornerstones of a successful grant application. *Surgery (United States), 170(4),* 1080-1082.
42. Kan, P., Mokin, M., MacK, W.J., Starke, R.M., Sheth, K.N., Albuquerque, F.C., Levitt, M.R. (2021). Strategies for writing a successful National Institutes of Health grant proposal

for the early-career neurointerventionalist. *Journal of NeuroInterventional Surgery, 13(3),* 283-286.

43. Kaplan, K. (2012). Funding: Got to get a grant. *Nature, 482*, 429-431. Retrieved from: www.naturejobs.com, 09.2025.
44. Koppelman, G.H., Holloway, J.W. (2012). Successful grant writing. *Paediatric Respiratory Reviews, 13(1),* 63-66.
45. Kwekkeboom, K.L. (2014). Overview and tips for successful grant writing for infusion nurses. *Journal of Infusion Nursing, 37(5),* 371-378.
46. Kwiek, M. (2022). *Globalna nauka, globalni naukowcy*. Warszawa: PWN.
47. Lamont, M. (2015). *How Professors Think*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
48. Langfeldt, L. (2021). *The many dilemmas of grant peer review*. Retrieved from: www.r-quest.no, 09.2025.
49. Langfeldt, L., Scordato, L. (2015). Assessing the broader impacts of research: A review of methods and practices. *Sociology*.
50. Langille, L., Mackenzie, T. (2007). Navigating the road to success: A systematic approach to preparing competitive grant proposals. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, 2(1),* 23-31.
51. Langley, D. (2012). Research management and administration: A reflection of where we are and where we need to go as a profession. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 16(3),* 71-76.
52. Laudel, G. (2006). Conclave in the Tower of Babel: How peers review interdisciplinary research proposals. *Research Evaluation, 15(1),* 57-68.
53. Merton, R.K. (1968). *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press.
54. Murray, D.L., Morris, D., Lavoie, C., Leavitt, P.R., MacIsaac, H., Masson, M.E.J., Villard, M.A. (2016). Bias in research grant evaluation has dire consequences for small universities. *PLoS ONE, 11(6).*
55. Neufeld, J., Huber, N., Wegner, A. (2013). Peer review-based selection decisions in individual research funding: The case of the ERC Starting Grants. *Research Evaluation, 22(4),* 237-247.
56. Nokkala, T., Heller-Schuh, B., Paier, M. (2011). *Ranking lists and European Framework Programmes. In Public Vices, Private Virtues? Assessing the Effects of Marketization in Higher Education,* 111-139. Dordrecht: Springer.
57. Oztaysi, B., Onar, S.C., Goztepe, K., Kahraman, C. (2017). Evaluation of research proposals for grant funding using interval-valued intuitionistic fuzzy sets. *Soft Computing, 21(5),* 1203-1218.
58. Pina, D.G., Buljan, I., Hren, D., Marušić, A. (2021). A retrospective analysis of the peer review of more than 75,000 Marie Curie proposals between 2007 and 2018. *ELife, 10,* 1-12.

59. Pina, D. G., Hren, D., Marušić, A. (2015). Peer review evaluation process of Marie Curie Actions under EU's seventh framework programme for research. *PLoS ONE, 10(6).*
60. Recio-Saucedo, A., Crane, K., Meadmore, K., Fackrell, K., Church, H., Fraser, S., Blatch-Jones, A. (2022). What works for peer review and decision-making in research funding: A realist synthesis. *Research Integrity and Peer Review, 7(1).*
61. Reinhart, M. (2009). Peer review of grant applications in biology and medicine: Reliability, fairness, and validity. *Scientometrics, 81(3),* 789-809.
62. Rodriguez Rincon, D., Feijao, C., Stevenson, C., Evans, H., Sinclair, A., Thomson, S., Guthrie, S. (2022). *Study on the proposal evaluation system for the EU R&I framework programme: Final report*. Brussels: European Commission.
63. Rodriguez Rincon, D., Feijao, C., Stevenson, C., Evans, H., Sinclair, A., Thomson, S., Guthrie, S., European Commission. Directorate-General for Research and Innovation., & RAND Europe (2023). *Study on the proposal evaluation system for the EU R&I framework programme: Final report.* Brussels: European Commission.
64. Sauer, R.M., Gabbi, C. (2019). Grantsmanship writing tips: Significance, innovation and impact. *European Journal of Internal Medicine, 65,* 26-28.
65. Seeber, M., Alon, I., Pina, D.G., Piro, F.N., Seeber, M. (2022). Predictors of applying for and winning an ERC Proof-of-Concept grant: An automated machine learning model. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 184*.
66. Seeber, M., Vlegels, J., Reimink, E., Marušić, A., Pina, D.G. (2021). Does reviewing experience reduce disagreement in proposals evaluation? Insights from Marie Skłodowska-Curie and COST Actions. *Research Evaluation, 30(3),* 349-360.
67. Smith, C., Boyack, K., Klavans, R. (2019). *Toward predicting proposal success: An update.* ISSI 2019 Proceedings, 770-781. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338434681, 09.2025.
68. Suebtrakul, S., Adams, P., Vutikes, P., Titapiwatanakun, B., Kaewkungwal, J. (2020). Perceptions of successful domestic and international research grant applications among experienced and novice researchers. *Journal of Health Research, 35(6),* 527-539.
69. *The Digital Europe Programme. Shaping Europe's digital future* (2025). Retrieved from: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/digital-programme, 09.2025.
70. Turner, S., Davidson, P., Stanton, L., Cawdeary, V. (2014). Features of successful bids for funding of applied health research: A cohort study. *Health Research Policy and Systems, 12(1)*.
71. Valsecchi, V. (2019). Horizon 2020 – European research funding. *Nuovo Cimento Della Societa Italiana Di Fisica C, 42(4)*.
72. van den Besselaar, P., Mom, C. (2021). *Writing style and research grant success – a linguistic analysis.* Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348522864, 09.2025.

73. van Rijnsoever, F.J., Hessels, L.K. (2021). How academic researchers select collaborative research projects: A choice experiment. *Journal of Technology Transfer, 46(6),* 1917-1948.
74. Veugelers, R., Cincera, M., Frietsch, R., Rammer, C., Schubert, T., Pelle, A., Renda, A., Montalvo, C., Leijten, J. (2015). The impact of Horizon 2020 on innovation in Europe. *Intereconomics, 50(1),* 4-30.
75. Vidal, S., Laureano, R., Trindade, M. (2015). Assessing the impact of grant managers on the success of grant applications. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 19(3),* 84-91.
76. Vidmar, U., Jezikov, P., Tina, S.P., Vukasović, V. (2018). Identifying elements for a successful approach to applying projects. *International Journal of Management, Knowledge and Learning, 7(2)*, 217-243. Retrieved from: www.issbs.si/press/ISSN/2232-5697/7_217-243.pdf, 09.2025.
77. Viner, N., Powell, P., Green, R. (2004). Institutionalized biases in the award of research grants: A preliminary analysis revisiting the principle of accumulative advantage. *Research Policy, 33(3),* 443-454.
78. Wanzenböck, I., Lata, R., Ince, D. (2020). Proposal success in Horizon 2020: A study of the influence of consortium characteristics. *Quantitative Science Studies, 1(3),* 1136-1158.
79. Whitley, R., Gläser, J., Engwall, L. (2010). *Reconfiguring Knowledge Production: Changing Authority Relationships in the Sciences and Humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
80. Wisdom, J.P., Riley, H., Myers, N. (2015). Recommendations for writing successful grant proposals: An information synthesis. *Academic Medicine, 90(12),* 1720-1725.
81. Yin, R.K. (2014). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods (5th ed.).* CA: SAGE Publications.