

Proof of Concept Program

Review Guidelines

Version 1.3

February 3, 2020

Submission deadline

<u>Approximate</u>	<u>Administrative and eligibility check (IF)</u>	2 weeks
<u>duration</u>	<u>Peer Review of Applications</u>	4 weeks
	<u>Financing Decision</u>	4 weeks

1. REVIEW PROCESS

The Innovation Fund (IF) policy is intended to ensure that Applications submitted to the IF are evaluated on the basis of a process that is timely, fair and based on merit.

Therefore, the review process is organized in the following way:

- Eligibility check for all received Applications
- Peer Review (two blind assessments); with optional additional Peer Review as requested by the internal IF's Decision Committee
- Final decision on financing by the internal Decision Committee (based on the Peer Review assessments)

The IF staff conducts eligibility checks for all received Applications to ensure their completeness and compliance with Proof of Concept Program (PoC) requirements. The IF verifies the receipt of all submitted documents, confirms that appropriate document templates were used and that the Application satisfies all the necessary eligibility criteria and administrative completeness as described in the Proof of Concept (PoC) Program Guidelines. All Applications which meet these criteria will be considered eligible and sent to selected Peer Reviewers for assessment.

Peer Review is carried out by Peer Reviewers composed primarily of scientists and industry experts who have experience and knowledge in relevant disciplines and industry areas. The Peer Reviewers do not make any decisions regarding the selection of projects for financing. Instead, their expertise serves as an input to the internal IF's Decision Committee.

The final decision by which the Applicant is awarded PoC grant is made by the Decision Committee composed of three staff members of the IF. The members of the Decision Committee read the written evaluation provided by the Peer Reviewers and make ranking based on scores provided by Peer Reviewers. The role of the Decision Committee is to facilitate the financing decisions and resolve matters in case where conflicting evaluation by Peer Reviewers are provided.

The final decision for financing under the PoC is made by the Decision Committee and signed by the chair person.

2. EVALUATION CRITERIA

The Applications are evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Strength of the team;
- Clarity of the proposed concept;
- Innovativeness and feasibility of the proposed concept;
- Potential for commercialization of the resulting product;
- Feasibility of the implementation plan;

Only Applications satisfying and excelling in all the above-mentioned criteria will be selected for financing by the Decision Committee.

The following guidance has been given to support the Peer-Review process:

<p>Strength of the team</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the project team have adequate skills, education, knowledge, and experience to execute the proposed project? • To what extent, the publication track record fits with the proposed project?
<p>Clarity of the proposed concept</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the concept to be proven clearly formulated? • Does the Application describe benefits and potential use of the concept for future use? • Is the value proposition resulting from the proposed concept clearly formulated and understandable?
<p>Innovativeness and feasibility of the proposed concept;</p> <p>Note: Projects that are focused on routine or periodic changes made to existing products, production lines, manufacturing processes, services and other already established operations are not necessarily suitable for financing under the PoC, even if those changes may represent improvements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the Application suggest to explore unique concept? • Has the applicant identified the closest prior art? • Does the proposed technology, product or service have potential for creation of new IP or know-how? • Is it likely that the Application can result in the creation of new or improvement of existing technologies, products or services?
<p>Potential for commercialization of the resulting product;</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the proposed approach, if successful, have potential to lead to a marketable technology, product or process? • Evaluate the competitive advantage of this technology vs. alternate technologies that can meet the same market needs. • Will this lead towards the establishing of the first-mover advantage? • What is likely to be impact of the potential technology, product or a process?
<p>Feasibility of the implementation plan;</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the plan laid down in the Application a sound approach for proving the proposed concept? • Are the overall methodology and activities well-reasoned and appropriate to accomplish the proposed development of the technology, product or service? • How feasible is the proposed process of proving the concept proposed in the Application? • Are the items listed in the budget in line with the proposed activities (e.g. man hours, materials)?

3. ADMINISTRATIVE AND ELIGIBILITY CHECK FOR ALL RECEIVED APPLICATIONS

After the Application is submitted, the IF staff will conduct a desk review of the eligibility and administrative completeness of the submitted Applications as well as initial screening of the submitted documents (where applicable). Only fully completed, signed, and electronically submitted Applications will be considered for further evaluation. Ineligible Applicants will be notified of their ineligibility by email, after the IF completes eligibility review of all submitted Applications.

Each Application received will be checked for eligibility using the following criteria:



- The Applicant is a public sector R&D¹ institution, or any other institution and organization accredited to conduct R&D² activities (including the private ones), registered in Serbia;
- The principal researcher (project manager) is employed/engaged by the Applicant;
- The TRL of the Application is higher than 1 and lower than 4.

The IF will make sure to check the status of a R&D institution regarding the ownership structure and possible accreditation for R&D using available public data at the time the eligibility check is carried out.

Application is nominated and prepared by the researcher or the research team, whereas the eligible R&D institution is a signing party responsible for the grant management in case the Application is accepted for funding. Only one organization can submit an Application for funding, receive and manage financial support. Researchers from other R&D organizations could also be part of the teams as regular team members.

In case the Principal researcher fails to provide valid proof of employment/engagement with the Applicant, the IF will not sign PoC grant agreement. Existence of a valid proof of employment/engagement will be verified only for the Applications selected for financing by the IF. Awardees that have already received grants under TTF program for commercialization of inventions are eligible to apply for funding under PoC, provided their application is in line with the conditions prescribed in the PoC Program Guidelines.

One Principal researcher can submit only one Application per call for proposals. In case of more than one Application submitted by the same Principal researcher the IF will consider the first submitted Application (as per official Portal submission time), while all other Applications will be rejected as ineligible.

Modified and improved Applications are allowed in subsequent calls for proposals. However, an Applicant can resubmit substantially the same Application only once. An Application which is substantially the same as any two Applications (i.e., based on the substantially same or similar innovative technology, product or service and business plan) previously submitted to the IF by the Applicant will not be considered for further evaluation.

If an Applicant wishes to file a fact-based objection to the outcome of the administrative completeness and eligibility check (citing evident omissions, oversights or mistakes made by the IF staff), they may submit a formal letter of objection to the IF, written in English and not exceeding 500 words within 8 calendar days from the day of receiving the original eligibility review decision notification. The letter should be signed by the authorized representative of the Applicant (dean of the faculty or the director of the institute/innovation center) and sent to PoC@inovacionifond.rs. The IF will provide an official response to the formal letter of objection within 8 calendar days from receiving the objection.

4. PEER REVIEW

The Peer Review includes a technical review carried out by the international Peer Reviewers selected by IF, who is responsible for ensuring that each Application receives an objective and fair Review.

¹ Majority state-owned R&D organizations

² Accreditation of an institution to do R&D is governed by the [Law on research and development](#) and the [Rulebook on valuation of R&D works in the process of accreditation of institutes, integrated universities, faculties and centers of excellence](#).

**IF staff:**

- Provide the Peer Reviewers with the Declaration of impartiality and confidentiality to sign before assigning them the Applications to review;
- Document and manage conflicts of interest;
- Assign at least two appropriate Peer Reviewers to each Application based on the corresponding field of industry and science, so that the Peer Reviewers can conduct their evaluation and assign individual scores for each criterion;
- Attend and oversee all administrative and regulatory aspects of Peer Review.
- Prepare Final evaluation report based on the Final decision of the Decision Committee.

Peer Reviewers:

- Sign the Declaration of impartiality and confidentiality as provided by the IF;
- Receive access to the Applications for review through the IF portal;
- Examine the Review Guidelines and instructions;
- Within two days of receiving access to the Applications to review, examine each assigned Application to verify that the Applications match the reviewers' area of expertise and inform the IF;
- Declare any conflicts of interest with regard to specific Applications presented to them, in accordance with the IF Confidentiality and Prevention of Conflict of Interest Policy;
- Prepare a written evaluation (using the online Peer Review Evaluation Form on the IF Portal) for each Application assigned, based on the defined evaluation criteria and judgment of merit;
- Assign a numerical score (from 1 to 4, with 1 being the poorest and 4 being the best) to each evaluation criterion.

Peer Review Procedures

The IF Program Manager will assign Peer Reviewers and provide them with the username and password to access the Applications on the IF online application portal.

Within 2 days of receiving the projects from the IF, Peer Reviewers will:

- Examine review assignments, review materials (including Applications), and instructions;
- Review all Applications assigned to them for conflicts of interest or the appearance of conflicts of interest and inform the IF whether any exist;
- Review each assigned Application to verify that the Applications match the reviewers' area of expertise and inform the IF of any concerns.



Within 2 weeks of receiving the projects from the IF, Peer Reviewers will:

- Read Applications, consider each of the five evaluation criteria, and give a separate score for each, based on the technical merit, and write detailed evaluation for each of the assigned Applications using the Peer Review Evaluation Form on the PoC online portal;
- Complete and submit the Peer Review Evaluation Form for each Application assigned to the PoC online application portal.

Note: should the IF establish that the Peer Reviewer has not provided sufficiently elaborate comments to justify the claims and conclusions made for any of the evaluation criteria, the IF reserves the right to ask of the Peer Reviewer to expand upon their comments and supplement their opinion with additional explanations.

Scoring methodology

Peer Reviewers will consider each of the evaluation criteria (described in Section 2 above) in the evaluation and give a separate score for each. The scoring system utilizes a 4-point rating scale (4 = excellent; 3 = good; 2 = acceptable; 1 = poor). The total score for an Application is the sum of the points given to each criterion by two Peer Reviewers, producing a maximum of 40 points. All projects will be scored based on the score of two Peer Reviews and ranked accordingly by the Decision Committee. If an Application scores less than 4 points in total on any of the evaluation criteria or less than 20 points overall, the Application will automatically become ineligible for funding.

Peer Reviewer scoring represents the main segment of the overall evaluation and the final decision is made primarily based on their assessments. The IF's internal Decision Committee is responsible for selecting the Awardees for financing based on the analysis of each completed Peer Reviewer written evaluation. If the two Peer Reviewers provide conflicting assessments, an additional Peer Reviewer will be called upon to assess the Application. A conflicting assessment exists in cases where the difference between the total scores of two Peer Reviewer written evaluations assigned to one Application is greater than 8 points. Decision Committee may request the opinion of a third Peer Reviewer if necessary, in projects where the above difference is less than 8 points. In the case when the third Peer reviewer is used, his/her score will be used for determining the final score, along with the score of one of the two Peer Reviewers whose number of points is closer to the third Peer Reviewer's score. In the case when the difference in the score between the third and both first and second Peer Reviewers is the same, the score of the Peer Reviewer with the least points will be excluded.

5. INTERNAL DECISION COMMITTEE REVIEW

The written evaluations are reviewed by the IF's Decision Committee who creates a ranking list of all reviewed Applications and prepares Peer-Review summaries for each Application summarizing the evaluations produced by the Peer Reviewers. Based on the final ranking and funds available, the IF's Decision Committee makes a list of awardees to receive funding under the PoC.

If a member of the Decision Committee declares conflict of interest regarding a specific Application, the IF is responsible to provide a substitution so that the Decision Committee always has three members in the decision-making process.

Rejection letters and Award notices containing Peer-Review summaries are sent to the Applicants within 2 weeks from the end of the Peer Review evaluation process.

In the case when the IF has reasons to suspect that an Application may have potentially negative environmental effects, an independent environmental specialist may be called upon to advise on any safeguard issues, which may affect the length of the contracting process for the awarded Applications. In such a case, the terms stipulated in the Environmental and Social Management Framework³ available online (www.inovacionifond.rs) will apply.

While making the final decision on financing, the Decision Committee will take into consideration the total amount of available funds for the public call. If the number of quality Applications that the Decision Committee would approve for funding exceeds the total available budget allocated for that particular public call, the Decision Committee will then select and rank preferably three (3) backup projects from the list of those Applications which were selected, but not ultimately approved for financing. These Applications are to be subsequently offered financing by the IF should any of the originally approved ones fail to sign the PoC Grant Agreement.

In the case where there is more than one Application with the same score at the cut-off, the following principles will be used to prioritize Applications in the following order of importance:

1. Application with the highest total score under criterion: Usefulness and potential for commercialization of the resulting product;
2. Application with the highest total score under criterion: Strength of the team;
3. Application with the highest total score under criterion: Innovativeness and feasibility of the proposed concept;
4. Application with the highest total score under criterion: Clarity of the proposed concept;
5. Application with the highest total score under criterion: Feasibility of the implementation plan;
6. Application with the highest number of maximum points given by either of the assigned Peer-reviewers for any of the evaluation criteria.

If there are still two or more Applications with the same ranking, randomization will be used to determine the Awardee(s).

At the end of the evaluation process the Decision Committee prepares Final evaluation report, summarizing all aspects of the respective public call.

³ Environmental and Social Management Framework can be accessed on [this link](#)