

Innovate UK

An introduction to the Innovate UK competition assessment process on the Innovation Funding Service

Most Innovate UK funding involves a competitive application process. Applicants submit into a competition, the assessment process is transparent and managed at arm's length from Innovate UK and its co-funders.

Independent assessors are appointed by Innovate UK for each competition. As an appointed assessor, you are required to register for an account on IFS (Innovation Funding Service), unless you already have one. Note: you only need to register once. The registration covers confidentiality and the need to declare any potential conflicts of interest in the competition or a particular application being submitted into the competition. You must treat all applications in the strictest of confidence.

As an independent assessor, you are engaged as an individual and not as a representative of your employer. As such, you must register your assessor account on IFS as an individual. You must assess each proposal yourself and must not ask anyone else to review an application in your place or seek opinion from others. Innovate UK runs webinar briefings for all competitions in order to brief you on the scope and requirements for each competition. For each competition, scoring guidance is available on IFS to use when assessing to help you ensure that your assessments and feedback are consistent and reflect the true quality of each application.

Innovate UK preserves the anonymity of its assessors and so names will not be provided to applicants under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. All panel reports and ranking sheets associated with a competition are confidential and will not be available to anyone other than Innovate UK, its co-funders and its contractors.

Assessor recruitment: how do you become an Innovate UK assessor?

Assessors are selected by the Innovation Lead for the competition. They are representatives of academia, business or industry led bodies and are usually known to the Innovation Lead through their day to day interaction with their market and network. When selecting or inviting assessors to participate in a competition call, the Innovation Lead will usually request a CV which is used to validate their years of experience.

It is the Innovation Lead who determines the level of experience an assessor should have for their competition. It is in their interest to have the highest quality pool of assessors available to them in order to secure a smoothly run competition which delivers the best outcome in the form of successful applicants.

Assessors are contracted with Innovate UK as individuals and not as representatives of their organisation although the fact that they may work for a particular organisation may of course influence our decision to use them due to the network of experience available to them.

Individuals will sometimes contact the competitions team directly to become assessors. In this case, we would always refer them to the Innovation Lead for their area of expertise.

To register your interest as an assessor for a particular competition, please contact the Innovation Lead. To find out more please contact the Knowledge Transfer Network for your sector of expertise who will be happy to connect you with the relevant contacts.

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You will be invited to attend an assessor induction webinar, hosted by the competitions team, which will provide an overview of the assessment process and what we expect from assessors. It will also give you the opportunity to ask any questions. All new assessors are expected to attend this before they start working for Innovate UK.

Once the Innovation Lead has identified their pool of assessors for a competition, Innovate UK will invite them via IFS and they will be required to attend a webinar briefing specific to that competition. For more information please contact us via competitions.admin@innovateuk.gov.uk or call 0300 321 4357.

The assessment process

Each new assessor is required to register on IFS. Once you are a registered assessor, you will find any applications for assessment appear on the assessor dashboard, with assessment guidance and score selection within each application.

A standard assessment process applies to all applications:

- Applications are allocated to assessors after the closing date for submission. Each application is assessed by up to five assessors.
- Each application is assessed against the same set of gateway scope and criteria questions. Each assessor is required to give a score with comments for each question within each application they are assigned to assess.
- Assessments must be completed by the assessment deadline.
- A report is compiled to identify ranked order of all applications (where there is a second stage to the competition, viable applications are invited to the second stage of the competition).
- In some instances, an assessment moderation panel consisting of five assessors from the competition may be convened to discuss any applications that require clarification around scope, quality, feasibility or fundability. The assessment panel recommends a ranked list of applications to be funded by Innovate UK.
- In some instances, an interview panel consisting of five assessors from the competition may be convened to discuss and interview the top scoring applications. The interview panel recommends a ranked list of applications to be funded by Innovate UK.
- A competition will either have an assessment moderation panel, an interview panel or a portfolio review which is an internal Innovate UK process.
- The final recommended panel list is presented to the Funders' Panel of Innovate UK to obtain final approval for funding. NB Whilst Innovate UK engages assessors to act on its behalf, it retains the right of decision over scope and to whether a proposal is in or out of scope absolutely, with respect to providing funding.
- All applications will be assessed on individual merit in accordance with the normal Innovate UK process. However, Innovate UK reserves the right to apply a "portfolio" approach to ensure the distribution of funds across areas, subject to meeting the required quality threshold.

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- The comments provided by the assessors form the official feedback provided to the applicant. Innovate UK will not edit this feedback before it is released to the applicant.

Why is an assessor's identity kept anonymous?

It is standard process for Innovate UK to keep the assessors anonymous to applicants. This is primarily to allow the assessors the freedom to comment on an application without the threat of being contacted by an applicant after the competition to pursue a comment which they feel is unfair or unwarranted.

There are some situations where applicants may have the opportunity to meet assessors. Certain competition processes, particularly where the funding is significant, require final stage applicants to attend a presentation to a panel of assessors. Here the assessors will be present in the room with the applicant and so their identities are revealed. It is rare in this situation that the assessor has provided written feedback to those applicants and where this is likely to happen, assessors are made aware of the fact that they are likely to meet the applicants at a later panel meeting.

How do assessors score/mark applications?

For each competition, assessors are expected to attend a webinar briefing where the Innovation Lead will present the scope of the competition and detail what they are expecting the assessors to look for. The Portfolio Manager will also go through the application form questions and supply a scoring matrix to show how they should score an application based upon their assessment. Each assessor is sent an email with the webinar briefing slides, the recording and Innovate UK's invoice template.

Each assessor is required to record their score for each question as well as some written feedback for each question to justify the given score. They are also asked to say whether they recommend the application for funding with an explanation of why they have answered yes or no.

How are any conflicts of interest resolved?

Under the terms of the assessor contract, the assessor must inform Innovate UK if they have a conflict of interest with a particular application or competition.

- Direct conflicts – This would be where an assessor is directly involved in an application or stands to benefit from a project being successful (for example, owning a company that is putting in a bid). In this case you could not assess on the competition.
- Indirect conflicts - This may be that they know the company, have or had a business relationship with them or a member of the consortium which could influence their marking. In this case you could still assess the competition but not that particular application, which would be reallocated to another assessor.

How are the final projects selected?

A panel sheet is created with the average application scores ranked in order. The panel sheet gives Innovate UK the ability to drill into each application in order to review an assessor's score. Where there is a large spread, the competitions team and the innovation lead will review any outliers and decide whether the outlier score is justified or if it should be disregarded.

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If there is a **moderation panel**, a subset of typically 5 independent assessors are invited to attend, usually in Swindon at Innovate UK's offices. Applications which may be borderline or in the area immediately above or below the funding line are discussed at assessment panel with all assessors asked to re-score and vote on whether they recommend each application being discussed for funding. This forms the final selection for funding which is then taken to Innovate UK Funders' Panel for the competition for approval.

If there is an **interview panel**, a subset of typically 5 independent assessors are invited to attend, usually in Swindon or a London venue. The highest scoring applicants from the written stage will be invited to present to the panel and will then be interviewed by the panel. All assessors re-score and vote on whether they recommend each application for funding. This forms the final selection for funding which is then taken to Innovate UK Funders' Panel for the competition for approval.

If there is a **portfolio review**, the innovation lead and competitions team will review the scores and applications received to select a portfolio of projects that meet the different scope areas, categories of research and development, project durations and project costs. This is to fit the spend profile of the competition. It will make sure that funds are allocated across the strategic areas identified in the scope of the competition. Successful applications are all required to meet a quality threshold. Assessor input is not required for this stage of the process.

When and why is assessor feedback given to applicants?

As described above, the assessors are asked to provide feedback to applicants for each of the questions. This feedback is then released to each applicant, both successful and unsuccessful applicants within 4 weeks of them being notified of the competition decision. If the competition has an interview stage, applicants will receive their feedback prior to the interview so that they can respond to this either in advance of the interview or during their presentation.

The intention of the feedback is to provide the applicant with constructive comments on their project, whether they are to proceed with Innovate UK funding or whether they are to improve their project proposal and seek funding from an alternative source.