



Guide for External Assessors

in the frame of the

1st Call for Proposals

of the

**INTERREG V-A SLOVAKIA-HUNGARY
COOPERATION PROGRAMME**

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SKHU/1601

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the document

The aim of the Guide for External Assessors [Guide] is to provide background and practical information to the external assessors involved in the quality assessment of application forms submitted under the 1st Call for Proposals of the Interreg V-A SKHU Cooperation Programme.

The document is aimed at regulating project quality evaluation process in the Interreg V-A SKHU Cooperation Programme. In its present form it builds on

- the Co-operation Programme document, approved by the European Commission on 30 September 2015 and amended on 1 September 2016,
- the Applicant's Manual of the first Call for Proposals (AM), published on 29 July 2016, and,
- Assessment Manual in the frame of Interreg V-A SKHU Cooperation Programme, approved by the Monitoring Committee on 29th November 2016,
- in order to express continuity with the 2007-2013 programming period, on the best practices gathered in project selection during the assessment of the five calls for proposals of the Hungary-Slovakia Cross-border Co-operation Programme 2007-2013.

1.2 The purpose and structure of the Guide for Assessors

The rules governing the assessment of project proposals submitted to calls for proposals published under the Programme are contained in several documents, all of them regulating the assessment process in different detail and depth. The basic rules are laid down in Chapter 5 of the CP document.

The Guide builds upon the Assessment Manual of the Interreg V-A SKHU Cooperation Programme and is primarily focused on practical information and steps to be taken in the quality assessment process. Assessors are strongly advised to perform their assessment duties in line with the Guide as well as other Programme related documents.

2 BASIC RULES

2.1 The definition of assessment

The selection of project proposals is a complex process stretching in time over several activities whereby every stage of the selection is linked to the preceding and succeeding steps. The assessment process begins as soon as the Call for proposals closes (if the Call is not continuously open) when all project applications are submitted. First, the Joint Secretariat [JS] checks the admissibility and eligibility of projects and only then will the quality assessment start. The project evaluation steps comprises of the following phases:

1. Administrative assessment (performed by JS)
 - a. Admissibility criteria
 - b. Completeness criteria
2. Eligibility assessment (performed by JS)
 - a. Cross-border cooperation criteria
 - b. General eligibility criteria
3. Quality assessment (performed by external assessors and/or JS)
 - a. Strategic evaluation
 - b. Operational evaluation



External assessors are involved in the third stage of the assessment process, in which the quality assessment is carried out thus; this Guide is focused only to this particular stage of the assessment.

When examining application forms assessors will only apply criteria set out in this Guide and those questions that arise during the process which are not tackled in this document are to be clarified by the Joint Secretariat. In situations that require a decision from the Managing Authority/National Authority, the JS will coordinate answers and clarification. When such a question arises assessor should immediately contact the JS. After receiving the feedback from MA/NA, answer will be distributed among all assessors in order to keep the same level of knowledge. Assessors will not be allowed to apply any criteria which deviate from those set out in this Guide and evaluation grids and the Programme documents.

2.2 External actors of assessment

Based on the definition of assessment and with respect to the tasks and responsibilities of the programme implementing structures detailed in the ETC Regulation and the CP document, several actors (institutions, bodies and persons) are involved in the process of assessing project proposals. The present Chapter lists only the external assessors performing the quality assessment of the application forms and their role in the process.

Related to the independent quality assessment of projects the JS contracts external assessors in line with the rules laid down in Chapter 2.3.2 of the Assessment Manual. The individual assessors are selected from the Pool of Assessors, established through an open Call for Assessors (CfA). In the quality assessment phase every project proposal is evaluated by two independent assessors.

2.3 Rules governing correspondence and the handling of documents

2.3.1 The nature of the documents of project assessment

As a basic rule, the content of documents submitted by the LB-s to the JS in connection to the CfP must be kept confidential. The content of the project proposals must not be published or be forwarded to persons or institutions that are not involved in the assessment procedure or in the decision-making. The project idea itself, as well as the detailed description of the project, furthermore the structure of the project proposal and the identity of its partnership's members remain the property of the LB.

All actors of the assessment procedure have to guarantee that the privacy and confidentiality of all submitted project proposals and documents (including assessment grids and other results of the assessment) will be ensured and that all national laws of privacy and Directive No. 95/46/EC on the protection of personal data will be respected.

It is strictly prohibited to forward, on paper or electronically, project proposals, parts of projects, assessment documents and any other confidential data related to the assessment process, including the personal data of the assessors, to actors outside of the regular assessment procedure, especially to LB-s, Beneficiaries or the wider public. Actors of project assessment who fail to comply with the rules of the confidentiality of information shall be liable for their actions.

2.3.2 Exchange of documents with external assessors

External assessors shall use the printed versions of project proposals for their work. Where applicable, the (printed or electronic) copy may also be used. The external assessors may be allowed to transport (paper-based and electronic) project proposal material and to prepare their assessments on their own premises. However, the safety and confidentiality of the documents must be guaranteed at all times. Material related to project proposals can only leave the premises of the JS in a documented way; proofs of receipt have to be issued in connection to every transport.

The external assessors prepare their quality assessment grids in an electronic form, additionally; they should print and sign the finalised versions of the assessment grids.

After having finished the quality assessment, external assessors do not retain documents of project proposals. Following the closure of quality assessment the return of all project-related material (including the electronic versions supplied to the assessors on data devices) must be ascertained.

2.3.3 Correspondence with Lead Beneficiaries

Deriving from the LB principle the JS (and the MA) exclusively communicate with the LB of a given project proposal's project partnership. This holds true for all stages of project assessment. Correspondence with LB-s during project assessment is the right and duty of the programme implementing bodies, thus external assessors are not entitled to communicate with them. Requests for clarifications shall be initiated by the external assessors but shall be communicated to the LB-s by the JS exclusively. In a similar manner, pieces of information (completions, clarifications) coming from the LB-s have to be addressed to the JS, and it will forward the information to the external assessors. Members of the JS acting as assessors also communicate with the LB-s as individuals but through the JS as an organisation.

3 STEPS OF THE QUALITY ASSESSMENT

3.1 Assessment of the quality criteria

The quality assessment will be provided by external assessors. Assessors have to use the quality assessment grid published as part of the application package of the given CfP. The assessors fill in the grid electronically but the final version of the grid has to be printed and signed as well.

3.2 Request for clarification

In special cases, when inconsistency or confusion in application form hampers the assessment of a given criterion, a clarification question can be sent/communicated to the JS. This possibility should only be used in exceptional cases and it cannot result in changing the content of application form (introducing additional activities or explanations or budget changes), only further details can be obtained about proposed activities truly necessary to evaluate certain criterion. Assessor cannot pose these questions directly to Lead Beneficiary in any case. Since answering these questions are not compulsory, absence of answers from Lead Beneficiary does not necessarily result in rejection of the proposal, however the absence of the relevant information must be reflected in the scoring of the respective evaluation criterion.

Clarifications are possible only once during quality assessment.

3.3 The scoring of project proposals

Every project proposal is evaluated by two quality assessors. The summarised score of a project proposal is calculated as the average of the two scores given by the assessors. If the scores show a difference of more than 15 points then the project proposal has to be evaluated by a third quality assessor. The summarised score for the project proposal in this case will be the average of the two scores that are closest to each other.

After the quality evaluation grids are finalised, the JS summarizes the evaluations done by the assessors. Afterwards the JS prepares a summary opinion (Assessment Summary) on each project above 65 points and within the available allocation reflecting the observation of the JS. These summaries will be sent out with the ranking list to help the MC members with the decision.

4 METHODOLOGY OF THE QUALITY ASSESSMENT

The following methodology is applied while conducting the quality assessment of application forms:

1. Familiarization with the Interreg V-A SKHU Cooperation Programme guiding documents
2. Thorough assessment of application forms applying the following steps:
 - Assessment of individual criteria, giving the scores and filling in the assessment grids
 - Overall recommendation of assessor – including comments and conditions
3. Finalization of the assessment process – providing results of assessment/filled in quality grids to JS in required form and within the deadline.

4.1 Familiarization with the Interreg V-A SKHU Cooperation Programme guiding documents

Before the assessment process starts all assessors are required to get familiar with the documents related to the overall description of Interreg V-A SKHU Cooperation Programme as well as the documents related to the specific Call for Proposals. Apart from application form with annexes submitted by Lead Beneficiary, assessor should consult the Cooperation Programme document as well as the Applicant`s Manual elaborated under the specific CfP and assess whether the given project is in compliance with their requirements. The following documents are concerned:

- Cooperation Programme
- Application package of the CfP concerned from which mainly the following relevant documents:
 - Call for Proposal
 - Applicant`s Manual
 - Application Form and Annexes
 - Guide on Eligibility of Expenditures
 - Assessment Grids

All documents and other additional information about the Programme can be found at Programme`s webpage www.skhu.eu

4.2 Thorough assessment of application forms

As already mentioned in the previous chapters, external assessors are involved in the third stage of the assessment process focused on the **quality assessment**.

Assessor has to take into consideration and evaluate all information provided by Lead Beneficiary. This means he/she has to read application form with its annexes very carefully

paying attention to all parts of application form and required annexes. Attention should be given to missing documents that were received from Lead Beneficiary during completion phase as they include updated information concerning the Annexes of the AF relevant for assessment.

Assessor has to check the coherence of information given by Lead Beneficiary in all submitted documents. Only adequate knowledge of respective measure, eligible activities and goals to be achieved by the Programme makes it possible for the assessors to give an objective evaluation and assess relevance of submitted project. The task of Lead Beneficiary is to describe reasoning for submitting proposal, show the added value, sustainability and positive impact of the Programme area in order to convince assessor about necessity to finance respective project under the Programme and PA.



It is necessary to keep in mind that exclusively written information in the application form about the project and its annexes can be taken into account, any assumptions of assessor cannot be considered while performing assessment.

Assessors are required to pay attention to the aspect of eligibility of project activities and in case of any deviation to notify JS and insert his/her observation to the quality grid. In case of any uncertainties about eligibility or necessity of activities for its success implementation assessor is advice to consult with JS his/her findings.

4.2.1 Assessment of individual criteria, giving the scores and filling in the assessment grids

The first section of the evaluation grid contains identification data of the project and is filled in by assessor by inserting relevant information about the assessed project, Lead Beneficiary and the assessor himself/herself.

The table, more particularly, the name of the Lead Partner and the project title should be identical with the data listed in the application form concerned. **The project ID should have the following form: SKHU/1601/4.1/xxx**

Following the identification part, the quality grid is divided into strategic and operational assessment parts.

Strategic evaluation

Strategic evaluation is aimed on assessment of the:

- project environment and coherence,
- relevance of the submitted proposal for the set objectives,
- level of cross-border cooperation,

- added value,
- Project partnership and
- sustainability of project results.

Operational evaluation


Operational evaluation assesses

- feasibility of project activities,
- management capacities,
- requested financial resources,
- project working schedule as well as
- horizontal principles.



The main categories of quality assessment listed above are further divided into the sub-criteria with pre-defined scores and thresholds. Each application can receive maximum of 100 points from which 65 points threshold have to be gained by the Application form in order to be proposed for approval. The achievement of minimum 65 points threshold doesn't automatically mean co-financing for the project, co-financing depends on the funds available.

Each criterion defined above is assessed against a pre-defined score range. For better understanding of prescribing of scores to respective evaluation criterion, the following table shall be consulted:

SCORE		DESCRIPTION
MINIMUM  MAXIMUM	None	The information requested is missing (either not filled it in or not provided in the text). The information is provided but reflects the inexistence of a requirement.
	Very poor	The information provided is considered as not relevant or inadequate
	Poor	The information provided lacks relevant quality and contains strong weaknesses
	Fair	The overall information provided is adequate, however some aspects are not clearly or sufficiently detailed
	Good	The information provided is adequate with sufficiently outlined details
	Very good	The information provided is outstanding in its details, clearness and coherence



Pre-defined score ranges **MUST** be kept and any deviations are unacceptable. Assessor gives scores in the format of whole numbers (e.g. 1, 2, 6).

Throughout entire assessment process assessors are required to insert comments, justifications and/or observations explaining their evaluation, describing reasons leading to that particular opinion and awarded scores. Furthermore, assessors are allowed to insert comments and recommendations to achieve better quality of project implementation and results.

For instance, if some activity has no positive impact and is not inevitable for reaching the project results, assessor should advice to exclude respective activity while on the other hand, if e.g. broadening the scope of research would bring better results, assessor should advice so.

When selecting a project for financing and presenting it to the Monitoring Committee, clearly defined conditions have to be set in order to overcome possible deficiencies. The assessment should enable the JS to prepare recommendations to the decision making body with clear inputs. Therefore any correctional measures or additional actions to be carried out by the applicant(s) improving the overall quality of the project or ensuring smooth implementation should be described in the comment field of the grid.



The assessment grid and all comments **MUST** be done in English!

4.2.2 Overall assessor recommendation – including comments

After assessor finishes with strategic and operational assessment paying attention to all different aspects of application form he/she has to write down summarized comments supporting overall recommendation for respective project. While summarizing the overall evaluation and proposing the final recommendation on application form, assessor has to take into consideration all previously inserted comments and recommendations he/she has given for a certain criterion. Assessors should extract the most relevant comments and notes according to which, the final recommendations was done and conditions set.

The overall assessment is a summary of evaluation of individual criteria and should be very informative and comprehensive. Furthermore, assessor must describe the logic behind making the particular decision and clearly present his/ her arguments.

The following overall recommendations are applicable:

- Recommended for approval
- Recommended for approval with conditions
- Recommended for non-approval with reasons specified

See the table below describing the final recommendations according to the overall scores gained for application form or concept note.

TYPE OF ASSESSOR RECOMMENDATION	OVERALL SCORES
Recommended for approval	65 - 100
Recommended for approval with conditions	65 - 100
Recommended for non-approval with reasons specified	0 – 64

This last section of the quality evaluation grid is highly important when the JS prepares the recommendation for the Monitoring Committee to approve or reject submitted application form and thus **MUST** contain all assessor remarks and recommendations to any condition that project partners should fulfil in order to be awarded a grant.



All information and comments in the “Overall assessor recommendation” table **MUST** be done in English!

4.2.3 Finalization of the assessment process

Duly filled in quality evaluation grids as the results of assessment process **MUST** be delivered by assessor or by a person nominated by him/ her to the JS in both versions:

- electronic (via email)
- on paper (in one signed original)

All sections of evaluation grid should be properly filled in on computer.

An electronic version of all evaluation grids filled in by assessor should be saved in a form indicating the project registration number as follows:

QAG_SKHU-1601-xxx_v1-00_HU/SK

Example:

QAG_SKHU-1601-001_v1-00_HU

5 DEADLINES

5.1 Final Deadline

The **final deadline** for submitting the electronic and paper versions of quality evaluation grids along with the paper versions of the projects handed over to the assessor at the respective training must be delivered according to the hand over protocol as it was agreed on the assessors training to the following addresses:

Joint Secretariat: Szép utca 2., 1053 Budapest, Hungary

National Authority in Slovakia: Račianska 153 A, 830 03 Bratislava 33, Slovakia

Assessor should inform the JS to make an appointment in advance and agree the way of delivery.



The paper versions of quality evaluation grids must be signed by assessor on the first page in the relevant cell (part of identification of application form assessed and the assessor) and on every page of the printed document.

The electronic versions of the filled in quality assessment grids are to be sent to the following email addresses:

csveres@skhu.eu | lstrizencova@skhu.eu | szholop@skhu.eu

5.2 Deadline for sample check

Minimum 2 filled in quality assessment grids have to be sent to the above mentioned email addresses by the date as it was agreed on the assessors training.

5.3 Ongoing evaluation

Assessors are required to send over the finished assessment grids to the JS on a continuous basis in order to ensure the effectivity of the coordination of quality assessment process.

Important note:



By signing the Declaration on Impartiality and Confidentiality assessor agrees to hold in trust and confidence any information and documents handed to him/her. Documents disclosed to assessor should be prevented from any damage or lost and assessor is personally responsible for handing them back to the JS after the assessment process is accomplished. The payment of fee is carried out only after

launching the performance sheet by the JS and the delivery of following documents to the JS:

- application forms with all the annexes
 - signed paper versions of evaluation grids.
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6 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Explanation
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AM	Applicant's Manual
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CfA	Call for Assessors
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CfP	Call for Proposals
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CP	Cooperation Programme document
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CPR	Common Provisions Regulation (Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013)
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ETC Regulation	Regulation (EU) No 1299/2013
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JS	Joint Secretariat
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LB	Lead Beneficiary
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MA	Managing Authority (Prime Minister's Office, Hungary)
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MC	Monitoring Committee
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NA	National Authority (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Slovak Republic)
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