Reviewer Guidelines – Winter Calls 2025/26

DARA
Danish Advanced Research Academy

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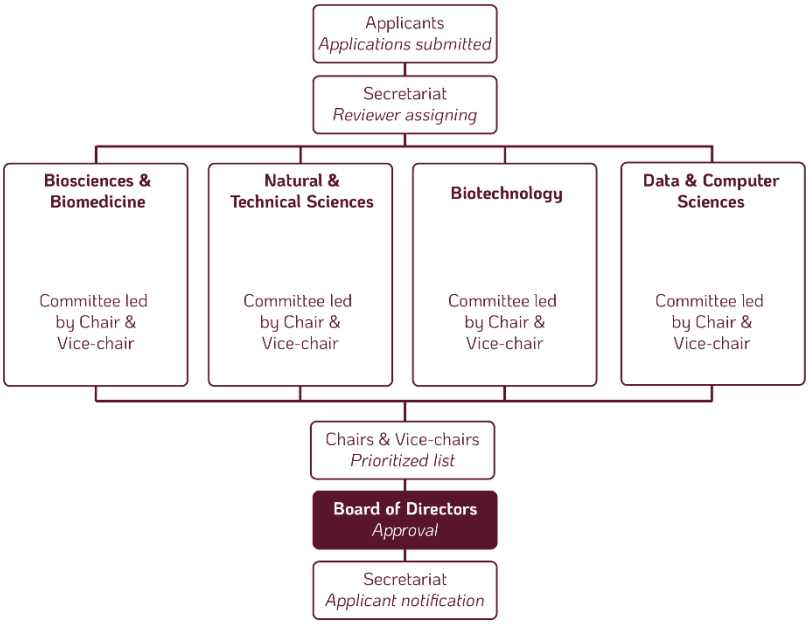
Conceptual structure of the review process

Applications are evaluated by international experts within the natural, medical, and technical sciences, grouped in four fellowship committees. Each committee is led by a chair and vice-chair. The roles of the committee members are to review, score, and jointly rank submitted applications within each committee. Committee chairs and vice-chairs will rank applications across the four committees and provide the Board of Directors with a list of applications recommended for funding.

Overview of the evaluation process and timeline for the Winter 2025/26 call

The review process is schematised in the figure, and the timeline is listed below.



20th of February	Deadline for the submission of applications
Latest 1st of March	The DARA secretariat screens and assigns applications to committee members, enabling reviewers to access applications in the online DARA application portal. *Three reviewers will be assigned from the primary committee. For proposals spanning committees, two reviewers will be assigned from the primary committee and one reviewer from the secondary committee.* The secretariat hosts an online information meeting for committee members on the review process on Tuesday the 24th of February, 4 pm CET.
Latest 10th of April	Deadline for the committee members to upload scores and short written statements on applications.
Latest 1st of May	Committee consensus meetings, discussing and ranking the highest scoring applications in each committee.

Latest 10th of May	Cross-committee consensus meeting for committee chairs and vice-chairs, compiling a ranked list of applications across all committees.
18th of May	Board of Directors selects applications for funding based on recommendations by the committee chairs and vice-chairs.

All meetings in and across the committees will be online.

Calls in the Winter 2025/26 round

The following two calls are available to applicants. An applicant cannot apply to both.

The Open Fellowship call - 19 fellowships available

Scientific Scope

The DARA Open Fellowships Call embraces proposals within fundamental areas of natural, medical, and technical sciences.

Eligible scientific areas include fundamental research across:

- bioscience & biomedicine – molecular biology, cell biology, bioinformatics, modelling of biological systems, enzymology, genetics, microbiology, pharmacology, experimental physiology, veterinarian medicine, biophysics, biochemistry, biology, biostatistics, etc.
- natural and technical sciences - physics, chemistry, mathematics, nanotechnology, material sciences as well as technical sciences.
- data and computer sciences - development of new algorithms, methods and technologies within data science or computational science, artificial intelligence, statistics, bioinformatics, and other computational sciences, as well as application of data science and computational sciences to areas like life science, biomedical- and health science, public- and global health, infectious disease, sustainability, green transition, agriculture, as well as natural and technical sciences.
- biotechnology - covering areas such as environmental biotechnology, bioproduction, synthetic biology, and bioprocess engineering as well as sustainable and bio-based methods in agriculture, industrial biotechnology and production.

The following non-exhaustive list of research themes are not within the scope of the Open Fellowship call:

- Projects within social sciences or humanities
- Marine and ocean-related research
- Cosmology
- Zoology
- Psychiatry and psychology
- Exclusively clinical focus in e.g. clinical trials
- Urban planning, housing, engineering, and architecture
- Research on livestock and livestock derivatives
- Aquaculture and derived commodities
- Projects with primary focus on the use of data and computer science within finance, insurance, fraud detection, advertisement, commercial analysis, telecommunication, mass surveillance, defence, cyber security, gaming, and similar
- Projects with a retrospective focus or of historical value
- Didactic research in science education and science communication

Applicants may pursue either mono- or interdisciplinary projects. In keeping with DARA's mission, proposals should exhibit transformative potential, whether by opening new scientific frontiers, refining existing paradigms, or leading to tangible benefits for people and society.

The AgriFood fellowships – 4 fellowships available

Scientific Scope – Environmental Impact and Sustainable Food Systems

With this call, DARA invites research proposals that address major challenges related to the environmental footprint of plant-based food production and the development of resilient and resource-efficient food value chains. Projects should be fundamental in nature while maintaining a clear and strategic focus on advancing climate-smart and sustainable plant-derived food systems.

Non-exclusive list of research areas covered by the call:

- Life Cycle and Carbon Footprint Analysis: Development of advanced methodologies to assess and minimise the environmental footprint of plant-based food production.
- Resource-Use and Nutrient Efficiency: Innovations that improve nutrient supply and recycling efficiency in plant-based systems.
- Preservation of Relevant Ecosystems and Biodiversity: Research that integrates biodiversity conservation and relevant ecosystem services into plant-based food production.
- Circular and Climate-Resilient Value Chains: Design of circular food system models that enhance productivity, reduce resource consumption, and contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Technological and Data-Driven Solutions: Application of new methods, modeling tools, and data science approaches to monitor, optimise, and scale up environmentally friendly food production.

The following non-exclusive list of areas are not within the scope of the call:

- Research primarily focusing on livestock, livestock-derived commodities, or feed.
- Research focusing on aquaculture, or its derived commodities.

Accessing applications

All applications in DARA are submitted and reviewed in the Good Grants platform. Invites will be sent automatically to reviewers by the platform. A detailed description on how to register and access the applications is provided in the accompanying document “DARA Reviewer Guidelines for Good Grants”.

Application Format

Each application includes the following materials relevant for evaluation:

- *Summary of Research (up to 1,500 characters, including spaces)*
  A concise summary of the proposed PhD project in layman’s terms. The summary must emphasise the central research questions, hypotheses, methods, and potential impact. The abstract should be comprehensible to a non-expert audience.
- *Project Description (up to 12,500 characters, including spaces but excluding figures/tables and references)*
  The project description should in general highlight how the project aligns with the scientific scope of the call. The project description must address the following:
  - Scientific background and state of the art
  - Research objectives
  - Methodology (including any experimental or analytical approaches with milestones and deliverables)
- *References*
  List of scientific literature cited in the Project Description.
- *Illustrations (optional)*
  It is possible to include a maximum of 3 illustrations with each proposal.
- *Scientific and Potential Societal Impact (up to 1,000 characters, including spaces)*
  An explanation of the expected outcomes and the scientific impact in the research field - and where possible, the applications to human and/or planetary health.
- *Research Environment Description (up to 2,000 characters, including spaces)*
  A description of the department or research unit where the project will be conducted, including a brief account of the environmental exchange if in place at the time of submission.
- *Motivation Letter (up to 3,000 characters, including spaces)*
  A description of the applicant’s aspirations for the exact research, the doctoral project, and how the DARA fellowship will contribute to his/her career development. The applicant must also explain how she/he will contribute to the DARA community.
- *CV of the Applicant (up to 5,000 characters, including spaces)*
  A summary of the applicant’s academic background, key achievements and relevant skills or training. The CV must adhere to the following structure:
  Education
    - In what, when and where the applicant got his/her bachelor and – if graduated – master’s degree. Must include a Grade Point Average (GPA) as well as the maximum possible GPA at the institution, where possible.

- Distinctions achieved during your education.

Relevant Professional experience

- Any employments of relevance to the proposed research project.

Skills

- Attained skills relevant to the methodologies in the research project.

Publications and/or conference abstracts

Awards and honours

Other relevant achievements

Evaluation Framework

Applications in DARA are evaluated based on two criteria:

Excellence of the Candidate - weighed 33%

• Assessment of academic achievements and prior training.

• Where applicable, publication record, conference presentations, awards, or other evidence of research potential.

• Alignment of background and skill set with the proposed research.

• The motivation of the candidate for pursuing the proposed research and for joining DARA.

Quality, Novelty, Feasibility, and Impact of the Research Project – weighed 67%

• Alignment with the scope, including an assessment of the transformative potential of the research question/hypothesis.

• Originality and innovativeness of the approach, methodology, or proposed solutions.

• Adequacy of the project design, work plan, and timeline.

• Suitability of the host institution's facilities, resources, and infrastructure.

• Strength of the research environment, including the principal supervisor's expertise.

• Likelihood of generating new knowledge or impact within the given scientific field and/or societally on human and planetary health.

For each criterion:

- Provide a numerical score (1–5).
- Write comments on the strengths and weaknesses. ***Comments will be shared with applicants.***

Score	*Explanation*
5	Outstanding.
4	Strong.
3	Adequate.
2	Below expectations.
1	Unsatisfactory.

We encourage reviewers to consider their overall scoring, so the distribution forms a dumbbell curve with an average of approximately 3. This will facilitate a better ranking of proposals.

Ethical Compliance and Conflict of Interest

To ensure a fair and unbiased review process, it is essential that evaluators approach their tasks with transparency and professionalism. Do not evaluate an application if:

- You have collaborated with the researcher or supervisor in the past 5 years.
- You are affiliated with the host institution.
- You have any personal or financial stake in the outcome.

Report **potential conflicts of interest** to the DARA administrative unit immediately info@daracad-emy.dk. This allows us to reassign the proposal to another reviewer. Reviewers may be asked for feedback on the review process as part of quality assurance.

Evaluating Applicants at Different Career Stages

DARA welcomes a broad spectrum of applicants. To ensure an equitable, consistent, and inclusive evaluation process, reviewers should consider the applicant's career stage as a context of their achievements. To uphold DARA's standards of excellence while ensuring fairness across diverse profiles:

- Apply a career-stage-sensitive lens: Early-career applicants should be evaluated for their potential and alignment with the proposed research and training environment.
- More experienced applicants—such as those with completed degrees, extensive work experience, or prior research roles—should be held to a correspondingly higher level of scrutiny.

For Applicants Still Completing Their MSc

This applies to students applying prior to having started their master thesis studies (4-year PhD) and students currently in conducting their master thesis studies (3-year PhD).

- Assess academic performance based on available results and overall academic trajectory.
- Look for indicators of emerging research potential: motivation, clarity of interest, early engagement in research activities, or initiative taken within academic settings.
- Publications and presentations may be limited or absent; this should not disadvantage otherwise strong applications at this stage.

For Applicants Who Have Recently Completed Their MSc

- Evaluate how they have transitioned from coursework to independent research.
- Look for early signs of initiative, such as conference presentations, project leadership, or applied research work.
- Give credit for independent work, internships, or collaborations, even if not yet published.

Experienced and Professionally Advanced Applicants

- Assess the proposal's scientific merit and originality, and how the applicant's background enhances the project's relevance or impact.
- Evaluate whether the project and host environment are well aligned with the candidate's career goals and capacity for growth.

Evaluating Interdisciplinary Proposals

DARA applicants may pursue interdisciplinary research that spans the scientific domains of two committees. These proposals will be reviewed by reviewers representing the relevant committees. Reviewers are encouraged to apply the following principles when evaluating interdisciplinary proposals:

Focus on your main area of expertise

- Assess the proposal's contribution to your own field: Does the research demonstrate clarity, relevance, and potential to advance knowledge in your discipline?
- Evaluate the connection between the disciplines: Are the fields meaningfully connected? Does the proposal explain how insights or methods from each will be used to strengthen the research?

Use your evaluation to highlight questions or risks—without penalising the candidate for merging disciplines. Focus on whether the applicant presents a coherent, well-justified case and has the necessary support and skills to pursue the project successfully.

Non-Evaluative Criteria

To ensure fairness, consistency, and alignment with DARA's principles, reviewers must **not** consider the following factors in their evaluation:

- **Nationality, gender, or personal background**
  Evaluations must remain free of bias based on identity, citizenship, ethnicity, or gender.
- **Optional materials**
  Documents besides material relevant to gauge the scientific excellence of the candidate or the project should not influence scoring unless they are necessary to assess feasibility or directly address reviewer concerns.
- **Language fluency**
  The proposal must be written in English, but minor language errors or non-native phrasing should not affect scoring unless they obscure meaning or clarity of scientific content.

Committee Consensus Meeting

The reviewing in each fellowship committee is concluded with a consensus meeting. With this, each committee will generate a ranked list of candidates suggested for funding through joint discussion of the highest scoring applications.

Selecting proposals for the consensus meeting

Prior to the meeting, the chair and vice-chair are presented with an overview of the scoring of all proposal, evaluated by the committee. The scoring is reported in three dimensions:

(i) The average score for a proposal

(ii) The average z-score based on the scoring of each reviewer

(iii) The average rank order for each application, again relative to each reviewer

Also, the overview states how often a proposal is ranked amongst the top in each of the three dimensions. Based on this, the chair and vice-chair decide on the proposals to be discussed at the consensus meeting.

Procedure for the consensus meeting

The meeting is hosted by the committee chair and vice-chair with representative(s) from the DARA secretariat present. In the meeting, approximately 10 minutes are allocated for the discussion of each application. The primary reviewer summarises their applications with their individual strengths and weaknesses. Secondary reviewers can add additional observations or differing perspectives. Other committee members can comment, ask questions, and get needed clarifications.

Once presented, each reviewer grades the discussed proposal with an A, B, or C. Each reviewer is given a definite number of As, Bs, and Cs, depending on the number of proposals discussed. The scores are collated in a joint spreadsheet and ranking at the meeting is based on:

- The highest number of As
- Then, the highest number of Bs

It is imperative that committee members hold a high degree of ethical standards and members with conflicts abstain from grading. Should one or more reviewers abstain, the counting of grades will be seen relative to the number of grading reviewers.

Cross-Committee Consensus Meeting

The chair and vice-chairs from the four fellowship committees conclude the evaluation process by having a joint consensus meeting, with the presence of representative(s) from the DARA secretariat. The chair and vice-chair are asked to briefly introduce the proposals selected by the committee. Chairs and vice-chairs of the other committees can then ask questions, to either consolidate the committee's conclusion or introduce a reconsideration.

Shifting the priorities within or between committees will rely on joint agreement between the participants at the cross-committee consensus meeting. Can a conclusion on redistribution within or between committees not be reach, the original ranking by each committee stands.

For the waiting list, can an agreement between the committees on a joint waiting list not be reached, each committee will have their own waiting list. Should an applicant amongst the ones

recommended for funding decline a fellowship, a proposal from that given committee's waiting list will be offered the available fellowship.

Committee Member and Remuneration

Committee members must have no formal institutional affiliation with any Danish research institution, and all members of the committees are expected to adhere to the DARA Code of Conduct, including disclosing any conflict of interest.

Committee members will receive a fixed honorarium for each evaluation round according to their roles. Both honorarium and functions are outlined below:

- Members – Review applications and partake in online consensus meeting. *Honorarium per round - 12.500 DKK*
- Vice-chair – Review applications and co-lead the online consensus meeting, partake in cross-committee prioritisation meeting. *Honorarium per round - 20.000 DKK*
- Chair – Review applications and lead the online consensus meeting, partake in cross-committee prioritisation meeting. *Honorarium per round - 25.000 DKK*

After each reviewing round is completed, committee members have to fill-out one of the following forms, depending on whether they reside in Europe or not and send it to eleni@daracademy.dk

1. Reimbursement form for EU-residents
2. Reimbursement form for non-EU-residents

Once the form is received, it is sent to our financial department where it will be processed, and the funds will be sent to the account provided. This process usually takes about a month.