CULTURAL COOPERATION PROJECTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

“Strengthening cultural cooperation with and competiveness of cultural and creative industries in the Western Balkans”

Call for Proposals EACEA 39/2019

GUIDE FOR EXPERTS

ON QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF THE

CULTURAL COOPERATION PROJECTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

managed by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency

JANUARY 2020
1. INTRODUCTION

This Call for Proposals is entirely funded by the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II). It is implemented in accordance with the applicable rules of the Creative Europe programme and the relevant work programme.

The European Commission’s Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (hereafter the 'Agency') is responsible for the implementation of the the Cultural Cooperation Projects in the Western Balkans Call. This means that the Agency is in charge of the selection of projects to be funded under the Cultural Cooperation Projects in the Western Balkans Call.

The Agency appoints an Evaluation Committee for each call for proposals, whose role it is to carry out the evaluation process of all proposals submitted. The Evaluation Committee is the only instance in charge of the selection of the proposals. The Evaluation Committee is composed of representatives of the Executive Agency and the European Commission. Experts are not part of this committee. As a result of the deliberations of its members, the Evaluation Committee proposes a list of projects based on the quality assessments. The Agency’s Authorising Officer takes the formal decision on the award of grants.

The Evaluation Committee runs these selections with the assistance of independent external experts. The experts hired by the Agency have an advisory role; the final recommendation on the selection or rejection of applications remains with the Evaluation Committee. The aim of the expert evaluation is to ensure that each application receives an objective assessment from an external person with expertise in the field covered by the action, and that this Preliminary assessment is also subject to a review with another external person (or eventually a third one) who has assessed the same application. The aim is to ensure that only proposals\(^1\) of the highest quality are selected for funding. Experts support the process through evaluating application, drafting feedback provided to applicants.

In order to guarantee transparency, equal treatment and impartial decisions, the assessment process is based on a peer review system further described in the coming sections of this document.

This guide is a tool for experts, providing instructions and guidance in order to ensure a standardised and high quality assessment of applications.

2. ROLE AND APPOINTMENT OF EXPERTS

2.1 Role of experts

The role of independent experts is to advise the Evaluation Committee on the quality of project proposals in relation to the policy objectives of the Call.

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\(^1\) Please note that the terms 'proposal' and 'application' are used interchangeably in this Guide.
The quality assessment is an essential part of the selection procedure. The feedback on applications sent to applicants at the end of the selection also builds on these assessments (see section 4 Feedback to applicants).

Experts are recruited through an open call for expression of interest. Experts are appointed based on their skills and expertise in the cultural and creative sector in which they are asked to assess applications. However, other criteria like language competencies, gender balance, the coverage of nationalities and geographical balance will also be taken into account in the final composition of an expert pool. Experts may be asked to assess a number of interdisciplinary proposals.

The Agency does not disclose information or contact details on experts in relation with a given proposal they assess. The Agency however publishes each year on its website a list with the details on experts who have concluded a contract of more than 15.000€ per year.

Experts perform evaluations on a personal basis, not as representatives of their country, their employer or any other entity.

2.2 Code of conduct and conflict of interest

Experts must perform their task with impartiality, objectivity and equal treatment to all applicants, to the highest professional standards and within the deadline agreed with the Agency. They are further bound to a code of conduct as set out in the call for expression of interest and contract with the Agency. In that respect, expert’s attention is drawn to the following aspects:

Conflict of interest

- Experts must not have a conflict of interest at the time of their appointment and sign a declaration that no such conflict exists.

- They also inform the Executive Agency should such a conflict arise in any of the applications, particularly on those allocated to them.

Can be considered as conflict of interest any situation where the impartial and objective implementation of the experts' work is compromised for reasons involving economic interest, political or national affinity, family or emotional ties or any other shared interest.

When a potential conflict of interest is reported by the expert or brought to the attention of the Agency by any means, the Evaluation Committee will analyse the circumstances and any objective elements of information at its disposal. If the

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2 The list resulting from this call for expression of interest is valid for the duration of the current generation of programmes managed by the Agency, i.e. until 31.12.2020.

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/about-eacea/working-expert/call-for-expressions-interest-n%2C%2880-eacea201301_en

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

Evaluation Committee concludes that there is conflict of interest, the expert is excluded from the assessment of that particular application or from the entire selection round.

The Agency will undertake its own checks to verify that there is no conflict of interest by any of the expert involved in the selection. In case of breach of the declaration obligations, the Agency may terminate the contract.

Confidentiality

Experts are bound by confidentiality, as all information relating to the assessment process is strictly confidential. They are not allowed to disclose any information about the applications submitted and results of the assessment and selection to anyone either during or after the selection. During the assessment process, experts are also bound to respect the data protection of individuals as stipulated in the applicable Regulation to which the EU institutions and bodies are bound.

2.3 Conditions of remuneration and reimbursement

Experts will be informed about their precise workload and payment conditions, including reimbursement of travel and subsistence cost (if applicable), at the time of engagement. These conditions are clearly stated in the contract signed with the Agency.

3. ASSESSMENT OF APPLICATIONS

The different phases of the assessment procedure consists on the following main steps described in more detail below:

- Briefing of experts
- Individual preliminary assessments performed by each expert or the pair in charge of the evaluation of the application Consolidated final assessments named consensus, made by the pair of experts in charge of the evaluation of the application
- Deliberation of the Evaluation Committee
- Decision by the Authorising Officer on the selected proposals
- Information to applicants, including the consolidated final assessment on the quality of the proposals

3.1 The assessment process

3.1.1. Expert briefing

In order to ensure high quality of evaluations, the Agency makes certain that experts receive all necessary information and training before they start working. Therefore, they generally participate in one or several briefing sessions in order to:

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• ensure that all information on the content of the call, the technicalities (tools) and the process (selection timetable) has been read by the experts and thoroughly understood

• make sure experts are familiar with the structure and content of the application form and tools to be used

• foster common understanding of the award criteria, priorities and objectives of the call for proposal through group discussions

• train and guide experts on how to conduct their evaluations in compliance with the award criteria set out in the call and on what is expected in terms of comments so that all assessments are carried out in a coherent and consistent way

• ensure that all experts adhere to the principles of confidentiality, impartiality and absence of conflict of interest in the frame of the evaluation exercise

General principles of expert briefings

• All information needed to carry out the evaluations is made available in advance before the briefings preferably through an Online Expert Community.

• Transparency: experts must be provided with the same information as applicants and carry out their assessments on that basis.

• Experienced experts may take the lead role as facilitators to stimulate and frame discussions during the briefing sessions or on the forums in the Online Expert Community.

The briefing sessions are essentially interactive and emphasis is put on practical exercises (i.e. exercise on anonymised mock application). This allows experts to exchange points of view, get answers to their questions and clarify any doubts related to the selection process and methodology.

The briefings will be organised online.

3.1.2 Individual preliminary assessments

Proposals are evaluated by two experts. Each expert first works individually and independently, gives scores and comments for each award criterion and submits independently in the OEET online tool. This assessment is to be considered a draft proposal summarising her/his assessment for the consideration of the other expert.

3.1.3 Consolidated final assessments: the consensus

Once the individual preliminary assessments have been finalised and submitted electronically in OEET, the Agency puts both experts in contact to consolidate their views on the proposal and produce a single commonly-agreed on final assessment with scores and comments per award criterion\(^5\) and an overall summary of their evaluation.

\(^5\) Only full points can be used.
The overall summary of 10 lines is a short condensed review of the key strengths and weaknesses of each award criterion.

For an application, each expert is nominated either as Expert 1 or Expert 2. Expert 1 is in charge of drawing up the draft consolidated assessment in terms of scores and comments, based on the two individual preliminary assessments and on the discussion with Expert 2. Expert 1 submits the consolidated assessment electronically in the OEET system and an approval is given by the other expert.

If the difference between the total score of both individual preliminary assessments is more than 30 points and one of the two experts scored above the threshold (i.e. 75 points) or more, an additional third assessment of the application is automatically generated. This would also be the case if two experts are unable to reach consensus, or to agree on consolidated scores and comments for an application. A third individual preliminary assessments might as well be triggered at the request of the Evaluation Committee on a case-by-case basis.

When a third assessment is triggered, the experts with the two individual assessments that are closest in terms of their overall score will undertake a consolidation while taking into consideration the other (third) assessment.

3.1.4 Individual preliminary assessments review by Quality Experts

Quality Experts are appointed among the recruited experts for the Call. They are appointed based on their skills and expertise in the cultural and creative sector and their editing skills. However, other criteria like language competencies, gender balance, the coverage of nationalities and geographical balance will also be taken into account in the final composition of a Quality expert group.

Their role is not to assess the proposals submitted under the Call, but to review a certain number of individual assessments and all consensus assessments of a group of experts they will be following (approximately 5, depending on the number of applications). They are in charge of the monitoring of the work of their fellow colleagues, checking of the quality of their assessments based on the quality benchmarks established by EACEA, and they ensure the consistency between comments and scoring. They are also asked to monitor the quality of the expert’s work as well as their capacity to take into account the feedback and to respect deadlines.

The Quality check experts have an online briefing.

3.1.5 Quality check

In order to ensure high quality evaluations and support Quality Experts, each Quality Expert is followed by a Project Officer from the Agency’s B.1 Culture Unit. The Project Officers monitor the Quality Experts’ work and guide them when needed. The Project Officer gives a structured feedback and reviews some of the individual assessments.
The Project Officers do a follow up of all evaluations, experts and checks the respect of the deadlines set by the Call coordination team.

3.1.6 Experts' panel

Once the consolidation phase is complete, a group of experts (called 'Lead quality experts') may meet, online or onsite in Brussels, to review projects which evaluation raised specific concerns and for which the Evaluation Committee needs further advice.

3.2 Assessment of award criteria and scoring

Experts assess applications against the award criteria defined in the Guidelines related to each scheme.

The award criteria for the “Cultural Cooperation Projects in the Western Balkans Call” are:

- 1. Relevance
- 2. Quality of the content and activities
- 3. Communication and dissemination
- 4. Quality of the partnership

Each of the award criteria is defined through several elements and guiding questions which must be taken into account by experts when analysing an application. These elements form an exhaustive list of points to be considered before scoring the criterion. The sub-questions are intended to guide experts through the evaluation of the criterion but they must not be scored individually. Nevertheless, it is advised that the experts evaluate each sub-question by a separate sentence.

When assessing applications against award criteria, experts make an evaluation on the extent to which these applications meet the defined criteria. This evaluation must be based on information provided by the applicant only. Experts must not assume information that is not stated explicitly or search the internet. Information relevant to a specific award criterion may appear in different parts of the application. Experts take all of it into consideration.

An application can receive a maximum total of 100 points. The number of points to be attributed per award criterion is indicated in Section 9 – AWARD CRITERIA of the 'Guidelines'.

In order to be considered for funding, proposals must score a minimum quality threshold of 75/100 points and a minimum score of 50% is required for each criterion.

The table below shows the relative points of each criterion for the Cultural Cooperation Projects in the Western Balkans Call':

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the content and activities</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and dissemination</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the partnership</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Experts assess the application based on the given award criteria and score each criterion.

In order to ensure quality standards and coherence in approach, six ranges of scores and quality levels for applications have been defined.

The table below shows the ranges of scores for the individual quality standards depending on the maximum score of the award criterion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award criteria</th>
<th>Maximum points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the content and activities</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and dissemination</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the partnership</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ranges of scores correspond to the following standards:

- **Excellent** – the application fully addresses all relevant aspects of the criterion in question convincingly and successfully. It provides all the information and evidence needed and there are no concerns or areas of weakness.

- **Very good** – the application addresses in detail all relevant aspects of the criterion in question. It provides all the information and evidence needed and there are only few minor concerns or areas of weakness.

- **Good** – the application addresses the criterion well. It gives clear information and presents almost every component satisfactorily and thoroughly, although some areas of the criterion remain underdeveloped.

Proposals with a score corresponding to weak or very weak in a given criterion will not be selected for funding.
- **Fair** – the application broadly addresses the criterion, but there are **some important weaknesses**. It gives some relevant information, but there are several areas where detail is lacking or the information is unclear.

- **Weak** – the application fails to address the criterion, as **many important weaknesses** are present in the proposal.

- **Very weak** – the application fails to address the criterion or addresses it very poorly and/or cannot be judged due to missing or **incomplete information**.

Experts must provide comments on each award criterion and, in their comments, refer explicitly to the elements of analysis under the relevant criterion. The comments on each award criterion have to reflect and justify the score given for it. They should emphasise the proposal's strengths and weaknesses.

Experts must assess all applications in full, regardless of the score given to any award criterion.

### 3.3 Assessment tool

Experts carry out their assessment online using the Online Expert Evaluation Tool (OEET). The applications to be assessed are accessible through the OEET. Experts are provided with technical instructions for the use of OEET as part of their briefing.

Experts examine the issues to be considered under each award criterion, enter their scores and provide comments.

Once the individual preliminary assessments are completed, experts validate it in the OEET and confirm that they have no conflict of interest with respect to that particular application.

### 3.4 Funding threshold

In order to be considered for funding, proposals must score a minimum quality threshold of 75/100 points and a minimum score of 50% is required for each criterion.

Applications are ranked in order of merit by the Evaluation Committee and considered for funding until the budget runs out. If enough applications of sufficient quality are available, the Evaluation Committee can propose a **reserve list** of applications. These could be considered for funding in the event that:

- one or several applications on the main list can no longer be funded;
- additional budget becomes available.

The Agency expects to fund around 20 proposals. The Agency reserves the right not to distribute all funds available.

In case of ex-aequo proposals, these proposals will be ranked in accordance with the following rule: priority will first be given to the proposals having obtained the highest score in the award criterion 'Relevance'.
If ex-aequo proposals remain, priority will then be given to the proposals having obtained the highest score in the award criterion ‘Quality of the content and activities’.

If ex-aequo proposals remain, priority will then be given to the proposals having obtained the highest score in the award criterion ‘Quality of the partnership’.

3.5 Quality assurance

The Agency aims at the highest level of quality at every stage of the evaluation process. Therefore particular emphasis is put on:

**Training of experts & communication:** the Agency sets up interactive and flexible briefing sessions to make sure that all aspects of the assessment procedure are clearly understood by experts before they start working. Where possible, an Online Expert Community allows on-going dialogue and exchange on thematic, methodological and technical issues among peers and with Agency staff (see section 3.1).

**Quality review:** The Evaluation Committee closely monitors the quality of expert’s assessments and can require the expert to revise the assessment if it fails to meet the quality standards. The Agency may call upon experienced experts, commonly referred to as quality / lead experts, to assist the team in carrying out quality review of individual and/or consolidated assessments. The aim is to ensure:

- formal correctness;
- appropriateness, clarity and completeness of comments;
- coherence between scores and comments.

Agency staff or lead experts will not, however, influence the opinion of the independent experts.

**Quality control:** The work of experts will be monitored according to a set of quality standards mentioned here below:

- the application has been assessed according to the award criteria defined in the Guidelines solely and the evaluation only address those
- coherence between the scores provided to each award criteria and the respective comments
- the comments provide clear and sustained strong and weak points under each award criteria
- the comments are expressed in clear, neutral and respectful language
- the comments provided are of appropriate indicative length
- the work has been performed according to the pre-defined calendar and deadlines
- the individual preliminary assessments are reviewed by Quality Experts
- the Quality Experts are followed up and the Individual preliminary assessments reviewed by the Project officers of the EACEA B1 –Culture Unit
4. Feedback to applicants

The Agency notifies the applicant in writing of the result of their application. Each applicant receives feedback on scores and comments. This feedback is based on the consolidated final assessment and is given in English.

Reference documents

- Guidelines documents for the call ‘Cultural Cooperation Projects in the Western Balkans 2019 EACEA 39/2019’:
  
  https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/2._call_guidelines_eacea_39_2019_0.pdf This Call for Proposals is funded under the EU’s Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), in accordance with the Commission Implementing Decision adopting the Multi-Country Action Programme for the year 2019:


- The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II) Legal basis:


- Legal basis Creative Europe Programme:


- Creative Europe Culture - European Commission DG EAC website:

  http://ec.europa.eu/culture/index_en.htm
Eligible applications will be assessed on the basis of the following criteria:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Maximum points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Relevance</td>
<td>This criterion evaluates how the project implement the selected priority(ies) and contributes to the objectives referred to in section 2 of these Guidelines.</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Quality of the content and activities</td>
<td>This criterion evaluates how the project will be implemented in practice (quality of the activities and deliverables, methodology, timetable, appropriateness of the budget) and how likely it will reach its objectives.</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Communication and dissemination</td>
<td>This criterion evaluates the project's approach to communicating its activities and disseminating its results and to sharing knowledge and experiences within the sector and across borders. The aim is to maximise the impact of the project results at local, regional, national and European levels, and to ensure the sustainability of the impact beyond the project's lifetime.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quality of the partnership</td>
<td>This criterion evaluates the relevance of the partnership to the project as well as the extent to which the structure and management of the project will ensure the effective implementation of the project.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Award Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score: 0 to 30</th>
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</table>

#### 1. Relevance

This criterion evaluates how the project implements the selected policy priority(ies) referred to in section 2 of the guidelines.

**Guiding questions:**

- How does the proposal meet the **objective** to increase cultural cross-border cooperation within the Western Balkans region and the EU Member States or to strengthen the competitiveness of the cultural and creative industries in the region?
- How does the proposal address the European Commission’s **cross-cutting objectives**: the environment and climate change (together with environmental impact), the promotion of a rights-based approach, that of minorities, displaced people, migrants or refugees, persons with disability, youth, elderly or LGBTQ+ people, as well as ensure gender equality?
- How good is the project's strategy to implement one or more of the chosen priority/sub-priority (ies) in a meaningful and impactful way?
- How well and to what extend does the project foster the situation of CCIs of the Western Balkans and will have a structuring effect on the sector?
- How will the project foster the work of artists and cultural operators, their creation, productions, their mobility, training and employment?
- What is innovative in the project compared with the state of the arts (innovative approach to creation, audience, business models, etc)?
- What is the **European added value** of the project? To what extent is the project complementary to other cultural actions implemented at national, regional or local level?
  
  What is the expected short/medium/long term **impact** of the project and how appropriate is that considering the project’s nature and objectives?
- What is the strategy proposed to ensure **sustainability** beyond the project’s duration, both in terms of project outcome, as well as in terms of impact on the beneficiaries involved in the project?

#### 2. Quality of the content and activities

This criterion evaluates how the project will be implemented in practice (quality of the activities and deliverables, methodology, timetable, appropriateness of the budget) and how likely it will reach its objectives.

**Guiding questions:**

- How appropriate are the **activities** proposed to respond to the **objectives** of the project?
- How appropriate are the activities and approached proposed to the **needs of the presented target groups** in relation to the objectives and activities of the project?
- How appropriate is the **methodology** of implementation of the activities?
- How appropriate are the expected **results** (outcomes) and the deliverables (output) of the project?
- How appropriate is the qualitative and quantitative **assessment** of the project?
- Is the **timetable** for implementing the project activities **feasible**?
- How appropriate is the allocation of the **budget** to the activities undertaken in the framework of the project?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award Criteria</th>
<th>Score: 0 to 20</th>
</tr>
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</table>

### 3. Communication and Dissemination

This criterion evaluates the project's approach to communicating its activities and disseminating the results and to sharing knowledge and experiences with the sector and across borders. The aim is to maximise the impact of the project results at local, regional, national and European levels, so that they have an impact beyond the project's lifetime.

**Guiding questions:**
- How appropriate is the strategy of **communication** of the project considering the objectives and target groups?
- How appropriate is the **dissemination** strategy to share knowledge and provide information of the results of the project to the sector and across border?
- How ambitious and appropriate would be the foreseen **impact** of the dissemination strategy in terms of scope (at local, regional, national and European levels) and extent (beyond the end of the project)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award Criteria</th>
<th>Score: 0 to 20</th>
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### 4. Quality of the Partnership

This criterion evaluates the relevance of the partnership to the project as well as the extent to which the structure and management of the project will ensure the effective implementation of the project.

**Guiding questions:**
- Is the **composition** of the partnership relevant and **appropriate** to implement the project?
- Will the partnership be able to foster the situation of CCIs in the **Western Balkans region**, thus primality befitting this region? How go sis the representation of these countries/operators in the partnership?
- Is the **repartition of tasks** balanced and proportionate between partners?
- Is the budget allocation between partners well explained?
- If any, how relevant are the associated partners what is their contribution to the project?
- How appropriate is the management structure of the project?