Health Research 2017
Call for Proposals
Evaluation process guide

"la Caixa" Foundation

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0 Introduction

This guide sets out the procedure for evaluating and selecting proposals in the Health Research 2017– "la Caixa" Foundation – Call for Proposals and presents the guidelines and evaluation criteria to be followed to score a grant proposal.

The "la Caixa" Foundation has established that the following principles should govern all assessment processes for the Health Research 2017 – "la Caixa" Foundation – Call for Proposals:

- **TRANSPARENCY.** Project Leaders, evaluators and the general public have access to the basic principles that govern the process of evaluating and selecting Proposals and procedures followed for that purpose, which are available on the Call for Proposals website. In addition, Project Leaders receive timely information on the status of the Proposal at each stage of the process and, when appropriate, feedback on the outcome of the evaluation of their proposal.

- **EQUITY.** Proposals are evaluated based only on the merits they have accredited in relation to the evaluation criteria explicitly defined for each stage of the process, not taking into consideration any other factor. All Proposals are treated equally and according to the same evaluation criteria. All Proposals must pass an assessment process conducted by expert, independent evaluators.

- **EFFICIENCY.** The "la Caixa" Foundation grants are characterised by the thoroughness with which the Proposal assessment process is conducted and the rigor in complying with the stipulated procedures. Punctuality in meeting deadlines, which are published, and hence known by Project Leaders, is of the utmost importance. The system has been designed in such a way that evaluators can have sufficient time to perform their scoring with quality standards.

- **QUALITY.** The "la Caixa" Foundation grants are based 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 Project Leader's career trajectory and research potential (and that of the Co-Project Leader, if applicable). For this reason, and to ensure that the evaluators perform their duties suitably, they are appointed in accordance with both their previous experience in this type of evaluation processes and their CV.

The evaluation and selection of Proposals is carried out taking into consideration the recommendations of the European Science Foundation.

The evaluation of a Proposal is comprised of a maximum of three phases:

a) **Eligibility criteria scrutiny:** The Grant Project Office examines all Proposals received by the deadline and rejects those that do not meet the formal criteria published in the Call guidelines or that are incomplete.

b) **Pre-selection Peer-review Process (Remote Assessment):** Each eligible Proposal is sent to three peer-reviewers, experts in the Thematic Area and disciplinary field corresponding to the Proposal. After a remote assessment, Proposals receiving the highest scores will proceed to the next evaluation phase.

c) **Selection Committees:** Project Leaders whose Proposals have passed the pre-selection evaluation phase will be invited to a face-to-face interview in front of an Expert Selection Committee composed of evaluators with extensive experience in the Thematic Area of the Proposal presented.

1 Eligibility criteria scrutiny

The Grant Project Office checks the suitability of the Proposals submitted by the established deadlines and their compliance with the formal requisites of the Call, including the required documentation.

Therefore, the evaluators must consider all Proposals submitted to them for examination and scoring as formally eligible, as they have not been dismissed during the previous eligibility scrutiny phase.

2 Pre-selection Peer-review Process (Remote Assessment)

Proposals sent for pre-selection evaluation are reviewed by peer reviewers, via remote assessment, from the same disciplinary field(s) as the Proposal evaluated or from a closely related field.

The evaluation process for the Proposals by each peer reviewer is as follows:

1. The final mark for each peer reviewer is calculated according to the established evaluation criteria and weights.
2. The final mark for each Proposal is calculated by adding the marks of all the peer-reviewers and weighing them accordingly, then an average mark is taken.
3. If there are any significant discrepancies amongst the peer reviewers regarding a Proposal, the "la Caixa" Foundation will send the Proposal to a fourth peer reviewer for evaluation.
4. Each Proposal's marks are normalised according to each peer reviewer, and the final classification is thereby obtained.

2.1. Formation of the peer-review remote assessment

The selection of peer reviewers is determined at the beginning of the Call by the Grant Project Office. These peer reviewers have expressed both their willingness to be part of this phase of the evaluation phase and their adequacy in the specific Thematic Area and the disciplinary fields of this Call for Proposals.

There will be a pool of peer reviewers for each disciplinary field within the five thematic research areas defined for this Call.

Each Proposal will be assigned to and evaluated by three peer reviewers, who will be selected randomly from the list of peer reviewers corresponding to the disciplinary field identified in the Proposal.

In general, no peer reviewer can evaluate more than 30 Proposals. However, these thresholds may be adapted according to the number and type of Proposals submitted for this Call for Proposals.

2.2. General considerations and recommendations for peer review evaluators

The pre-selection evaluation phase is carried out by independent peer-reviewers: renowned professors and researchers from each disciplinary field.

Peer reviewers involved in the pre-evaluation phase will sign an agreement with the "la Caixa" Foundation whereby they undertake to maintain the confidentiality of the Proposals examined.

Before starting to evaluate a Proposal, the best practice is for evaluators to familiarise themselves with the Evaluation Criteria (detailed in Section 7 of the **Call for Proposals**) and how the process functions in general. They should also review this **Evaluation Process Guide**

and the **Code of Conduct for Evaluators**. Similarly, it is recommended that they become familiar with the procedure by reading a certain number of Proposals before starting to evaluate them.

Evaluators sign an agreement with the "la Caixa" Foundation whereby they undertake to maintain the confidentiality of Proposals examined. Similarly, evaluators undertake not to use the information with which they are provided for any use other than that which corresponds to the evaluation of the Proposals.

To rate Proposals during the pre-selection evaluation phase, peer reviewers will use a rating scale with the criteria and sub-criteria for evaluation, each of which will have a certain weight (detailed in Section 7 of the **Call for Proposals**).

Each peer reviewer must give a rationale (i.e., a qualitative evaluation) of the different criteria for each application along with a concise written brief that includes the reasoning behind their evaluation of each Proposal, as well as its strong and weak points.

The purpose of this brief is twofold:
- To provide additional information for the Expert Selection Committee who participate in the final phase of the evaluation phase through interviews.
- To break a tie amongst Proposals that get the same score during the evaluation phase.

These comments will be accessible to members of the Expert Selection Committee, along with the overall score of the application. Subsequently, a person designated as a "Reporter" will make a final pre-selection report on the Proposals, taking into account the qualitative comments from each evaluator.

The Grant Project Office will not review or filter any observations, so evaluators should be extremely careful with their wording and respectful of the Proposals presented. In any case, comments should have a strictly professional tone and a constructive spirit.
In no case should comments:
- Give information about the identity of the evaluator.
- Contain offensive, discriminatory or improper statements.
- Not correspond to or be inconsistent with the numerical score.

So that evaluators can score the Proposals free from pressure and act with maximum independence, the composition of the peer review remote assessment or the Expert Selection Committee will not be made public as long as the evaluation phases are open. However, once the grants have been awarded, the complete list of evaluators (by first name and surname, position and institution) who have intervened in the evaluation phases will be published on the "la Caixa" Foundation website, without specifying the phase in which they have taken part.

2.3. Evaluation of a Proposal in the pre-selection phase

Score

For each Proposal, peer-reviewers will rate each evaluation sub-criteria using a whole number from 1-8 according to the following scale of values.

Rating	Score
Exceptional	8
Excellent	7
Very good	6
Good	5
Average	4
Mediocre	3
Poor	2
Very poor	1

These scores will be weighted correspondingly and added in order to obtain a final score for each Proposal, rounded to two decimal places.

Aspects evaluated

The 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, as will each sub-evaluation criteria.

Each peer reviewer shall 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 evaluation criteria, sub-criteria and aspects that will be taken into account for all projects, and the established weights that apply to each criteria and sub-criteria, are as described in the **Call for Proposals document, Section 7,** also detailed here:

1. **Scientific Excellence of the Project (Weight: 50%):**

    1.1. Project Quality (30%)
    - Originality of the concept and the research.
    - Clarity and pertinence of the objectives.
    - Relevancy and transformative approach of the concept towards challenges in its own field of action.

- The extent to which the proposed Project goes beyond the state-of-the-art and demonstrates originality and groundbreaking potential.
- The extent to which the trans-disciplinarity of the Project is an added value (only applicable to *Category B* Projects).

1.2. Methodology and resources (10%)

- Feasibility and rigor of the methodology and work plan according to the goals and expected outputs.
- Proper justification of timescales and resources needed to conduct the Project.

1.3. Research team / Consortium (10%)

- Adequacy of the role and capacity of the research team members to support Project execution.
- Clarity of the governance model of the Consortium members and value of their contribution.
- Inclusion of international research partners and the extent to which they improve the scope of the Project (only applicable to *Category B* projects).

2. **Project Leader (and Co-Leader, if applicable) (Weight 25%):**

2.1. Career trajectory (12.5%)

- Demonstration of scientific excellence and management capacity for conducting groundbreaking research in the research field(s), based on their career trajectory.

2.2. Research potential (12.5%)

- Demonstration of capacity for conducting original and groundbreaking research beyond the state-of-the-art in the research field(s) of the Proposal.

3. **Impact (Weight 25%):**

3.1. Scientific impact (12.5%)

- Extent to which the Project aims to make a positive, relevant and innovative difference to its specific research field.
- Consistent description of the contributions to knowledge and advancement in its scientific field.
- Demonstration of accurate consideration of the gender dimension in research and innovation content.

3.2. Social relevance (12.5%)

- Adequate description of how the Project will anticipate and assess potential implications and societal/clinical benefits.
- Adequate description of mechanisms, actions and activities of dissemination, communication and social engagement. The inclusion of Civil Society organizations, including non-academic audiences and patients, will be valued positively.
- Management of the possible valorisation and knowledge transfer generated by the implementation of the Project, if applicable.
- Accurate consideration of ethical, legal, social and environmental implications of the project.

Determination of projects that pass the peer-review remote assessment

Evaluators complete their scores for each Proposal, and once all the Proposals assigned to them have been reviewed and scored, these scores are submitted to the Grant Project Office.

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 will be calculated.

The system monitors the consistency of evaluations amongst evaluators who examine and score the same Proposals, also taking into account the each evaluator's average score for the total number of Proposals evaluated.

If there are any significant discrepancies amongst the peer reviewers regarding a Proposal, the "la Caixa" Foundation will send the Proposal to a fourth peer reviewer for evaluation. The average score will then be created by taking into account the four peer-review evaluation scores.

Proposals will be ranked according to their average score in their project category and Thematic Area. The best projects will proceed to the next evaluation phase.

Once this evaluation phase is complete, Project Leaders will be notified whether or not they have passed to the next evaluation phase.

3 Evaluation by Selection Committees

Proposals that have passed to this evaluation phase, i.e., the face-to-face interview, are reviewed by evaluators from the Expert Selection Committee from the same Thematic Area of the Proposal.

The process used by each Expert Selection Committee to evaluate the proposals is as follows:

1. The final mark for each Proposal is calculated based on the established evaluation criteria and weights.
2. Alarms are activated if there is a significant discrepancy in the evaluation of Proposals conducted by the same Expert Selection Committee.
3. Each Proposal's marks are normalised according to each Expert Selection Committee's standardisation values, and the final grade is thereby obtained.

3.1. Formation of Expert Selection Committees

Proposals that go on to the pre-selection evaluation phase, the Project Leaders are invited to a face-to-face interview in front of an Expert Selection Committee.

The Expert Selection Committees are formed from the database of evaluators maintained by the Grant Project Office. These evaluators have expressed their willingness to be part of this evaluation phase, as well as their suitability in the specific Thematic Area to which they are assigned.

Each Expert Selection Committee will consist of 8-12 internationally renowned experts.

3.2. General considerations and recommendations for evaluators in the Selection Committees

Each Expert Selection Committee will receive information about the Proposal and corresponding Project Leader to be interviewed sufficiently in advance as to adequately prepare for interviews. The Expert Selection Committees will also have access to the ratings 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 rating interviewed Project Leaders.

Before starting to evaluate a Proposal, the best practice is for evaluators to familiarise themselves with the Evaluation Criteria (detailed on Section 7 of the **Call for Proposals**) and

how the process functions in general by also reviewing this **Evaluation Process Guide** and the **Code of Conduct for Evaluators**. Likewise, it is recommended that they become familiar with the procedure by reading a certain number of Proposals before starting to evaluate them.

Evaluators sign an agreement with the ”la Caixa” Foundation whereby they undertake to maintain the confidentiality of Proposals examined. Similarly, evaluators undertake not to use the information with which they are provided other than that which corresponds to the evaluation of the Proposals.

To ensure that evaluators can score the Proposals free from pressure and with maximum independence, the composition of Expert Selection Committees is not made public as long as the evaluation phases are open. However, once the grants have been awarded, the complete list of evaluators (by first name and surname, position and institution) who have intervened in the evaluation process is published on the ”la Caixa” Foundation website without specifying in which phase of the evaluation they have taken part.

3.3. Evaluation of a Proposal by the Selection Committees

Score

The Expert Selection Committee shall rate the various aspects of the Proposal during the face-to-face interview evaluation phase in accordance with the evaluation criteria.

For each Proposal, the Expert Selection Committee will rate each evaluation sub-criteria using a whole number from 1-8 according the following scale of values.

Rating	Score
Exceptional	8
Excellent	7
Very good	6
Good	5
Average	4
Mediocre	3
Poor	2
Very poor	1

These scores will be weighted correspondingly and added in order to obtain a final score for each Proposal, rounded to two decimal places.

Aspects evaluated

The Expert Selection Committee will carry out an evaluation of all Proposals that includes an interview with the Project Leader, in line with the evaluation criteria. To score Proposals, evaluators will use a qualification grid with three main evaluation criteria to assess, each of which has a specific weight and contains specific aspects to consider in the evaluation. Criteria are described in Section 7 of the **Call for Proposals** and detailed here:

1. **Scientific Excellence of the Project (Weight: 50%):**

   1.1. Project Quality (30%)
   - Originality of the concept and of the research.
   - Clarity and pertinence of the objectives.
   - Relevancy and transformative approach of the concept towards challenges in its own field of action.
   - The extent to which the proposed Project goes beyond the state-of-the-art and demonstrates originality and groundbreaking potential.
   - The extent to which the trans-disciplinarity of the Project is an added value (only applicable to *Category B* Projects).

   1.2. Methodology and resources (10%)
   - Feasibility and rigor of the methodology and work plan according to the goals and expected outputs.
   - Proper justification of timescales and resources needed to conduct the Project.

   1.3. Research team / Consortium (10%)
   - Adequacy of the role and capacity of the research team members to support Project execution.
   - Clarity of the governance model of the Consortium members and value of their contribution.
   - Inclusion of international research partners and extent to which they improve the scope of the Project (only applicable to *Category B* projects).

2. **Project Leader (and Co-Leader, if applicable) (Weight 25%):**

   2.1. Career trajectory (12.5%)
   - Demonstration of scientific excellence and management capacity for conducting groundbreaking research in the research field(s), according to the career trajectory.

2.2. Research potential (12.5%)
- Demonstration of capacity for conducting original and groundbreaking research beyond the state-of-the-art in the research field(s) of the Proposal.

3. **Impact (Weight 25%):**

3.1. Scientific impact (12.5%)
- Extent to which the Project aims to make a positive, relevant and innovative difference to its specific research field.
- Consistent description of the contributions to knowledge and advancement in its scientific field.
- Demonstration of accurate consideration of the gender dimension in research and innovation content.

3.2. Social relevance (12.5%)
- Adequate description of how the Project will anticipate and assess potential implications and societal/clinical benefits.
- Adequate description of mechanisms, actions and activities of dissemination, communication and social engagement. The inclusion of Civil Society organizations, including non-academic audiences and patients, will be valued positively.
- Management of the possible valorisation and knowledge transfer generated by the implementation of the Project, if applicable.
- Accurate consideration of ethical, legal, social and environmental project implications.

Each Expert Selection Committee of Experts shall also provide a rationale, along with a brief explanation in writing, of the reasons for the score of each Proposal evaluated as well as its strengths and weaknesses.

The evaluation criteria, sub-criteria and aspects that will be taken into account for all projects, and the established weights that apply to each criteria, is similar to that made in the pre-selection evaluation ranking.

The "la Caixa" Foundation representative will be in charge of entering the scores from all of the Expert Selection Committee for each Proposal into a database.

The system will consider the various weighting levels of each aspect evaluated and arrive at a primary score for each Proposal resulting from the calculation of the average mark of the scores from all evaluators from the same Expert Selection Committee for a single Proposal.

Interview content

Face-to-face interviews make it possible for the Expert Selection Committee to detect, based on more subjective, fine and subtle considerations, the quality and consistency of the Proposal being evaluated. The interview will make it possible to resolve any question not reflected in the Proposal and to show the capacity 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, considering the evaluation criteria.

The face-to-face interview seeks to:
- Deepen the information provided in the Proposal, particularly with regards to the Project Leader's academic, scientific and professional potential, background and interests.
- Evaluate the Project Leader's scientific and professional potential in connection with his or her capacity to implement the project.
- Ask about matters which were not included in the Proposal and which the evaluators considers particularly relevant to evaluate the suitability of the Project Leader to carry out the proposed research project.
- Evaluate the personal and scientific maturity of the Project Leader, his or her motivation to complete the proposed project and his or her capacity to clearly express his or her ideas and firmly defend them.

Formal aspects to consider in the interview by evaluators
- Each interview will last 15 minutes.
- Interviews will be conducted entirely in English.
- Evaluators comprising the Expert Selection Committee will not introduce themselves to the Project Leader.
- The "la Caixa" Foundation representative will begin the interview in all cases by inviting the Project Leader to briefly summarise his or her Proposal in 5 minutes. Then the Expert Selection Committee will ask the questions that they deem relevant in order to properly assess the Proposal.
- Interviewers should not ask questions about topics already discussed in the Proposal, unless they aim to clarify some aspects.
- Except in cases deemed necessary, conventional questions or those that Project Leaders can typically expect should be avoided.
- The Expert Selection Committee must try to observe the established schedules and be as punctual as possible with the Project Leaders called in for interviews.
- There are no established protocols with regards to using the formal form of address or the need to shake hands before or after the interview. These are aspects that are

left to the discretion of the Expert Selection Committee or to the spontaneity of the Project Leaders. Nevertheless, interviews must be characterised by their formality and the relevance of the questions.

Additional recommendations for better evaluation practices are:

- It is advisable from the outset to score interviews as they take place, although it is convenient, once a certain number is reached (4-6), to review the initial scores to adjust them considering the development of the evaluation.
- Experts should take notes on each interview, since they may be necessary later on in remembering the details of the Proposals that the Expert Selection Committee intends to discuss.
- Notes taken on other Project Leaders or documents with their scores should also be kept out of the visual reach of Project Leaders.
- Expert evaluators should avoid mentioning the previous interview when a new Project Leader is entering the interview room or giving any information about previous Project Leaders or interviews.
- In order to ensure the confidentiality of internal debates, the "la Caixa" Foundation will make sure that successive candidates will wait for their interview in a remote waiting room and that Project Leaders adequately leave the surroundings of the room after their interview.
- At the end of each interview, experts should discuss the score for each criterion based on their notes and impressions.
- After the completion of all interviews, the Expert Selection Committee must inform the "la Caixa" Foundation representative of their scores for each Project Leader interviewed.
- Furthermore, before assuming that the evaluation is complete and the scores are sent to the Grant Project Office, it is recommended that the first Proposals evaluated be reviewed and checked to ensure that there is in no bias in the scores. These scores will result in a provisional classification that shall be communicated to the Expert Selection Committee.
- Expert Selection Committees should not, under any circumstance, inform Project Leaders of their judgements regarding the statements of purpose discussed, suggest their qualification or predict the outcome of their Proposal.

4 Feedback to project leaders

The Proposal Project Leader and Host Institution will receive information on the total number of submissions to the Call, the total number of Proposals per Thematic Area and the

total number of Proposals that went on to the next evaluation phase. They are also informed of the score that their Proposal received and the resulting classification of that score by the peer reviewers to which they are assigned.

In addition, Project Leaders will obtain information on the quartile in which their Proposal is located for each aspect evaluated compared to the rest of the Proposals evaluated by the same peer reviewers in their disciplinary field.

Finally, the Proposal Project leaders will also obtain a qualitative report based on the justifications of the evaluations carried out by the experts.

5 Awarding of the Grant

The "la Caixa" Foundation shall communicate, in an initial meeting with members from all of the Expert Selection Committees, which will be held before the interview, the total grant budget assigned to each committee and the maximum number of Proposals on the waiting list. The determination of the Proposals awarded a grant will result from the selection lists obtained based on the finals list of awarded Proposals made by each Expert Selection Committee.

The number of Projects to be awarded grants will depend on the total budget of the Proposals selected. The intent is to distribute the total funding (€12,000,000) of the Call for Projects approximately equally amongst the Thematic Areas, but the final distribution will always be subject to the quality and specific characteristics of the Projects submitted to this Call.

The members of each Committee should express their conformity with the outcome of the process by signing a document that includes the final classification of the Proposals evaluated and the corresponding awarding of grants and Projects on the waiting list.

If a Committee considers the level of the Proposals not to reach the minimum required for being awarded a grant, grants not awarded will be released. These grants will be reassigned by the "la Caixa" Foundation amongst the other Committees.

Committees that do not award all of the grants may not declare Proposals on their waiting list.

If all Committees consider the level of the Proposals not to reach the minimum required for being awarded a grant, these grants will be declared void.