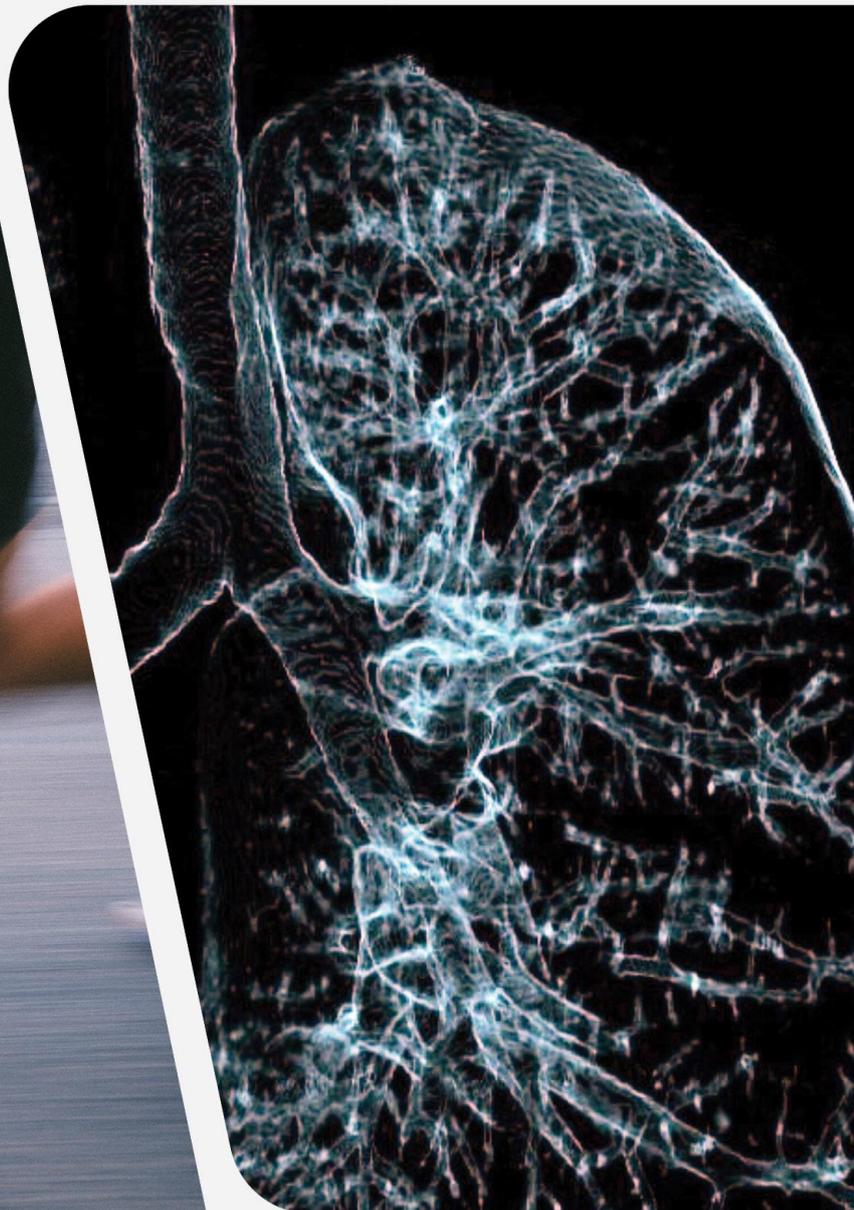


# Eligibility and evaluation guidelines

## HealthCare Research Call

*Call for Proposals 2026*



*A world to discover*

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## 1. Introduction

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This guide sets out the procedure for evaluating and selecting proposals in the HealthCare Research Call (hereinafter, proposals and individually proposal) and contains the guidelines and evaluation criteria to be followed in scoring a grant proposal.

The "la Caixa" Foundation has established that the following principles should govern all assessment processes for the HealthCare Research Call:

- » **TRANSPARENCY.** Information about the basic principles that govern the process of evaluating and selecting proposals, and procedures followed for that purpose, is available to Applicants, evaluators and the general public on the Call for Proposals website. In addition, Project Leaders receive timely information on the status of their proposal at each stage of the process and, when appropriate, feedback regarding the evaluation of that proposal.
- » **EQUITY.** Proposals are evaluated based solely on the merits they demonstrate in relation to the evaluation criteria explicitly defined for each stage of the process, with no other factors being taken into consideration. All proposals are treated equally and according to the same evaluation criteria. All proposals undergo an assessment process conducted by expert, independent evaluators.
- » **EFFICIENCY.** The "la Caixa" Foundation's grants are characterised by the thoroughness with which the proposal assessment process is conducted and the rigour applied in complying with the stipulated procedures. Punctuality in meeting established deadlines, all of which are known to Project Leaders, is of the utmost importance. The system has been designed to allow evaluators sufficient time to perform their scoring with high standards.
- » **QUALITY.** The "la Caixa" Foundation's grants are awarded solely on the criteria of scientific excellence and quality of the Project, the potential value of the proposal, its social relevance and impact, and the suitability and research potential of the Project Leader and Team. For this reason, and to ensure that the evaluators perform their duties adequately, they are appointed in accordance with their area of expertise.

The selection of a proposal comprises a maximum of three phases:

**ELIGIBILITY:** All Applications received will be reviewed to ensure they fulfil the Application criteria published in the Rules for Participation of this Call.

**REMOTE PRE-SELECTION:** Each eligible proposal is evaluated by three to four experts in the relevant research field(s). Following this remote assessment, the proposals with the highest scores in each Proposal category will advance to the next evaluation phase.

**SELECTION COMMITTEE EVALUATION:** Shortlisted proposals from the remote review will be invited to an online interview with a Selection Committee composed of eight to twelve experts. This committee will conduct the final evaluation and make the final selection.

## 2. Eligibility

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During the eligibility phase, the format of the proposal will be validated. The Grant Project Office checks the suitability of the proposals submitted by the established deadline and their compliance with the formal requirements of the Call, based on the Application criteria described in section 5 of the Rules for Participation.

Moreover, any application that does not comply with the requirements set forth in section 3 and 6 of the Rules for participation (e.g. incomplete, incoherent information, application in a language other than English, proposals out of the focus of the Call, etc.) may be discarded at any time through the eligibility and evaluation processes.

If a proposal is dismissed by the eligibility process, the "la Caixa" Foundation will send an email notification to the Applicant. **No redress or appeal procedure will be admitted.**

## 3. Remote pre-selection

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Proposals sent for pre-selection evaluation are reviewed by three or four peer reviewers from the same research field(s) as the proposal or from a closely related field. This phase of the evaluation is carried out through the online platform.

The evaluation process for the pre-selection is as follows:

- » Proposals that fulfil the eligibility criteria will be sent to three peer reviewers for remote assessment.
- » Each peer reviewer will assign a score to the proposal according to the established evaluation criteria. All scores will be normalised (see Box – Normalisation process, in Section 7).
- » The final score for a proposal is calculated as the weighted average of the normalised scores of each peer reviewer.
- » If there is a significant discrepancy between the highest and lowest normalized scores assigned by the peer reviewers assessing the same proposal, that proposal will be sent to a fourth peer reviewer if it has a potential to be pre-selected. The final score will then be recalculated using the four normalised scores.
- » Proposals will be scored and a ranking for each Proposal category will be obtained. A shortlist of proposals will be pre-selected per each Proposal category: 18-20 proposals in Pilot studies, 15-18 proposals in Retrospective evaluations, and 12-15 proposals in New interventions.

### 3.1. Assignment of evaluators for the remote pre-selection

The pre-selection evaluation phase is carried out by independent peer reviewers who are recognised experts and researchers from the different key fields related to this Call. The selection of a pool of peer reviewers is conducted at the beginning of the Call by the Grant Project Office. For this selection, every year a data-scraping process is performed to update the scientific profiles of the experts and select those ones that will conform the pool of peer-reviewers (experts based in Spain or Portugal are not eligible). With the information gathered in

the scraping process and the keywords listed by the PL in the application, a matching process is performed with the objective of finding the most suitable group of three peer-reviewers to evaluate the proposals in the remote evaluation phase, independently of the Proposal category. Then, **each peer reviewer could evaluate proposals from any of the three Proposal categories** included in the Call. These peer reviewers will have expressed both their willingness to be part of this phase of the evaluation and their suitability for the research field(s) of this Call for Proposals.

Each peer reviewer will initially receive a maximum of 15 and a minimum of 5 proposals. However, this threshold may be adjusted based on the needs of re-assignments.

Each peer reviewer does not have a pre-established quota per category and must not compare proposals from different categories.

### 3.2. General considerations and recommendations for evaluators

Peer reviewers involved in the remote pre-selection will accept an agreement with the "la Caixa" Foundation through the online system, whereby they undertake to maintain the confidentiality of proposals examined, declare any conflicts of interest, accept the code of conduct and commit to follow the guidelines and recommendations provided by the "la Caixa" Foundation in this document.

Before beginning their evaluation, evaluators are expected to familiarise themselves with the Evaluation Criteria (detailed in Section 7 of the **Rules for Participation**). They should also review this **Evaluation Process Guide** and the **Code of Conduct for Evaluators**. It is recommended that they become familiar with the Call by reading several proposals before starting to evaluate them.

To score proposals during the pre-selection evaluation phase, peer reviewers will use a scoring scale with the criteria for evaluation, each of which has a specific weight (detailed in Section 7 of the **Rules for Participation**).

Each peer reviewer must provide a rationale for each criterion, along with a concise written brief that includes the reasoning behind their scoring, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. The main objective of the rationale is to ensure objective and well-justified evaluations to be useful feedback in case of a resubmission of the proposal in subsequent editions.

The **use of AI tools by evaluators in writing their comments is not allowed**, except for translation or grammar correction purposes, provided that such tools do not compromise the confidentiality of the information. In all cases, the content of the report must be original and authored by the expert.

An AI-based tool is integrated into the online system to identify potential errors or inconsistencies in the evaluation report at the time of submission. Any flagged information will be shown to the reviewer, who may decide whether to take it into account before submitting the report.

These evaluation reports will be made accessible to candidates and members of the online Selection Committee in the next evaluation phase, along with the overall score of the proposal. Therefore, evaluators should be extremely careful with their wording and respectful towards

the proposals presented. Comments should have a strictly professional tone and a constructive spirit. Under no circumstances should comments:

- » reveal information about the identity of the evaluator;
- » contain offensive, discriminatory or improper statements; or
- » be inconsistent with the numerical score.

In order to allow evaluators to score the proposals free from pressure and act with maximum independence, their identity will not be made public while the evaluation phases are open. However, once the grants have been awarded, the complete list of evaluators (including full name and institution) who have intervened in the evaluation phases will be published on the ”la Caixa” Foundation website.

### 3.3. Evaluation of a proposal in the remote pre-selection

#### » Scoring scale.

For each proposal, **peer reviewers will score each evaluation criterion using a two-decimal number from 1 to 8** based on following scale of values.

RATING	Exceptional	Excellent	Good	Poor	Very poor
SCORE	7.50 to 8.00	6.50 to 7.49	5.50 to 6.49	4.00 to 5.49	1.00 to 3.99

These scores will be weighted accordingly and added together to obtain a final score for each proposal, rounded to two decimal places.

#### » Evaluation criteria.

Peer reviewers will carry out the pre-selection evaluation of all proposals in line with the evaluation criteria described below. To score proposals, peer reviewers will use a qualification grid with the evaluation criteria to be assessed, each of which will have a specific weight.

Each peer reviewer will also provide a rationale, along with a brief written explanation, of the reasons for the score of each proposal evaluated, as well as its strengths and weaknesses.

The same evaluation criteria will be applied to all proposals, as well as the established weights that apply to each criterion. However, the peer reviewer must have into consideration under which Proposal category the application was submitted and do not compare proposals of different categories.

Evaluation criteria are described in the **Rules for Participation document, Section 7**, are also detailed here:

#### a) Need and significance (Weight: 20%):

- » Relevance of the need or problem to be solved in the context of the state of the art.
- » Potential impact of the proposed intervention or evaluation on the target population and coherence of the scalability plan.

#### b) Scientific proposal and methodology (Weight: 60%):

- » Soundness of the hypothesis, clarity of the research question and coherence of the objectives.

- » Methodological robustness: choice of trial or evaluation format, sample-size justification and statistical power, bias-control measures, demonstrated access to data or population, etc.
- » Workplan and timeline: alignment of tasks with the project's objectives and a realistic distribution of activities throughout the execution period.

**c) Proposal Feasibility (Weight: 20%):**

- » Capacity of the team to bring the project to execution. If applicable, capacity, relevance and commitment of collaborating institutions (Consortium or Partner Organizations).
- » Viability of the proposed intervention/evaluation (including budget; study limitations and contingency plan; ethical, social, legal and environmental project implications).

**» Pre-selection of proposals.**

Once the total score for each proposal is established by each of the three peer reviewers, results are received by the Grant Project Office and an average score calculated. The system monitors the consistency of evaluations among reviewers who examine and score the same proposals, also considering the average score of each reviewer across all their proposals. Scores are weighted according to the keywords-matching value associated with the peer reviewer and the proposal (see Normalisation process in section 7).

If there are any significant discrepancies between the three scores assigned to a proposal that could determine whether it passes the threshold for the next evaluation phase, the "la Caixa" Foundation will send that proposal to a fourth peer reviewer for evaluation. The average score will then be calculated considering the four peer-review evaluation scores.

Proposals will be ranked based on their scores, and a shortlist of the highest-scoring proposals in each category will be created to advance to the next evaluation phase.

Once this pre-selection remote evaluation phase is complete, Project Leaders will be informed whether they have been pre-selected or not.

## 4. Selection Committees evaluation

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A **Selection Committee** for each Proposal category will conduct **online interviews** to evaluate the pre-selected proposals and determine the final selection. The members of these Selection Committees have not participated in the remote evaluation phase of the same Call.

### 4.1. Assignment of evaluators for the Selection Committees

The Selection Committees are formed by international experts from different disciplinary areas within a Proposal category. The Committee is characterised by the integration of the knowledge and scientific approaches of its members. These experts will have expressed both their willingness to be part of this phase of the evaluation process, as well as their expertise in the research fields of this Call for Proposals.

Experts involved in the selection phase will accept through the online system an agreement with the "la Caixa" Foundation whereby they undertake to maintain the confidentiality of proposals examined, declare any conflicts of interest, accept the code of conduct and commit to follow the guidelines and recommendations provided by the "la Caixa" Foundation.

There are three Selection Committees, one for each Proposal category. Each Selection Committee will consist of eight to twelve internationally recognised experts.

### 4.2. General considerations and recommendations for evaluators in the Selection Committees

Each Selection Committee will receive information about the proposal and the corresponding Project Leader sufficiently in advance to enable them to prepare adequately for the interviews. The Selection Committees will also have access to the scores and evaluations given to each proposal by the peer reviewers who were involved in the pre-selection evaluation phase. To the extent that they deem appropriate, evaluators may consider such information when evaluating and scoring the proposals.

Prior to the Selection Committee meetings, the best practice is for evaluators to familiarise themselves with the Evaluation Criteria (see Section 7 of Rules for Participation of the Call and section 4.3 in this document) and the process in general. Likewise, it is recommended that they become familiar with the procedure by reading the Online System Manual. Information regarding the pre-selected proposals to be evaluated will be available to all members of the Selection Committee on the online system at least three to four weeks before the interviews. The online system will be open to allow comments or annotations that may be helpful during the interviews. Evaluators' final comments and scores will be entered into the same online system during the interviews.

Once the grants have been awarded, the complete list of evaluators (by full name and institution) who have taken part in the Selection Committee process will be published on the "la Caixa" Foundation website.

### 4.3. Evaluation of a proposal by the Selection Committees

#### » Scoring scale

The Selection Committee members will **score the various aspects of the proposal after the online interview** in accordance with the evaluation criteria. Each expert on the Selection Committee will score each evaluation criterion using a two-decimal number **from 1 to 5** (where 1 is the lowest).

These scores will be weighted correspondingly by the platform and added together to obtain **one final score for each proposal, rounded to two decimal places**. This score will determine the final ranking of the proposals in each Proposal category, and therefore which proposals will be selected and funded by the Call.

The Selection Committee will carry out an evaluation of all proposals, including the proposal documents provided on the online platform and the online interview with the Project Leader, according to the evaluation criteria.

Each expert will also provide a rationale, in a brief written explanation, of the reasons for the score of each proposal evaluated as well as its strengths and weaknesses.

#### » Evaluation criteria

Evaluation criteria are described in the **Rules for Participation document, Section 7**, and also detailed here:

##### a) Need and scientific proposal (Weight: 60%):

- » Relevance of the need or problem to be solved in the context of the state of the art and potential impact of the proposed intervention or evaluation on the target population.
- » Soundness of the hypothesis, clarity of the research question and coherence of the objectives.
- » Methodological robustness: choice of trial or evaluation format, sample-size justification and statistical power, bias-control measures, demonstrated access to data or population, etc.
- » Workplan and timeline: alignment of tasks with the project's objectives and a realistic distribution of activities throughout the execution period.

##### b) Proposal Feasibility (Weight: 25%):

- » Capacity of the team to bring the project to execution. If applicable, capacity, relevance and commitment of collaborating institutions (Consortium or Partner Organizations).
- » Viability of the proposed intervention/evaluation (including budget; study limitations and contingency plan; ethical, social, legal and environmental project implications).

##### c) Scalability plan (Weight: 15%):

- » Scalability plan: coherence of the scalability plan and feasibility of integrating the expected results into the Spanish and/or Portuguese healthcare systems.

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**» Interview content**

Online interviews enable the Selection Committee to assess the quality and consistency of the proposal being evaluated, based on more detailed and nuanced considerations. The interview allows evaluators to resolve any questions that arise from reviewing the proposal and to gauge the ability of the Project Leader to defend their Project according to the evaluation criteria.

During the interview, the Project Leader's theoretical knowledge may be tested, although this is not the main objective. First and foremost, interviews are used to judge the merit of the proposal, based on the evaluation criteria.

The online interview seeks to:

- expand on the information provided in the proposal, focusing on the scientific excellence and impact of the Project;
- evaluate the Project Leader's and Project Team members' scientific and professional potential in relation to their capacity to implement the Project; and
- resolve doubts or seek clarification on matters not included in the proposal.

Formal aspects to consider in the interview by evaluators

- Interviews will be conducted by the Project Leader and will be entirely in English.
- Each interview will last 25 minutes. Project Leaders will briefly summarise their proposal in 10 minutes. The Selection Committee will then ask any questions they deem relevant to assess the proposal properly (Q&A). If necessary, the PL may be accompanied by up to two Team Members or PIs, who can assist in the Q&A phase.
- After the interview, experts will have 10 to 15 minutes to discuss the proposal, if necessary, and to enter scores and comments into the system.
- A representative of the "la Caixa" Foundation will chair the interview, ensuring adherence to established schedules and moderating the discussion, if necessary.

There are no established protocols regarding the form of address. Nevertheless, the interviews must be characterised by their formality and the relevance of the questions.

- Evaluators comprising the Selection Committee will not introduce themselves to the Project Leader.
- In order to ensure confidentiality of internal discussions, the "la Caixa" Foundation will ensure that the Project Leader leaves the session after their interview and before the discussion of the committee.
- The Selection Committee should avoid discussing previous interviews when a new Project Leader is entering the session.
- At the end of the last interview, the selection committee will deliberate and discuss, and each expert will decide their final scores, which will determine the final ranking.

## 5. Feedback to Project Leaders

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Project leaders will be informed whether they have been selected or not for funding by the HealthCare Research Call.

Once the evaluation process is finished, feedback reports will be sent to all Project Leaders. These reports aim to provide Project Leaders with a general understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their Projects as identified by the experts during the evaluation process.

Specifically, they will contain a quantitative evaluation of the proposal's performance in comparison with other proposals within the same Proposal category, and qualitative comments on the value of the Project. The reports received by Project leaders are reviewed, and, in the case of the selection committees, compiled with the support of an AI tool.

The reports are intended as an informative tool for the researchers, and no redress procedure will be available at this point.

## 6. Awarded grants

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After the final discussion, the members of each Selection Committee should express their agreement with the outcome of the process, including the final ranking of the proposals evaluated.

The number of projects to be awarded will depend on the total budget requested by the highest-ranked proposals, up to the maximum amount allocated for each Proposal category. While the intention is to distribute the budget per category as outlined in the Rules for Participation, the final allocation will always depend on the quality of the proposals submitted under this Call.

If a Selection Committee considers the level of the proposals falls below the minimum standard required to be awarded a grant, any unallocated budget will be reassigned by the "la Caixa" Foundation to the proposals of the other Proposal categories, following the ranking established by the corresponding Selection Committee.

## 7. Appendix

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### » Remote evaluation final score

Once the remote evaluation process is complete, the system will collect the three scores assigned to the proposal. The procedure to obtain the final score that will be used for the ranking is as follows:

- Each peer reviewer will assess each proposal and assign a score ranging from 1 (min.) to 8 (max.) to each criterion. **The scores for each criterion will be given to two decimal places.**
- By means of the weighting associated with each sub-criterion, the system will calculate a weighted score for the proposal that ranges from 1 to 8. **This number represents the score by that reviewer for a specific proposal and will be rounded to three decimal places.**

- The Grant Project Office will receive three scores associated with each proposal, which will then undergo a process of normalisation (see Remote Evaluation Normalisation Formula). **The final score for a proposal will be obtained by calculating the average of the three normalised scores and rescaling it to the 1-8 range.**
- If there is a significant discrepancy between the highest and lowest normalised scores assigned by the peer reviewers assessing the same proposal, that proposal will be sent to a fourth peer reviewer. The new final score will be calculated as the average of the four scores.

The step-by-step procedure to obtain the final score that will be used for the ranking is detailed below:

<b>BOX - Normalisation process</b>	
Prior to computing the average, the scores are normalised. Scores are normalised via a two-step process:	
<b>1. “TENDENCY”:</b> Scores are normalised according to (I) the standard deviation of the peer reviewer’s scores across all editions and (II) the standard deviation of the scores in the current edition. The intent is to minimise the effect of harshness or leniency bias among reviewers.	<b>2. “WEIGHTED-MATCHING”:</b> Scores are weighted according to the keywords-matching value associated with the peer reviewer and the proposal. The aim of this step is to reflect the peer reviewer’s familiarity with the discipline of the proposal.
The specific calculations for this procedure can be found in the Remote Evaluation Normalisation Formula below (steps 2 and 3).	

**Remote Evaluation Normalisation Formula**

A = proposal

p = peer reviewer

w<sub>s</sub> = weight associated with each sub-criterion

s = sub-criterion (1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2)

i = editions in which the peer reviewer has participated

1 < mark<sub>A,p</sub> < 8

E<sub>A</sub> = average score

w<sub>A,p</sub> = weight of the peer reviewer with respect to proposal A

$\frac{w_{A,p}}{\sum_A w_{A,p}}$  = normalised matching-weight

$\frac{w_{A,p}}{\sum_A w_{A,p}}$  correctmark<sub>A,p</sub> = Final score

**Step 1:** Calculation of the score for each proposal according to the weighted sub-criteria:

$$mark_{A,p} = \sum_{s=1,1,1,\dots}^2 mark_{A,p,s} W_s$$

**Step 2:** Normalisation of the score according to the peer reviewer's mean and standard deviation:

$$normmark1_{A,p} = \frac{mark_{A,p} - mean_p}{Stddev_p}$$

Goal of this step: to normalise by accounting for the effect of the mean and standard deviation of a reviewer's scores across all editions of the Call in which the reviewer has participated (historical record).

**Step 3:** Normalisation of the score according to the Call mean and standard deviation:

$$normmark2_{A,p} = \frac{normmark1_{A,p} - mean_{normmark1}}{Stddev_{normmark1}}$$

Goal of this step: to normalise by considering the oscillation in scoring in the current Call across all reviewers compared to each other.

**Step 4:** Rescaling considering the original Call score and the evaluator's historical record:

$$reescmark1_{A,p} = (normmark2_{A,p} * Stddev_p) + (mean_p + \frac{mean_{convhist p} - mean_p}{k})$$

Where:  $mean_{convhist p} = \frac{\sum_i n_{A_i} * mean_i}{n_A}$

and  $k$  is a correction factor used to adjust the impact on the score of the distance between the historical mean of a given evaluator and the weighted mean of all editions in which that evaluator has participated.

Goal of this step: to rescale taking into account the original score of the proposal as well as the historical record of the evaluator and its differences from the weighted mean of all editions in which the evaluator has reviewed.

**Step 5:** Rescaling to the previous range 1 to 8:

$$reescmark2_{A,p} = \frac{reescmark1_{A,p} - \min(reescmark1)}{\max(reescmark1) - \min(reescmark1)} * (\max(originalmark_A) - \min(originalmark_A)) + \min(originalmark_A)$$

**Step 6:** Corrector factor for peer reviewers with a small number of evaluated proposals:

$$Variation = reescmark2_{A,p} - originalmark_{A,p}$$

$$Corrector Factor_{A,p} = \frac{number\ projects_p}{threshold(number\ projects)}$$

$$; \quad threshold(number\ projects) = 20$$

$$If\ number\ projects_p > threshold(number\ projects) \rightarrow Corrector\ Factor_{A,p} = 1$$

$$correctmark_{A,p} = originalmark_{A,p} + variation * Corrector\ Factor_{A,p}$$

**Step 7:** Calculation of discrepancies:

$$n = \max(correctmark_{A,p}) - \min(correctmark_{A,p})$$

**Step 8:** Calculation of the final score for each proposal considering the weighted matching:

$$\frac{E_A}{n} = \sum_{p=1}^3 \frac{w_{A,p}}{\sum_A w_{A,p}} correctmark_{A,p}$$

there are discrepancies among the peer reviewers, the calculation for the final score would be:

$$\frac{E_A}{n} = \sum_{p=1}^4 \frac{w_{A,p}}{\sum_A w_{A,p}} correctmark_{A,p}$$

After calculating the discrepancy and sending proposals with the potential to be pre-selected to a fourth reviewer, the normalisation is recalculated considering the four scores in those cases.

All final normalised scores are then weighted according to the discipline-matching value associated with the peer reviewer for the proposal.

**» Selection committee final score**

The final score for a given proposal is derived from the average of the scores indicated in the system by each of the experts for that proposal (see Selection Committee Normalisation Formula below).

A final score with two decimal places will be used.

**Selection Committee Formula**

$A$  = proposal

$p$  = expert

$w_c$  = weight associated with each criterion

$s$  = sub-criterion (1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2)

$1 < mark_{A,p} < 5$

$\underline{E}_A$  = average score

$n$  = total number of experts in the Selection Committee

**Step 1:** Calculation of the score for each proposal according to the weighted sub-criteria

$$mark_{A,p} = \sum_{s=1, \dots}^3 mark_{A,p,c} w_c$$

**Step 2:** Calculation of the average score for each proposal. The resulting number is the final score for that proposal:

$$\underline{E}_A = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{p=1}^n mark_{A,p}$$