

Brussels, 19 December 2016
COST 133/14
REV

CSO DECISION

Subject: **Amendment of documents COST 133/14: COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval**

The “COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval” lays down the rules and procedure for the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of COST Action proposals. These rules replace the document 133/14 and shall be completed by accompanying guidelines.

The present rules shall enter into force on 19 December 2016.

The Committee of Senior Officials approved this document on 19 December 2016 by written procedure.

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COST ACTION PROPOSAL SUBMISSION, EVALUATION, SELECTION AND APPROVAL

The COST Committee of Senior Officials (“CSO”) having regard to
the Statutes of the COST Association as revised on 14 Sept 2016;
the Internal Rules of the COST Association;
the CSO Decision COST 132/14 REV, “Rules for the Participation in and Implementation of COST Activities”,
in accordance with its role as General Assembly of the COST Association,

Whereas:

- (1) COST Members have established an International not-for-profit Association, the COST Association, integrating the governance, management and implementation functions of COST.
- (2) COST contributes to the objective of strengthening the scientific and technological bases of the European Research Area by promoting the European-based scientific and technological networking encouraging all stakeholders to share, create and apply knowledge, thereby encouraging Europe to become more competitive.
- (3) COST shall be open to all fields in science and technology and wishes to foster multi- and interdisciplinary, **aiming to enable breakthrough scientific developments leading to new concepts, services and products.**
- (4) The set of “COST Implementation Rules” should provide a coherent, comprehensive and transparent frame to ensure efficient and harmonised implementation of activities, as well as ease access for all potential stakeholders, by promoting and facilitating participation from a wide range of researchers, engineers or scholars from universities, research centres and companies, as well as other relevant stakeholders (in particular small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and legal entities.
- (5) For the benefit of the Action Participants the set of COST Implementation Rules should be robust, stable and consistent and should focus on best interest of research communities and foster mutual trust in their networking activities.
- (6) COST should provide funding for activities of relevance for fulfilling COST mission and achieving COST objectives, more particularly for COST Actions, the COST networking instrument.
- (7) COST should further encourage participation of young talents and next generation leaders in science and technology, promote working opportunities for Early Career Investigators and gender balance.
- (8) COST should support integration of scientific research communities and increase the contribution of participants from identified Inclusiveness Target Countries in COST activities.
- (9) COST should fund networking activities in the field of science and technology destined only for peaceful purposes; any funding of activities related to sensitive technology development, armament or defence oriented research should be avoided. COST should support activities carried out in compliance with fundamental ethical principles.

- (10) COST should establish rules and procedures to govern the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of proposals for COST Actions and other activities where appropriate.
- (11) COST should protect EU financial interests and ensure sound financial management. COST is aware that the EU auditing procedures apply.

The CSO has adopted the present rules for “COST Action Proposal Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval” in accordance with the “Rules for Participation in and Implementation of COST activities”. They aim at further developing on the principles and rules contained in the “Rules for the Participation in and Implementation of COST Activities”.

The present rules shall be subordinated to and may not contravene the “Rules for the Participation in and Implementation of COST Activities”. In case of any contradiction between those CSO Decisions, the “COST Rules for Participation in and Implementation of COST Activities” shall prevail.

SUBJECT MATTER AND SCOPE

COST shall strive to implement transparent, cost-efficient, timely and simple evaluation and selection procedures.

This decision shall lay down the rules and procedure for the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of COST Action proposals. These rules derive from the basic principles laid down in the “Rules for Participation in and Implementation of COST Activities”.

These rules shall be further detailed and explained in the COST Vademecum and in the related Guidelines.

DEFINITIONS

Definitions of the “Rules for Participation in and Implementation of COST Activities” shall apply to this Decision.

GENERAL PROVISIONS

The present rules and procedure shall allow researchers, engineers, scholars or other stakeholders to submit proposals to jointly develop their own ideas and new initiatives across all fields of science and technology aiming notably at break-through scientific developments leading to new concepts, services and products.

The objective of the present rules and procedure described herein shall be to enhance the scientific excellence and transparency through an accessible bottom-up opportunity with rigorous peer review on a competitive basis.

COST Action proposals shall be submitted for evaluation and selection following the publication of the Open Call. They shall aim at addressing the COST mission and policies.

COST Action proposals shall guarantee that the proposed Action objectives shall be achieved by means of COST networking support using national or other R&D funding and resources.

1. BASIC PRINCIPLES

The present rules shall reflect the basic principles governing the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of proposals for COST Actions which shall ensure fairness, transparency, openness, excellence and inclusiveness.

COST shall make the best endeavours to avoid conflict of interest.

All those involved in the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of proposals shall commit to confidentiality.

2. OBLIGATION OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Each person involved in the submission, evaluation, selection and approval procedure (independent External Expert, Review Panel Member, Scientific Committee Member, CNC and CSO Member) shall:

- Treat confidentially any information and documents, in any form (i.e. paper or electronic), disclosed in writing or orally in relation to the performance of the evaluation;
- Not disclose, directly or indirectly, confidential information or documents relating to proposals or applicants, without prior written approval of the COST Association;
- Not discuss any proposal with others, including other evaluators or staff not directly involved in evaluating the proposal, except during formal discussions at dedicated Review Panels and Scientific Committee meetings;
- Not disclose any detail of the evaluation process and its outcomes or of any proposal submitted for evaluation for any purpose other than fulfilling their tasks as evaluator;
- Not disclose the names of other experts participating in the evaluation;
- Not communicate with proposers on any proposal during or after the evaluation until the approval by the CSO.

Further, under no circumstances should the proposers contact any of the actors involved in the evaluation, selection and approval procedure regarding their proposal. Any attempt to do so may lead to immediate exclusion of the proposal from the evaluation, selection and approval process.

3. COST OPEN CALL

The COST Open Call shall allow submitting proposals on a continuous basis;–.

COST shall publish on its website the official announcement of the Open Call indicating the Collection Date, the description of the procedure and complete schedule, and criteria against which COST Action proposals shall be evaluated and selected.

The COST Open Call shall enhance transparency of COST through an accessible bottom-up opportunity with rigorous peer review. Proposals shall be evaluated on a competitive basis, taking into account the available funds for the particular Collection Date.

The proposal shall be submitted by a Main Proposer acting on behalf of a network of proposers who see an opportunity for advancing scientific, technological or social knowledge and impact resulting from such advancements through the international coordination support offered by COST.

The Open Call shall be a one-stage submission process where proposals may be submitted at any time using a dedicated secure online tool. Proposals shall be gathered at a Collection Date, those submitted after that date shall be considered for the upcoming collection.

The Open Call follows the subsequent phases:

- Proposal Submission by a Main Proposer on behalf of a network of proposers;
- Proposal Assessment for Eligibility;
- Proposal Evaluation by independent External Experts and ad-hoc Review Panels;
- Proposal Selection by the Scientific Committee;
- Proposal Approval by the CSO.
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4. PROPOSAL SUBMISSION

Proposals shall be submitted by a network of proposers, represented by a Main Proposer. The network shall be composed of proposers from at least seven (7) COST Members amongst which a minimum number shall be from COST Inclusiveness Target Countries as detailed in Annex II to the present decision.

Proposals may be registered and submitted at any time during the year via a secured on-line tool designed for this purpose (e-COST). The on-line tool allows the Main Proposer to access, edit and submit the proposal until the chosen Collection Date. Only the last submitted version of a proposal shall be considered for evaluation.

Proposals shall be written in English, as no translation shall be provided and peer reviewers come from different countries.

5. PROPOSAL ASSESSMENT AGAINST ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

To be eligible, a proposal for a COST Action shall:

- a) Represent a network of proposers from at least seven (7) COST Members amongst which a minimum number shall be from COST Inclusiveness Target Countries as detailed in Annex II with proposers having a registered e-COST profile¹²;
- b) Be anonymous, hence contain no reference to the proposers' and/or institutions' names participating in the network of proposers, meaning that proposers and/or institutions' names should neither be explicitly mentioned nor be potentially identifiable³;
- c) Address science and technology challenges destined only for peaceful purposes;
- d) Respect word or page limits as described in the SESA Guidelines⁴;
- e) Be written in English, the working language of the COST Association.

¹ Proposers shall be aware that according to CSO Decision "Rules for Participation of Non-COST countries and Specific Organisations", International organisations may not propose new Actions, even if the researcher is based in a COST Member.

² European Commission, EU bodies, offices or agencies and European RTD Organisations may be part of the network of proposers. When non-COST Countries are part of the initial proposal, the network of proposers shall explain in the proposal the benefit of the participation of such stakeholders to the Action

³ Details in COST Open Call – Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) Guidelines.

⁴ COST Open Call – Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) Guidelines.

Proposals can be declared non-eligible at any point of the process should any breach of the above eligibility criteria be identified during the evaluation.

6. PROPOSAL EVALUATION

6.1. EXPERTS ROLE

Three different groups of experts shall intervene throughout the procedure towards selection of the best proposals: the independent External Experts, the ad-hoc Review Panels and the Scientific Committee.

6.1.1. EXTERNAL EXPERTS

Independent External Experts carry out the remote peer-review evaluation.

They shall be identified, selected and assigned to proposals on the basis of their scientific and technological expertise necessary for the evaluation of proposals. This shall be notably based on keywords chosen by the network of proposers themselves.

Whenever possible, each External Expert shall evaluate at least three proposals.

6.1.2. REVIEW PANELS

Ad-hoc Review Panels shall be established after each Collection Date based on the number and topics of received proposals from a pool of active researchers, engineers or scholars, previously nominated by the COST National Coordinators.

The experts shall register in the COST Expert Database (e-COST). The mandate of the Review Panel experts shall be of a maximum of 3 years.

The Review Panels shall be in charge of checking the quality of the independent External Expert evaluation outcome and resolving potential differences in their opinions.

As the outcome of their work, the Review Panels prepare a shortlist of proposals with their validated consensus reports and marks for examination and selection by the Scientific Committee.

In addition, the Review Panels shall prepare a report to the Scientific Committee using the templates provided by COST.

6.1.3. COST SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

The Scientific Committee shall guarantee that the present rules and procedures shall all be observed throughout the process. Specifically, the Scientific Committee shall be in charge of:

- a) Ensuring a quality control of independent External Experts;
- b) Examining membership and validating the ad-hoc Review Panels constituted for each Collection Date (number and composition);
- c) Identifying, among the list of proposals presented by the Review Panels, those that respond best to COST mission and policies;

- d) Establishing the shortlist of proposals that shall, together with a list on the evaluation results of all evaluated proposals, be presented to the CSO for approval.

6.2. PROPOSAL EVALUATION

Proposals shall be evaluated against the following two steps procedure.
During this process, the identity of the Main Proposer and of the network of proposers will be kept anonymous.

6.2.1. STEP 1 – EXTERNAL REMOTE EVALUATION

Each proposal shall be evaluated by a minimum of 3 independent External Experts identified, selected and assigned to proposals as described here above. The evaluation shall be performed remotely and each independent External Expert shall submit an evaluation report for each proposal he/she evaluates.

Further to the individual evaluation, a consensus shall be sought between the independent External Experts (remotely).

The consensus shall not be imposed; independent External Experts may maintain their views on the proposal.

6.2.2. STEP 2 – REVISION BY AD-HOC REVIEW PANELS

Further to the evaluation performed by the independent External Experts, the ad-hoc Review Panels shall carry out a quality check, deliberate how to manage differences in opinions, arbitrate and establish a ranked list of proposals having passed the overall threshold as described hereunder.

Review Panels shall:

- a) Review and validate the evaluation consensus reports and marks of the proposals for which the independent External Experts achieved consensus.
- b) For proposals without consensus, resolve the differences in opinions between the External Experts, using one of the following options:
 - Choose any mark within the range of marks awarded by the individual independent External Experts or the non-agreed consensus mark entered into e-COST as the review consensus mark and produce the consensus report.
 - In exceptional cases, ask for one or two additional independent External Experts to remotely evaluate the proposal. In this case the Review Panel shall make use of the additional evaluation reports to prepare the final consensus report and mark.
- c) After validation of consensus reports and marks, rank the proposals above the threshold.
- d) Strive for consistency of marking across the proposals within the Review Panel.
- e) Identify those proposals with potential high impact or that indicate emerging issues or potentially important future developments.

At their meeting, the Review Panels shall prepare their reports to the Scientific Committee.

6.3. EVALUATION CRITERIA

Proposals will be evaluated on the basis of the following evaluation criteria:

S&T EXCELLENCE	IMPACT	IMPLEMENTATION
■ Soundness of the challenge	■ Scientific, technological and/or socio-economic impact	■ Coherence and effectiveness of the work plan
■ Progress beyond the state-of the-art and innovation potential	■ Measures to maximise impact	■ Appropriateness of management structures and procedures
■ Added value of networking	■ Level of risk and level of potential innovation/breakthroughs	■ Network as a whole
Total Mark for the section: 25 points	Total Mark for the section: 20 points	Total Marks for the section: 20 points
TOTAL MARK AWARDED: 65 points		
OVERALL THRESHOLD: 45 points		

Proposals failing to achieve the overall threshold shall not be funded.

7. PROPOSAL SELECTION

Ahead of the meeting, the Scientific Committee shall receive the reports of the Review Panels as well as information on the composition of the network of proposers and other information considered relevant on the proposals, such as:

- Aggregated information on the network of proposers (breakdown, expertise, geographic, age and gender distribution);
- Plans to involve relevant participants or targeted stakeholders; openness to additional participants.

Based on this information, the Scientific Committee shall establish the shortlist of proposals for approval by the CSO.

In order to do so, the Scientific Committee shall:

1. Adopt the list of proposals which are of sufficiently high quality to be retained for possible funding based on the available budget for the call (the retained proposals);
2. Select among the retained proposals the ones for the final list on the basis of the following criteria applied sequentially:
 - a. S&T Excellence, Impact and Implementation as described in 6.3.
 - b. Compliance with COST Excellence and Inclusiveness policy with regard to Inclusiveness issue. A high degree of compliance with it shall be achieved by proposals:
 - i. Presenting a high proportion of COST Inclusiveness Target Countries represented in the proposal; and/or
 - ii. Having very well defined plans for including COST Inclusiveness Target Countries participants in the implementation of the Action; and/or
 - iii. Led by a Main Proposer from an ITC.
 - c. Applied on equal steps :

- i. Compliance with COST Excellence and Inclusiveness policy with regard to Early Career Investigators (ECI). A high degree of compliance with it shall be achieved by proposals:
 - 1. Presenting a high proportion of Early Career Investigators in the Network of Proposers; and/or
 - 2. Having very well defined plans for including Early Career Investigators in the implementation of the Action; and/or
 - 3. Led by a Main Proposer being an Early Career Investigator.
- ii. Compliance with COST Excellence and Inclusiveness policy with regard to Gender balance. A high degree of compliance with it shall be achieved by proposals:
 - 1. Presenting a good gender balance; and/ or
 - 2. Having very well defined plans for achieving gender balance in the implementation of the Action; and/or
 - 3. Led by a Main Proposer of the underrepresented gender.
- d. For proposals that shall be deemed equivalent after application of criteria under 2. a to c, achieving a balanced COST Actions' portfolio and promoting interdisciplinarity. This shall be done by selecting proposals addressing Research Areas and/ or Science Sub-Fields that are less extensively covered among the existing COST Actions' portfolio and those that are of a more interdisciplinary nature.

Detailed procedure shall be described in the Open Call - Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) Guidelines⁵. The Scientific Committee shall submit the final ranked list of selected proposals to the CSO for approval.

The SC shall adopt a SC recommendation per selected proposal and a SC comment per non-selected proposal among the retained proposals.

8. PROPOSAL APPROVAL

The final decision on approval and funding for new COST Actions shall be taken by the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) on the basis of the shortlist submitted by the Scientific Committee, together with a list on the evaluation results of all evaluated proposals taking into account the available budget. The CSO may decide not to approve Actions selected through the procedure described under paragraphs 5 to 7 of the present rules.

The draft of a successful proposal approved by the CSO shall form the basis of the Action's Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The start of the COST Action shall be described in the "COST Action Management, Monitoring and Final Assessment" rules⁶.

The result of the evaluation and selection shall be made available to the Main Proposer and the network of proposers via e-COST

9. REDRESS OF THE EVALUATION

In order to contribute to the fairness and transparency of the COST evaluation process, the COST Association has established a redress procedure. The Main Proposer shall thereby have the possibility to submit a request for assessment of the evaluation and potential redress.

Redress shall be allowed only in case of potential procedural shortcomings and factual errors, i.e., whenever:

⁵ COST Open Call – Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) Guidelines.

⁶ COST Action Management, Monitoring and Final Assessment".

- The network of proposers considers that the evaluation has not been carried out in accordance with the procedures set out in the current document;
- The network of proposers deems that the evaluation report bears a factual mistake.

Requests for redress dealing with the scientific judgment by the independent External Experts or of the Review Panels shall not be admissible.

The proposal selection by the Scientific Committee shall not be open to redress.

The redress procedure shall be designed to ensure a prompt and fair feedback to requests and shall be available in the COST Open Call - Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) Guidelines⁷.

10. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

COST expects ethical behaviour from all participants in COST activities in accordance with the principles established in the "COST Code of Conduct".

COST shall strive to avoid any conflict of interest in its evaluation, selection and approval procedure.

Actors involved in the evaluation, selection and approval of proposals may not take any benefit from any Action approved under the particular Collection Date they participated in.

The present rules shall apply to all players concerned by the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of COST Action proposals (CNC, independent External Experts, Review Panel Member, Scientific Committee Member, and CSO Member).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DEFINITION AND CASES

A Conflict of Interest with regard to the submission, evaluation, selection, and approval procedure shall be the risk that professional judgement or actions regarding a person's duties and responsibilities shall be unduly influenced by that person's professional or private interests. Each individual shall have only one role in the evaluation selection and approval of a COST Action.

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

1. Cases of Real Conflict of Interest

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

1. Has been involved in the preparation of the proposal;
2. Has been involved in any previous evaluation step in the same Collection Date.

2. Cases of Potential Conflict of Interest

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

1. Was aware of the preparation of the proposal;
2. Has a professional or personal relationship with a proposer;

⁷ COST Open Call – Submission, Evaluation, Selection and Approval (SESA) Guidelines.

3. Stands to benefit directly or indirectly if the proposal shall be accepted or rejected.

3. Cases of Perceived Conflict of Interest

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

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

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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

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

TABLE OF INCOMPATIBILITIES

This table presents cases where a position shall be incompatible with an evaluation, selection and approval step.

Steps	Main proposer and network of proposers	Independent External Expert	Review Panel Member	Scientific Committee Member
Step 1 Evaluation (External Experts)	X		X	X
Step 2 Revision (Review Panel)	X	X		X
Step 3 Selection (Scientific Committee)	X	X	X	
Final approval (CSO)	X	X	X	X

X = incompatible

Any individual having participated in the submission, evaluation, selection or approval of Action proposals shall observe these rules of conflict of interest.

CONSEQUENCES

The first duty of any person involved in the evaluation or selection procedures shall be to declare a Conflict of Interest.

Failure to declare the Conflict of Interest may have the following consequences:

- Notification to the COST Association Director;
- Notification to the respective CNC for Review Panel Members;
- Notification to the CSO for Scientific Committee Members;
- Removal of the expert from the COST Expert Database.

All cases of Conflict of Interest shall be recorded and, for nationally nominated evaluators (Review Panel Members and Scientific Committee Members), reported to the COST National Coordinator.

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

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

FINAL PROVISIONS

The present rules shall be binding in their entirety and directly applicable to all actors concerned by the submission, evaluation, selection and approval of COST Action proposals.

Any change or derogations to the present rules shall be subject to the approval of the CSO.

ANNEX I

List of Fields and Sub-Fields of Science and Technology⁸

Natural Sciences
Mathematics (research on methodologies of pure and applied mathematics, statistics and probability: mathematics and statistics applied to other fields of science are excluded)
Computer and Information Sciences
Physical Sciences (excluding engineering and nano-technology applications to be found under each engineering category)
Chemical sciences
Earth and related Environmental sciences
Biological sciences (excluding medical, clinical and agricultural applications)
Engineering and technology
Civil engineering
Electrical engineering, electronic engineering, Information engineering
Mechanical engineering
Chemical engineering
Materials engineering
Medical engineering (excluding biomaterials and physical characteristics of living material as related to medical implants, devices, sensors)
Environmental engineering (excluding environmental biotechnology)
Environmental biotechnology
Industrial biotechnology
Nano-technology
Other engineering and technologies
Medical and Health Sciences
Basic medicine
Clinical medicine
Health Sciences
Medical biotechnology
Other medical sciences
Agricultural sciences
Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (excluding agricultural biotechnology)
Animal and dairy science (excluding animal biotechnology)
Veterinary science
Agricultural biotechnology
Other agricultural sciences
Social Sciences
Psychology

⁸ Science and Technology Fields and Sub-Fields correspond to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Fields of Science used for international and European R&D statistics (source: OECD Document DSTI/EAS/STP/NESTI(2006)19/FINAL)

Economics and business
Educational sciences (excluding institutional and economic aspects)
Sociology
Law
Political Science
Social and economic geography
Media and communications
Other social sciences
Humanities
History and Archeology
Languages and literature
Philosophy, Ethics and Religion (excluding philosophy and ethics applied to other fields of science)
Arts (arts, history of arts, performing arts, music)
Other humanities

ANNEX II

Required minimum number of COST Inclusiveness Target Countries' participants per number of COST Members represented in a proposal

Number of COST Members	Minimum number of ITC
7	3
8	3
9	3
10	4
11	4
12	4
13	5
14	5
15	5
16	6
17	6
18	7
19	7
20	7
21 or more	8