Impressions from a Belgian evaluator in the COST Review Panel

COST Info Session, 10/9/2020

Andy Wullaert
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VIB-UGENT CENTER FOR INFLAMMATION RESEARCH

GHENT UNIVERSITY

My background:

- Affiliated with the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at UGent and the VIB Inflammation Research Center

- Fundamental biomedical researcher investigating the cellular and molecular mechanisms by which particular signaling pathways regulate health and disease, using mouse models of inflammatory and infectious diseases

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My experience in COST review panels:

- Member of the review panel on 'Biomedical networks for a healthier population: prevention to treatment of diseases, family care, healthier childhood and aging' (COST Open Call 2018-2)

- Member of the review panel on 'Joining forces through biomedical networks for a healthier population' (COST Open Call 2019-1)

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The COST proposal Evaluation and Selection Process

The proposal Evaluation and Selection follows a three-step process:

- Step 1 – Evaluation by Independent External Experts (IEEs)
  - Submission of Individual Evaluation Reports
  - Submission of Consensus Evaluation Reports
- Step 2 – Revision and Quality Check of Consensus Reports by Review Panels
- Step 3 – Selection by COST Scientific Committee (SC)

The proposals selected by the SC are approved by the COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO).

STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

- COST proposal peer review is double blind

Proposals may **not contain any direct or indirect reference** to people and/or institutions participating in the Network of Proposers (be they Main or Secondary Proposers). This means that proposers' or institutions' names should **neither be explicitly mentioned**, **nor be potentially identifiable** through links to web pages or through references to their role and/or participation in existing or ended projects, grants, networks. (e.g. do not make statements such as "several members of the proposer network have been involved in previous FP7 projects, like ATTPS and ADAPTIWALL, and COST Actions, such as FP0901");

STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

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References

- Non mandatory
- Max. 500 words
- Free text section to list relevant references on the topic of the proposal further demonstrating your awareness on the state-of-the-art of the given field(s). The list of references is optional. It is shown to the evaluators, but not assessed during the evaluation.

N.B: In compliance with the eligibility criterion of anonymity, proposers should ensure that the bibliography submitted respects this criterion (see section 3.2 of these Guidelines).

Note on "References": in the "References" section of the proposal, you may quote proposers' own publication(s), only provided that: a) there is no evidence that the publication is authored by one or more proposers and b) it is only one of a set of other bibliographical references.

STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

- Three remote 'Independent External Experts (IEEs)' score Q1-Q10 and list 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' for each Q

S&T EXCELLENCE	NETWORKING EXCELLENCE	IMPACT	IMPLEMENTATION
Soundness of the challenge	Added value of networking in S&T Excellence	Impact to science, society and competitiveness, and potential for innovation/ Breakthroughs	Coherence and effectiveness of the work plan.
Progress beyond the state-of-the-art (2 questions)	Added value of networking in Impact (2 questions)	Measures to maximise impact (2 questions)	
Total marks for the section = 15 points	**Total marks for the section = 15 points**	**Total marks for the section = 15 points**	**Total marks for the section = 5 points**

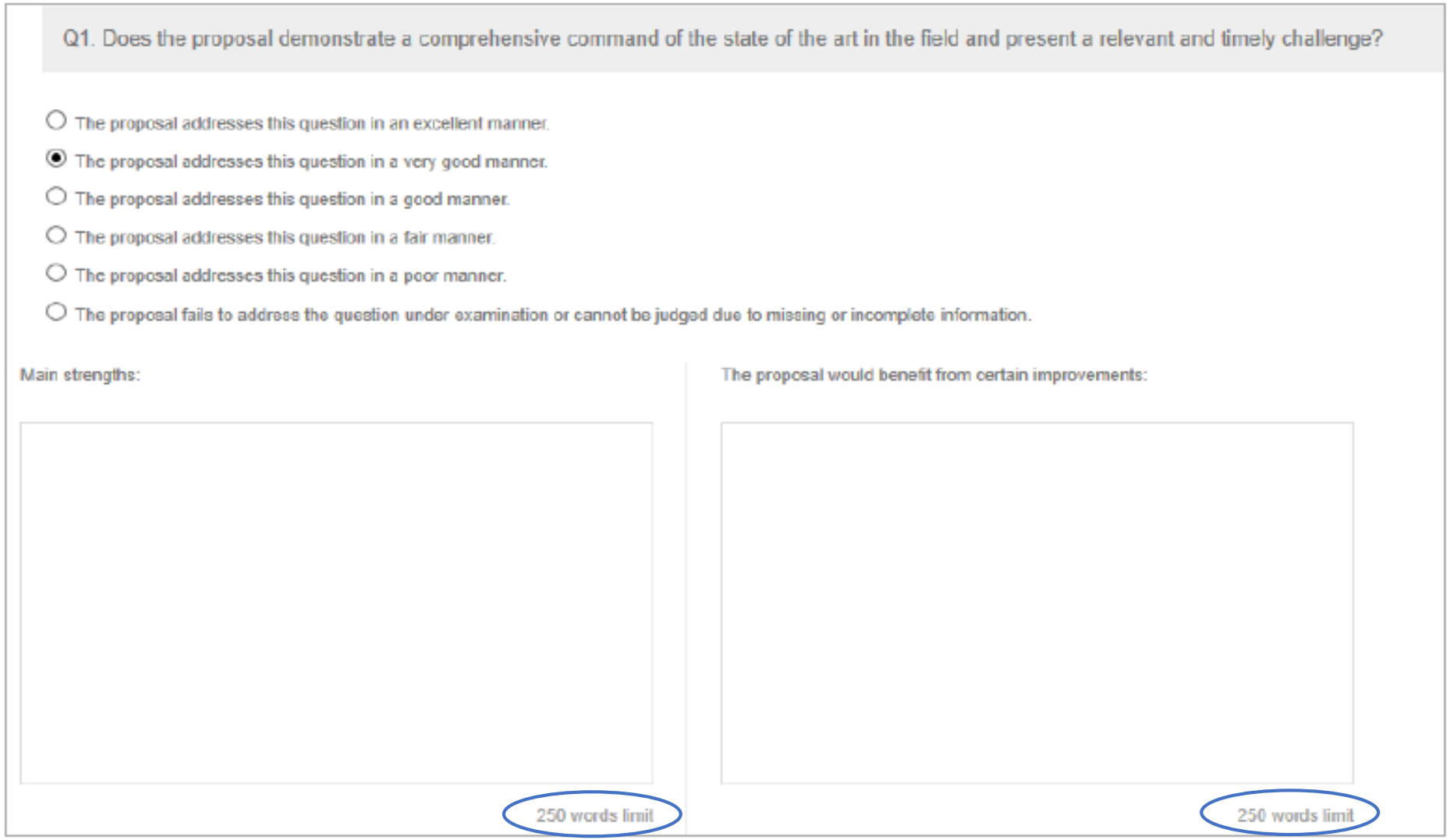
STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

- Three remote 'Independent External Experts (IEEs)' score Q1-Q10 and list 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' for each Q

MARK	DISPLAYED IN e-COST AS	LABEL	DESCRIPTION
5	E	Excellent	The proposal fully addresses all relevant aspects of the question. Any shortcomings are minor.
4	VG	Very Good	The proposal addresses the question very well, although certain improvements are still possible.
3	G	Good	The proposal addresses the question well, although improvements would be necessary.
2	F	Fair	While the proposal broadly addresses the question, there are significant weaknesses.
1	P	Poor	The question is addressed in an inadequate manner, or there are serious inherent weaknesses.
0	Fail	Fail	The proposal fails to address the question under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information.

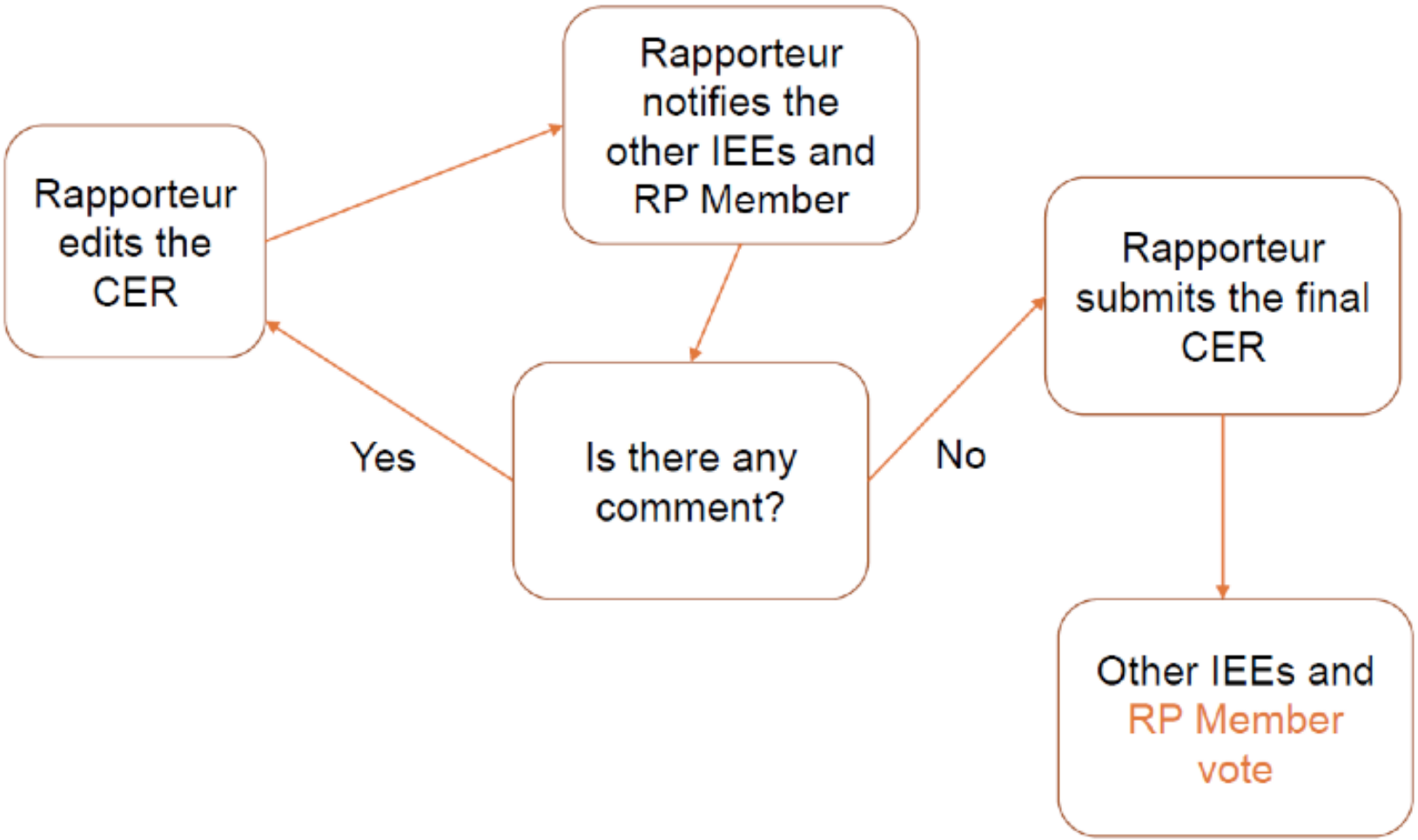
STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

- Three remote ‘Independent External Experts (IEEs)’ score Q1-Q10 and list ‘strengths’ and ‘weaknesses’ for each Q



STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

- After submission of three independent review reports one of the IEEs acts as the ‘rapporteur’ that drafts a consensus evaluation report (CER), which eventually is submitted for approval (or not) by the other IEEs and the review panel member responsible for the proposal



STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

- One IEE is the 'rapporteur' and is responsible for drafting the CER

- One review panel (RP) member overviews/moderates the CER drafting but does not evaluate the proposal!

SUMMARY TABLE

	S&T EXCELLENCE			NETWORKING EXCELLENCE			IMPACT			IMPLEMENTATION
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
EE 1	G	G	F	G	F	F	G	VG	G	P
EE 2	F	P	P	F	Fail	F	Fail	E	E	P
EE 3	E	VG	E	VG	VG	VG	E	VG	E	VG
CER	VG	VG	G	G	G	G	VG	VG	VG	F

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	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
EE 1	G	G	F	G	F	F	G	VG	G	P
EE 2	F	P	P	F	Fail	F	Fail	E	E	P
EE 3	E	VG	E	VG	VG	VG	E	VG	E	VG
CER	VG	VG	G	G	G	G	VG	VG	VG	F

- And sometimes this is not easy…

STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

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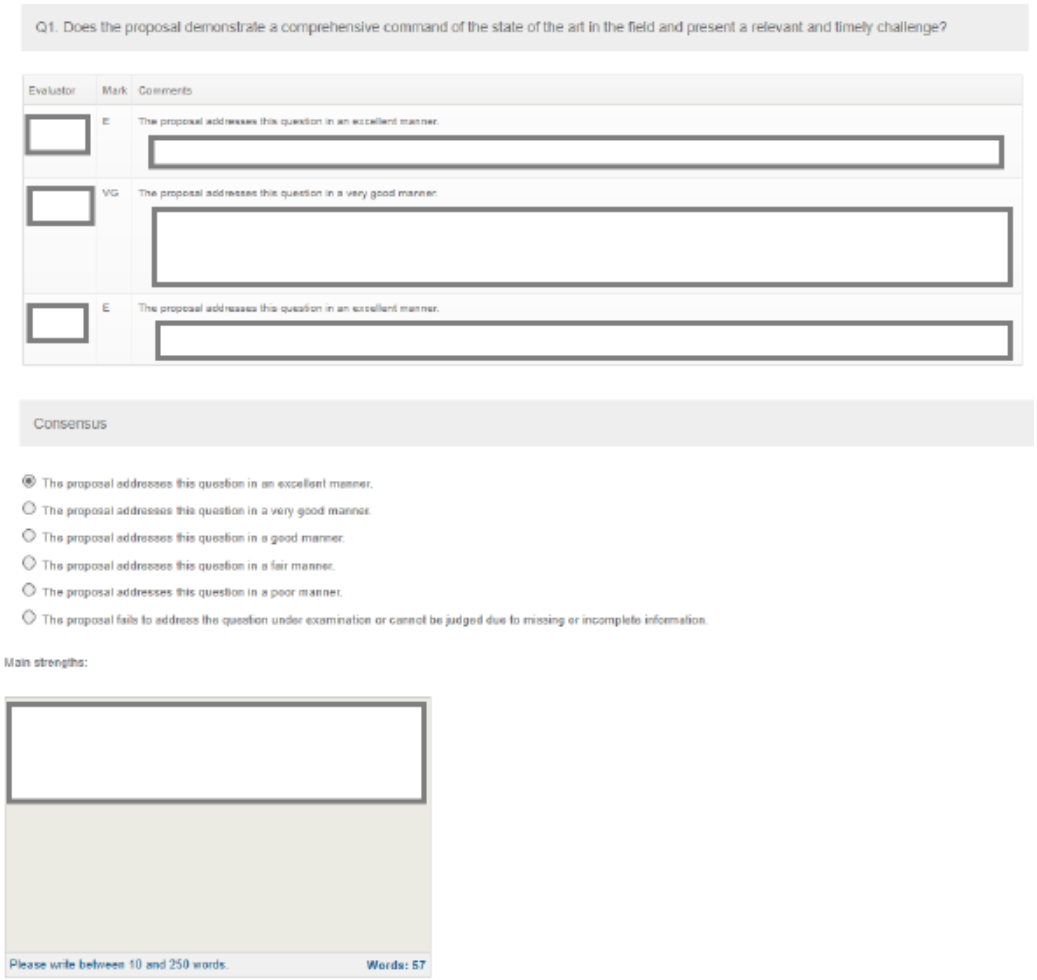


Q1. Does the proposal demonstrate a comprehensive command of the state of the art in the field and present a relevant and timely challenge?

Evaluator	Mark	Comments
	E	The proposal addresses this question in an excellent manner.
	VG	The proposal addresses this question in a very good manner.
	E	The proposal addresses this question in an excellent manner.

Consensus

- (•) The proposal addresses this question in an excellent manner.
- ( ) The proposal addresses this question in a very good manner.
- ( ) The proposal addresses this question in a good manner.
- ( ) The proposal addresses this question in a fair manner.
- ( ) The proposal addresses this question in a poor manner.
- ( ) The proposal fails to address the question under examination or cannot be judged due to missing or incomplete information.

Main strengths:

Please write between 10 and 250 words. Words: 57

STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

- One IEE is the ‘rapporteur’ and is responsible for drafting the CER

- One review panel (RP) member overviews/moderates the CER drafting but does not evaluate the proposal!

- Comments in a CER should be:

  - Consistent with the selected mark.
  - Strictly related to each specific evaluation criteria;
  - Substantial (no hollow statement);
  - Adequately justified, providing enough feedback to the proposers, concise and to the point.
  - Factual, evidence-based, and not formulated as subjective opinions: *“This proposal is…” and not “I think that...”, “I feel that…”*
  - Written having in mind the proposer as recipient (avoid discriminatory language, be polite, be fair, etc.)
  - Clear and avoid obscure acronyms or technical terms:

STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

- One IEE is the ‘rapporteur’ and is responsible for drafting the CER

- One review panel (RP) member overviews/moderates the CER drafting but does not evaluate the proposal!

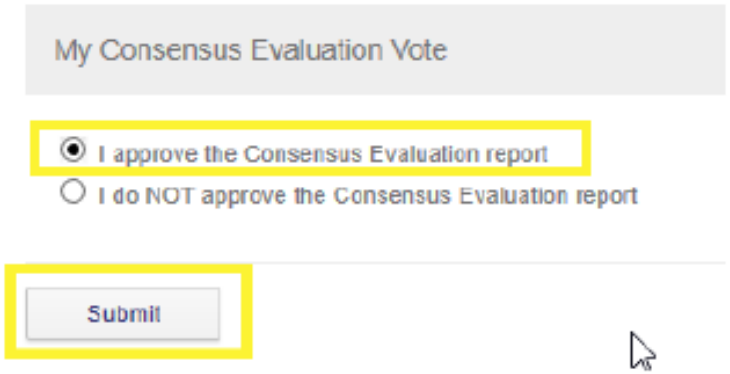
- Comments in a CER should not contain factual errors:

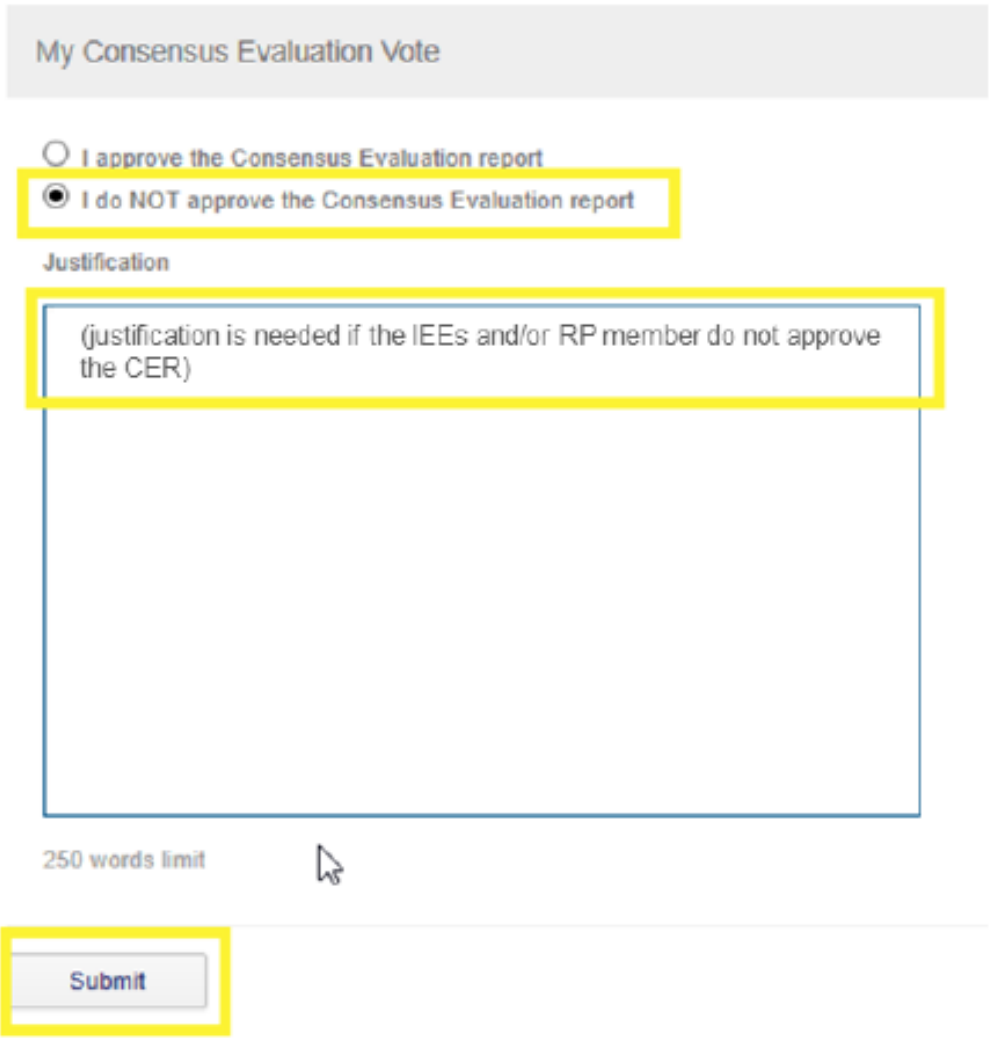
i. An example of a factual error is the following: the CER states: “The state of the art section in the proposal does not mention the new developments in Black hole theory”, while in fact on p. 3 of the proposal there is a section called “Black hole theory - new developments”

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

STEP 1 – PROPOSAL EVALUATION BY INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL EXPERTS

- After submission by the rapporteur, the CER needs to be approved by the other IEEs as well as by the RP member
    - Consensus is not imposed, each IEE as well as the RP member are free to ‘not approve’ the CR





STEP 2 – REVISION AND QUALITY CHECK BY AD HOC REVIEW PANEL

- Step 2 happens in 2 phases:

1. **Remote preliminary quality check of the CER by one or two review panel members.**

The role of the RP Member is to carry out a preliminary quality check of the CER, addressing the following aspects: content, consistency between comments and marks, completeness, clarity and language. The RP Member **does not** evaluate the proposal(s).

2. **Review panel meeting for final quality check of CERs and ranking the proposals.**

- Finalise all reviews of the CERs of the proposals of that RP and establish a ranking of proposals based on the consensus mark for those proposals above the threshold;
- Analyse the proposals allocated to that RP in order to provide insight on the trends, early signals and overall quality.

STEP 2 – REVISION AND QUALITY CHECK BY AD HOC REVIEW PANEL

1. **Remote preliminary quality check of the CER by one or two review panel members.**

→ CERs fall in two categories: the approved ones and the non-approved ones

→ CERs that were approved by all IEEs and by the RP member are edited/pre-validated by the RP member that was responsible for the proposal (no change of mark)

Evaluator	Report Status	Options	S&T Excellence			Networking Excellence			Impact			Implementation
			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Consensus	Approved		E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
Review panel report	Incomplete		N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C	N/C

The RP Member can either "Pre-validate" the comments (to accept the existing comments with no linguistic and content changes) or "Edit" the comments.

In case the comment is "Edited", the type of edit (Form or Content) must be specified, to facilitate the discussions during the RP meeting:

- Form: refers to stylistic or linguistic edits such as corrections of typos or misspellings;
- Content: refers to modifications of text including removal of words or sentences found inappropriate or with factual errors (please see Section 4), as well as edits to ensure coherence between comments and marks;

STEP 2 – REVISION AND QUALITY CHECK BY AD HOC REVIEW PANEL

1. **Remote preliminary quality check of the CER by one or two review panel members.**

→ CERs fall in two categories: the approved ones and the non-approved ones

→ CERs that were not approved are edited/pre-validated by the RP member that was responsible for the proposal together with an additional independent RP member (change of mark possible)

The two RP Members assigned to the proposal should **jointly**:

- Prepare together a CER based on the information available;
- Choose any mark corresponding to their comments within the range of marks given by the IEEs or the non-agreed consensus mark;
- One of the two RP Members encodes and submits the CER in e-COST.

STEP 2 – REVISION AND QUALITY CHECK BY AD HOC REVIEW PANEL

2. Review panel meeting for final quality check of CERs and ranking the proposals.

- Ad hoc RP meetings are held in Brussels and last 2,5 days
- Different RPs based on the expertise meet at the same time, the meeting is started by a plenary session
- 6-8 experts in each RP, assisted by 2-3 COST Scientific Officers
- Also RP members are blind to the proposers' identities
- RP ensures the quality and consistency of the CR and scores (already during step 1)
- If needed change the marks within the range of marks provided by the IEEs. In that case IEEs are notified.
- Rank the proposals according to score
- Identify emerging topics and trends and prepare report for the COST Scientific Committee

STEP 2 – REVISION AND QUALITY CHECK BY AD HOC REVIEW PANEL

2. Review panel meeting for final quality check of CERs and ranking the proposals.

This is the situation at the start of the RP meeting:

STEP 2 – REVISION AND QUALITY CHECK BY AD HOC REVIEW PANEL

2. Review panel meeting for final quality check of CERs and ranking the proposals.

This is what is told to the applicants:

S&T EXCELLENCE	NETWORKING EXCELLENCE	IMPACT	IMPLEMENTATION
Total marks for the section = 15 points	Total marks for the section = 15 points	Total marks for the section = 15 points	Total marks for the section = 5 points
TOTAL MARKS AWARDED = 0 – 50 points **OVERALL THRESHOLD = 34 points**			

STEP 2 – REVISION AND QUALITY CHECK BY AD HOC REVIEW PANEL

2. Review panel meeting for final quality check of CERs and ranking the proposals.

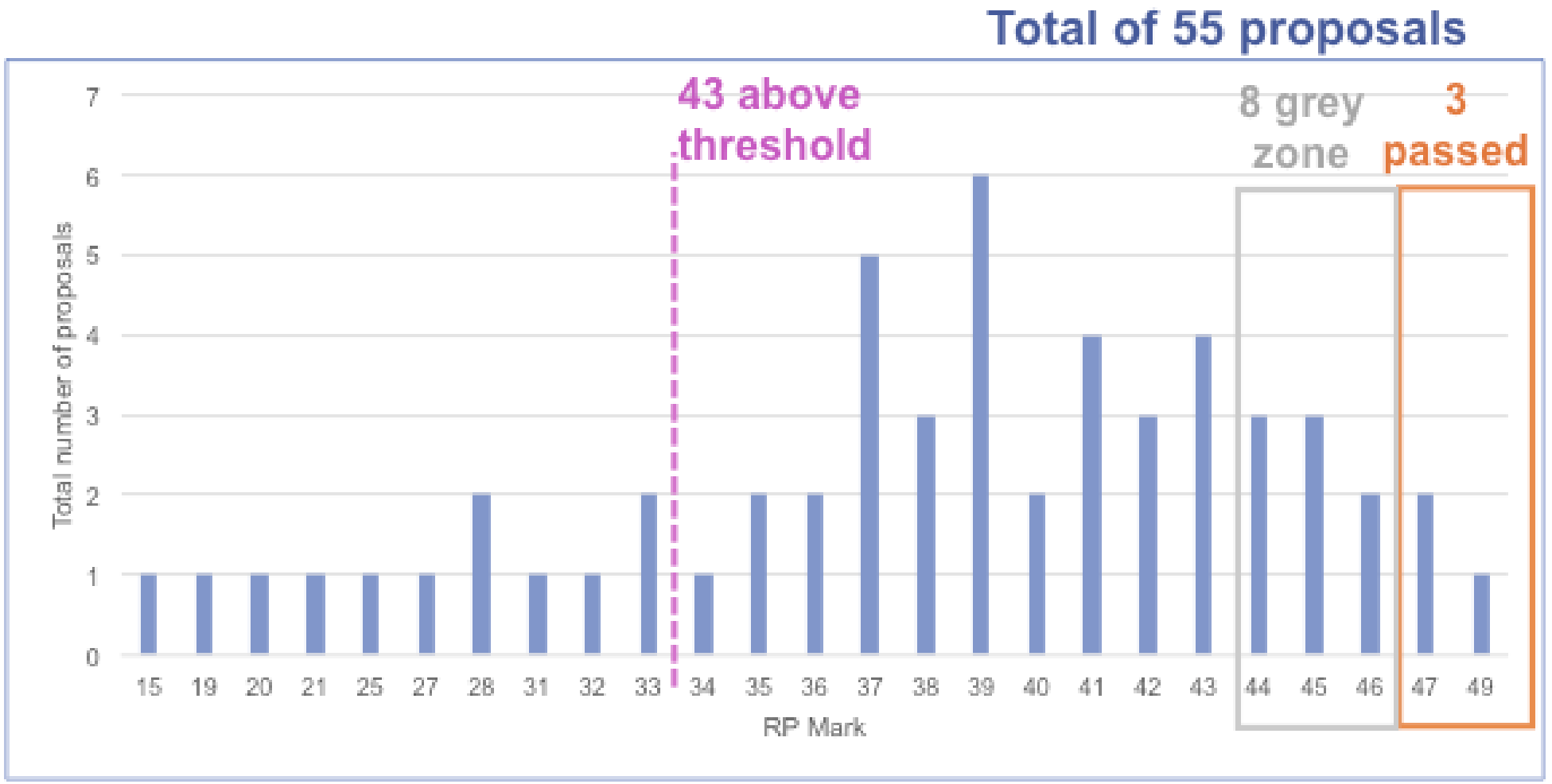
This is the hard reality across the different Review Panels (2019-2 open call):

		RP 1	RP 2	RP 3	RP 4	RP 5	RP 6	**Total / Avg**
Number of Proposals		75	56	57	57	77	65	**387**
Consensus Evaluation Report	**Approved**	67	51	55	53	67	64	**357**
	Not approved	8	5	2	4	10	1	**30**
Consensus Mark	**Average**	37.0	36.8	37.5	38.0	36.7	34.6	**36.7**
	Max	50	50	49	48	50	50	**50**
	Min	18	16	16	24	20	10	**10**
	StdDev	6.3	8.6	7.2	5.8	7.6	9.1	**7.6**
% of proposals with consensus mark ≥34 (threshold)		74.7%	71.4%	71.9%	80.7%	67.5%	58.5%	70.5%
% of proposals with consensus mark ≥34 (threshold) in relation to the total no. of eligible proposals		14.5%	10.3%	10.6%	11.9%	13.4%	9.8%	70.5%

STEP 2 – REVISION AND QUALITY CHECK BY AD HOC REVIEW PANEL

2. Review panel meeting for final quality check of CERs and ranking the proposals.

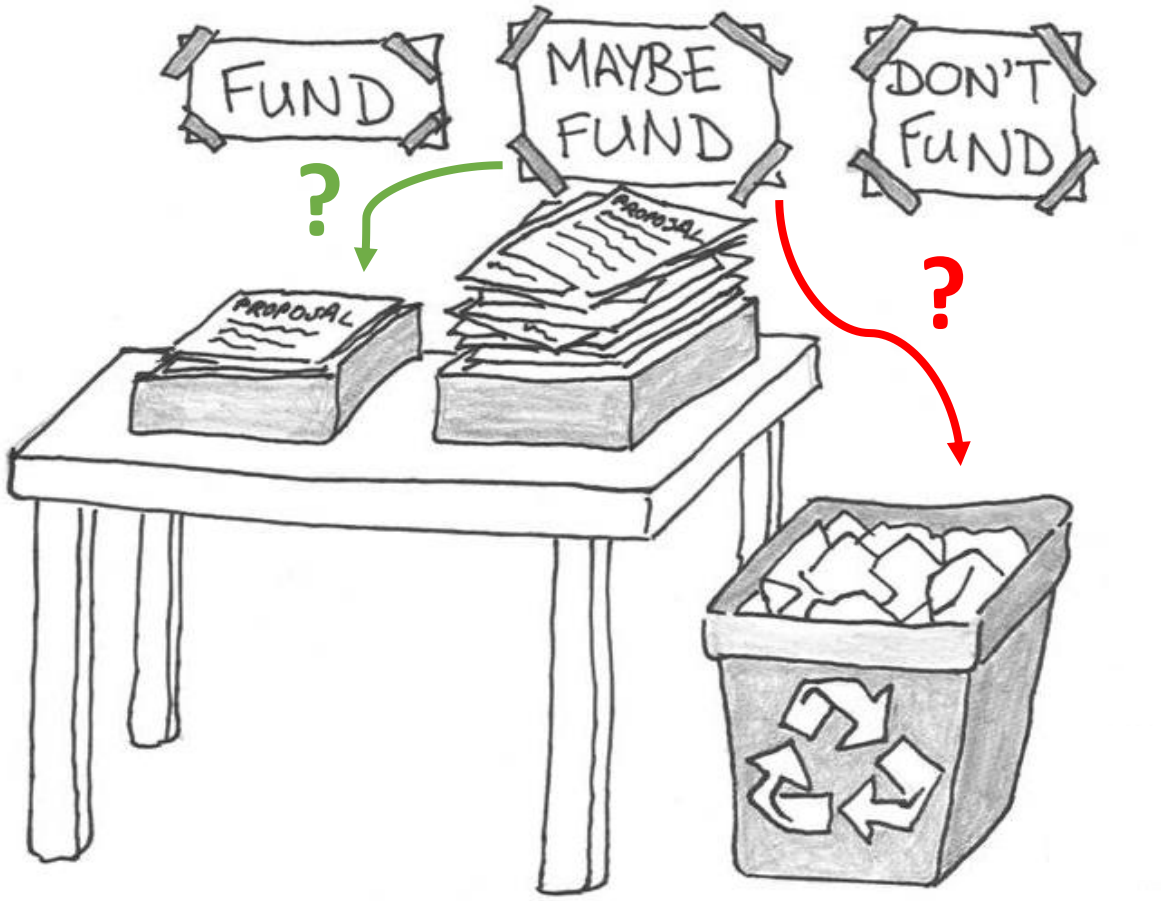
This is the hard reality in Review Panel 1 (2018-1 open call):



STEP 3 – PROPOSAL SELECTION BY COST SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

Upon receiving the RP Reports, the COST Association prepares a consolidated report for the Scientific Committee, which consists of two parts:

- The overall ranking of proposals, i.e. all RP rankings are merged into one ranking list;
- The compilation of each RP analysis on the trends, early signals and overall quality.



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Thank you for your attention and good luck with your application!

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