ORA – Open Research Area for the Social Sciences

Programme Evaluation 2016

Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR)
Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)
Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)
Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

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Programme Evaluation 2016

Executive summary

The Open Research Area (ORA) for the Social Sciences is an international funding scheme that has been running since 2010 by the four largest European social science research funding agencies: the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR, France), the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, Germany), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, United Kingdom) and the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO, Netherlands).

The main objective of the scheme has been to strengthen international co-operation in the social sciences by funding high quality scientific research projects in any social science discipline. The scheme is thematically open and research can be fundamental and curiosity-driven. Integrated research projects are expected to create added value to the production of knowledge through international cooperation.

The idea of the ORA scheme is also to minimize bureaucratic obstacles and restrictions usually associated with international funding. The scheme management, therefore, is based on a shared understanding by the agencies involved in terms of the assessment procedure and guiding criteria. The partner agencies conduct a co-ordinated peer review and a single common selection process. Thereafter, funding is distributed among the partners according to the place of work of the researchers, and generally according to the funding rules of each individual agency (virtual pot mechanism).

Whereas, basically, ORA is anchored in the European area, the scheme remains open to other partners if there is an interest of the scientific communities and the funding agencies. As many European social scientists share connections with North American social scientists, for example, it was quite relevant to include a North American partner, the National Science Foundation (NSF) for the third round.

Following up on the original ORA agreement (Memorandum of Understanding, signed by the respective institutions' heads in 2009), the partner funding agencies decided in 2016 to conduct an evaluation of the scheme. This report presents the findings from this evaluation and high-level recommendations for the future operation of the scheme.

Evaluation aims and methodology

The evaluation aim was to provide an independent and balanced review to assess first results and to inform the future operation of the scheme, especially advising on any developments, improvements and continued engagement of the funders. The agencies were particularly interested in learning whether the scheme fosters international cooperation, how it is positioned in the European funding

landscape, and applicants' perceptions of the overall operation and management of the programme by the agencies.

The evaluation procedure was based on three approaches: a statistical data analysis about projects across the four rounds, an online survey to approach successful and unsuccessful applicants, and a panel member questionnaire, exploring qualitative aspects of submissions, awards and panel procedures. For the applicant survey, 1671 applicants were invited to respond to 37 questions. The response rate was 15.2%. For the panel member questionnaire, 32 panel members were invited, of which 18 responded, which makes a response rate of 55%.

Result of the Evaluation

In consideration of the findings, we conclude that ORA has provided a genuine platform for international high quality research collaborations between researchers from the European participating countries. Based on this, it is suggested continuing with the scheme, taking due account of the recommendations made in this report.

ORA's funded research was considered of excellent scientific quality, and there were actually some excellent proposals which were rejected due to lack of funds. Despite low success rates, ORA has enabled international collaborations in a number of ways. For example, with regard to positive side effects, there is some evidence that unsuccessful applicants maintain and continue to develop established transnational connections after proposals have been rejected, and that good quality applications that have failed to secure funding from ORA have been successful in other schemes.

The assessment procedure is successfully established and running. The administration of the scheme and the assessment procedure, basically, run quite effectively. However, the number of applications submitted to each round has steadily increased, and the ORA's commissioning process remains very resource-intensive. The large volume of submissions puts a significant amount of work on the agencies managing the scheme, as well as on peer reviewers and panel members, and therefore takes too long. It is necessary to consider strategies for reducing the number of poorer quality submissions and focusing efforts on higher quality proposals.

Statistics

ORA has attracted growing interest from the academic community in each round, from 123 applications in the first round to 188 in the fourth round. Due to budget constraints, the success rate has remained around 10% across all rounds.

The four agencies' participation rates have remained relatively stable across the four rounds. Applications with ESRC involvement have consistently been most common, followed by NWO, DFG and finally ANR. ORA projects must bring together researchers from at least two participating countries, with the exception of round 3 which required teams from at least three participating countries due to the involvement of the NSF. Bilateral and trilateral consortia were the most commonly submitted to ORA.

In terms of disciplinary coverage, proposals submitted to the scheme are often inter- or multidisciplinary. Looking at only the main discipline, Psychology proposals account for the largest share, followed by Politics and International Studies, Sociology and Economics. These four disciplines

alone make up 58% of total submissions. Statistical evidence shows that Psychology proposals perform largely above the average, whereas Sociology proposals do rather poorly.

ORA scheme management

Most applicants learned about ORA calls through personal communication with colleagues. Fewer researchers referred primarily to the announcements published by the national funding agencies or their respective official communication channels. Surprisingly, 40-50% of the respondents did not see the pre-announcement indicating the next call. This leaves us with the question of whether the official communication channels maintained by the funders work effectively.

Call documents should offer guidance in a self-explanatory, efficient and consistent way. The call text, describing the aims, criteria, procedure and requirements of the call, is mostly perceived as being clear or very clear. The same holds true for the application form, which provides the template for the preparation of the proposal. However, around half of the respondents (52%) found the national annexes – explaining the specific features and requirements of each funding agency – unclear.

More than half of the applicants got in touch with their respective agency. 70% of those reported that their questions were answered from satisfactorily to excellent. 30% of applicants who got in contact were left with unanswered questions or requests.

Findings relating to the evaluation procedure indicate that applicants did not feel strongly with regard to whether the evaluation criteria provided helpful guidance for preparing a research proposal, whether the evaluation procedure was transparent, and whether the feedback given to applicants after the decision was instructive and provided sufficient evidence for the funding decision. On average, each category is rated "3", which means neither agreement nor disagreement. Interestingly, if one splits up the answers over the funding agencies, there is no remarkable difference to report. This indicates a mutual understanding across applicants from different countries familiar with different agencies' procedures. Beyond that, it still seems sensible to strive for more clarity in relation to both written assessment and panel procedures. It is recommended that clear, coherent and consistent assessment criteria about what makes a proposal strong and of high scientific merit are communicated to reviewers and panellists about what makes a proposal strong and of high scientific merit.

According to panel members' statements, the time dedicated for the panel discussions, which actually lead to the final decision about funding, should be used more efficiently; one way of doing this would be to have parallel disciplinary sub-panels. In addition, less time should be spent discussing low-quality proposals; rather, panels should focus on those that have greater chances of being funded.

Applicants and panel members, frequently, raised two concerns: firstly, low success rates and the different amounts of funding available per national agency that have had an adverse impact on the number of proposals actually being funded; secondly, the commissioning period, which is thought to take too long. Therefore, introducing an outline stage should be considered.

International partnership

Unsurprisingly, international research collaboration is the main driver for submitting an ORA application. A sizeable number of researchers indicated that access to data or new methodologies,

and accessing expertise not available in their country, influenced their decision to apply to an ORA call; sharing of infrastructure and staff were mentioned less often.

The openness of the call to all social science topics and the reputation of the scheme also featured among the motivation to apply to ORA, albeit not as strongly. Other aspects, like duration of the decision procedure, success rates, are less obviously important in the decision to apply. It is also quite clear that applicants' institutions' perceived expectations are not the key driving forces. The answers do not differ remarkably between successful and unsuccessful applicants.

All applicants knew some of their ORA collaboration partners before they decided to jointly apply; half of them were familiar with the whole team partners. This finding is quite understandable, as writing an ORA proposal requires a certain trust and closeness between partners based on preceding experience. It also gives evidence of a closely internationally interlinked social science community.

On average, across all rounds, 80-90% of successful applicants reported good project partnership. The share of successful applicants confirming that they have strong and effective partnership does not significantly depend on the number of partners or countries involved. A few applicants reported that some problems arose during the project phase, which were mainly in terms of recruitment and retention of staff; just a minority indicated technical problems in terms of infrastructure, data, and experiments.

Supporting the funders' objective reinforcing of longer-term international cooperation it appeared that the majority of successful applicants who have already completed their ORA projects are still participating in joint activities.

In order to get a sense of the position of ORA within the European funding landscape, applicants were asked how they compare the ORA scheme against other international programmes' opportunities. Summarising the statements, the obvious advantage of ORA over other international funding programmes is the openness in topics, the curiosity-driven research that is aimed at (instead of impact and policy oriented research), the less bureaucratic procedure, the substantive reviews provided by experts in the field and the opportunity to conduct independent research. ORA was mostly compared against different EU funding programmes such as Horizon 2020 (including ERC), or other programmes administered by national funders.

Positive side effects

The fact that ORA – like most international calls – has a low success rate makes it imperative to listen in particular to the rejected applicants and to learn from their perspective. The findings indicate that there are some positive additional effects: for example, 40% of rejected applicants have already continued, or intend to continue with, their collaboration. Some resubmit the proposal to alternative funding schemes, others plan for new and follow up collaborative research activities in different ways, such as close exchange of ideas, joint conferences, papers or joint projects. At the same time, it is fair to say that a considerable number of respondents were disappointed about the rejection and, at least for the time being, are not inclined to roll out new plans or think about further options. Asking for perceived positive effects of an application on academic prospects, one third reports some favourable impacts.

List of tables and charts

List of abbreviations

ANR	Agence Nationale de la Recherche
COST	European Cooperation in Science and Technology
DFG	Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
ERA-NET	European Research Area Network
ERC	European Research Council
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
JPI	Joint Programming Initiative
JSPS	Japan Society for the Promotion of Science
NORFACE	New Opportunities for Research Funding Agency Cooperation in Europe
NSF	National Science Foundation
NWO	Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek
ORA	Open Research Area
PI	Principal Investigator
SSHRC	Social Science and Humanities Research Council

1   Preliminary remarks: history and features of the scheme

The ORA scheme is a joint venture between four European national funding agencies to support internationally collaborative projects in any area of the social sciences, however, project topics funded should be within the remit of each of the agencies involved.

To start with the scheme's history: ORA was conceived by the *Bonn Group*, which is an informal group of department or institution heads covering social sciences in four European funding agencies as well as in North America. It was founded circa 12 years ago, and named after its first venue Bonn. The European partners are ANR (France), DFG (Germany), ESRC (Great Britain), and NWO (Netherlands). US American researchers are represented by the NSF and Canadian researchers by SSHRC. The original aims of this group were not only to initiate a regular exchange about issues concerning national and international developments in the funding landscape, but also to figure out possibilities for collaboration in order to accommodate the social sciences' needs in working in international networks. After having contributed successfully to the establishment of the ERA-NET NORFACE (New Opportunities for Research Funding Agency Cooperation in Europe) scheme in 2004 as a thematically driven scheme, which is open to all EU countries (also including Norway and Switzerland) to participate, the *Bonn Group* responded to a rising need in the social science communities to support international research collaboration with thematically open funding opportunities. Therefore, the idea came up to run a regular scheme that allows for all social science topics and is mainly directed towards fundamental, curiosity driven research. Apart from several ERC funding lines, this scheme seems to be the only one that provides, in the European context, an opportunity to follow up purely curiosity driven social science research questions in cross-border cooperation, and therefore could be considered as being unique in this sense.

To develop the guiding principles for this new scheme a *Technical Group* was established, comprising administrative staff of each agency involved. Within 12 months, the terms and conditions had been fixed, and finally agreed by signing a Memorandum of Understanding by the agencies' Presidents or institution's heads. The first call was launched in 2010, followed by three others in 2012, 2013 and 2015. Across all rounds, the *Technical Group* has managed the call.

In the following, the essential features of the scheme are summarized.

ORA should support and strengthen international co-operation in the field of social sciences. According to the call documentation, agencies wish to fund high quality scientific research projects to further our understanding of individual and social behaviour, thereby contributing to new scientific knowledge and perhaps influencing policy. The scheme therefore has brought together knowledge-driven research ideas in Sociology, Political Science, Economic Sciences, also including parts of Geography, Psychology, Linguistics, Social Anthropology and Social History and Law.

In doing research in collaboration and integrated research programmes, research projects are expected to create a certain added value to the production of scientific knowledge and might have some societal impact. Projects usually run for two to three years and could be designed by partners in several combinations of two or more countries. Also, funding allows for the establishment of certain infrastructure – for example to establish cross-country surveys, datasets or corpora, if it is necessary to address projects' specific research questions.

The idea is that applicants submit one single application that describes the collaborative project, including a joint research description and a joint research programme for all participants. As usually

expected, applicants are required to address the aims of the research proposed, the intellectual background, the theoretical and methodological basis for the work and particularly to outline (or justify) how this project will be innovative and original. Given the international background and collaborative spirit of the programme, applicants need to explain how the various national partners will contribute to these envisaged objectives.

Scheme management and evaluation procedures are based on a shared understanding by the agencies involved in terms of the assessment principles and guiding criteria. Guiding criteria are those usually applied when assessing fundamental research projects: they refer to the originality and potential contribution to knowledge; to the appropriateness of the research design, work plan, and research team; they ask about the added value of this joint working in an international project, the overall value for money, and also about societal impacts that projects might have.

The partner agencies conduct a co-ordinated peer review and a single common selection process. External experts (at minimum two but, depending on the size and the disciplinary breadth of the project, additional reviews may be commissioned) are invited to provide the reviews. The projects are then assessed by a joint panel based on the reviews. The panel consists of recognised researchers from various fields of social sciences who have sound knowledge and understanding of national level decision-making systems. The funding recommendations of the joint panel are subject to approval by the national agencies. Thereafter, funding is distributed among the partners according to the place of work of the researchers, and generally according to the funding rules of each individual agency (virtual pot mechanism).

Whereas ORA, basically, is anchored in the European area, the scheme remains open to other partners if there is a certain interest from the agencies representing social science communities. As many European social scientists share connections with North American social scientists, for example, it was quite relevant to include a North American partner, the National Science Foundation (NSF) for the third round.

For the third round, therefore, the call was opened up to researchers from the US seeking funds from the NSF. Likewise, in the fourth round, Japanese researchers were included in the scheme, though there was a difference in operation: Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) carried out an independent assessment process ahead of the ORA panel meeting and independent funding recommendations were made. Following the ORA panel meeting, applications successful in both the ORA and JSPS panels were funded by both ORA agencies and JSPS.

2   Evaluation aims and methodology

According to the aforementioned Memorandum of Understanding of the ORA partners, in 2015 it was agreed to carry out an evaluation investigating how the scheme has been run over the first four rounds. The aim was to provide an independent, fair and balanced review and to inform the future operation of the scheme, especially advising on any developments, improvements and continued engagement.

The evaluation assessed a number of key points, including:

- the structure and disciplinary composition of successful and unsuccessful proposals;
- the profiles of scheme applicants;

- the unique added value and contribution of the scheme to grant holders and side effects to rejected applicants;
- the scheme in relation to European/international research funding schemes;
- the scheme's academic impact;
- scheme management and operation.

The agencies were particularly interested in learning whether the scheme fosters international cooperation, how it is positioned in the European funding landscape, and applicants' perceptions of the overall operation and management of the programme by the agencies.

The evaluation procedure is based on three approaches:

i. Data analysis covering the profiles of applicants, grant-holders and disciplinary coverage across the four rounds.

This section presents a descriptive statistical analysis of the four commissioned rounds of ORA. It uses process-produced data gathered by the respective lead agency that was compiled into a final report after the completion of each round.

ii. Applicant survey, looking at operational aspects of the scheme, including management, application process, project performance, and aiming to understand the benefits and values of the programme as well as to identify weaknesses (see Annex 1).

The online survey approached all applicants (Principal Investigators[1]) – successful as well as unsuccessful. The four partner organisations provided the email addresses of all Principal Investigators (PI) participating in each call. Around 1900 researchers in their capacity of PI applied to ORA. Due to out of date email addresses or researchers presumably having moved research organisation, only 1671 applicants could be successfully invited to participate in the survey. The survey was carried out by the German company SKOPOS. They used an online questionnaire comprising 37 questions whose completion took approximately 15-20 minutes. The questionnaire was designed and agreed by the four agencies. Two social sciences academic experts, one of them a panel member in ORA round 4, also checked the questionnaire.

The questionnaire focused on:
- applicants' profiles and disciplinary coverage
- ORA scheme management
- international cooperation
- project performance
- side effects
- applicants' recommendations

iii. Panel member questionnaire, exploring qualitative aspects of submissions, awards and panel procedures (see Annex 2).

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[1] PIs act as national contact points with their national funding agencies and fulfil the role of a PI as defined in the rules of their agency. There is necessarily only one PI per country involved in the proposal. (In addition to PIs, applications can also involve team coordinators for those countries where funding can be distributed between several teams, and work organized accordingly, though team coordinators are not considered in the online survey.) In order to get an idea of how many applicants in a broad sense are involved in ORA, we can illustrate it by ORA round 4, where we had 516 Principal Investigators, and the total number of applicants (including the PIs) amounted to 1345, which makes 7 applicants per application on average.

The aim of the questionnaire was to gather information on qualitative aspects of the ORA programme, on the scheme's main strengths and areas for improvement, the quality of projects submitted to the scheme, and recommendations about panel procedures. A total of 32 panel members were invited to take part, from each of the four core participating countries. 18 responses were received, which makes for a 55% response rate. The questionnaire was composed of open-ended questions. The majority of responses were from panel members participating in round 4 (59%), followed by round 3 (28%), round 2 (6%) and finally round 1 (6%), which may be explained by panel members participating in the most recent round feeling more confident that they can accurately recall their experiences of participating in ORA. A total of six panel members took part in more than one round; for these cases only the most recent round has been counted. The length of responses varied from one to five lines, with two lines per response on average.

In the following chapter, we present the statistical analysis. In chapter 4, we report the findings from the applicants' survey and the panel members' qualitative survey, arranged according to the various topics. Chapter 5 summarizes the key findings and recommendations.

3   Statistics

ORA has attracted growing interest from the academic community in each round. In the first round 123 applications were peer reviewed, 142 in the second, 186 in the third and 188 in the fourth round. The amount of funding per round per agency has fluctuated each round, which is reflected in the number of proposals funded. In the first round, 15 projects were awarded, 10 in the second, 15 in the third and 20 in the fourth. Success rates have remained low; the lowest success rate was seen in round 2 whereas the highest was in round 1.

Round	No. of eligible proposals	No. of funded proposals	% Success rate
Round 1	123	15	12.2
Round 2	142	10	7.0
Round 3	186	15	8.1
Round 4	188	20	10.6
Total	**639**	**60**	**9.4**

Table 1: Number of eligible and successful proposals

Financial Resources

The following table shows the financial involvement of the agencies:

	ANR (€ million)	DFG (€ million)	ESRC (100% full economic cost) (£ million)	NSF ($ million)	NWO (€ million)
Round 1	€ 3,37	€ 2,31	£5,6	---	€ 2,08
Round 2	€ 1,04	€ 1,56	£3,11	---	€ 2,2
Round 3	€ 1,08	€ 3,39	£4,79	€ 2,92	€ 2,78

Round 4	€ 1,93	€ 5,35	£5,33	---	€ 4,39
Total	**€7,42**	**€12,61**	**£18,83**	**€2,92**	**€11,45**

Table 2: Investment per national agency per round

Table 2 reports the amounts of granted money in each round per agency. The agencies spent exactly the same budget on project grants as they have been able to confirm beforehand meaning that each agency spent its ORA budget in full each round. However, having a sizable number of excellent proposals national agencies always run the risk of running out of funds. Panel members raised these budget shortages respectively imbalances as a major issue. For example, due to the different amounts of funding available per national agency it was felt that some excellent proposals have missed the cut-off line. So, limits to national budgets lead to the question how transparent and fair the selection process can be designed, and whether all applicants enjoy equal opportunities.

Moreover, taking into account these budget imbalances between funding agencies, panel members and applicants both see the risk that the ORA scheme might favour safe, rather mainstream projects whereas particularly innovative, high-risk, and perhaps interdisciplinary projects had less chance of success. Although this concern is also raised regarding national funding schemes and has been a controversial issue for many years, it raises a legitimate issue that needs to be monitored.

Quality of proposals

Looking at the scientific quality of proposals across the four rounds, in terms of the grades the invited reviewers have assigned to the proposals in each of the four rounds, the quality appears highly consistent across the rounds. Mean grades of each round have remained – between 3.1 and 3.2 – indicating that the scientific quality of the proposals might also have been fairly stable across the years.[2] For the discussion in the panel meetings ORA uses a grading system of A, B, C,[3] however, panel members appeared to adjust their grading to the specific situation of each round. Therefore, we are not able to report a completely consistent grading here and have refrained from presenting statistics, only saying that on average around 50% of proposals are assigned grade "C". What we learn for the future is that we need to adopt consistent grading, particularly to inform applicants how their proposals have scored.

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[2] Reviewers are invited to indicate their overall judgement of the proposal using the following definitions:
Grade 5: Excellent: World leading, rigorous and innovative research, likely to make a major new contribution to knowledge.
Grade 4: Very Good: Internationally important research, robust and at the leading edge, likely to make an important new contribution to knowledge.
Grade 3: Good: Internationally significant research, with no significant flaws or concerns, likely to contribute to knowledge at the international level.
Grade 2: Average: Sound research likely to make a valuable contribution to knowledge, but with some concerns and therefore not necessarily with international impact.
Grade 1: Weak: Interesting research but with some clear weaknesses and therefore likely to make only a limited contribution to knowledge.
Grade 0: Unacceptable: Poorly designed research with too many concerns or weaknesses to be taken forward as it stands.

[3] Panel members are invited to grade the proposals based on the provided reviews; they are asked to indicate their overall judgement of the proposal using the following definitions:
Grade A: Research of the highest quality, likely to significantly advance knowledge at an international level (clearly worthy of funding, should be funded, subject to availability of funds).
Grade B: Very good quality research (potentially worthy of funding, may be funded, subject to the availability of funds).
Grade C: Research which, due to flaws in its design or limitations in its potential significance, does not represent a strong candidate for funding in a highly competitive scheme (not worthy of funding).

To bring in here the assessment of panel members regarding the overall quality of proposals submitted to ORA: generally, panel members consider the proposals of comparable quality to those submitted to national schemes; likewise, funded projects meet the same scientific excellence as projects funded within national schemes. However, some panel members felt that unsuccessful applications were of lower quality. Compared to the quality of proposals submitted to international schemes, ORA's proposals are seen as of similar overall quality, more research oriented and with higher methodological rigour than comparable EU-funded projects.

Distribution of applications

The four agencies' participation rates have remained relatively stable across the four rounds. Applications with ESRC involvement have been consistently the most numerous, followed by NWO, DFG and finally ANR. The involvement of ANR and DFG has fluctuated across rounds, with the participation of NSF bringing a significant increase in the proportion of applications including both France and Germany.

	ANR	DFG	ESRC	NWO
Round 1	39%	54%	81%	68%
Round 2	35%	63%	79%	74%
Round 3 (with NSF)	44%	74%	80%	75%
Round 4	42%	68%	84%	77%

Table 3: Participation rate per national agency, per round (based on number of applications)

ORA projects must bring together researchers from at least two participating countries, with the exception of round 3 which required teams from at least three participating countries. Bilateral consortia were the most commonly submitted in the first two calls, followed by trilateral. In round 4 trilateral submissions were marginally more numerous. It should be noted however, that the special requirements of round 3, where bilateral projects were not allowed, and the inclusion of NSF may have contributed to the larger number of trilateral project submissions across the four rounds.

ORA has successfully engaged beyond its founding members. Rounds 3 and 4 provided an opportunity for cooperation with the USA National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) respectively. In round 3, 112 projects involving US partners were submitted and 9 funded; in round 4, there were 33 submissions including collaborations with Japan and two were recommended for funding. [4]

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[4] The involvement of NSF and JSPS had some fundamental differences between them. NSF was part of the virtual common pot and participated in the ORA panel meeting as a co-funder. JSPS carried out an independent assessment process ahead of the ORA panel meeting and independent funding recommendations were made. Following the ORA panel meeting, final funding decisions were made taking into account JSPS' recommendations.

	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Total
Bilateral	83 (60%)	85 (53%)	----	77 (41%)	245 (36%)
Trilateral	26 (19%)	40 (25%)	125 (67%)	82 (44%)	273 (41%)
Quadlateral	14 (10%)	17 (11%)	48 (26%)	29 (15%)	108 (16%)
Pentalateral	---	---	13 (7%)	---	13 (2%)
Unknown Type	16 (11%)	18 (11%)	0	0	34 (5%)
Total	**139**	**160**	**186**	**188**	**673**

Table 4: Number of proposals by consortium composition

Among the bilateral consortia, the ESRC-NWO combination, followed by DFG-NWO and ESRC-DFG were the most commonly found combinations across the four rounds.[5] However, the most successful bilateral consortium type across all rounds was that formed by DFG-NWO, followed by ANR-ESRC. The success rate for all bilaterals is 8.2%. Among trilaterals, the consortium formed by ESRC-DFG-NWO with 105 trilateral submissions was notably the one submitting the largest number of proposals across the four rounds, and particularly in round 4. ANR-ESRC-DFG and ANR-ESRC-NWO followed with 33 and 27 submissions respectively. The consortium type formed by ESRC-DFG-NWO has been the most successful with 6 successful proposals, followed by consortium types ANR-ESRC-NWO and ANR-DFG-NWO with 4 successful proposals each. The involvement of NSF in round 3 unsurprisingly increased the number of trilateral submissions. The success rate for all trilaterals is 9.5%. Quadlateral type consortia are overall less common, having in total 86 submissions among the four core partners and 28 between different combinations of core partners plus NSF. Despite the number of quadlateral submissions being less frequent, the success rate of quadlateral projects at 12% is slightly better when compared against other consortium types. The success rate against all quadlaterals is 12%. In round 3, there were 13 projects involving five partners. One of these 13 projects was funded.

Disciplinary coverage

The following chart shows the main disciplines of submissions (per round) and awards (across the four rounds) of ORA. While proposals submitted to the scheme are often inter- or multidisciplinary, for coding purposes, only the main discipline has been captured. Psychology proposals have consistently constituted the overwhelming majority of submissions, followed by Politics and International Studies, Sociology and Economics. These four disciplines alone make up for 58% of total submissions. Evidence shows however that Psychology proposals perform disproportionately well, whereas Sociology proposals do disproportionately poorly.

In addition, it is worth noting that there have been no successful projects falling under the main discipline of Education and Pedagogy (despite the fact that 5.6% of submissions fall under this category). This is the same for Communication and Media Studies, Economic and Social History, and Psycholinguistics.[6] Note though that these are small numbers of submissions overall.

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[5] Please note that since ANR-DFG collaborations are submitted to a dedicated bilateral scheme, the consortium type ANR-DFG collaborations are ineligible for consideration under ORA.

[6] It should be emphasised that this chart shows the main discipline only, and projects coded under Economics or Psychology may have Economics and Social History or Psycholinguistics as secondary classifications.

Discipline	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Total	% of total projects	Number of funded projects	Success rate against total successful applications	Success rate within discipline
Communication, information and media studies	0	3	6	3	12	1.8%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Demography	1	1	4	4	10	1.5%	1	1.7%	10.0%
Development Studies	1	0	3	0	4	0.6%	1	1.7%	25.0%
Economic and Social History[7]	1	4	1	1	7	1.0%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Economics	14	16	23	18	71	10.6%	7	11.7%	9.9%
Education and Pedagogy	10	7	9	12	38	5.6%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Environmental Planning	2	2	3	6	13	1.9%	1	1.7%	7.7%
Geography	7	9	12	11	39	5.8%	5	8.3%	12.8%
Legal Studies	2	0	2	8	12	1.8%	2	3.3%	16.7%
Linguistics	8	5	1	2	16	2.4%	1	1.7%	6.2%
Management	13	16	11	10	50	7.4%	2	3.3%	4.0%
Politics and International Studies	16	18	28	23	85	12.6%	9	15.0%	10.6%
Psycholinguistics	0	0	5	2	7	1.0%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Psychology	34	34	41	49	158	23.5%	22	36.7%	13.9%
Science and Technology Studies	8	1	3	0	12	1.8%	3	5.0%	25.0%
Social Anthropology	2	4	3	1	10	1.5%	1	1.7%	10.0%
Social Policy	2	3	1	10	16	2.4%	2	3.3%	12.5%
Social statistics, methods and computing	2	14	1	2	19	2.8%	1	1.7%	5.3%
Sociology	11	16	24	26	77	11.4%	2	3.3%	2.6%
Unknown discipline	5	7	5	0	16	2.4%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Total	139	160	186	188	673		60		

Table 5: Distribution by discipline per ORA round, top 4 disciplines by participation highlighted

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[7] Note that different funding agencies use different disciplinary configurations to comprise "social sciences" (e.g. economic and social history is not a social science discipline for NWO but is for ESRC).

5 Findings from the applicants' survey

5.1 Applicants' profiles

Out of 1671 applicants invited to the questionnaire, 247 responded and completed the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 15.2%. Among the respondents are 71 successful and 176 unsuccessful applicants. Given the mean success rates of the ORA call calculated for each round (see p. 11), it became clear that this sample was biased due to the fact that successful applicants were over-sampled with 29.5%. When interpreting the results this bias should be kept in mind.[8]

Around one third of the respondents are from German institutions, so German researchers are slightly over-sampled. Not surprisingly, half of the respondents took part in the last round in 2015 – perhaps as they may be better able to recall their experience of participating in ORA. In contrast, 18% of survey respondents were applicants in the first call.

The majority of applicants (83%) applied to only one ORA round. Apart from ESRC, the agencies allow for revision and resubmission of proposals to subsequent ORA rounds. In general, the number of those resubmissions is not significant. Just 6% (13 out of 212) of the rejected applicants did so. The success rate of those applicants who resubmitted proposals were slightly higher compared to the average success rate.

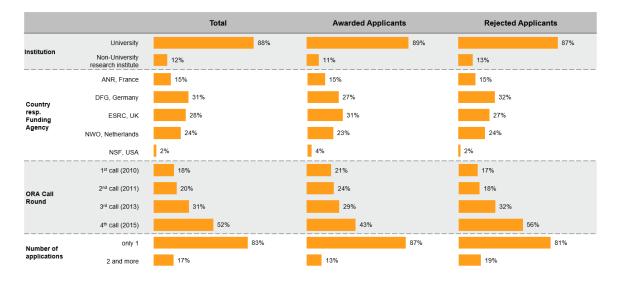|		Total	Awarded Applicants	Rejected Applicants
Institution	University	88%	89%	87%
	Non-University research institute	12%	11%	13%
Country resp. Funding Agency	ANR, France	15%	15%	15%
	DFG, Germany	31%	27%	32%
	ESRC, UK	28%	31%	27%
	NWO, Netherlands	24%	23%	24%
	NSF, USA	2%	4%	2%
ORA Call Round	1st call (2010)	18%	21%	17%
	2nd call (2011)	20%	24%	18%
	3rd call (2013)	31%	29%	32%
	4th call (2015)	52%	43%	56%
Number of applications	only 1	83%	87%	81%
	2 and more	17%	13%	19%

Chart 1: Statistics of respondents according to country, call round, affiliation, and success/failure of application

Next, we look at the disciplinary distribution of the applicants.

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[8] Regarding the statistical representativeness of the respondents, the complete profile of the respondents would need checking against the composition of the whole set of Principal Investigators (as the core group of applicants). This cannot be done easily. Even though we are aware of this representativeness issue, in the following analysis we use "applicants" as a synonym for "respondents".

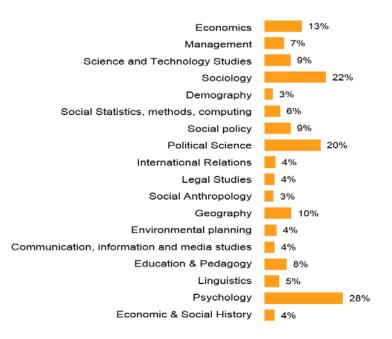|	
Economics	13%
Management	7%
Science and Technology Studies	9%
Sociology	22%
Demography	3%
Social Statistics, methods, computing	6%
Social policy	9%
Political Science	20%
International Relations	4%
Legal Studies	4%
Social Anthropology	3%
Geography	10%
Environmental planning	4%
Communication, information and media studies	4%
Education & Pedagogy	8%
Linguistics	5%
Psychology	28%
Economic & Social History	4%

Chart 2: Distribution of applicants according to main disciplines for all ORA rounds

Social scientists – in a strict sense Sociology, Political Science, Social Policy, International Relations – make up the largest group (55% combined), followed by psychologists and economic scientists (Economics, Management, Economic & Social History). These are the major disciplines participating in ORA – according to survey data as well as to our statistics of the applications.

The proportion of applicants reporting in each of the remaining disciplines is below 10%. One should note that around two thirds of the applications are more or less interdisciplinary in nature. Only one third of applicants reported only one discipline. Looking at the second disciplines listed by applicants, again Sociology, Political Science, Social Policy, International Relations account for most of the cases (25%), Economic Sciences for 10%, interestingly Psychology for only a small number of applications. There are disciplines that are listed more frequently as the secondary discipline than as the primary one, such as science and Technology Studies, Linguistics, or Statistics. Analysing the combination of primary and secondary disciplines, it is obvious that neighbouring disciplines/ sub-disciplines go together, like Demography and Quantitative Sociology, economics/statistics.

In relation to consortium type, half of the respondents applied in trilateral consortia, and one quarter respectively applied as either a bilateral or quadlateral consortium. Checking against the distribution of applications across this dimension (see Table 4) shows that applicants from trilateral and quadlateral applications are somewhat over-sampled, whereas applicants from bilaterals are under-sampled. 83% of respondents stated that they applied in consortia with British applicants, 79% together with Dutch researchers, 77% with German and 50% in cooperation with French researchers. As compared with our statistical data, cooperation with British and Dutch partners are the most frequent ones. Again, the over-sampling of German researchers takes effect here. French researchers are involved in half of all applications, researchers from the other three countries are more often involved. This demonstrates the "real" distribution of the countries being involved in

applications quite well, except for Germany, which has a lower share than is represented in this sample.

5.2   ORA scheme management

It is essential to have an efficient, clear and transparent structure for the application process and for the decision-making procedure. This is critical for all agencies, which need to make sure that they continuously live up to their own reputation and ambition to identify and fund scientifically excellent projects. Likewise, running an ORA call requires a lot of time and effort, including resources drawn from the experts invited to review proposals, and from panel members invited to give funding recommendations, and particularly from the researchers, who need to invest a lot of time and effort preparing the applications. Therefore, the questionnaire asked applicants for statements concerning the overall operation and management of the scheme.

Communication of the call

Interestingly, most applicants learned about ORA calls through personal communication with colleagues. Fewer researchers primarily referred to the documents published by the national funding agencies or their respective official communication channels. Given the large number of applicants pointing to word of mouth (WoM), this signals that this sort of communication about funding opportunities works very well across the disciplines. However, it leaves us with the question of whether the official communication channels maintained by the funders work effectively. Likewise, surprisingly, 40%-50% of respondents did not see the pre-announcement indicating the next call. On the other hand, once having taken notice of this pre-announcement, almost all found it valuable as a source.

Information Sources	Total	ANR	DFG	ESRC	NWO
word of mouth / personal communication	63%	59%	73%	58%	58%
national funding agency's website	30%	51%	23%	27%	33%
communication channel of the national funding agency	29%	30%	18%	37%	34%
other	9%	3%	10%	10%	8%

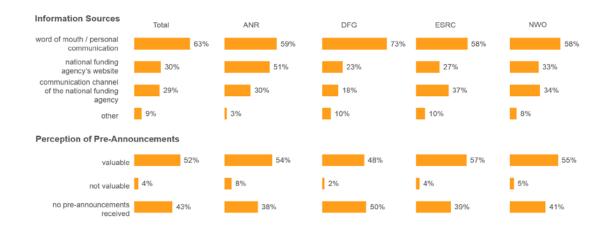| Perception of Pre-Announcements	Total	ANR	DFG	ESRC	NWO
valuable	52%	54%	48%	57%	55%
not valuable	4%	8%	2%	4%	5%
no pre-announcements received	43%	38%	50%	39%	41%

Chart 3: Sources of Information

Apart from the above-mentioned methods of communication, several applicants reported in the "free text" that they received information about the published call from their universities, mostly from their central research management department or communication office.

Clarity of the call documents

We assume that submitting a funding proposal according to the requirements of funding agencies is to some extent a demanding task. Having four funding agencies in one joint call, the question arises as to what extent the call documents offer guidance that is formulated in a self-explanatory, efficient and consistent way. Chart 4, therefore, indicates whether the call documents provided are considered valuable to the applicants. The call text, describing the aims, criteria, procedure and requirement of the call, is mostly perceived as being clear or very clear. The same holds true for the application form, which provides the template for the preparation of the proposal. However, around half of the respondents (52%) found the national annexes unclear. Notably the majority of these (48%) referred to ANR annexes. The purpose of the national annexes is to explain the specific features and requirements of each funding agency.
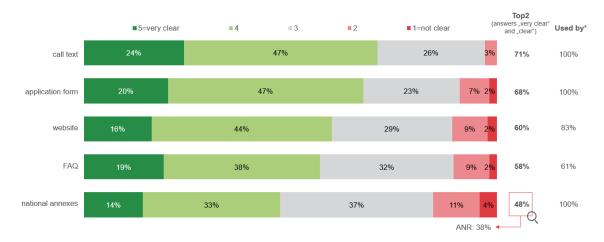

Chart 4: Clarity of the call documents

Comparing the answers across the four rounds, one could expect a "learning process" (especially by the agencies) but, in fact, the distribution of the assessment categories does not differ considerably.

Applicants' communication with the agencies

It is quite reasonable that the preparation of an ORA application might lead to questions that are better answered through personal contact. That is why the questionnaire asked for the effectiveness of personal contact. As a result, Chart 5 shows more than half of the applicants got in touch with their respective agency. 70% of those reported that their questions were answered from satisfactorily to excellent. 30% of applicants who got in contact were left with unanswered questions or requests. Apart from that, the large number of respondents who approached their respective national agency indicated that the call documents were not sufficiently instructive, or the national annexes not sufficiently clear.

Contact to Call Administration

no yes

47% 53%

Efficacy of Call Administration to answer queries

excellent good satisfactory fair poor

17% 53% 20% 7% 2%

Chart 5: National agencies' efficacy answering queries

Respondents also used the opportunity to express their thoughts about the call administration in the "free text" box, by suggesting areas for improvement. The following are examples of feedback echoed by several applicants.

- It was suggested to have a more joined up approach to submissions and scheme regulations:
  "It is impractical to ask all consortium members to fill in a part. It would be better to allow the option to do this centrally. It would be easier to have one format for the entire application, rather than having to deal with four different types of regulations."

- Call documents cause confusion, and are perceived as inconsistent and complex:
  "The application form was not clear. Several areas were overlapping and we had to very carefully reread the documents and put the information together to be able to fill the application form. We considered the form (and the various accompanying documents, e.g. FAQ) as not functioning well – they were too lengthy, with core information spread across different sections or documents."

- It is pointed out that questions are not answered by the different agencies in the same way, maybe due to different regulations, maybe due to insufficient clarification among the agencies:
  "… that the funders discuss and agree on the full detail of the application process – including what exactly is required in the forms and what the different fields are meant for – and communicate this clearly to national contact points, so that applicants can be appropriately and consistently informed."

Various measures were already taken between calls to improve the clarity of the scheme, but these concerns will continue to be taken seriously by the agencies when preparing new rounds.

Decision procedure and feedback documents

Applicants were asked to rate procedural fairness and transparency, which is crucial for acceptance of the scheme, particularly against the backdrop of low success rates. The findings indicate that applicants did not feel strongly either way in their assessment of this aspect of the procedure. In Chart 6, there is no assessment category prevailing or salient. On average, each category is rated "3", which means neither agreement nor disagreement.

40% of the respondents said that the "*evaluation criteria*" were clearly formulated, and informative, whereas 25% disagreed and 35% did not feel strongly about this. The *soundness and fairness* of the decision procedure was similarly rated: around 40% are quite satisfied with this, 31% are not. Summarising the rating about the *"quality of the feedback"* that is provided after the decision procedure has been completed, around 40% of the respondents again answered that the feedback

given was robust and instructive and that enough evidence was provided to support the funding decision.

Again, it should be noted that there is no remarkable difference across the four rounds. At maximum, the percentage varies by 10 percentage-points. If there is a difference to note, then it is between the first two rounds compared to the two more recent rounds (pertaining to assessment criteria, which were considered to be clearer and more informative in the more recent two rounds than they were previously), and between the first three rounds and the fourth round (pertaining the quality of the feedback, which was assessed as being most instructive and robust in the fourth round). As anticipated, successful applicants gave higher ratings for all categories within "the quality of feedback": Around two thirds of successful applicants agree or strongly agree with the statements that the evaluation procedure was fair, and that the results were justified and supported by evidence, whereas only 20-30% of rejected applicants agree or strongly agree.
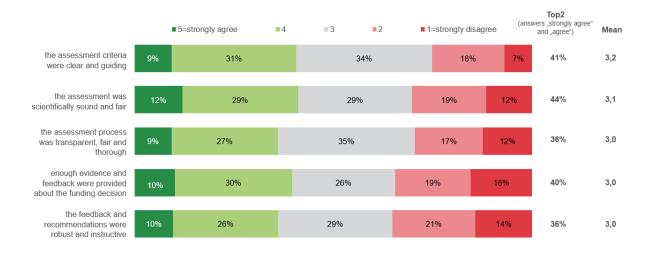

Chart 6: Quality and efficiency of the assessment (1)

If one splits up the answers over the funding agencies, there is no remarkable difference to report. All statements are close to "neutral". We interpret this as an indication of mutual understanding across applicants from different countries familiar with different agencies' procedures.
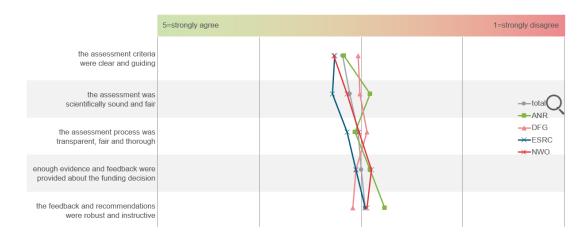
Chart 7: Quality and efficiency of the assessment (2)

Applicants also used the "free text" to extend their thoughts on improvements in the decision-making procedure. Similar to panel members' responses, low success rates and the long commissioning period were raised most frequently. The commissioning period of ORA – from submission until funding decision announcements takes almost one year – is thought to be too long, running the risk of the project losing relevance as the research scenario may have changed, or particularly when researchers need to look for alternative funding after rejection of their proposals. Therefore, an outline stage is suggested, to screen out proposals with little chance of success. Beyond this, applicants would appreciate getting more information about the total number of applications submitted to the call, on the timescale of the decision-making process, and about further steps as soon as the call is closed. With regard to the outcome of the process, they are interested to learn about the disciplinary background of the different reviewers, and about how their applications scored against others. In addition, a rebuttal phase would be welcomed, giving the applicants the opportunity to respond to reviewers.

Asking for procedural improvements, panel members feel that the time dedicated for panel discussions should be used more efficiently; one way of doing this would be to have parallel disciplinary sub-panels. In addition, less time should be spent discussing low-quality proposals and rather focus on those that have greater chances of being funded. Taking into account the assessment about the orientation help of the evaluation criteria it seems to be advisable to bring in more clarity in relation to both written assessment and panel procedures. It is recommended that clear, coherent and consistent assessment criteria are communicated to reviewers and panellists about what makes a proposal strong and of high scientific merit.

5.3   International Collaboration

Driving motivation

Assessing the attractiveness of the scheme as a whole, respondents were invited to give some indication for their motivation to apply for this programme. Not surprisingly, international research collaboration is the main driver for submitting an ORA application. The openness of the call to all social science topics and the reputation of the scheme also featured among the responses, albeit not

as strongly. Likewise, the panel members perceived enabling international research collaboration as ORA's main driver. Openness to all social sciences disciplines and conducting interdisciplinary projects were also highly valued by panel members.

Other aspects, such as duration and success rates, are less important in applicants' decision to apply; this is worth noting as success rates are low and the commissioning timescale relatively long (see also Chapter 5.2). The answers do not differ remarkably between successful and unsuccessful applicants.
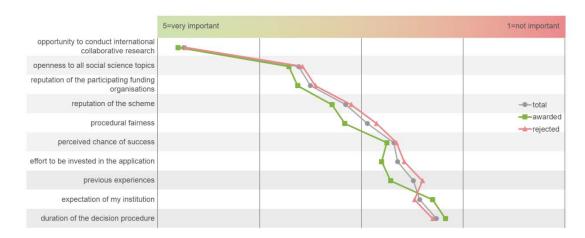

Chart 8: Considerations when applying for an ORA project

Role of research institutions

Asking the applicants about the *"expectation of my institution"* when applying to ORA, we were also interested to learn about the role that these institutions might have in this context. As it stands, applications for additional funds (extramural/third party money beyond the regular institutional funds) has been a prominent feature in the competitive research landscape for a number of years. Institutional funds of research organizations and universities have tended to shrink and, to compensate for that development, researchers might be pushed by their institutions to apply for external funds. Beyond that, one might think that research organizations are happy having successful researchers within an international call, thus contributing to the international network of universities and research institutes.

Therefore, two questions arose: (1) is there any institutional support from the universities or research organizations for the preparation of the proposal and (2) do applicants feel some expectation by their institution to seize the ORA opportunity and apply? The results show that actually on average almost half of the applicants got some support from their institution, whereas the shares between the countries differ substantially, with ESRC 75% of the applicants, followed by ANR (41%), NWO (39%), and DFG (30%). As it stands, this support mainly referred to administrative assistance from a partly centralized research management department, such as giving advice on the preparation of budget plans, but also offering some funds, for example for travel or a workshop also in preparation of the proposal. On the other hand, Chart 8 shows that universities' expectations are not considered a pressing or dominant reason to decide to submit an application.

Added value of international collaboration

As established above, for most researchers, the opportunity to take part in international research projects was the most important reason for applying, either starting or strengthening international collaborations. The more specific motives for international collaborations were also important: a sizeable number of researchers indicated that access to data or new methodologies, and accessing expertise not available in their country of work influenced their decision to apply to an ORA call; sharing of infrastructure and staff were mentioned less often.
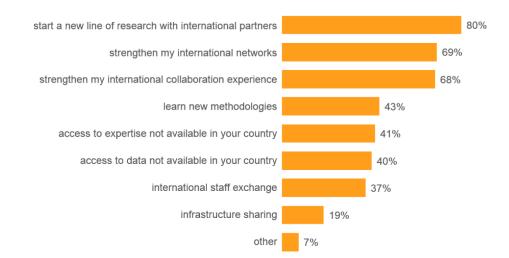

Chart 9: Science-driven motivations to apply for an ORA project

According to this, the panel members also appreciate ORA as a valuable scheme that encourages researchers to think about their research across borders, and which complements skills, attracting talented researchers from across various European countries as opposed to expertise available in a single country, bringing significant added value to national schemes.

Position in the international funding landscape

As we know, there are actually almost no funding opportunities for international collaborative projects, which allow for thematically open research projects. In order to get a sense of the position of ORA within the European funding landscape, applicants were asked how they compare the ORA scheme against other international programmes' opportunities. The following are presented as examples of respondents' views:

- *"Similar to our funder's national scheme, which compares well to other domestic funders."*

- *"ORA is much better than Horizon 2020 in terms of the type of information that is required from applicants. Horizon 2020 requires applicants to provide something in the order of 100 pages of information, whose preparation requires at least several person-weeks of work and much of which has little relevance to the evaluation of the proposal. In consequence, each rejected application represents a large waste of human resources. By contrast, with ORA, the proposers provide essentially the information that reviewers need to decide whether to accept the proposal or not (though a certain amount of additional formal information is apparently necessary because of the multiple countries that are involved)."*
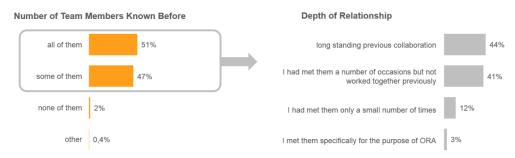
- *"Excellent about the ORA funding: that individual teams continue to be accountable to their own funding organisations (DFG, ESRC or else); that the scheme provides an opportunity for truly collaborative/joint work, but with less administrative burdens than ERC funding, for instance (with regards to both the application phase and the execution/administration of the project).*

- *"ORA had solid reviews and explicit and detailed feedback that one could work with. Got the impression that the reviews were handled by actual colleagues / experts in the field, with a clear focus on scientific rigor. That's not my experience with Horizon 2020 which strikes me as (a) quite political and a game where it's important to have this type of country, or that type of country in the batch (whether they can contribute or not) and to use these important keywords and (b) as concerned about dissemination as it is about the value of the research itself, which I find out-of-balance."*

- *"ORA makes it possible to do fundamental research, free from political influence (in contrary to EU programs)."*

Summarising the individual statements, the obvious "advantage" of ORA over other international funding programmes is the openness in topics, the curiosity-driven research that is aimed at (instead of impact and policy oriented research), the less bureaucratic procedure, the substantive reviews provided by experts in the field and the opportunity to conduct independent research. ORA was mostly compared against different EU funding programmes such as Horizon 2020 (including ERC), or other programmes administered by the national funders. Having found this out there seems to be good reason to run ORA in parallel to the EU programmes since they will complement rather than duplicate each other.

5.4 Project Partnership and Performance

Starting or continuing partnerships

Projects need to be based on strong partnerships and applications need to convince in terms of the complementary expertise of the researchers participating in a proposal. So, the first thing to do is to find the appropriate research fellows, and team up with them in efficient and fruitful ways.

Chart 10: Collaboration ahead of the application process

For 92% of the respondents, international cooperation with European researchers is essential to their research. Accordingly – as already shown in Chart 8 – access to international partnerships is the main driver in ORA. This large number gives evidence of a closely internationally interlinked social science community. This leads to the point that almost all applicants (98%) knew some of their ORA

collaboration partners before they decided to jointly apply; half of them were familiar with all team partners. This finding is understandable, as writing an ORA proposal requires not only a certain trust and closeness between partners based on preceding experience, but also needs some joint preliminary research that lays the foundation to build upon with the planned ORA project. That is, the idea of the scheme is primarily to strengthen reliable, successful relationships at both scientific and personal levels, rather than to spur new cooperation lines.

Then the question arises as to how applicants get involved in teams, and how ways of teaming up differ between countries.

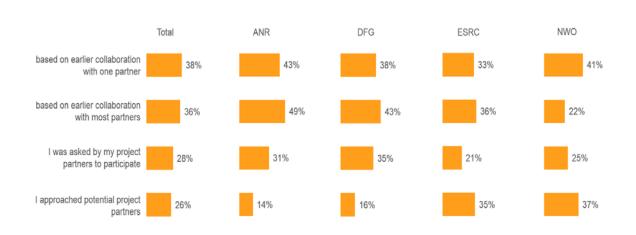|	Total	ANR	DFG	ESRC	NWO
based on earlier collaboration with one partner	38%	43%	38%	33%	41%
based on earlier collaboration with most partners	36%	49%	43%	36%	22%
I was asked by my project partners to participate	28%	31%	35%	21%	25%
I approached potential project partners	26%	14%	16%	35%	37%

Chart 11: Different ways into a research partnership

Strikingly, British and Dutch researchers are more active in approaching new research partners, whereas French and German researchers are more ones that can be contacted in order to become a team partner. Likewise, they rely more heavily on already-existing relationships. Though, in general, the numbers are not that different to indicate substantial biases.

Performance of ongoing partnerships

Then we turn to the project performance of successful applicants. As indicated above, 71 respondents were successful, though only 22% of them had completed their projects by the time they responded to the survey. This number is relatively small, but plausible. The number of awarded proposals in the first two calls amounted to 25; these should be now completed, given the funding period of three years.

The question is, how effectively are the collaborative projects running, whether certain or even typical management problems can be identified and how these relate to the number of project partners.
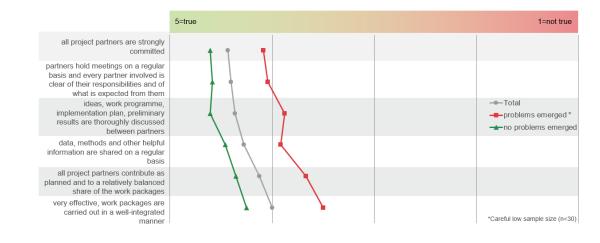
Chart 12: How is the cooperation running?

According to our respondents, strong commitment from all partners, effective communication, and sharing of resources, such as data, are the basic pillars of successful work. On average, across all rounds, 80-90% of successful applicants reported good project partnerships, which is reflective of the statements in Chart 12. The share of successful applicants confirming that they have strong and effective partnerships does not significantly depend on the number of partners or countries involved.
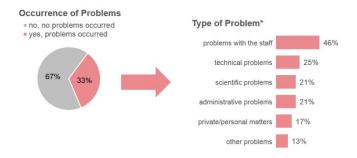

Chart 13: Problems in project performance

Fewer than 25 applicants reported that problems had arisen during the project phase. These were mainly problems relating to recruitment and retention of staff; just a minority indicated technical problems in terms of infrastructure, data, or experiments. In terms of scientific problems, applicants pointed to similar issues also potentially emerging during the project phase of nationally funded projects. For example, more time than expected is needed for developing a comparative framework or a questionnaire, or difficulties are encountered in the coordination of fieldwork due to different work commitments. Likewise, respondents reported problems with the data provision by national agencies where the data provision was delayed, or of lower quality than envisaged, and severe restrictions on sharing data across countries emerged.

Respondents also reported, once problems appeared, that they tried to develop adequate solutions to those problems; for example by adapting the project parts so that they could be successful even without an expected contribution of another partner; by achieving sample sizes in some countries that

are smaller than planned but still viable; by an extension to the grant due to the recruitment of new personnel; or simply by *"doing the best we could with what's available"* and by abandoning parts of intended research as a response to restrictions on data sharing.

The question about the outputs produced at the current project stage was raised with all successful applicants. Out of 71, about half have not published any results to date. This is quite understandable because half of the respondents' awards started only last year. 42% indicated that they have co-authored publications that include project findings, which would be one desirable output that is linked with the programme's philosophy. The average number of publications differs a lot, between 1.0 and 8.3. Any attempt to analyse this result according to consortium type etc. would be too early due to the small numbers we just have.

Fostering long-term partnerships

Funding research projects of outstanding scientific quality, fostering international collaborations and joint knowledge production are the aims of the scheme. Beyond these very direct and obvious effects, funders wished to learn if ORA has fostered longer-term international cooperation. In this sense, applicants were asked if they intended to continue their joint activities beyond the project's completion date. 75% of all successful applicants who have already completed their ORA project are still participating in joint activities. Applicants that are still involved in ongoing projects also respond very positively; however, here we asked about only future intentions, which is often different to the actual realisation of joint work.

Chart 14: Prospects for longer-term collaboration of successful applicants?

Applicants that are reluctant to continue collaborative activities with their project partners described their cooperation as rather unsuccessful, and not a very fruitful experience. Other with opposite experiences would consider a new ORA project, or point to longstanding proven relationships and effective matching of partners.

5.5 Positive side effects

As already indicated, ORA has a low success rate (like most international calls), essentially due to budget constraints. This leads to the consideration of whether this resource-consuming scheme is

nevertheless worthwhile to run. This question makes it imperative to listen in particular to the rejected applicants and to learn from their perspectives. Since we talk about an international programme, the idea of any additional side effects comes to mind: perhaps in terms of new cooperation opportunities, carrying out the project in a different way or in an alternatively-funded format.
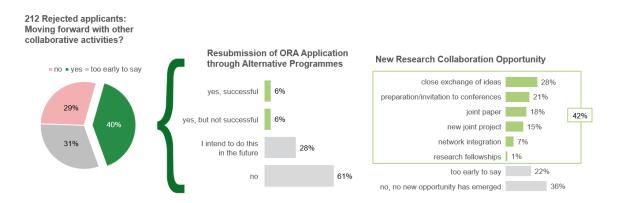

Chart 15: Positive side effects of rejected applications

The findings on potential positive additional effects are quite promising; still it might need some extra time in order to get solid results for those effects. Preliminarily, one could state that 29% (61) of rejected applicants did not pursue further collaboration, 31% (65) are still unsure and 40% (85) already did, or intend to, continue with their collaboration. 10 rejected applicants revised and resubmitted the proposal, NOT to the succeeding ORA round but instead to alternative funding programmes. Half of them were successful. Another 24 of the rejected applicants intend to do this in future. Beyond the resubmission of proposals, 42% out of 85 unsuccessful applicants have already talked about concrete ideas for new and follow up collaborative research activities in different ways, such as the close exchange of ideas, conferences, or even joint papers or joint projects. However, 22% of those 85 rejected applicants are not yet sure about which concrete joint activities should be envisaged and 36% of those 85 indicated that new opportunities had not yet emerged.

A closer look at the reasoning for positive or negative statements in relation to applicants' aspirations for future collaboration revealed mixed views. Very often, it was stated in the sense of *"We do not have definite plans for a specific research project but are interested in further collaboration."*

As the vast majority of project proposals are based on prior existing relationships, it appears very reasonable that respondents report that: *"Collaboration is likely to go on as several partners have been already collaborating before the ORA project." // "We imagine European grant projects, but even without them, I imagine, given the shared interest of our partners, we will continue to collaborate." // "We're still working together but the scope of the collaboration is limited due to lack of funding."*

If asked for different forms being envisaged for further collaboration, a common reply is: *"We continue to collaborate in writing, conferences, seminars, and further funding bids." // "We do have plans to submit other joint EU-based funding proposals and/or continue on joint publications."* Alternative international funding sources, such as Horizon 2020, and its various sub-programmes such as COST, the Marie Curie network, or JPIs; or national funding agencies, like VolkswagenStiftung in Germany,

or other European funding platforms such as NORFACE; were frequently mentioned. Bilateral funding mechanisms such as the DFG-ANR funding programme were mentioned as well.

At the same time it is fair to say that a considerable share of respondents were disappointed about the rejection and, at least for the time being, are not inclined to roll out new plans or think about further options: *"We didn't have a clue as to why our proposal was rejected so we didn't know how to revise it for other agencies."* // *"It was a lot of work to try to meet the requirements of three funding agencies. It is easier to work on smaller projects together."* After a rejection, one can easily imagine that a certain momentum is lost, and *"everyone went their own way doing their own projects again, the proposal gets forgotten quite shortly."* Additionally, screening the funding landscape, there seem to be gaps in relation to the extent of partners' cooperation and the complexity of the projects: *"We did not find other calls that accept a small number of partners (rather small research groups) across only 4 or so countries, e.g. H2020 wants large consortia."* // *"There aren't a lot of international schemes which you can readily apply to."*

Effects on academic prospects

A significant share of applicants are postdocs or junior scientists who have recently worked abroad. Coming back to their home country or settling in a new one, they apply to ORA because they have established research cooperation, and take up the opportunity of ORA to further maintain or deepen these relationships. So, the question arises whether – even if rejected – there are some perceived positive effects on their academic prospects. Basically, applicants are indifferent, though at least one third reports some positive effects, whereas 25% are not able to estimate such potential effects. Few paradigmatic remarks from the "free text" illustrate the opinions of the positive and the negative share.

Positive Effects of Application on Research / Career

- yes, I experienced positive effects
- too early to say
- no, no positive effects

36%
24%
39%

"I deepened my experience of this qualitative empirical approach; I got a national funding for research based on some of the results of my former collaboration."

"It helped define open research questions and structure our thoughts around new projects."

"All the work for preparing the project was in vain. I could have written some articles instead of this project proposal."

"Only very discouraging effects. Not sure I will try to submit anything else to ORA or funders involved again."
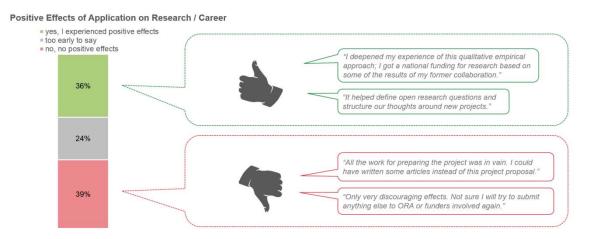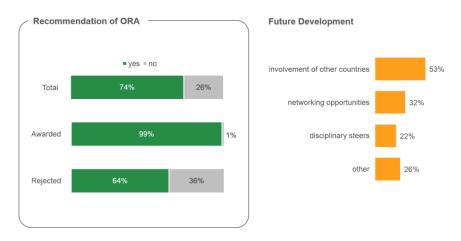
Chart 16: Expected effects on academic career

Due to anonymity, we were not able to check the numbers and answers against the career status of respondents. However, we got an impression along which channels the ORA process, even if not successful completed, might be helpful for people's careers:
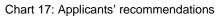
Frequently it was mentioned that the ability and willingness to submit proposals is essential to academics: *"Valuable experience of grant writing and even failed applications are evidence of attempts to secure funding."* or "*The fact that I applied and made the international connections was looked upon favorably by my home institution.*" It was reported very often that the preparation

strengthened collaboration and network building *per se*: *"We got in still closer contact to people that I did know well before*." And, interestingly, respondents noted that writing up a proposal has intellectual merit on its own: "*It helped define open research questions and structure our thoughts around new projects."* Some sort of windfall profits were reported: *"Working on the proposal with the international co-proposers gave me new ideas and knowledge that I have been able to use in various ways in my research."* Finally, aspects in relation to teaching and supervising also came up: *"Some things I learned helped me in advising PhD students."*

5.6   Applicants' overall assessment

Based on the number of applications, it is clear that the ORA scheme has been in high demand. At the same time, we are keen to listen to the overall recommendations and detailed advice for improvements that applicants have to offer based on their experiences with ORA. First, we asked whether applicants would recommend the scheme as a funding opportunity to their colleagues. Second, we wanted to learn about their considerations about valuable future developments pertaining to the ORA scheme in general. In particular, answers to the last question should inform further discussions among the funding agencies about this issue.

Chart 17: Applicants' recommendations

It is quite natural that awarded applicants would recommend ORA as a funding scheme to other researchers. Beyond that, we take it as a positive signal that two thirds of those applicants who have been unsuccessful would recommend the scheme as well. Analysis indicates that the share of those applicants prepared to recommend the scheme who were satisfied with the quality of feedback in the rejection letter (given after the completion of the decision process), is considerably higher than the share of those prepared to recommend the scheme and who found the feedback not convincing.

As for ideas for the future development of the scheme, the involvement of additional countries is the most frequent recommendation. In particular, the Nordic countries, East European countries, Italy, Spain, and also the USA and Canada were mentioned. In terms of topics there is a mixed response: whereas some applicants would favour the inclusion of humanities disciplines, others are in favour of more thematically-focused calls. Some respondents would like to receive more guidance in terms of the preparation of interdisciplinary proposals.

Screening through final assessments respondents made, results were mixed. We found both enthusiastic and negative comments, which illustrate the broad range of opinions we are confronted with:

"We have had two projects funded, and they were really helpful. We produced (and are producing) research that has been highly cited. We have the time together to think critically about assumptions and concepts in our field, and to develop some challenging empirical work. It was ground-breaking work, rather than validating work already happening in the field. I cannot think of many funding schemes that allow that in an internationally collaborative way."

But we also got a lot of these comments:

"Too time consuming; too much of a lottery; despite some great reviewers, no success. I strongly have the impression that due to the high number of proposals, the decision-makers took one unprofessional review as a reason to reject the proposal - without engaging with the substance. The feedback/rationale for rejection was immensely poor."

5.   Key findings and recommendations

In consideration of the findings, we conclude that ORA has provided a genuine platform for international high quality research collaborations between researchers from the participating European countries. It provides good evidence to continue with the scheme, taking due account of the recommendations of this report.

Objectives of the scheme

1. **ORA has delivered its core objective of promoting and facilitating high quality international research collaborations in the social sciences**. ORA has succeeded in bringing 'best to best' researchers together, and the scheme has funded proposals of comparable quality to other European schemes and, where measurable, national schemes. Within four rounds, 639 proposals have been processed, and altogether 60 projects have been funded, either focused on topics primarily in one discipline, or focused on interdisciplinary scientific problems in any area in the social sciences.

2. Overall, the findings from both the applicant survey and the panel member questionnaire are mostly positive, confirming more or less anecdotal evidence gathered on different occasions: **ORA enjoys broad acceptance among successful as well as unsuccessful applicants.** The main expectations connected with ORA refer to conducting international research based on comparatively small teams of researchers and flexible forms of cooperation; enabling cross-national comparison; learning from and working with some of the best researchers in this research domain; and benefits for researchers' career enhancement. Most applicants knew at least some members of their project team before starting the application process.

3. ORA has enabled international collaborations in a number of ways. There is some evidence that are some **positive side effects**, for example, where good quality applications have failed to secure funding from ORA, they have been successful in other schemes. Likewise, a number of unsuccessful applicants intend to continue to work with each other, strengthening collaborative relationships.

Administration of the scheme

4. The **assessment procedure is successfully established and running**. The administration of the scheme, basically, runs quite effectively.

5. The number of applications submitted to each round has steadily increased, while success rates remain relatively low, at 10% or less in rounds 2, 3, and 4. ORA's commissioning process remains very resource-intensive. The large volume of submissions puts a significant amount of work on the agencies managing the scheme, as well as on peer reviewers and panel members. **It is necessary to consider strategies for reducing the number of poorer quality submissions and focusing efforts on higher quality proposals.** It may be appropriate that an outline stage is introduced for the initial sifting stage.

6. More clarity in relation to both written assessment and panel procedures seem in order. It is recommended that **clear, coherent and consistent assessment criteria** are communicated to reviewers and panellists about what makes a proposal strong and of high scientific merit.

7. Panel procedures are in general positively perceived. Nevertheless, there is room for **improving the efficiency of the panel meeting**. Mechanisms for focusing on the potentially fundable applications ought to be considered. It is important to sift applications to reduce panel and peer review requirements. It may be worth discussing if parallel disciplinary panels for the final panel meeting would be appropriate.

8. As to **transparency issues and communication with the applicants**: the call documents seem to be comprehensible and clear to the applicants. The national annexes, however, need closer examination, based on the finding that national agencies are frequently contacted.

   In addition, greater transparency towards the applicants with regard to the peer review process and final funding decisions seems in order. As per the peer review, one option to improve this might be to pilot a rebuttal phase. In relation to final funding decisions, applicants might receive further information as to how their application fared in relation to the whole scheme.

   It is perceived that the different funding amounts that each national agency is able to commit results in disadvantages for researchers from agencies committing smaller amounts. One way of addressing this may be to indicate from the outset an approximate number of projects that each national agency is able to fund within their respective budgets.

9. It is currently difficult to measure the scholarly impact of the scheme in a coherent and robust way because of different approaches to reporting and monitoring. It is necessary to consider more **harmonised reporting by the grantees to track the outputs and impact of the scheme**, or to detect issues in the whole project performance. A separate 'impact study' should be considered.

10. Each round of ORA has been run by and reported upon each of the participating funding agencies on a rota basis. Reports have followed different formats and the content has been inconsistent across rounds. There need to be an **agreement upon a consistent grading scale, final reporting format and content** so that future comparisons can be made robustly.

Annex 1: Applicants' Survey Questionnaire

Applicant questionnaire on ORA

The funding organisations of the Open Research Area (ORA) are currently evaluating the overall operation and strategic priorities of the programme. As part of this evaluation, we are contacting all applicants from the four participating countries, in order to gather information on the added value of this funding programme, particularly with regard to international collaboration.

We have identified you as a Principal Investigator (PI) in one of the four ORA calls and would value your contribution to this survey. Your answers will be anonymized and treated confidentially. We would be very grateful if you could complete this questionnaire which will be open for completion until 22 July 2016.

For any further questions or clarifications, do not hesitate to contact:
Christiane Joerk, DFG (Christiane.Joerk@dfg.de)
Michael Sommerhof, DFG (Michael.Sommerhof@dfg.de)

In case you have been PI in more than one application, please refer to the most recent application for answering the questionnaire (except for question 3-5).

A. IDENTIFICATION

1. **Applicant/Project Details**
   Name (including title):

   Institution:
   □ University: ………………….
   □ Non-university research institute: …………………….
   □ Other: ………………..

   Country:
   □ ANR, France
   □ DFG, Germany
   □ ESRC, United Kingdom
   □ NWO, Netherlands
   □ NSF, USA

   Research Areas of the application:
        Primary….. (list of subjects according to a menu)
        Secondary……(list of subjects according to a menu)

   Coding:
   ECONOMICS
        Economics (micro)
        Economics (macro)
        Economics (international or related)
        Economics/Political economics/ organizational economics/ Management
   Management
   Science and Technology Studies
   SOCIOLOGY
        Sociology (Qualitative)
        Sociology (Quantitative)
   Demography
   Social Statistics, methods, computing
   Social policy

Political Science
International Relations
Legal Studies
Social Anthropology
Geography
Environmental planning
Communication, information and media studies
Education & Pedagogy
Linguistics
PSYCHOLOGY
    Psycholinguistics
    Psychology (neuro-cognitive)
    Psychology (cognitive)
    Psychology (developmental)
    Psychology (clinical)
    Psychology (social)
    Psychology/communication
Economic & Social History

2. To which ORA call did you apply?

☐ Applicant of the 1st call (2010)
☐ Applicant of the 2nd call (2011)
☐ Applicant of the 3rd call (2013)
☐ Applicant of the 4th call (2015)

3. Have you applied to more than one call?
    ☐ Yes
    ☐ No

4. If yes, was your application a resubmission?
(A resubmission means that a rejected proposal has been revised along the recommendations provided by the reviewers' and panel's feedback, including changes in the proposal's main research questions and objectives, methodology, resources and/or composition of the research group.)

    ☐ Yes
    ☐ No

5. If yes, was it successful after it was resubmitted?
    ☐ Yes
    ☐ No

6. Was your most recent application:
    ☐ Awarded
    ☐ Rejected

7. How many and which countries/funding organisations (including yours) were involved in your application?
    ☐ Two countries …………………….. (choice: ANR, DFG, ESRC, NWO)
    ☐ Three countries …………………… (choice: ANR, DFG, ESRC, NWO, NSF)
    ☐ Four countries …………………… (choice: ANR, DFG, ESRC, NWO, NSF)
    ☐ Five countries

8. Of the options provided below, please indicate how each of them influenced your decision to apply to ORA? Please choose for each option on a scale between 1 (not important) and 5 (very important).

  □ Opportunity to conduct international collaborative research

  □ Openness to all social science topics

  □ Procedural fairness

  □ Duration of the decision procedure

  □ Expectation of my institution

  □ Reputation of the participating funding organisations

  □ Reputation of the scheme

  □ Effort to be invested in the application compared to applications to other international funding programmes

  □ Perceived chance of success

  □ Previous experiences with either the national funding organisation or the ORA programme in the past

  □ Other: Please specify: [Free text]

9. Please comment how, in your experience, ORA funding compares to other national and international schemes in the social sciences (for example Horizon 2020, JPIs, ERA-Net, bi-lateral and tri-lateral agreements).

[Free text]

10. Did you get any institutional support from your University/research institution for the preparation of the application?

  □ Yes, please provide any further details: [Free text]
  □ No

B. CALL ADMINISTRATION

11. How did you find out about the ORA calls? (Please select all that apply.)

  □ Communication channel of the funding organisations (e.g. newsletter, mailing list, social media, Twitter)
  □ National funding organisation website
  □ Word of mouth / personal communication (other applicants, academic colleague or other)
  □ Other, please specify: [Free text]

12. Did you find the pre-announcements valuable as an advance notification?
  □ Yes
  □ No
  Please provide any reasons why not

13. On a scale between 1 (not clear) and 5 (very clear), please indicate if the following documents were clear, comprehensive and easy to understand.
□ Call specification
□ Application form

□ FAQ
□ Website
□ National annexes

Do you have any suggestions for improvement? [Free text]

14. In preparation of your application, did you get in touch with the call administration of one of the participating funding organisations?

□ Yes
□ No

15. If yes, how would you rate the efficiency of the call administration to respond to your queries?
□ Poor
□ Fair
□ Satisfactory
□ Good
□ Excellent

Do you have any suggestions for improvement? [Free text]

16. How did you find the quality of the assessment/feedback? Please choose a grade between 1 "strongly disagree" and 5 "strongly agree".
□ The assessment was scientifically sound and fair
□ The assessment criteria were clear and guiding
□ The assessment process was transparent, fair and thorough□ The feedback and recommendations were robust and instructive
□ Enough evidence and feedback were provided about the funding decision

C. EFFECT ON INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

17. How did you become a member of your international project team? (Please select all that apply.)
□ Based on earlier collaboration with one partner
□ Based on earlier collaboration with most partners
□ I approached potential project partners
□ I was asked by my project partners to participate
□ Other, please specify: [Free text]

18. Did you know your partners before joining the project team?
□ None of them
□ Some of them
□ All of them
□ Other, please provide any further details: [Free text]

19. How well did you know your project partners before putting together your ORA application?
□ Long standing previous collaboration
□ I had met them a number of occasions but not worked together previously

□ I had met them only a small number of times
□ I met them specifically for the purpose of ORA

20. In a scale of 1 (not important) to 5 (very important), how important is international collaboration for your specific research interests?
□

21. What did you expect from your participation in the ORA project? (Please select all that apply.)
□ Strengthen my international networks
□ Strengthen my international collaboration experience
□ International staff exchange
□ Start a new line of research with international partners
□ Infrastructure sharing
□ Learn new methodologies
□ Access expertise not available in your country
□ Access to data not available in your country
□ Other, please specify: [Free text]

D. ONLY FOR GRANT HOLDERS

22. Have your project's outcomes and findings been published or been accepted for publication (co-authored with your international project partners)?

□ Yes
How many publications? [number]
Which journal(s) or publicly available working paper(s)? Please provide full citation information: [Free text]

□ No
Please provide any reasons why not [Free text]

23. Have your project's outcomes been published separately (not co-authored with your project's partners)
□ Yes
How many?   [number]
Which journal(s) or publicly available working paper(s)? Please provide full citation information: [Free text]

□ No
Please provide any reasons why not [Free text]

24. How would you describe the work with your international partners? Please choose from a scale from 1 (not true) to 5 (true). (Please select all that apply.)

□ Very effective, work packages are carried out in a well-integrated manner
□ Data, methods and other helpful information are shared on a regular basis
□ Partners hold meetings on a regular basis (either in person or by teleconference) and every partner involved is clear of their responsibilities and of what is expected from them
□ Ideas, work programme, implementation plan, preliminary results are thoroughly discussed between partners
□ All project partners are strongly committed

□ All project partners contribute as planned and to a relatively balanced share of the work packages

25. Have any problems emerged during the project phase?
       □ Yes
       □ No

26. If yes, which kind of problems?
       □ Scientific, please specify: [Free text]
       □ Technical, please specify: [Free text]
       □ Administrative, please specify: [Free text]
       □ Staff, please specify: [Free text]
       □ Private/personal matters, please specify: [Free text]
       □ Other, please specify: [Free text]

27. Have these problems been solved? What measures were taken to solve the situation? Please give further details:

[Free text]

28. Have any changes taken place with regard to the project's aims/work program or composition of the project group?

□ Yes
Which changes?: [Free text]
How did this affect the overall work and outcomes of the project?: [Free text]
□ No

29. *Only for ongoing projects:* After finishing the project, will you continue working with your international partners through other collaborations?

□ Yes
      Please provide any further details: [Free text]
□ No
      Please provide any reasons why not: [Free text]

30. *Only for projects that have been completed*: Have you continued working with your international partners in/towards any other research collaboration?

□ Yes
      Please provide any further details: [Free text]
□ No
      Please provide any reasons why not: [Free text]

E. ONLY FOR REJECTED APPLICATIONS

31. Despite your project not being funded through ORA, did you pursue other international collaborative activities with any of your ORA project partners?
      □ Yes Please give further details (for example funding programme, funding agency)
      □ No, Please provide any reasons why not [Free text]
      □ Too early to say

32. If yes, have you revised and resubmitted your application (or parts of it) through alternative national/international funding programmes?

□ Yes
  Which programme, which funding organisation?: [Free text]
  Was your application successful? □ Yes □ No

□ No
  Please provide any reasons why not: [Free text]

□ I intend to do this in the future
Please provide any further details: [Free text]

33. Ifyes, beyond the application at hand, has any new fruitful research collaboration opportunity emerged throughout the process of preparing the ORA proposal? (Please select all that apply.)

□ Yes, What kind of collaboration?
  □ Close exchange of ideas
  □ New joint project
  □ Network integration
  □ Research fellowships
  □ Joint paper
  □ Preparation/invitation to conferences
  □ Others, please specify: [Free text]
□ No
  Please provide any reasons why not: [Free text]

□ Too early to say

34. Despite your proposal not being funded through ORA, do you consider that your application had some positive effects for your research/for your career?
□ Yes
  In which way? Please give further details: [Free text]
□ No
  Please provide any reasons why not: [Free text]
□ Too early to say

F. GENERAL REMARKS

35. Do you have any other remarks that could help to improve the process for future calls?

[Free text]

36. Would you recommend your colleagues applying to the ORA scheme?

□ Yes
□ No

Please add a short comment about your answer: [Free text]

37. When considering the future development of ORA, what items would be valuable to you?

☐ Involvement of other countries (funding organisations). Please indicate which countries:
☐ Disciplinary steers. Please indicate which disciplines.
☐ Networking opportunities to identify potential partners
☐ Others, please specify:

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire!

Annex 2: Panel members' questionnaire

Open Research Area
Panel member questionnaire

Name

Affiliation

1. **Please specify in which round (or rounds) you served as a Panel member:**
   ☐Round 1 (2010)
   ☐Round 2 (2011)
   ☐Round 3 (2013)
   ☐Round 4 (2015)

2. **Please indicate which national agency invited you to serve on the Panel**
   ☐ANR
   ☐DFG
   ☐ESRC
   ☐NWO

3. **Please indicate your area of expertise (all that apply)**
   ☐ Communication, information and media studies
   ☐Demography
   ☐Development studies
   ☐Economic & Social History
   ☐Economics
   ☐Education & Pedagogy
   ☐Environmental planning
   ☐Geography
   ☐International Relations
   ☐Legal Studies
   ☐Linguistics
   ☐Management
   ☐Political Science
   ☐Psycholinguistics
   ☐Psychology
   ☐Science and Technology Studies
   ☐Social Anthropology
   ☐Social policy
   ☐Social Statistics, methods, computing
   ☐Sociology

4. **Please answer the following questions providing as much detail as possible**

a) What would you say the main strengths of the ORA scheme are?

b) What would you say the main weaknesses of the ORA scheme are?

c) How does the track record of applicants and quality of proposals submitted to the ORA compare against national grants funded by the national agency in your country?

d) How does the quality of proposals submitted to the ORA scheme compare against other international research funding opportunities? (JPIs, bilateral agreements, H2020, etc.) *please write non applicable if you are unable to comment*

e) Considering that we aim to fund only scientifically outstanding projects, do you think that all funded projects were of excellent quality?

f) Do you have any recommendations about the assessment process of the proposals submitted to ORA?

g) Do you have any recommendations about the way the Panel meeting procedures could be improved?

h) Is there any other issue relevant to the evaluation of the ORA scheme that you would like to comment on?

In case we have any queries about your responses or comments, we may follow up on the comments provided and contact you by email or telephone. If you would not like to be contacted, please tick the box ☐

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

DFG