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OPEN LETTER

Expertise and Consensus in Evaluation

[version 1; peer review: 2 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) are designed to foster mobility and support career development across disciplines. Serving as a reviewer in this programme often reveals a central tension: being appointed as an “expert” does not necessarily mean working within one’s own narrow field of specialization. Proposals rarely fit within a single discipline, and the evaluation process gains richness precisely from the diversity of perspectives that reviewers bring to it. Equally significant is the consensus phase, where individual assessments converge. Rather than being an endpoint, consensus operates as a tool that structures dialogue, encourages openness, and allows evaluators to recognize different perspectives. Agreement achieved in this way is not about uniformity, but about building trust and legitimacy in the process. It is through this interplay between expertise and dialogue that evaluation outcomes acquire both credibility and meaning.

Keywords

consensus building, decision-making, MSCA, peer review, research evaluation

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ? ?

	1	2
version 1 17 Dec 2025	? view	? view

1. **River Huang**, PSI Centers for Nuclear Engineering & Sciences and Energy & Environmental Sciences, Villigen PSI, Switzerland

2. **Rachel Heyard**, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

H2020 This article is included in the Horizon 2020 gateway.

This article is included in the Marie-Sklodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) gateway.

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The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) is one of the flagship EU programmes designed to foster researcher mobility and support career development across disciplines and countries. With the most recent call for proposals now closed, I recalled a conversation I once had with a colleague.

During that exchange, I mentioned an intriguing idea I had first encountered a few years earlier while reviewing a project proposal focused on a signaling pathway involved in fungal infection in plants. To my surprise, my colleague — an expert in fungal pathogenesis — was taken aback when she realized that I had served as a reviewer. From her perspective, the topic was clearly far outside my own field of expertise (plant genetics). Reflecting on the variability inherent in the expert review process, she half-jokingly remarked that this finally explained why her own proposal, submitted to the same programme some years earlier, had not been successful.

That conversation has echoed in my mind every time I have taken part in a review panel. It often makes me wonder whether the degree of overlap between a reviewer's expertise and a proposal's focus might inadvertently influence the outcome of an evaluation. This question naturally leads to a broader one: what does it actually mean to be appointed as an *Expert*?

When you first receive your assigned proposals for the MSCA program, the European Commission explicitly reminds you that you may feel your expertise does not perfectly match the topic. The immediate reaction is often to think, *"This isn't really my area,"* and to consider declining. Yet reviewers are encouraged not to. Proposals rarely fit neatly into a single discipline, and it is precisely this multidisciplinarity that allows your perspective to provide valuable insights into aspects of the evaluation that might otherwise remain underexplored.

Understanding how the evaluation is structured also sheds light on the role of expertise. The MSCA process itself is organized in two main steps. First, each proposal undergoes an individual evaluation, typically carried out by three reviewers. Each reviewer produces an Individual Evaluation Report (IER) covering the three core evaluation criteria: excellence (weighted at 50%), impact (30%), and implementation (20%). Once the IERs are submitted, a consensus meeting is convened for each proposal. Here, reviewers discuss and reconcile their assessments, agreeing on a consolidated set of comments captured in the Consensus Report (CR). Finally, a score is assigned to each criterion on a scale from 0 (fail) to 5 (excellent), reflecting the consensus reached in the panel.

There is little doubt that when experts share a technical language and a common body of knowledge, both understanding and discussion become easier. Conversations flow more naturally, allowing for more elaborate reasoning and more precise solutions. By relying on a shared knowledge base and a similar way of interpreting problems, experts are often able to reach agreement quickly.

Yet this raises an important question: is agreement—or consensus—truly the ultimate goal of an evaluation? At first glance, the terminology suggests so: after all, the final step is formally called the *Consensus Phase*. Still, the answer is not as straightforward, at least for me when I reflect on my role as a reviewer. The Guide for Evaluators defines consensus as a collaborative process in which experts work together to develop a conclusion that best represents the collective opinion of the group. In this phase, evaluators are expected to be responsive, to engage openly in discussion, and to acknowledge—even if not adopt—opinions that differ from the majority view. Seen this way, consensus is not an end in itself but rather a means: a structured tool that enables decisions to be both informed and legitimate.

When the decision-making process is open, transparent, and grounded in dialogue, active listening, and mutual respect, it creates a solid foundation for considering everyone's ideas and concerns. Reaching agreement through such a process gives the outcome greater weight and credibility. With each member bringing their own expertise to the table, what emerges is not simply an agreement, but one that each participant—through their own perspective and reasoning—can genuinely support and stand behind.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability statement

No data associated with this article.

Open Peer Review

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Rachel Heyard
University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

I thank the author for this letter, which offers an interesting perspective on what I often refer to as the “black box” of panel meetings. The letter explains, from the perspective of an MSCA reviewer, what is meant by expertise and how the diversity of expertise among panel members in a consensus meeting can contribute to improving the final decision.

General comments
In its current form, the letter is, highly anecdotal. In particular, it does not engage with the substantial body of literature on grant review panels and their decision-making processes. For example, the reference of panel meetings as a “black box” originates from this literature, which has tried to understand how grant funding panels operate and how collective decisions are formed. The author could situate their reflections within this broader context and cite relevant studies (Coveney et al., 2017).

Specific comments
In light of the literature on the topic, I find the final paragraph somewhat problematic. The author states that "When the decision-making process is open, transparent, and grounded in dialogue, active listening, and mutual respect, it creates a solid foundation for considering everyone’s ideas and concerns". From the perspective of an applicant, however, the decision-making process is neither open nor transparent, as it takes place behind closed doors. Applicants have limited insight into how the panel reached its conclusions, or whether the final outcome really reflects genuine consensus among all experts involved, or whether on expert was just "louder" than the others..

Minor comment
I suggest the author includes references or links to relevant documents they mention, such as "The Guide for Evaluators", to improve clarity and allow readers to follow up on these sources.

References
1. Coveney J, Herbert D, Hill K, Mow K, et al.: ‘Are you siding with a personality or the grant

proposal?': observations on how peer review panels function. *Research Integrity and Peer Review*. 2017; **2** (1). Publisher Full Text

Is the rationale for the Open Letter provided in sufficient detail? (Please consider whether existing challenges in the field are outlined clearly and whether the purpose of the letter is explained)
Yes

Does the article adequately reference differing views and opinions?
No

Are all factual statements correct, and are statements and arguments made adequately supported by citations?
No

Is the Open Letter written in accessible language? (Please consider whether all subject-specific terms, concepts and abbreviations are explained)
Yes

Where applicable, are recommendations and next steps explained clearly for others to follow? (Please consider whether others in the research community would be able to implement guidelines or recommendations and/or constructively engage in the debate)
Not applicable

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: statistics, science polics, funding decision-making, metaresearch

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 19 January 2026

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Summary of the Article

The article provides a reflective account of the MSCA evaluation framework, exploring the inherent tension between "narrow" technical expertise and the increasingly multidisciplinary nature of grant proposals. Drawing on personal experience and a description of the formal consensus-building process, the author argues that consensus functions not merely as a final agreement, but as a structured mechanism for dialogue and procedural legitimacy. The author concludes that the credibility of research evaluation is a product of the interplay between diverse perspectives and transparent, respectful deliberation.

Comments and Recommendations

1. In its current form, to me, the manuscript reads more as a personal essay than a formal Open Letter. To strengthen the scientific rigor of the text, I suggest that the author ground their observations in established literature on peer review and the sociology of evaluation. Specifically, citing works that explore the "black box" of consensus meetings—such as studies on inter-rater reliability or group dynamics in panel settings—would provide a necessary theoretical backbone to the author's qualitative observations.
2. The author shares an experience with a colleague who "half-jokingly remarked" a past failure on the variability inherent in the expert review process, particularly the involvement of non-domain experts. However, this experience conflicts with the author's subsequent recommendation that reviewers should not decline proposals outside their narrow area of expertise. To strengthen the argument, the author must explicitly link this personal experience to the recommendation and justify why a multidisciplinary perspective outweighs the potential risks of "expert variability."
3. The "challenge" being addressed remains somewhat ambiguous. While the final paragraphs offer observations of current procedures, they do not clearly define the systemic issue at hand. Is the challenge a lack of applicant trust in the fairness of the results, or a lack of consistency across panels? The author should explicitly state the problem to provide a clear rationale for the discussion.
4. To move beyond descriptive observation and facilitate constructive engagement within the research community, I suggest a formal "Call to Action." The author should provide clear guidelines or recommendations. For example, some potential recommendations in my opinions are:
    1. The European Commission should provide evaluators with explicit training in "active listening" and conflict resolution to better navigate the consensus phase.
    2. The IER phase could be adjusted to require reviewers to explicitly identify "knowledge gaps" or areas outside their expertise, ensuring these points are systematically resolved during the consensus phase.

Is the rationale for the Open Letter provided in sufficient detail? (Please consider whether existing challenges in the field are outlined clearly and whether the purpose of the letter is explained)

Yes

Does the article adequately reference differing views and opinions?

Yes

Are all factual statements correct, and are statements and arguments made adequately

supported by citations?
Partly

Is the Open Letter written in accessible language? (Please consider whether all subject-specific terms, concepts and abbreviations are explained)
Yes

Where applicable, are recommendations and next steps explained clearly for others to follow? (Please consider whether others in the research community would be able to implement guidelines or recommendations and/or constructively engage in the debate)
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: My research focuses on the theoretical advancement and pragmatic application of Multi-Criteria Decision-Aiding (MCDA) and Group Decision Support Systems (GDSS).

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.