

External evaluation protocol for research grants

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OBJECTIVE

The current protocol aims to provide a clear and transparent overview of the external evaluation processes related to competitive actions supporting research, knowledge transfer, and the valorization of scientific knowledge conducted by the Balearic Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (AQUIB) on behalf of other entities. AQUIB manages these evaluations through specific assignments with the purpose of obtaining expert assessments conducted by external evaluators and supported by public criteria. It is essential to emphasize that AQUIB does not act as a direct evaluator in these processes but rather plays the role of a manager.

1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

- [Organic Law 2/2023, of March 22](#), of the University System.
- [Law 17/2022, of September 5](#), amending Law 14/2011, of June 1, on Science, Technology, and Innovation.
- [Law 7/2022, of August 5](#), on Science, Technology, and Innovation in the Balearic Islands.
- [Law 39/2015, of October 1](#), on the Common Administrative Procedure of Public Administrations.
- [Regulation \(UE\) No 1290/2013 of December 11, 2013](#) establishing the rules for participation and dissemination applicable to Horizon 2020, the Framework Program for Research and Innovation (2014-2020), and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1906/2006.
- [Law 14/2011, of June 1](#), on Science, Technology, and Innovation.
- [Law 14/2007, of July 3](#), on Biomedical Research.
- [Law 2/2003, of March 20](#), on the institutional organization of the university system in the Balearic Islands.
- [Agreement of the Government Council on April 22, 2005](#), approving the modification of the Statutes of the Consortium of the Agency for University Quality of the Balearic Islands.
- [Agreement of the Government Council on December 13, 2002](#) approving the creation of the consortium of the Agency for University Quality of the Balearic Islands and its statutes.

2. PRINCIPLES OF ACTION

AQUIB has a long-standing commitment to the quality of higher education and participation in the external evaluation of various scientific and academic research programmes. This dedication is demonstrated by the implementation of an accredited quality standard, such as the ISO 9001 standard, in its internal procedures.

AQUIB's actions are guided by a set of current values, which are an integral part of its Code of Ethics and include the following:

- **Autonomy**: the Agency respects the autonomy of all institutions with which it collaborates.
- **Transparency**: conducts its activities in a clear manner and provides information about its management.
- **Independence**: works towards fulfilling its mission, vision, and objectives with complete independence in its actions.
- **Commitment to quality, innovation and excellence**: fundamental pillars of the Agency's culture to promote continuous improvement in its activities.
- **Integrity**: instills confidence through responsible actions of the organization and all its members.
- **Stakeholder oriented**: the Agency operates with a focus on meeting the needs and expectations of its stakeholders.
- **Rigor**: Conducts its activities based on accuracy and technical rigor.
- **Efficiency in management**: achieves its objectives by making proper use of resources in an ethical, economical, and equitable manner.
- **Social responsibility**: assumes commitments to sustainable development and is aware of its impact on society.

In addition, AQUIB aligns itself with the values derived from the Leiden Manifesto, as well as the Declaration of San Francisco (DORA) and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), of which the Agency is a signatory, integrating them as an integral part of its evaluative model.

In managing this process, the Agency also prioritises other core values inherent to all evaluation processes, such as impartiality, excellence, proportionality, confidentiality, gender balance, variability of academic disciplines, and geographical diversity in the composition of its panels and the assignment of evaluators.

3. AQUIB'S EXTERNAL EVALUATION

AQUIB has the capability to conduct scientific and technical evaluations of grants intended for R&D&I activities announced by other entities, both public and private. This capacity complements the evaluation processes inherent in the responsibilities of the Agency. This activity is governed by the following phases, which are outlined below.

3.1. Application process

Before the publication of the call, the requesting entity will consult with AQUIB regarding the scope of the evaluation, the scientific-technical evaluation criteria, the anticipated schedule, and the expected number of files, obtaining explicit acceptance of the evaluation work within the agreed-upon timeframe.

The evaluation request, addressed to AQUIB, will be submitted using the model provided by the Agency and signed by the responsible person. It will include applicable regulations, evaluation criteria and anticipated funding. Therefore, the convening entity must establish and inform AQUIB in advance of the fund allocation by area (or equivalents). The Agency will respond to this request within a maximum period of twenty business days.

Although other criteria specific to the requesting entity may be considered in the final selection of applications, the result of AQUIB's external scientific evaluation must carry significant weight —at least 70%— in the grant decision.

The call must be regulated through the Official State Gazette (BOE), Autonomous Official Gazette, or internal document of the requesting entity. It must have a public nature and include total funding.

The requesting entity will send the files to be evaluated according to AQUIB's instructions. The evaluation process will commence once all documentation is thoroughly reviewed and correctly submitted.

AQUIB's evaluation processes are based on peer review, with the participation of national and international experts. The language of the documentation will be agreed upon in advance between AQUIB and the requesting entity.

Finally, the requesting entity will inform AQUIB of the outcome of the grant decision once the process is concluded.

a) Collaboration framework

The collaboration framework may be governed by various legal forms, including agreements, delegation or assignment under budget, among other possibilities.

b) Criteria for standard evaluation

AQUIB will review, well in advance, the evaluation criteria proposed by the requesting entity, which will be clearly described in the call text, following the principles of action outlined in Section 2. These criteria differ from the minimum requirements necessary for submitting the application (eligibility criteria or requirements), which are the responsibility of the requesting entity. Evaluators will exclusively assess based on the evaluation criteria.

The evaluation will focus on assessing the scientific quality of trajectories or proposals, seeking the informed and expert judgment of anonymous peers. In case of including quantitative aspects —e.g., bibliometric indicators or academic records— these cannot constitute the substantive weight of the evaluation.

Evaluation in different thematic areas will be carried out by distributing the files among each of the knowledge areas based on parameters such as UNESCO, ANEP, and keywords. The results of the evaluation of different files may not necessarily be directly comparable.

The evaluation criteria and their respective value will be reflected in an evaluation report, which evaluators must complete. AQUIB will develop specific evaluation guides to facilitate comprehension of the grant's purpose and ensure maximum consistency in the application of criteria by individual evaluators.

c) Calendar and deadlines

The agreed-upon schedule should be compatible with AQUIB's own commitments. The duration of the evaluation, once all applications are received, will be at least three months. If this timeframe coincides with holiday periods, the deadline could be extended.

d) Billings and payment data

The payment terms for the invoice issued by AQUIB and the requesting entity will be mutually agreed upon, establishing the billing terms and payment deadlines.

3.2 Evaluation process

AQUIB can conduct various types of evaluations, including, among others:

- Research career
- Research technical staff
- Research projects
- Research groups

The Agency employs an evaluation model based on the characteristics of the application and the call, deciding on the feasibility of the evaluation under two approaches:

- Triple-blind evaluation with a coordinator.
- Evaluation with special difficulty.

In all these instances, AQUIB has a pool of expert evaluators enlisted in the Agency's Evaluators Database, a fundamental resource for the evaluation processes managed by AQUIB. This database encompasses a wide range of profiles, and the expertise and knowledge of these evaluators play a crucial role in upholding and enhancing the quality of the Agency's evaluation procedures. The selection of evaluators—whether academics, researchers or professionals—is carried out in accordance with international standards of scientific quality, emphasising criteria such as independence, integrity, objectivity, and absence of conflicts of interest.

AQUIB recognises the importance of ensuring equity in evaluations, advocating for gender balance and considering various age groups when selecting evaluators to avoid biases of any kind. AQUIB is committed to promoting a holistic perspective in evaluations, avoiding biases linked to specific areas of knowledge.

a) Assignment of files for evaluation

Evaluators will be selected from either AQUIB's Evaluators Database or national and international databases. The assignment process may involve technical considerations, such as linking area codes (UNESCO, ANEP, etc.) or selecting

coordinators directly from the Database. Efforts will be made to avoid overloading expert evaluators, and a rotational principle will be followed.

Evaluators will only have access to the assigned files. AQUIB's management and technical staff will accompany the process, providing support and clarification to the evaluators' tasks. Evaluations will be carried out using computer tools to generate the corresponding reports.

b) Evaluation process

The evaluation process will follow the criteria and requirements established in the regulatory framework and the current call. It will commence when the inviting entity delivers all files to be evaluated to AQUIB, without the possibility of adding additional documentation.

It is assumed that all evaluation requests have successfully undergone the general admission review and comply with the participation requirements. Evaluated files will be categorised according to classification parameters such as UNESCO, ANEP, and keywords, facilitating the selection of evaluators. Additionally, other classification parameters can be established through agreement between AQUIB and the requesting entity.

AQUIB can adjust the evaluation process with the requesting entity if specific knowledge areas present particular specificities that require the selection of suitable evaluators.

AQUIB's evaluation processes are based on blind peer review, involving national and international experts from the evaluators' database.

In case of significant discrepancies in peer evaluations —exceeding 20%— an additional evaluation will be conducted.

c) Scoring and weighting scales

Evaluations will be conducted on a scale from 1 to 5 (with 1 being the minimum and 5 being the maximum), allowing decimals, for each criterion and overall score. Evaluators must include qualitative comments justifying numerical ratings.

Coordinators are responsible for harmonizing and resolving discrepancies to generate a single synthesis report, determining the final score for each file.

d) Coordinación de evaluación

AQUIB assigns evaluation coordination to individuals of recognized prestige and experience. They review, harmonize, and supervise the different peer evaluations. Their responsibilities include arbitrating differences, resolving discrepancies, and responding to possible technical reports of allegations requested by the inviting entity. Additionally, they have the capacity to review entire areas to provide a comprehensive evaluation. Finally, they can also assess evaluators and propose improvements that will be implemented by AQUIB.

e) Evaluation results

Upon completion of the external evaluation process, AQUIB will prepare a report that includes the results of scientific evaluations, accompanied by individualized reports for each file. AQUIB will be responsible for sending this final results report to the inviting entity. It's important to note that evaluations may contain comments or justifications highlighting specific aspects. This variability may be due to the different research contexts of the evaluators but does not imply contradictions or errors in the procedure.

f) Additional technical report for allegations and appeals

After the delivery of the evaluation results, the inviting entity has the option to request technical reports to address possible allegations related to some of the evaluation reports. This request must be submitted by the inviting entity, along with additional documentation supporting the allegation, all at the same time. AQUIB will manage the response to these requests through evaluation coordinations within one working month from their registration.

g) Confidentiality agreement, Code of ethics and conflict of interest

Evaluators, previously analyzed for inclusion in the AQUIB Evaluators Database, have signed the AQUIB Agency Confidentiality Agreement. This includes acceptance of the AQUIB Code of Ethics and their willingness to be excluded in case of a conflict of interest. Evaluators commit to deleting files once the evaluation is completed. Additionally, inviting entities may request the exclusion of evaluators from the assessment of their files if justified causes exist.

4. EVALUATORS REMUNERATION

Evaluators collaborating with AQUIB will receive compensation in accordance with the guidelines set by the AQUIB Board of Directors, utilizing collaboration agreements or service contracts as expert personnel.

5. PUBLIC FEES

AQUIB adheres to publicly disclosed evaluation fees, aligned with the various types of evaluations it may manage. These fees are approved by its Board of Directors.

6. META-EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS WITH OTHER ENTITIES

AQUIB incorporates a meta-evaluation into its management procedure that involves all stakeholders. This includes collecting surveys from evaluators, feedback from AQUIB's technical staff, and a satisfaction meeting with the inviting entity. Subsequently, a meta-evaluation meeting will be held with the inviting entity to assess process satisfaction, receive improvement suggestions, or address any identified issues to achieve the highest quality standards.

7. DISCLOSURE OF EVALUATORS

AQUIB will transparently disclose the names of evaluators who have participated in its external evaluation processes.

8. ISO 9001 QUALITY CONTROL

All external evaluation processes of AQUIB adhere to strict quality controls certified under the UNE-EN ISO 9001:2015 standard.