European Innovation Council

Implementation of the Fast Track process for the EIC Accelerator –
Guidelines for eligible funding bodies

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(NB: This document should be read in conjunction with the Framework and Specific Programmes for Horizon Europe[1] [2] as well as the EIC Work Programme 2024[3])

Introduction

The Fast Track scheme (the 'Fast Track') is a novelty under Horizon Europe and a specific process applicable to the EIC Accelerator (the 'Accelerator'). It provides for a specific treatment of applications that result from existing Horizon Europe or Horizon 2020 projects.

Under the Fast Track, applicants do not apply directly to the Accelerator. Instead, the responsible funding body carries out a project review to assess the innovation or market deployment potential of results stemming from an existing project.

Based on the project review, the responsible funding body will decide whether the project is suitable for support under the Accelerator.

Responsible funding bodies eligible in 2024

The funding bodies and schemes which are eligible for the Fast Track for Accelerator cut off dates in 2024 are:

- The European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA) for EIC Pathfinder and Transition projects (including projects funded under the EIC pilot & certain H2020 FET calls). The Fast Track for Accelerator is also available for companies awarded a grant only under the Horizon 2020 EIC pilot Accelerator and the Horizon Europe EIC Accelerator managed by the Agency;

- The Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) supported by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT);

- The Eureka secretariat and relevant national bodies for SMEs supported under the Eurostars-2 Joint Programme and the Partnership on Innovative SMEs.

These funding bodies are responsible for implementing the Fast Track in accordance with the provisions. They may decide not to implement the scheme or to introduce it at a later stage.

In order to introduce the Fast Track scheme, the eligible funding body shall provide to EISMEA a description of how it will implement the scheme in compliance with provisions of the EIC Work Programme and the

[1] Article 48(6) of Regulation (EU) 2021/695: *With the agreement of the applicants concerned, the Commission or the funding bodies implementing the Programme (including the EIT's KICs) may directly submit for evaluation under the award criterion referred to in point (c) of paragraph 5 a proposal for an innovation and market deployment action which already fulfils the award criteria referred to in points (a) and (b) of paragraph 5 (e.g. 'excellence' and 'impact'), subject to the following cumulative conditions: (a) the proposal shall stem from any other action funded under Horizon 2020, from the Programme or, subject to an exploratory pilot phase to be launched under the first work programme, from national and/or regional programmes, starting with the mapping of the demand for such a scheme, detailed provisions of which shall be laid down in the specific programme referred to in point (a) of Article 1(2); (b) the proposal is based on a project review which was carried out within the previous two years assessing the excellence and the impact of the proposal and subject to conditions and processes further detailed in the work programme.*

[2] Section on *'The European Innovation Council'* (i.e. section *1.1.2 The Accelerator2)* of Decision (EU) 2021/764: *The Accelerator will also allow for take-up of innovations stemming from Pathfinder-supported projects and from other pillars of the Union framework programmes(25), in order to support them in reaching the market. This identification of projects supported in other pillars of Horizon Europe and also previous framework programmes will be based on pertinent methodologies, such as the Innovation Radar. Footnote 25: Such as ERC Proof of Concept, from projects supported under the pillar 'Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness', start-ups emerging from the KICs of the EIT. Applications shall also stem from Horizon 2020 activities, particularly projects selected under Horizon 2020 SME Phase 2 and related Seal of Excellence financed by Member States, or from (existing and future) European Partnerships.*

[3] Annex 3 - Fast Track scheme to apply for the EIC Accelerator.

elements set out in this note. This description shall include:

- A specification of the support scheme(s) which the Fast Track will be used for, ensuring that there is no overlapping of activities supported by the existing eligible scheme and the proposed EIC Accelerator support;

- A description of the project review process, including how experts will be selected and will conduct an evaluation process equivalent to the one set out for the short application stage of the EIC Accelerator;

- An estimation of the number of Fast Track project reviews to be conducted and of the maximum number of Fast Track applicants to be submitted for EIC Accelerator support.

EISMEA, as the granting authority for the EIC Accelerator, will then indicate its acceptance of the proposed Fast Track scheme together with contact points for the implementation. Note that as granting authority for Pathfinder and Transition, EISMEA is committed to following these guidelines for its Pathfinder and Transition schemes, too.

The project review for the Fast Track scheme

As mentioned above, the responsible funding body must assess the project results for the purposes of using the Fast Track during a dedicated project review. Such assessment has a different purpose from the usual reviews performed during the implementation of a project e.g. under a grant agreement. While the latter evaluate the project, the review for the Fast Track (i.e. for a project to be admitted to the Accelerator) must pay particular attention to the company (or the innovator who intends to start the company) and on the underlying idea of the potential new action to bring the innovation to market. Bearing this differentiation in mind, the responsible funding body may perform the project review for the Fast Track in the context of one of the regular progress meetings/reviews already envisaged during the implementation of the existing project, provided that the conditions for the review described in this document are met.

Timing of project reviews

The project review for the purposes of the Fast Track should be performed during the implementation of the project (as in the case of EIC Accelerator grant-only projects) funded by the responsible funding body[4]. It may also be performed up to 2 years after completion of the project (after the grant agreement has ended or final payment has been processed) in case of early stage research projects.

As per Horizon Europe legal base[5], the project review on which the proposal is based must have been performed within the two years preceding the submission of the proposal to the Accelerator via the Fast Track.

Eligibility of applicants

The responsible funding body shall assess the eligibility of its beneficiaries (and potential applicants to the EIC Accelerator via the Fast Track) using the eligibility criteria set out for the Accelerator in the EIC Work Programme (e.g. single legal entity, in most cases a start-up or SME established in an EU Member State or Associated Country, etc.). In case of collaborative projects, the project review will have to identify the individual legal entity (e.g. member of the consortium) to bring the project/results forward to the EIC Accelerator and ensure the legal entity has the necessary rights and access to the results generated by the existing project.

[4] When the responsible funding bodies enters into commercial agreements such as 'equity stakes' or 'revenue sharing' agreements with its beneficiaries, such agreements may also be considered as on-going contractual relationships.

[5] Article 48(6) b) – [...] the proposal is based on a project review which was carried out within the previous two years assessing the excellence and the impact of the proposal and subject to conditions and processes further detailed in the work programme.

Where the legal entity interested in commercialising the innovation is not the same as the one that generated the idea (i.e. it may be an entity that did not participate in the project funded by the responsible body, such as a newly-formed spin-out), it must have entered into an agreement (e.g. tech transfer) to commercialise the results and must have obtained the necessary IP rights as mentioned above.

The responsible funding body is expected to conduct a proportionate assessment of the eligibility of the applicants and to certify that the applicants/results stem from an activity/project supported by the responsible funding body. Note that EISMEA as granting authority for the EIC Accelerator has the final responsibility for the eligibility of applicants to the Accelerator.

Award criteria

As set out in the EIC work programme, the responsible funding body must assess the innovation during the project review using equivalent award criteria and evaluation processes as the ones used for the short application stage of the Accelerator, guaranteeing an independent assessment of proposals in compliance with Article 48 of Horizon Europe Regulation.

The criteria of *'excellence'* and *'impact'* and the related sub-criteria for the short application phase to be assessed during the project review are the following:

1. Excellence
Excellence of the company: Does the company has the vision and ambition to scale up?
Novelty and breakthrough character of the innovation: Does the innovation have breakthrough character and a high degree of novelty compared to existing solutions?
Technology readiness level: Has the innovation reached TRL 5 (i.e. it has been tested in the relevant environment)?
Timing: Is the timing right for this innovation in terms of market, users, societal or scientific of technological trends and developments?
2. Impact
Competitiveness and demand: Is the innovation better than what the competition proposes, and is the solution bringing sufficient added value to trigger demand from potential customers?
Market development: Does the innovation have the potential to develop new markets or significantly transform existing ones?
Broader impact: Will the innovation, if successfully commercialised achieve positive broader societal, economic, environmental[6] or climate impacts?

The third award criterion *"level of risk, implementation, and need for Union support"* will be assessed by EISMEA once the project has successfully passed the project review and has been invited to the EIC Accelerator for the remote evaluation of the full proposal.

As far as the content of the project review is concerned, there are no strict requirements as to what set of documents the beneficiary (potential Accelerator applicant) must submit to the responsible funding body for the purposes of the project review. While for the short application to the Accelerator applicants must submit a specific set of documents (i.e. video pitch, pitch deck, 12-pager), it is not mandatory for the responsible funding body to request the same documents to the applicant.

However, as part of the project review the applicant should submit documentation that:

- Provides sufficient evidence to assess the award criteria (and sub-criteria) of *'excellence'* and *'impact'* using the same interpretation and standard or assessment of such criteria and sub-criteria

[6] Projects must comply with the 'do no significant harm' principle of the EU Taxonomy.

as for the EIC Accelerator;

- Indicates the financial amount to be requested from the EIC Accelerator (recalling that the maximum grant amount is below EUR 2.5 million and the equity component should be between EUR 0.5 and 15 million);

- Provides assurance that the applicant meets the eligibility criteria as set out in the EIC work programme.

Use of experts and evaluation method

The project reviews must be conducted by suitably qualified experts. In the case of short applications submitted for the EIC Accelerator, EISMEA uses independent external experts. For Fast Track project reviews, the responsible funding body may derogate from this condition as long as all experts are independent and at least one of the experts appointed for each project review is external.

In selecting and allocating the experts the responsible funding body must ensure that:

- There is no situation of conflict of interest[7];

- The experts do not also work as consultants supporting companies in applying for EU funding;

- The experts have relevant experience in the technological and/or innovation field(s) of the proposed innovation as well as the market application of the innovation;

- There is a fair gender and geographical balance in the expert pool.

In order to fulfil the requirement of using independent external experts[8] while taking account of the existing practice of the responsible funding body[9], EISMEA aims to create a dedicated pool of experts with experience in evaluating EIC Accelerator applications from which the responsible funding body may decide to draw from to perform the project review. If the responsible funding body decides not to use any experts from this pool, it must demonstrate that it is already including one or more independent external experts in its project reviews. In such cases, EISMEA has the right to send an observer to the project review.

The selection of one or more experts from EISMEA dedicated pool shall be interpreted as a requirement for the responsible funding body when the latter does not meet the above-mentioned conditions for experts to perform the project review.

The experts selected from the pool will conduct the project review remotely alongside the other experts, which may be selected by the responsible funding body from its own pool.

Furthermore, in order to support the responsible funding body in complying with the requirements for the use of the Fast Track, EISMEA may share with it the briefing that the Agency prepares for its expert evaluators. EISMEA may also invite the responsible funding body's experts alongside the EIC experts to the briefing sessions organised by EISMEA ahead of evaluation sessions. By participating in such briefing sessions, the responsible funding body's experts will be able to ask questions/clarifications as well as to ask and receive feedbacks.

The responsible funding body may decide what method, including the scoring / ranking system, to use for the project review. However, the project review must lead to a binary GO/NO-GO decision to allow the applicants to submit (or not) their full proposal to the Accelerator via the Fast Track. A NO-GO decision may not prevent the applicants from applying to the EIC Accelerator via the normal application procedure (i.e. outside the Fast Track).

[7] Conflict of interest management should be aligned with the one implemented by the EU.

[8] Article 48 of Regulation (EU) 2021/695.

[9] Which may appoint as experts for evaluations and reviews, for example staff from the responsible funding body or, in the case of some EIT KICs, staff from partner organisations or from other members of alliances.

Outcome of the project review

The responsible funding body may communicate the successful outcome of the project review to EISMEA at any time (rolling basis) when the following conditions are met:

- the applicant meets the eligibility criteria for the Accelerator;
- the proposal meets the specific elements of the two first award criteria of the Accelerator (*'excellence'* and *'impact'*) indicated above;
- the proposal stems from a project supported by the funding body; and
- there is no duplication of funding between the activities and the costs covered in the project reviewed under the Fast Track and the activities to be supported under the EIC Accelerator ('no double funding' rule).

In order for EISMEA to keep records of the outcome of the selection phase occurring under the Fast Track (and therefore outside the EIC Accelerator evaluation and selection procedure), the responsible funding body (or the applicant) may be asked to fill in a report based on a template provided by EISMEA. Alternative means of communication of the outcome of the project review may be agreed upon.

In addition, the responsible funding body is expected to provide applicants with feedbacks on the outcome of the Fast Track assessment in the framework of the project review. EISMEA may also request copy of such feedback.

Applicants passing the project review and benefitting from the Fast Track will be required to obtain a Participant Identification Code (PIC) and will be invited by EISMEA to prepare a full application for the Accelerator to one of the cut-off dates within the next 12 months after the communication of the positive outcome of the Fast Track assessment to the applicants.

Applicants stemming from the Fast Track will be treated equally to other applicants. As such, they may benefit from use of EIC coaches. Full applications to the Accelerator stemming from the Fast Track will be assessed as set out in the work programme in exactly the same way as all other full applications.

When the responsible funding body is not EISMEA itself (e.g. for EIC Pathfinder and Transition projects), the responsible funding body may support Fast Track applicants in preparing the full application. However, the responsibility for the full application must remain with the applicant.

Ongoing support for Fast Track projects

Applicants invited to submit their full application will receive support in the form of coaching as any other applicant to the Accelerator. Support to the applicant by the responsible funding body may continue during the full application stage of the procedure for the Accelerator. However, the responsibility for the full application must remain with the applicant.

If the applicant is awarded EIC funding, then the funding body may also continue to support the company as long as such support is clearly complementary to EIC funding. In particular, the responsible funding body shall not reimburse the same cost-items and must avoid duplication of funding. The funding body may continue to provide in-kind support (e.g. access to advisory services, events, etc.) as long as this does not duplicate support (e.g. Business Acceleration Services) provided by the EIC.[10]

[10] The types of support provided by the EIC and by the responsible funding bodies using the Fast Track scheme may not serve for the same purpose, not to contravene Article 209.2(b) of the EU Financial Regulation: 'Financial instruments and budgetary guarantees shall: (b) achieve additionality by preventing the replacement of potential support and investment from other public or private sources'.

Follow-up and monitoring of performance and results

EISMEA will continually monitor the success rate of Fast Track applicants at the remote evaluation and jury interview phases and ultimately at the award decision phase in order to ensure equal treatment between all applicants. Should persistent or systematic weaknesses be identified (compared to external applicants), the responsible funding body will be expected to cooperate with EISMEA and to provide the necessary documentary evidence to allow the Agency to further co-investigate on such weaknesses. When the latter are identified, the responsible funding body may be requested to take corrective action. If no action is taken and the weaknesses persist, access to the Fast Track may be revoked.

The monitoring of performance and results will be used by EISMEA to review and where appropriate adjust the maximum number of applicants to be submitted by the responsible funding bodies via the Fast Track.

EISMEA will communicate to the responsible funding bodies any relevant changes affecting the implementation of the Fast Track, including any revisions or updates to the EIC work programme. The provisions set out in the 2024 EIC work programme (in particular those in Annex 3) are expected to be continued in future EIC work programmes. In case of any substantial change in these provisions, they will be discussed in advance with those funding bodies that have implemented the Fast Track.