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EIC Accelerator: 15 recommendations to reduce the part of luck vs skills in the selection of future European deeptech champions

This week EWGIC released its position paper on EIC Accelerator under Horizon Europe in view of the ongoing Horizon Europe negotiations. Created in 2014 under the "SME instrument" name, the EIC Accelerator has become the largest and most competitive public funding scheme for deeptech startups in Europe.

With success rates falling rapidly below 1% (over 5,000 submissions expected in October 2020 vs funding available for 30-40 companies), the EIC Accelerator has fallen victim to its popularity. Today, success in this programme requires a very high-quality application, and a fair amount of luck (represented by the subjective opinion of third-party evaluators).

To address these issues, the EIC Task Force has suggested to implement a radically new evaluation process with a pre-screening stage (short application), a regular written stage (full application) and an interview stage. The scoring scale (out of 15) is replaced with a simple "go / no go" approach. Most importantly, only two submissions would be allowed at each stage before a 24-month cooling off period.

Overall, these changes are likely to be **favourable to the best applicants** as they will reduce the application "noise" (sub-par applications that will not go through the pre-screening) and reduce the number of resubmissions overall. The EC will thus provide higher quality evaluations of a smaller set of full stage applications, and therefore reducing the "luck factor" of the evaluation process.

However, the approach will also put **a higher responsibility on a smaller number of evaluators** which, as a result, must be carefully selected and trained in the context of 3 main challenges:

- **Challenge 1: reducing oversubscription**

- **Challenge 2: supporting a fair evaluation with clear evaluation criteria**

- **Challenge 3: recruiting skilled and trained evaluators**

With its members having supported over 1000 successful applicants in the programme, EWGIC is **proposing 15 possible improvement areas** that should result in a fair and transparent evaluation process:

1. At the short application and full application stages, evaluators **should be completely new** between the two evaluations of the same proposal (to guarantee the absence of bias)

2. At the short application and full application stages, the cooling off period could be **reduced to 12 months** for the "best" unsuccessful applications (this would require a ranking process based on the number of "no go")

3. At full proposal stage only, **a third submission** could be granted before their cooling off period OR, the **use of an (online) consensus meeting and 3 evaluators** would eliminate potential "evaluation mistakes".

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4. At the interview stage, evaluators should receive **clear guidelines** about how to allocate cases to the 3 different negative outcomes (there is a substantial difference between getting a new interview chance, vs being rejected with or without Seal of Excellence).

5. **Seals of Excellence should be awarded to all high-quality proposals** (together with the 24-month cooling off period), not only low-risk ones, so they have equal chances to raise funding from alternative sources.

6. **All evaluators should receive detailed guidelines** to evaluate TRL and non-bankability based on the same rules. The guidelines should include concrete cases of what is deemed and not deemed "bankable", and what is TRL5/6 in multiple industries (as these guidelines already exist in most cases).

7. **All interview experts should receive detailed guidelines** to decide whether a proposal is allowed to present again at the interview, receives a Seal of Excellence or goes into a cooling off period, and the decision should be clearly motivated in the evaluation summary report

8. **The "non-bankability" criterion should be renamed "risk":** for example, a quantum computing company may have raised €10M last year and ask for €20M this year because it is extraordinarily difficult to get funded in this "high risk" domain.

9. **Evaluators should be evaluated:** data analysis could flag where evaluators are constantly underscoring or overscoring proposals and should be retrained or kicked out of the pool).

10. **EASME should proactively screen** the expert database for conflicts of interest instead of relying on third party reporting. EASME should also perform extensive due diligence on a random sample of evaluators to root out overstated credentials.

11. **All evaluators should be regularly tested about their knowledge** of the evaluation process (e.g. with an online survey) and re-trained when they are scoring under a certain threshold (especially when evaluation criteria keep changing during the course of the programme, as it has been the case under Horizon 2020).

12. **Scoring patterns of evaluators should be analysed** in order to flag outliers (experts who constantly underscore or over-score proposals, or specific criteria) in order to make sure that funded proposals are not the ones that got the most generous evaluators.

13. **The new evaluation system should provide the detailed comments** of the experts to the applicants, as well as to the evaluators of the next stage, for transparency of the evaluation criteria (applicants should of course accept that 2 experts might have conflicting comments).

14. **The new evaluation system should allow for bi-directional communication between experts** where evaluators can send comments to each other (within the same stage or across multiple stages) in order to give them feedback about their understanding of the criteria.

15. **All interview jury members should be requested to read the proposal entirely** before the panel, and the role of "briefer" (the jury member who is supposed to introduce the case and lead the pre-interview internal discussion) should be discontinued so one jury member does not have a disproportionate impact on the evaluation outcome.

PRESS RELEASE

Brussels, 8 September 2020

Will the new EIC Accelerator reduce the impact of luck vs skills in the selection of the European deeptech champions?

EWGIC believes the suggested changes are supporting a more transparent and fair evaluation, but only when combined with **clear and consistent evaluation criteria**, as well as a **thorough overhaul of the expert pool recruitment and training processes**.

Access the **short version of the position paper** here (4 pages)

Access the **full version of the position paper** here (12 pages)

About EWGIC
Created in September 2019, the European Working Group of Innovation Consultants (EWGIC) gathers active innovation consultants in the field of European research and innovation projects. The group aims to facilitate exchange and promotion of best practices and success stories, as well as to promote professional skills and expertise. Today the group gathers 40 members, active in more than 18 countries around Europe.