

FWF Statement on the Evaluation Report – Emerging Fields

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Vienna, September 20, 2024

Contents

1	Background.....	3
1.2	The Emerging Fields Programme	3
2	Key Findings.....	3
2.1	The FWF's responses to the recommendations from the evaluation.....	4
3	Closing Remarks on the FWF's Cooperation with the Evaluators	7

1 Background

1.1 The FWF

The Austrian Science Fund (FWF) is Austria's leading organization for the funding of basic research. The FWF was established to support the ongoing development of Austrian science and basic research at a high international level. In this way, the FWF makes a significant contribution to cultural development, to the advancement of our knowledge-based society, and to the creation of value and prosperity in Austria. Further information on the FWF's responsibilities, and the values to which it is committed, can be found on the FWF's website at <https://www.fwf.ac.at/en/>

1.2 The Emerging Fields Programme

In 2021, the Austrian federal government provided the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) with €150 million in funding for the subsequent three-year period dedicated to the excellent=austria initiative, created to support universities and other research institutions in further developing their research strengths. The excellent=austria initiative allows research institutions to enhance their reputation as internationally successful research stakeholders, and this in turn increases Austria's chances of attracting the best researchers from around the world.

In the first funding track of excellent=austria, the [Clusters of Excellence programme](#) was implemented and [evaluated](#). The current evaluation deals with the second funding track, [Emerging Fields \(EF\)](#). The Emerging Fields programme is aimed at teams of outstanding researchers doing pioneering work in basic research who are prepared to depart from established approaches. It gives researchers the opportunity to pursue particularly innovative, original, or high-risk ideas. The programme focuses on funding research that has the potential to trigger a paradigm shift in its field. The programme is also open to interdisciplinary teams, researchers involved in arts-based research who apply aesthetic and artistic methods, and transdisciplinary approaches that involve non-academic participants from outside the scientific community.

2 Key Findings

The FWF is pleased to note that a key objective of this programme has been achieved by attracting and identifying particularly innovative and promising research projects.

“Our headline conclusion is that the Emerging Fields (EF) programme has served a critical signalling and galvanising function. By launching the programme, the FWF provided an opportunity for Austria-based researchers to propose a wide range of highly novel research ideas. Many of these were fully formulated only in response to the EF call.”

(Kolarz, Peter; Vingre, Anete; Machado, Diogo; Sutinen, Laura; Dudenbostel, Tobias; Arnold, Erik (2024). Accompanying process evaluation of FWF’s Emerging Fields. Zenodo, p. 5) DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.13911479

2.1 The FWF’s responses to the recommendations from the evaluation

The FWF is grateful for the constructive and balanced feedback on improving the programme and the selection process provided in this report. We have itemised the recommendations and briefly outlined the resulting consequences for the FWF below. Some of the recommendations will already be implemented in the second EF call, while others will be considered and reviewed by the FWF’s executive bodies for application to the strategic planning and orientation of the funding portfolio and the next three-year plan.

“The additional funds provided for basic research in Austria through the EF scheme (and the Excellent=Austria initiative more broadly) is clearly much needed in stakeholders’ views and has been money well spent. However, without reducing budget, there is a case for combining the EF programme into the Spezialforschungsbereiche (SFBs). This would mean much clearer ‘signalling’ in terms of the scale and scope expected of projects (implicit definitions around what is a ‘field’ already culturally existing around SFBs would then automatically apply to EF), with only the element of high novelty as a distinguishing feature. SFBs could then alternate between ‘regular’ and ‘Emerging Fields’ rounds, with the EF round maintaining the current assessment process and signalling demand for unusual, high-risk/high-reward research.” (Kolarz et. al. 2024, p. 42)

All recommendations were carefully reviewed. The FWF is in the process of revising both the [Special Research Areas](#) and the smaller-scale programme [Research Groups](#). In this context, we are also considering to what extent the EF need to be more clearly differentiated from the Special Research Areas. There are no plans to alternate between the programmes, as this is currently not possible due to the FWF’s three-year planning. Rather, we see the strength of both programmes in the fact that the Special Research Areas are available as annual calls for proposals, so that these long-term research networks are not artificially forced into conforming with the objectives of the EF programme, even if only in the terminology, such as "emergent" and "high-risk, high-gain."

“The FWF should include in the documentation of future calls (both for applicants and assessors) some definitions and illustrative examples of key terms. This could also include a distinction between actual assessment criteria and eligibility, i.e. which key terms will actually be assessed and which key terms simply signal what kinds of applications are welcome. Specifically, this should include:

- A non-exhaustive list of definitions of what is meant by ‘highly novel/innovative’ or ‘high-risk/high-reward’. This may helpfully include any differing definitions and understandings that might exist between natural/technical sciences, biomedicine, social sciences and arts/humanities. The winning awards of the current call may even be used as illustrative examples. Novelty should be clearly stated as a central assessment criterion
- A definition of scale (what is a field?). This may lean heavily on definitions included in the SFBs, especially if the programmes are combined as recommended above. Minimum definition of a ‘field’ relates to the criterion of overall significance, which should affect decision-making
- There may be a need to define what it means to be ‘emergent’, especially in relation to prior funding for proposed research ideas. In cases of substantial prior funding (e.g. ERC grants for closely related topics or strongly overlapping consortia), the FWF might want to consider that a field is no longer ‘emergent’
- For interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity and arts-based approaches, the documentation should emphasise that such approaches are welcome and that there will be experts able to evaluate such approaches, but that they are not in themselves assessment criteria and will not in themselves be rewarded.” (Kolarz et. al. 2024, p. 42)

The FWF is aware that the key terms mentioned above are very open and broad and may result in different expectations among applicants, reviewers, and the jury. At the same time, it is very important to the FWF that, as a funding organization, it does not set any supposed standards to which applicants must adhere in order to be successful. The bottom-up principle therefore applies not only to the topic itself, but also to the respective approach. In similar programmes such as [Arts-Based Research](#) or [#ConnectingMinds](#), the FWF does not specify in detail what is meant by arts-based research or transdisciplinary research. The FWF values the heterogeneity of drivers from different disciplines and fields of practice. The meaning of respective approaches varies significantly depending on the context and should therefore be assessed by the relevant peers (reviewers and jury members). Nevertheless, we do see a need for further clarification here. In the next call for applications, the applicants themselves will have to explain to the reviewers how they define relevant key terms such as “emergent” or “field” as a frame of reference for their proposed research. This will make it clear how the applicants present their case and the reviewers will be able to understand and evaluate this reasoning.

“While there is an administrative need to assemble most of the Jury before applications have been submitted (simply to ensure adherence to timelines), the FWF should explore options at least partially to finalise Jury composition after applications have been received so that the Jury can be better tailored to the portfolio. This might involve having a slightly larger ‘roster’ of potential Jury members, from which a smaller subset may then be chosen to best reflect applications’ range of topics and fields.” (Kolarz et. al. 2024, p. 42)

Juries are an integral part of several FWF programmes. In these programmes, the FWF does not define the role of the individual jury members as providing specific expertise for a particular application or applications. Rather, it is about broad expertise in a field and experience with such decision-making formats. The specific expertise is always obtained in the form of reviews by external experts.

It is indeed the case that the EF programme differs slightly, as in stage 1 a decision recommendation is already drawn up by the jury without a written review by external reviewers. However, in this stage, it is not detailed scientific aspects that are of primary importance but whether the synopsis convincingly describes a proposal that fulfils the programme objectives: particularly innovative, original, or high-risk ideas. Only applications that are considered “conventional” or overly “far-fetched” or where teams do not have the necessary qualifications are proposed for rejection.

“The FWF should state in greater detail to applicants (i.e. in the guidelines) how the Jury is recruited, how allocations of Jury members to applications are undertaken, what main criteria the Jury members will emphasise in their reviews of synopses, what elements of synopses they will provide feedback on, and what kind of feedback will not be provided at Stage 1.” (Kolarz et. al. 2024, p. 42)

In the next call, the FWF will integrate the points mentioned in the revised application guidelines in greater detail than in the first call. Of course, it is very important to the FWF that applicants understand the framework conditions for decision-making and have realistic expectations of the feedback to be expected.

“The Jury meeting at the start of Stage 1 should become a formal part of the assessment process. It should be led by the Jury chair though they may request the presence of FWF staff if they wish. The meeting should provide opportunity for exchange among Jury members, most notably on how to apply the A-C rating scale and how to weigh up different aspects of the synopses.” (Kolarz et. al. 2024, p. 43)

At the request of the jury chair, the FWF immediately recognised the need for this and provided logistical support in the first call. A formalization of this internal exchange process is considered extremely useful and will be implemented by default.

The FWF should also mandate a slightly more defined structure for synopses. While there needs to be space for discretion, there is a need to clarify whether academic references, bibliographies and previous research awards should or should not be included, and what kind of information about the proposed project team should be included.” (Kolarz et. al. 2024, p. 43)

As before, the synopsis should remain short and concise, but a fourth page will be added for a more detailed description and explicit documentation of the team, including how existing and/or complementary expertise contributes to the proposed research collaboration. The application guidelines will also communicate more clearly to applicants what is expected.

“The FWF needs to continue monitoring diversity markers in future calls. Should the inequitable outcomes be repeated in future calls, the FWF may need to consider unconscious bias training or briefings for the Jury, external reviewers and FWF Scientific Board. We do not posit such provision as a recommendation at this time because the overall numbers and supporting observations cannot confirm the existence of actual bias. The observed outcomes may at this point simply have been coincidence.” (Kolarz et. al. 2024, p. 43)

The FWF promotes equal opportunities for all genders and is committed to gender mainstreaming in all areas and were pleased that no explicit biases in this regard were observed in the evaluation. However, the FWF always strives to review its procedures critically to ensure a fair and quality-assured process. For this reason, the FWF is already conducting training sessions on bias sensibilisation on a regular basis for FWF staff and members of the Scientific Board. Relevant aspects on unconscious bias are summarised before the scientific board meetings. The reviewers are also made aware of the topic in the cover letter.

3 Closing Remarks on the FWF's Cooperation with the Evaluators

The FWF is committed to the evaluation standards developed by the Austrian Platform for Research and Technology Policy Evaluation (fteval). In addition, the FWF has adopted its own [quality and transparency rules](#) that formed the basis of this evaluation. These sets of rules provide a clear delineation with regard to the relationship between the evaluators and the client. The cooperation with the Technopolis team led by Peter Kolarz was characterised by professional distance, in acceptance of and compliance with these different roles.