

## Pioneering Research – Exploring the Unknown Unknown

# Distributed Peer Review – Procedure, Rules and Guidelines

## 1 Introduction

Since 2024, the Volkswagen Foundation has been testing Distributed Peer Review (DPR). A review process in which applicants for funding also review one another's proposals. DPR can make assessments more robust by involving a broader pool of expertise, distribute review work more evenly, and ensure that each proposal receives multiple independent evaluations. In addition, applicants receive constructive feedback regardless of the funding decision.

DPR has been piloted twice in the funding initiative “Open up – New Research Spaces for the Humanities and Cultural Studies.” Early evidence is encouraging: many applicants would apply again, reviews are perceived as fair and inclusive, workloads are more balanced, and decisions are reached faster ([DPR Volkswagen Foundation](#)). Similar approaches are already being used by other funders.

Based on these experiences, the Volkswagen Foundation is now introducing DPR in the first stage of the two-stage decision procedure of the funding initiative “Pioneering Research – Exploring the Unknown Unknown.” This document outlines the DPR procedure, defines which proposals qualify for DPR and sets out the rules, responsibilities and review guidelines that apply to all applicants. It aims to ensure a transparent, consistent, and reliable review process and to support applicants in contributing constructive, well-founded reviews.

## 2 Procedure

The DPR is conducted fully **anonymously**. Short proposals are shared with reviewers without any identifying information. Likewise, reviewers submit their scores and feedback anonymously.

All submissions are split into **two cohort-based random pools**, to reduce strategic behaviour in the DPR process. Applicants are assigned proposals to review only from the other pool (not their own), so they cannot directly affect the ranking of proposals they compete against.

The **assignment of proposals to reviewers** is based on the [DFG subject area structure](#) to ensure disciplinary fit. It is therefore crucial that you select your subject areas carefully during the application procedure. You must indicate 3-5 subject areas matching your expertise and specify the subject area(s) of your short proposal (at least one; providing more areas improves the accuracy of reviewer matching). Obvious conflicts of interest are avoided in the assignment

process (e.g., reviewers will not be assigned proposals from their own institution). Any remaining conflicts of interest can be reported during the DPR process.

Reviews are conducted via LimeSurvey (web-based, anonymous). Usage instructions will be provided once proposals are distributed.

Each short proposal is evaluated by 8-10 reviewers. The final ranking of the short proposals is calculated using a **trimmed mean of the assessments** (the highest and lowest assessments are removed). Ties are resolved by lottery. There are no subject-area quotas. The approximately 30 best evaluated proposals (15 from each pool) are invited to submit a **full proposal**.

### 3 Rules and guidelines

#### 3.1 Admissibility Check/Proposals Qualifying for Distributed Peer Review

Only formally correct short proposals undergo DPR. Formally correct means:

- **Eligibility requirements** are met, in particular: post-doctoral researchers and professors may be PIs or Co-PIs, and the PI is based at a German university or research institution (or has submitted a letter of intent, where applicable).
- The application is **complete** and written in English (all required documents/sections are provided).
- The official **short proposal** and **CV templates**, which are available for download at the funding platform or on the website, have been used. The word and page limits are respected.
- The short proposal is properly **anonymised**, i.e., it contains no names of applicants or research group members, no affiliations/institutions or other information revealing the applicant's identity.
- For collaborative projects, **one Co-PI must be registered** at the funding platform, who will be part of the DPR. Further Co-PIs might be included in the full proposal.
- The application is submitted before the **deadline** (late submissions are not accepted).

Short proposals not passing the admissibility check will be rejected.

#### 3.2 Applicant/Reviewer Commitments

By submitting a short proposal, the PI and in case of collaborative projects also the Co-PI agree to act as reviewers in the DPR and to adhere to the ethical standards set out below. **In the event of non-compliance, the Volkswagen Foundation reserves the right to reject the applicant's short proposal or to withdraw the funding if it later comes to light that rules were not followed.**

- **Review commitment:** All PIs and Co-PIs commit to reviewing up to **8-10 assigned short proposals** (each max. 4 pages) within a period of **6 weeks** (November/December 2026). Reviews must be submitted by the stated deadline.
- **Confidentiality:** As a reviewer, you have access to confidential information that may be **protected by intellectual property rights**. You must not disseminate, copy, share,

store, or plagiarise any content from the proposals. If you download proposals or print copies, you must delete/destroy them once the review process is completed. The Volkswagen Foundation treats breaches of confidentiality very seriously and reserves the right to claim damages if it is held liable in this context.

- **Generative AI:** The use of generative AI tools/models in the preparation of reviews is **prohibited**, as the review documents are confidential.
- **Feedback and tone:** Reviews must provide constructive, fair, and specific feedback, using appropriate, factual, and non-offensive language. Please note that your comments are forwarded to applicants **unaltered**. Offensive, derogatory, or otherwise inappropriate language is strictly prohibited and is inconsistent with good scientific practice.
- **Anonymity:** You must submit your review in a fully anonymous manner. Your wording should be neutral and must not reveal your identity directly or indirectly. If you notice that a proposal is not properly anonymised (e.g., applicant names or institutions, self-identifying references), you are obliged to inform the Volkswagen Foundation.
- **Conflicts of interest:** Obvious conflicts of interest are considered during the process of matching proposals to reviewers. If, despite anonymisation, you identify a conflict of interest with an assigned short proposal, you are expected to disclose it.
- **Focus on the science:** The DPR is designed to evaluate the science, not the scientists. Please review proposals in the spirit of anonymisation and focus on the research idea and the scientific approach, avoiding speculation about the applicants' identity.

### 3.3 How Reviews Are Conducted

The review process for each proposal takes the form of a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire follows this structure:

- **Conflict of interest**  
Indicate whether you have any conflict of interest with the proposal and/or the applicant(s) – to the extent identifiable.
- **Anonymity check**  
Indicate whether the proposal is fully anonymised (e.g., whether names, institutions, or other identifying information are mentioned).
- **Short summary (1-2 sentences)**  
Write a brief summary of the core idea of the short proposal. This helps to clearly link the evaluation to the correct proposal.
- **Evaluation of the short proposal (ratings and comments)**  
The evaluation is based on 3 programme-specific criteria and one criterion covering other quality aspects. For each of the 4 criteria, reviewers provide a numerical rating and a brief written comment (= feedback) reflecting their assessment. Comments and feedback should be given in a respectful and appreciative manner – in other words, in the same way that you would like to receive them for your own proposal. All comments are forwarded to applicants unedited. Reviewers are solely responsible for the content and integrity of their comments. The **overall assessment** is calculated as a weighted score based on the 4 criteria.
  - **Radically explorative basic research (30 %)**  
The project is clearly rooted in basic research, is radically explorative, enters new scientific ground, and is based on as little preliminary work as possible. Ideally,

there are no publications on the specific research topic and only minimal prior results.

- **High breakthrough potential/scientific relevance and transformative potential (30 %)**

The project addresses a previously unresearched scientific challenge, would close a major knowledge gap if successful, and has the potential to provide fundamentally new impetus – up to breakthroughs and paradigm shifts, potentially also across disciplines.

- **Risk in terms of concepts and methods/risk profile and methodological robustness (30 %) (*discipline-specific*)**

The project entails a high conceptual and/or methodological risk and could fail (e.g., hypotheses may prove false; methods/technologies may not work as anticipated). Despite these uncertainties, the approach is scientifically sound and feasible in principle, and the balance between expected knowledge gain and risk is appropriate.

- **Other quality aspects (10 %)**

Provide a rating and comment on additional quality aspects of the proposal, such as whether the expenditure plan fits the project and the budget appears appropriate; whether the proposal is carefully prepared, coherent, and clearly written; whether ethical concerns exist, and whether the necessary resources, infrastructure, or collaborations appear realistically available.

- **Level of confidence**

Finally, reviewers indicate their level of expertise/confidence in their assessment for each proposal. This information is not shared with applicants but may be used by the Foundation to evaluate and improve the DPR process. The Volkswagen Foundation reserves the right to take confidence levels into account when compiling the final ranking.

Details on the Pioneering Research call as well as templates for the short proposal and CV are available at our [funding platform](#) and on our [website](#). Further information on the DPR including the final timeline will be announced to applicants in autumn 2026 after the formal admissibility check of all short proposals.