REvaluation Conference 2027

"Scouting Paths on Shifting Maps"

February 25 - February 26, 2027, Vienna, Austria

Special Session:

Title Session: ***Evaluating High-Risk, High-Reward Research Funding: Rethinking selection, success, and systemic intervention***

Dr. Anete Vingre, Dr. Florentine Frantz, Dr. Diogo Machado, Dr. Erik Arnold, Laura Sutinen, Rima Martin

Abstract/ Description:

Research funders across Europe and beyond are increasingly experimenting with funding models designed to support high-risk, high-reward (HRHR), exploratory, and potentially paradigm-changing research. In doing so, they are not simply creating new funding instruments, but they are challenging long-standing assumptions about how research should be selected, supported and evaluated.

The proliferation of new funding mechanisms and processes also reflects a critique of existing funding structures. Experimentation with new funding modes extends beyond individual instruments to entire institutions: new agencies, statutory mandates and governance models are being created specifically to enable disruptive research. Such arrangements often depend on a high degree of independence from political and ministerial control, which in turn raises unresolved questions about how autonomy can be reconciled with public accountability and the responsible use of public funds.

Evaluating these schemes poses fundamental challenges and requires an ongoing process of discussion. If projects are intentionally risky, how should "failure" be interpreted? What counts as success in research designed to explore uncertain pathways? How can funders distinguish between productive failure, methodological learning, and poor performance? Are conventional evaluation approaches adequate for capturing the effects of exploratory funding? How radically different do funding mechanisms need to be to change long-standing traditions, expectations, and cultures of those applying to them? What timeframes are realistic for assessments, but also for accompanying researchers during their projects? How much do funders themselves need to change their level of involvement and move beyond "fund and forget" mentalities? What kind of support, be it political, scientific, social, or economic, do those new institutions need to be sustainably implemented?

This special session zooms in on high-risk, high-reward research funding and invites funders, policymakers, evaluators, and researchers to discuss evidence and unresolved questions around the evaluation of HRHR funding instruments and what we can learn about the research ecosystems in which they are embedded.

Objectives

The session aims to create a reflexive discussion space for how research evaluation must adapt when funding systems intentionally embrace uncertainty. It speaks directly to REvaluation 2027's interest in changing science systems, experimentation in research governance, and new approaches to assessing societal and scientific value.

Hence this special session invites contributions targeting one or several of the following dimensions of HRHR funding:

- High risk – a means, or an end in itself? What do we understand as "high risk", who is able to bear it, and how should it be shared so that bold, exploratory work becomes more widespread? How many different types of risk are co-present at once, for researchers, funders and society? How is risk(re)distributed? High-risk schemes do not merely take on more risk but reallocate it. Which rewards are enough to justify high risk?
- Success and failure in HRHR funding: How should evaluators conceptualise productive failure, redirection, or methodological learning? What outcomes are realistic for exploratory funding instruments, and over what timeframes should they be assessed?
- Methodological challenges in evaluating HRHR programmes: What can bibliometrics, quasi-experimental methods, and counterfactual approaches realistically tell us about transformative research? Where do qualitative approaches become indispensable? How does all of that change in the light of AI research?
- Assessing innovative selection mechanisms: What evidence exists on the effects of anonymisation, lottery-based selection, shorter proposal formats, programme manager discretion? How can fairness, diversity, and scientific quality be evaluated under conditions of uncertainty?
- Institutional differences: How do expectations of high risk and high reward differ between early stage/seed programmes and mission-oriented organisations (e.g. ARIA, SPRIND)? How much uncertainty can or should public funders legitimately tolerate?
- Governance, independence and accountability: How should high-risk funders be governed so that they can act with agility, tolerate failure and insulate funding decisions from short-term political priorities? What degree of independence from public control is required for such institutions to function, and how can this autonomy be reconciled with public accountability and the responsible stewardship of public funds?

All of these discussions should be seen not as isolated reflections on single programmes, but as extending to the more systemic interventions these may have in the research and innovation ecosystem. Beyond funding individual breakthroughs, what is the wider value of high-risk funding in reshaping entry points into the research system, leveraging substantial follow-on investment, and building additionality across a portfolio?

Extended abstracts are welcomed, please see the submission guidelines: Call for Contributions.
To directly submit your extended abstract, click here.

Strand 7: ***Shifting science systems:*** *Changing conditions of research production*

Contact Person:

Anete Vingre – Technopolis – anete.vingre@technopolis-group.com

Florentine Frantz – Technopolis – Florentine.frantz@technopolis-group.com