REvaluation Conference 2027

"Scouting Paths on Shifting Maps"

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Special Session:

Title Session: Rethinking Research Funding: New Instruments, for which purpose? And for what impact?

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Abstract/ Description:

Mainstream funding instruments aim to select 'excellent' research proposals based on expert peer review. The fundamental assumption is that by selecting the highest-rated proposals, research funding organizations (RFOs) maximize the impact of (limited, and often public) available budget. However, in reality often multiple criteria play a role, and RFO's typically also seek to promote interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research, collaboration, and scientific risk-taking.

In fact, evaluation methods used by research funding instruments exhibit a greater degree of diversity than is typically acknowledged. In recent years, increasing attention has been directed towards international funding schemes that address global challenges by supporting researchers across multiple countries. Additionally, many funding organisations are actively exploring strategies to enhance diversity, both in terms of the researchers and stakeholders supported and the range of research topics funded.

Against this background, funding instruments with alternative and/or complementary methods have been and are being proposed and experimented with the goal of pursuing new/different policy objectives with innovative implementation strategies.

Examples of new funding methods that have been widely discussed in recent years include, without being exhaustive:

1. 'Funding-by-lottery' proposes to introduce (some) degrees of randomisation in the selection of research proposals. The core idea is to incorporate randomisation to reduce the administrative burden on applicants and reviewers, accepting that the selection will be (at least partially) made by a lottery. This approach also aims to increase equity by opening opportunities for underrepresented researchers, mitigating reviewer bias, and facilitating the selection of 'high-risk, high-gain' proposals (Shaw, 2023).
2. 'Portfolio approach' proposes allocating funding based on the collective attributes of a set of proposals rather than evaluating individual contributions in isolation. By adopting quantitative methods, the portfolio approach can maximize the synergistic benefits of a research cluster while balancing multiple policy objectives (Canton, 2025).
3. 'Distributed Peer Review' is a model in which applicants act also as reviewers. This model aims to overcome the structural shortage of reviewers that is even more critical given the diffusion of GenAI and the mounting pressure on researchers for funding. Furthermore, the model aims to reduce the submission of low-quality proposals, as applicants must 'internalize' the administrative cost of the review process (Stafford et al., 2025).
4. Recent models, such as the Villum Experiment and Volkswagen Foundation's The Experiment, have sought to promote creativity through assessment criteria that emphasise originality and a double-blinded review process (Bloch et al., 2025).

These evaluation methods for funding instruments are not mutually exclusive and can in some cases be combined. A variety of additional approaches have been employed, seeking to promote research that addresses societal challenges, with focus on collaboration, themes and societal goals (see Norn et al., 2024).

A central question remains: which models fits what purposes?

For example, the promotion of exploratory research may be viewed as the opposite of funding research targeting a specific mission. Therefore, funding-by-lottery seems well-suited to promote exploratory, high-risk/high-gain research, while a portfolio approach could help identifying a set of proposals with a multi-dimensional perspective on societal challenges. However, the selection of one approach over another might be influenced by other factors, such as cost-saving measures to reduce the burden of organizing large peer review panels, potentially undermining the quality of the evaluation process.

To address these dynamics, this session welcomes scientific contributions exploring the following questions:

- What funding models best align with specific policy scopes and purposes?

- How can these alternative selection methods be implemented effectively within specific instruments?
- How should we assess whether these alternative methods achieve their expected goals?
- What administrative frameworks are needed to implement these alternative funding models?

References

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Strand 8: ***Evaluators** under pressure: Changing demands and roles*

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