

# **CLUSTERS OF EXCELLENCE REVIEW PROCESS**

## **REVIEW OF THE CLUSTERS OF EXCELLENCE IN THE EXCELLENCE STRATEGY – DRAFT PROPOSAL AND PROPOSAL STAGE**

### **ONLINE SURVEYS OF REVIEWERS**

for the

**Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)  
German Research Foundation**



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## Summary

The DFG conducted a two-stage review process for Clusters of Excellence as part of the second competition phase of the Excellence Strategy. Following the review of the draft and proposal stages, reviewers were asked about the review process in a web-based survey.

The survey of reviewers following the draft proposal stage focused in particular on the use and evaluation of the information provided by the DFG in preparation of the review. The information provided in preparation was considered sufficient on the whole, with supplementary sources only being used to a limited extent but found to be helpful in isolated cases. The draft proposal stage review process was deemed well suited for identifying the best projects using the evaluation criteria provided. Both the interdisciplinary expertise of the respective review groups and the duration of the review were regarded as adequate for an assessment of the draft proposals. The digital review format used for the first time in the Excellence Strategy was largely well received, particularly due to its economic and environmental benefits, although the lack of personal interaction was regretted by some. Eighty per cent of the reviewers surveyed would also have participated in an in-person review format in Bonn. The organisation by the DFG received almost unanimously positive feedback, with nearly all those surveyed saying they would take part again.

The results of the web-based survey following the proposal stage show that the reviewers rated the elements used in the review process as important and relevant for the evaluation. Overall, the respondents deemed the review process very well suited for identifying the best proposals. The in-person format of the review process was rated very positively in the proposal stage, but almost half the reviewers would also have been willing to participate in a digital format. Practically all reviewers indicated they were (very) content with how the DFG Head Office organised and handled the review process and would be willing to take part again.

## Introduction: Excellence Strategy of the German federal and state governments

The Excellence Strategy is based on an agreement between the German federal and state governments aimed at strengthening Germany's position as an outstanding research hub and builds upon its predecessor, the Excellence Initiative. The objective of the Excellence Strategy is to encourage top-level research in areas that are internationally competitive, to institutionally strengthen German universities, and to advance the development of the German higher education system. To this end, the Excellence Strategy comprises two separate but intertwined funding lines: Clusters of Excellence and Universities of Excellence. The Clusters of Excellence funding line is administered by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation).

### Review and decision process for the Clusters of Excellence funding line in the Excellence Strategy of the German federal and state governments

Under the administrative agreement reached by the federal and state governments, the review and decision process in the Excellence Strategy comprises two stages and consists of a draft proposal stage and a proposal stage. The individual review stages were each followed by an online survey of the reviewers involved. The complete process is outlined briefly below in order to enable better contextualisation of the survey results.

## Draft proposal stage

The first funding phase of the Clusters of Excellence within the Excellence Strategy runs from 2019 to 2025. To enable a direct transition to the next funding phase, the second call for proposals for the Clusters of Excellence funding line was published on 15 December 2022. By 1 February 2023 a total of 143 draft proposals for Clusters of Excellence had been received from 59 applicant universities. Only new initiatives that had not yet been funded in the first round of competition needed to participate. These draft proposals were reviewed in 21 panels from the middle of September to the middle of November 2023.

Each panel consisted of 5-10 draft proposals grouped together on the basis of their disciplinary similarity. The panel reviews lasted two to three days, depending on the number of draft proposals considered, and followed a standardised procedure in order to ensure consistency across all panels. All review meetings began with an introductory closed session, during which the mostly international reviewers were brought up to the same level of knowledge about the funding line and the process. To that end the reviewers were provided with a range of information material in advance. The reviewers were then asked to offer initial assessments of the draft proposals, before being given an opportunity to engage with the participating researchers in a 30-minute interaction phase for the purpose of clarifying any issues arising from the drafts. Finally, all draft proposals were discussed openly in the review group in the context of the funding criteria<sup>1</sup>; the reviewers then quantified their assessments for each funding criterion – “research”, “researchers”, “supporting structures” and “environment of the cluster of excellence” – in an individual and anonymous vote using a five-point category scale.

Two significant changes were made to the draft proposal stage from the first competition round of the Excellence Strategy. The first of these was that the review was not conducted as an in-person meeting, but entirely virtually. Secondly, the fully virtual format enabled the introduction of the interaction phase, which made it possible to meet the universities’ request for an opportunity to clarify any questions the reviewers might have. As both aspects were new to the process, they were given special mention in the reviewer survey.

The discussions and the evaluation of the draft proposals involved 283 reviewers. The number of reviewers per panel averaged 13, reflecting the academic breadth of the draft proposals discussed. To ensure a sufficient level of expertise, the review groups in both the draft and the proposal stages were coordinated in advance with members of the DFG review boards or other DFG bodies from the relevant disciplines. In addition, care was taken to ensure that the reviewers appointed included an appropriate number of female researchers and a member of a DFG review board who was familiar with the conditions of the German academic research system. The review board members make up a significant proportion of the reviewers from Germany, who were surveyed, and have extensive reviewing experience, as they regularly take part in evaluations across a range of DFG programmes. The list of names of the reviewers were sent to the applicant universities in advance of the review so that any potential conflicts of interest unknown to the DFG could be identified. Each reviewer was assigned to one or more draft proposals as lead reviewer. The reviewers were also expected to engage with the other draft proposals of the panel. Two members of the Committee of Experts also took part in each review panel. The Committee of Experts forms the academic part of the Excellence Commission, which takes the ultimate funding decisions. In the draft proposal stage the Committee of Experts alone decides which initiatives are invited to submit a proposal. This body consists of 39 internationally renowned experts representing the entire range of research fields. As expert and non-expert rapporteurs, they assumed a quality assurance function during the panel meetings. The results of all review panels were presented

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<sup>1</sup> The catalogue of funding criteria can be found in Appendix 3.

to and discussed by the members in the meeting of the Committee of Experts from 30 January to 1 February 2024. Forty-one draft proposals were invited to submit a proposal.

## Proposal stage

By 22 August 2024 both the 41 new proposals and the 57 renewal proposals of the Clusters of Excellence already being funded had been submitted. The 98 proposals in total were again divided into panels on the basis of the subject expertise and disciplinary field of the researchers involved. Almost all panels consisted of three proposals. The proposals were reviewed in the DFG Head Office in Bonn or, if this was not possible, at external venues within Bonn, between November 2024 and the middle of February 2025.

The panels comprised 412 reviewers in total, most of whom were recruited from outside Germany. The same requirements were made regarding the composition of the groups as in the draft proposal stage. Again, potential conflicts of interest were considered. As in the draft proposal stage, each panel included two members of the Committee of Experts to ensure compliance with the review standards.

All review panels followed a largely standardised procedure. The objective of the first day of the review was to give an introduction to the funding programme and the review procedure and answer any questions about the process. Then followed an initial preliminary assessment of the proposals in order to identify possible questions, points of criticism, and key issues for the subsequent discussion with the representatives of the applicant universities, along with any positive aspects. Every proposal was reviewed in a standardised procedure. First, the applicant universities – represented by 15 lead researchers and representatives of the university managements – were given half an hour to present their project. This was followed by a plenary discussion in which the panel mainly addressed overarching issues relating to the Clusters of Excellence. A poster session then took place during which informal, detailed discussions were held at five discussion spots. Overall, this meant significantly more time was available for interactions between the lead researchers and the reviewers than in the draft proposal stage. On completion of the interaction phase, the reviewers then withdrew for a closed session in which the proposal was discussed and evaluated on the basis of the catalogue of criteria. The assessments given by the reviewers formed the basis of the minutes. As in the draft proposal stage, the reviewers quantified their individual assessment with regard to the four criteria in a secret vote. These categories served the Committee of Experts and the Excellence Commission as additional guidelines for their evaluation of the proposals.

The funding decisions were taken in May 2025. In a three-day meeting of the Committee of Experts, the results of the panel reviews were first compared, evaluated and then grouped on the basis of the written minutes and the verbal reports. Based on this ranking, the Committee of Experts presented its funding proposition to the Excellence Commission.

On 22 May 2025 the Excellence Commission, consisting of the members of the Committee of Experts along with the 17 federal and state ministers responsible for research, made its funding decision. A total of 70 Clusters of Excellence at 43 universities will be funded from 1 January 2026.



## 1 Methodological background

This report relates to results of the web-based surveys of reviewers which were conducted following the review panels by uzbonn, empirical social research and evaluation consultants.

The surveys were carried out in two waves, corresponding to the two-stage review process.

The survey of reviewers following the draft proposal stage served to obtain an assessment of the review process and how it was organised. In particular, feedback was sought on two innovations: the digital format and the interaction phase.

In the second stage of the reviewing process, the proposal stage, the subsequent survey of the reviewers provided a conclusive evaluation of the review process and enabled the identification of any areas of improvement for the organisation of future reviews.

### 1.1 Questionnaire design and methodology

In the draft proposal stage a total of 283 reviewers took part in 21 digital (draft proposal) review panels. The review stage lasted from the middle of September to the middle of November 2023.

The proposals were reviewed in 32 review panels held in person between November 2024 and the middle of February 2025, with a total of 412 reviewers taking part. A few reviewers had to be connected via video conference, as they were unable to travel at short notice due to various reasons and their expertise was indispensable for the review.

Reviewers were to be asked about their experience and assessments of the review process as soon as possible after the conclusion of the respective review meeting. uzbonn therefore sent out the email invitation to take part in the online survey in the week immediately following the corresponding panel. The email invitations were always sent on the first Tuesday after the end of the meeting. If the online survey was not completed after 16 days, a reminder email was sent again asking for participation in the survey. The survey stage was then closed four days later.<sup>2</sup> If reviewers contacted the DFG or uzbonn on their own, they were given an opportunity to complete the online questionnaire at a later date. This happened once in each of the two surveys. The online survey, and all communication with the reviewers, was conducted in English.

Table 1 gives an overview of the reviewer survey procedure.

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<sup>2</sup> For a few review panels, emails were sent a little later and the field phase was extended due to public holidays in the Christmas and New Year period.

Table 1 Methodology profile

	Draft proposal stage	Proposal stage
Method of collection	Online survey	Online survey
Review period	01.09.2023 to 10.11.2024	01.11.2024 to 15.02.2025
Number of review panels	21	32
Survey period	12.09.2023 to 04.12.2023	12.11.2024 to 10.03.2025
Number of email tranches <sup>1)</sup>	9	12
Number of reviewers contacted	283	412
Number of participations (response rate)	210 (74%)	289 (70%)
Average survey duration	8.9 minutes	5.8 minutes

<sup>1)</sup> Reviewers of multiple review panels running in parallel were invited with each email tranche.

## 1.2 Response rate of the draft proposal stage & proposal stage

In the draft proposal stage, all 283 reviewers who had been part of the review process were contacted by email and invited to fill out an online survey to evaluate this stage of the review process. In total, 210 reviewers responded to the invitation and took part in the online survey, a rate of 74 per cent. Another four per cent of the reviewers invited began to take the survey but did not complete it. The remaining 22 per cent did not respond to the email invitation. The participation rate in the survey varied between 54 and 93 per cent, depending on the panel. Table 2 gives an overview of the response rates of the nine email tranches in the draft proposal stage.

Table 2 Response rate per tranche (draft proposal stage)

Tranche number	Date of invitation email	Number of meetings	Total invitations sent	...of which completed		...of which stopped		...of which not started	
				Qty	%	Qty	%	Qty	%
1	12.09.2023	2	28	22	78,6%	2	7,1%	4	14,3%
2	19.09.2023	3	40	31	77,5%	0	0,0%	9	22,5%
3	04.10.2023	3	43	35	81,4%	1	2,3%	7	16,3%
4	10.10.2023	1	15	11	73,3%	0	0,0%	4	26,7%
5	17.10.2023	2	26	16	61,5%	1	3,8%	9	34,6%
6	24.10.2023	2	25	21	84,0%	1	4,0%	3	12,0%
7	31.10.2023	6	76	55	72,4%	4	5,3%	17	22,4%
8	07.11.2023	1	17	12	70,6%	1	5,9%	4	23,5%
9	14.11.2023	1	13	7	53,8%	1	7,7%	5	38,5%
<b>Total</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>74,2%</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3,9%</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>21,9%</b>

All 412 reviewers involved in the proposal stage were invited to take part in the follow-up survey. At 289, the response rate after the proposal stage was 70 per cent. Some three per cent of the reviewers

invited began but did not complete the survey, while the remaining 27 per cent did not respond. The response rate for the web-based survey following the 32 panels of the proposal stage varied between 33 per cent and 100 per cent. Table 3 shows the response rates of the twelve tranches of emails that were sent in the proposal stage.

Table 3 Response rate per tranche (proposal stage)

Tranche number	Date of invitation email	Number of meetings	Total invitations sent	...of which completed		...of which stopped		...of which not started	
				Qty	%	Qty	%	Anzahl	%
1	12.11.2024	2	23	16	69,6%	1	4,3%	6	26,1%
2	19.11.2024	3	36	25	69,4%	2	5,6%	9	25,0%
3	26.11.2024	2	27	21	77,8%	1	3,7%	5	18,5%
4	03.12.2024	1	15	5	33,3%	0	0,0%	10	66,7%
5	10.12.2024	2	25	18	72,0%	1	4,0%	6	24,0%
6	17.12.2024	3	42	27	64,3%	2	4,8%	13	31,0%
7	19.12.2024	1	13	11	84,6%	1	7,7%	1	7,7%
8	21.01.2025	5	66	46	69,7%	2	3,0%	18	27,3%
9	28.01.2025	5	65	43	66,2%	2	3,1%	20	30,8%
10	04.02.2025	3	40	31	77,5%	1	2,5%	8	20,0%
11	11.02.2025	4	49	35	62,9%	1	0,0%	13	37,1%
12	18.02.2025	1	11	11	100,0%	0	0,0%	0	0,0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>32</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>289</b>	<b>70,1%</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3,4%</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>26,5%</b>

At 74 per cent in the draft proposal stage and 70 per cent in the proposal stage, the willingness to take part can be considered good; the statements in this report are thus based on a solid foundation. All reported results relate to the 210 reviewers who took part in the survey following the draft proposal stage and the 289 reviewers who took part in the survey after the proposal stage.

## Results from the draft proposal stage

### 2 Information on the reviewers in the draft proposal stage

A total of 283 reviewers took part in the reviews of the draft proposal stage, which were held in 21 meetings from the middle of September to the middle of November 2023. Of these, 210 took part in the subsequent online survey. The following sections set out the research area and country of employment of the reviewers who took part in the survey, as well as their previous review experience for the DFG.

#### 2.1 Research area of the reviewers

Figure 1 shows the assignment of the reviewers to the four research areas according to the DFG classification, as stated by the reviewers themselves.<sup>3</sup> Almost one third of the reviewers who took part in the online survey belonged to the humanities and social sciences field (30%), while a good quarter of respondents came from the life sciences (27%). Engineering scientists (22%) and natural scientists (20%) comprised rather smaller groups.

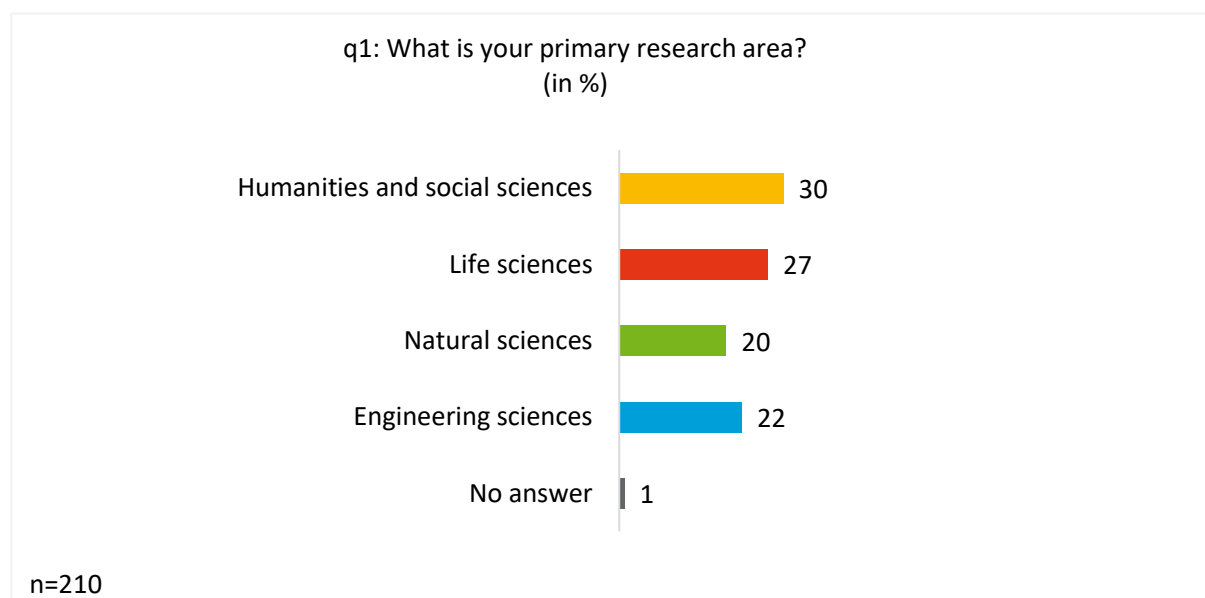


Figure 1 Summarised research areas of the reviewers (draft proposal stage)

#### 2.2 Country of employment of the reviewers

The country in which the reviewers are currently employed was also grouped into categories for the purpose of analysis.<sup>4</sup> Figure 2 shows both the distribution of the total population of reviewers invited to participate in the survey (gross) and that of the actual participants (net).

<sup>3</sup> The disciplinary affiliation was determined in the questionnaire based on a list of 14 specialisations (see appendix 1 of the questionnaire). For the evaluation, these were grouped into four research areas in accordance with the DFG classification system.

<sup>4</sup> The country was asked about openly. A total of 26 different countries were indicated.

The majority of the reviewers surveyed currently work in Europe (outside Germany). One tenth (10%) of the respondents carry out their research in Germany. 24 per cent are employed in North America, while only a minimal proportion (2%) work in countries outside this categorisation.

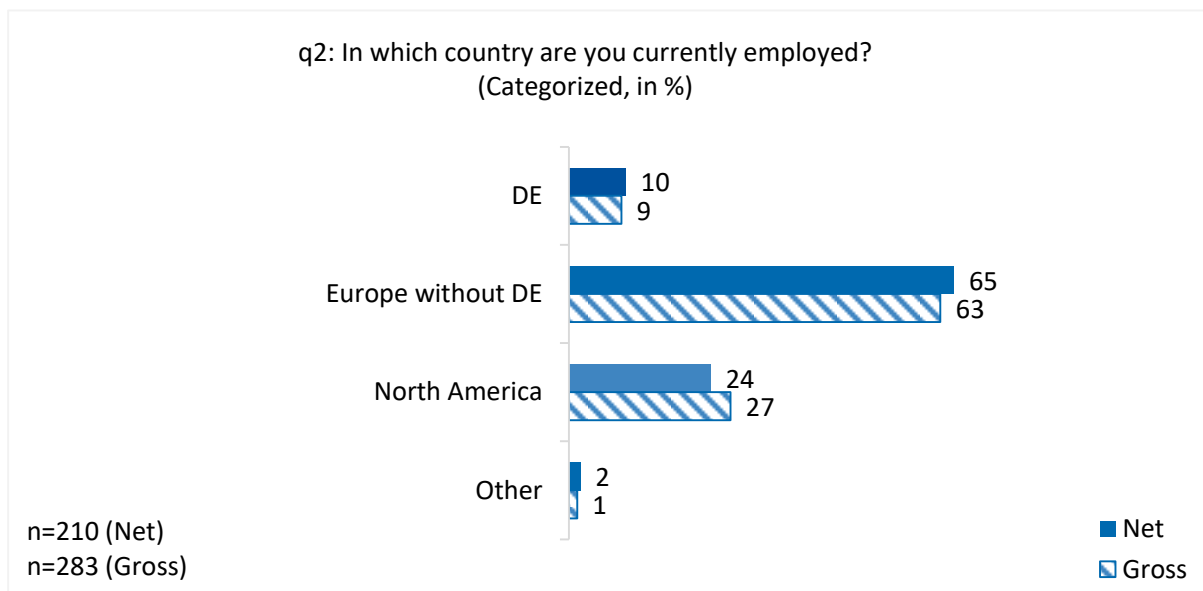


Figure 2 Region of current employment of the reviewers (draft proposal stage)

Given the small proportion of reviewers who indicated that they were employed outside Germany, Europe or North America, this group is not itemised separately from hereon, but instead reported together with the “North America” group (26% North America / Other).

The regional distribution of the reviewers who took part in the survey corresponds roughly to the distribution of the reviewers originally invited to take part (gross distribution).

## 2.3 Review experience

The reviewers were asked about their previous review experience for the DFG. Figure 3 shows that the majority of respondents had already acted as reviewers for the DFG before the draft proposal stage of the Excellence Strategy, with only just under 40 per cent of participants not reporting any previous experience in DFG review processes. Forty-eight per cent of respondents stated that they had already provided one or more written reviews for the DFG, while 35 per cent had participated in on-site review meetings for the DFG and 20 per cent of respondents had previous experience with digital review processes for the DFG. In the past, only 13 per cent of reviewers participated in review procedures specifically related to the Excellence Strategy or Excellence Initiative.

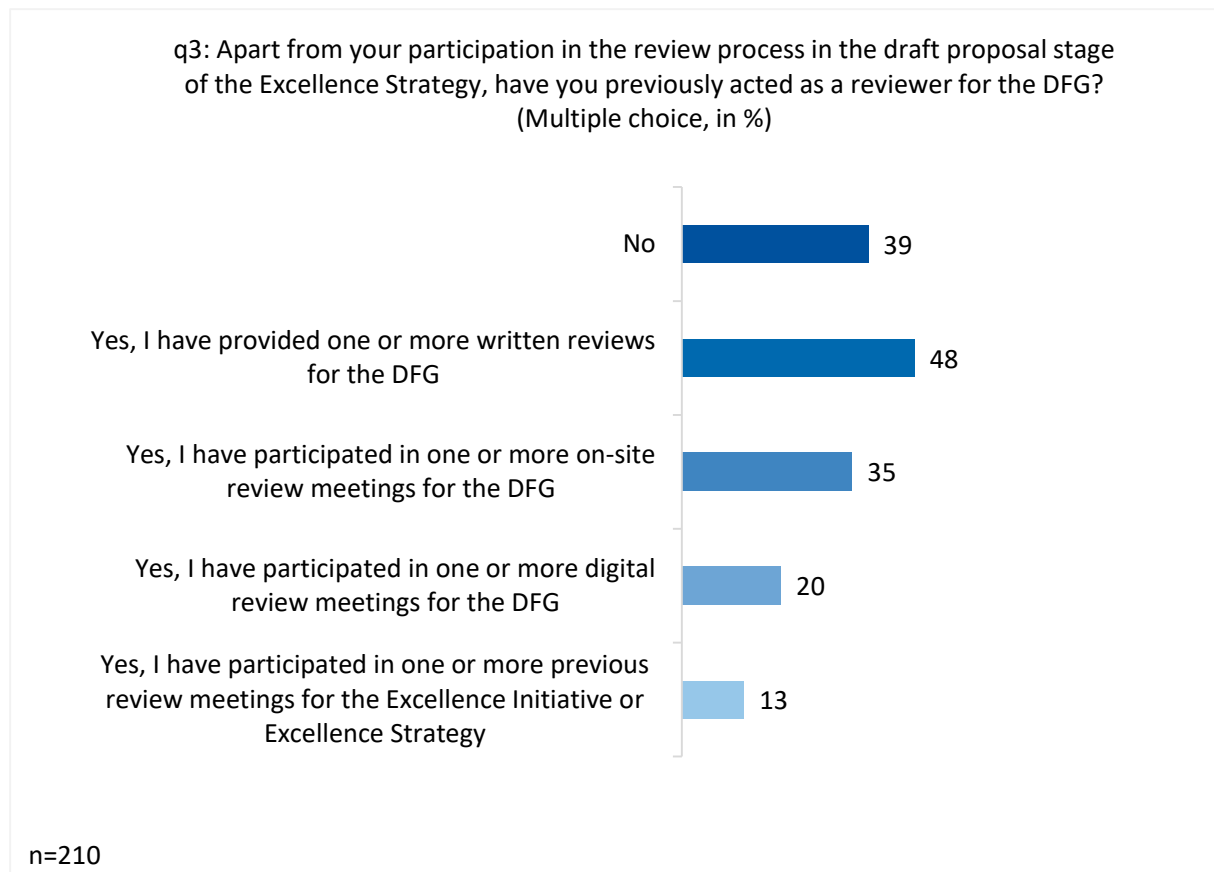
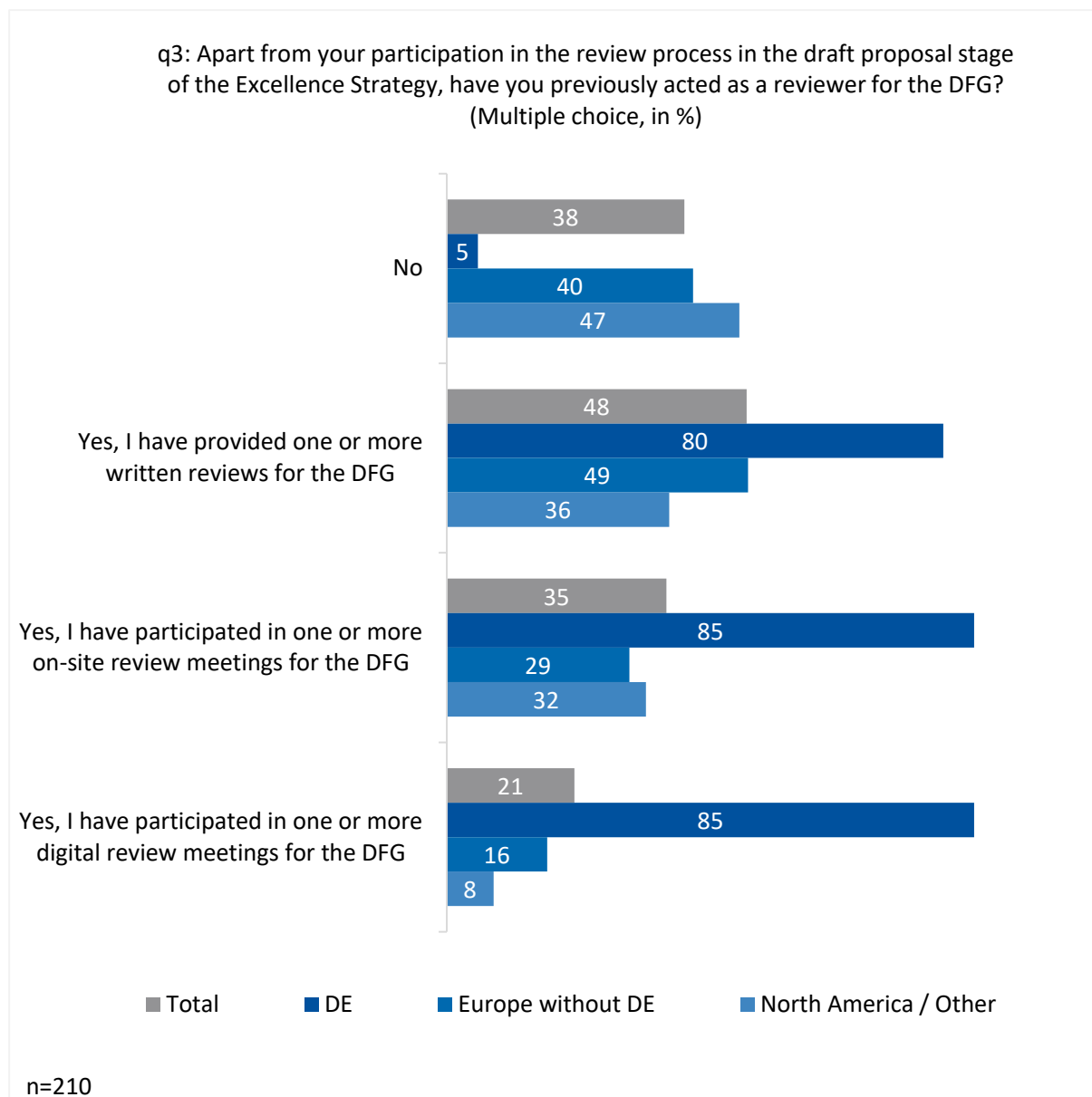


Figure 3 Review experience (draft proposal stage)

Differentiating the reviewers by region, it can be seen that participants from Germany had particularly great DFG review experience: Eight-five per cent of the participants working in Germany had already taken part in DFG reviews (on-site and digital). As stated in the introduction, the German reviewers are largely review board members, who are regularly involved in a lot of DFG processes, so this result was expected. In the North America group, which is reported together with the few cases in the “Other” category, the proportion of participants with previous experience of written reviews for the DFG was lower than the average (36%).

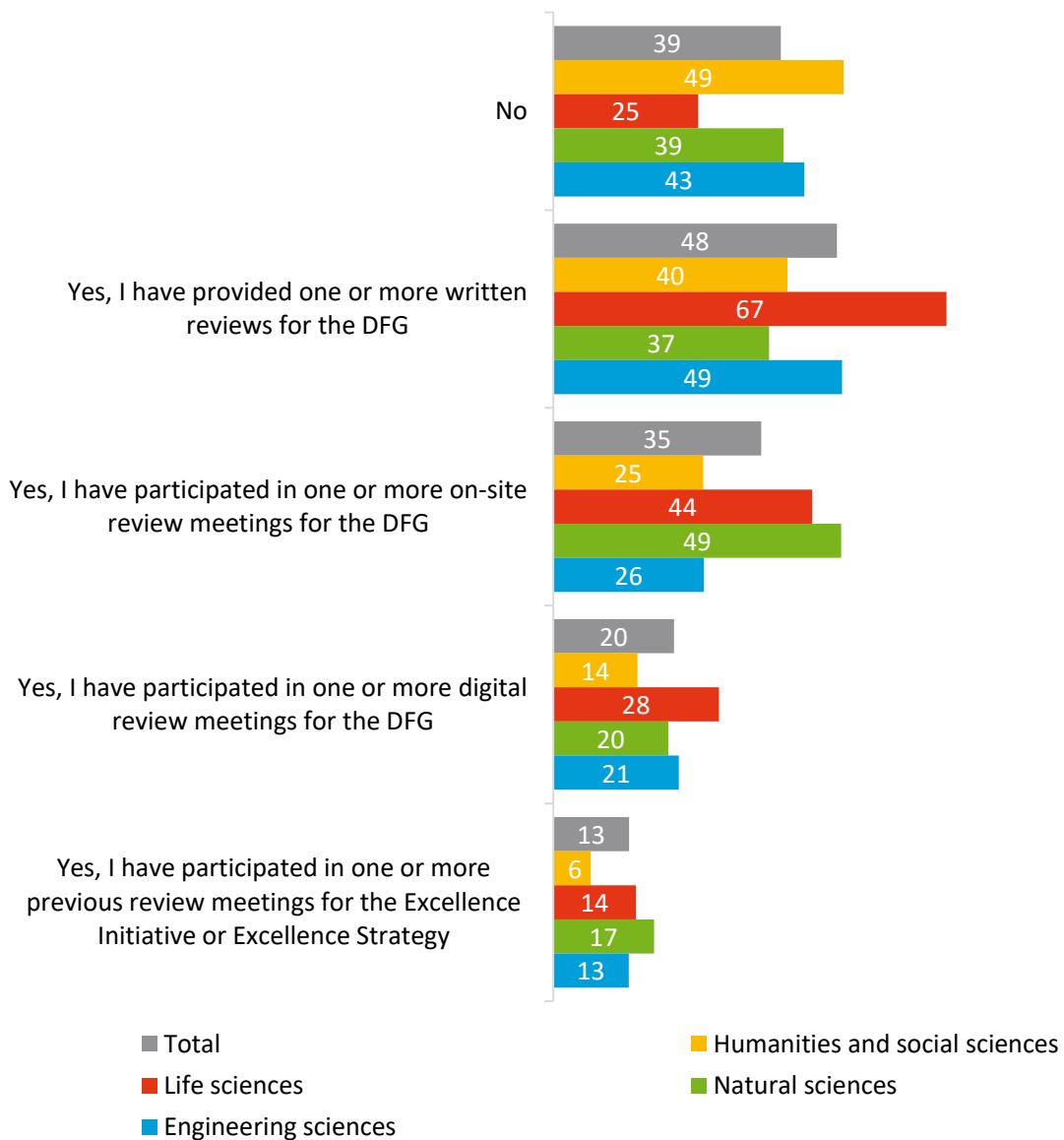


Given their low share, "Other" regions were reported together with North America.

Figure 4 Review experience by region (draft proposal stage)

Looking at the research areas, it is striking that reviewers in the life sciences have above-average previous experience with written DFG reviews (cf. Figure 5). The above-average experience of natural scientists with on-site reviews for the DFG is also worth noting.

q3: Apart from your participation in the review process in the draft proposal stage of the Excellence Strategy, have you previously acted as a reviewer for the DFG?  
(Multiple choice, in %)



n=210

Figure 5 Review experience by research area (draft proposal stage)



### 3 Preparation of the review process in the draft proposal stage

Reviewers were first asked what information (some of which was provided by the DFG) they had used and how important this was in their preparation for the review meeting. What helped them understand the objectives and processes of the Excellence Strategy?

#### 3.1 Use of the sources of information provided by the DFG

At 95 per cent, the preparatory documents provided by the DFG Head Office were found to be the most important source of information for understanding the Excellence Strategy (cf. Figure 6). In addition, 82 per cent of reviewers rated the introductory meeting prior to the review meeting as (very) important. Contact with DFG staff in preparation for the review meeting was considered to be (very) important by 74 per cent of reviewers. Almost all those surveyed used the stated sources of information for their preparation.

Fewer made use of the Excellence Strategy website ([www.exzellenzstrategie.de](http://www.exzellenzstrategie.de)) (75%) and the explanatory videos provided (65%). However, about one third of users regarded this information as (very) important for their preparation. Public sources of information had a relatively subordinate role for the reviewers.

Thirty-eight per cent of reviewers had experience from previous surveys for the Excellence Strategy, while 40 per cent prepared using information from discussions with colleagues who had previous review experience. Both sources of information were felt to be (very) important by almost half of those who had access to them.

An examination of the sources of information used to prepare for the review process shows that the reviewers from Germany benefit more than their international colleagues from information gathered from discussions with reviewers who had participated in previous meetings, with 40 per cent of reviewers from Germany regarding this information as (very) important. Again, it should be noted that, as stated in the introduction, this group consists mainly of review board members. Comparatively fewer (10%) reviewers from Germany considered explanatory videos relevant.

In terms of the various research areas, preparatory contact with DFG staff also stands out as a distinguishing feature: It plays an essential role in preparations for the review process, especially for reviewers in the humanities, social sciences and life sciences (> 80 per cent found it (very) important in their preparation). For reviewers from the natural sciences, contact had a relatively smaller role (54%).

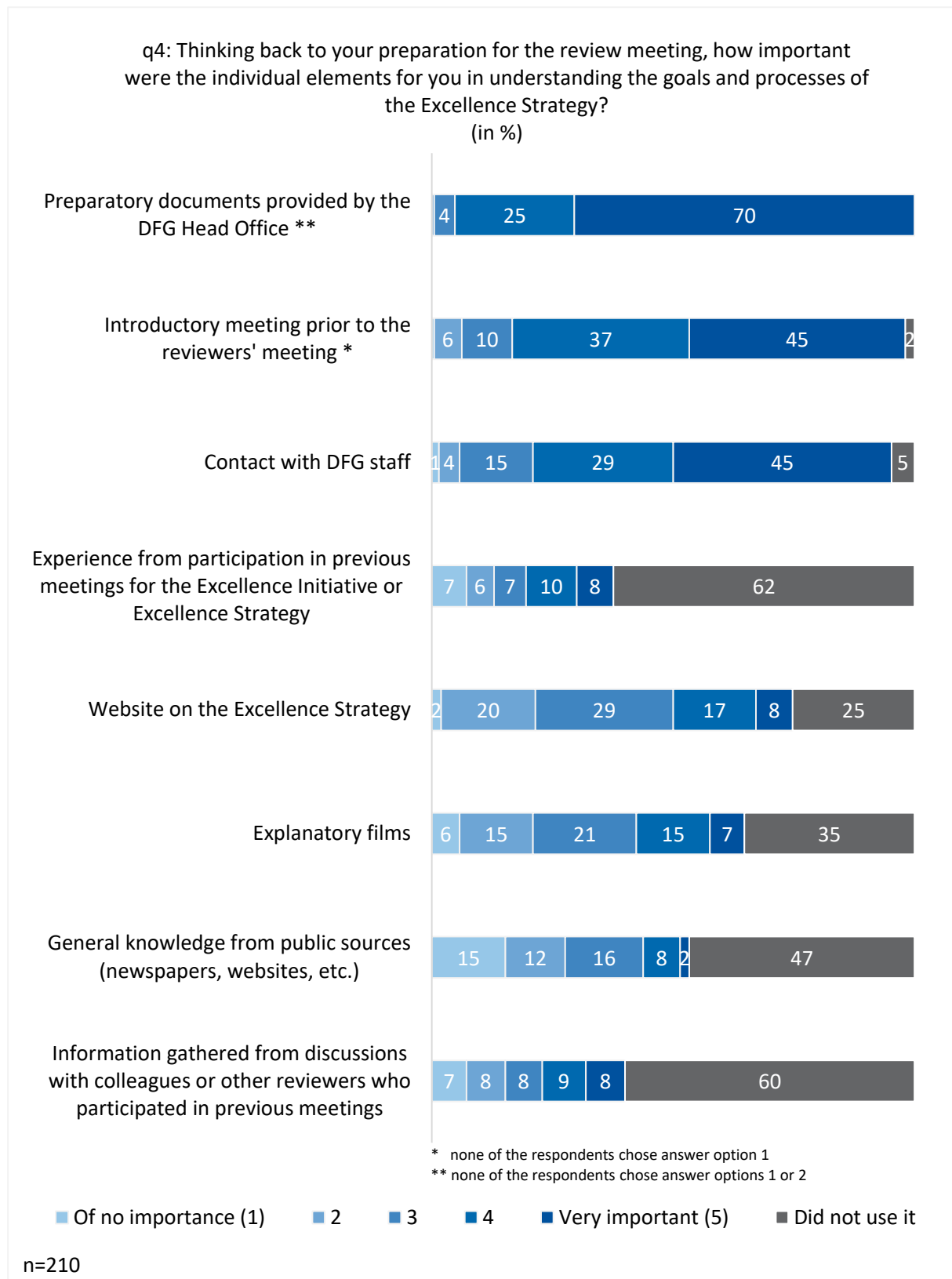


Figure 6 Evaluation of the sources of information on the understanding of the Excellence Strategy (draft proposal stage)

### 3.2 Use of additional sources of information

It is known from previous review stages that reviewers find the information provided by the DFG to be fundamentally sufficient, but that they, nevertheless, access further sources as well in their preparations for the review process.<sup>5</sup> As part of the online survey on the draft proposal stage, reviewers were asked which additional sources they had used for the preparations (cf. Figure 7). At 57 per cent, information posted on the websites of the applicant universities was the most relevant source of additional information. Forty-six per cent of reviewers used lists of publicly accessible publications by the researchers, while 46% referred to performance indicators of participating researchers. Colleagues were rarely used as a source of information about the researchers involved, with only nine per cent indicating that they had asked them for information. Additional sources of information were accessed rather sparingly overall.

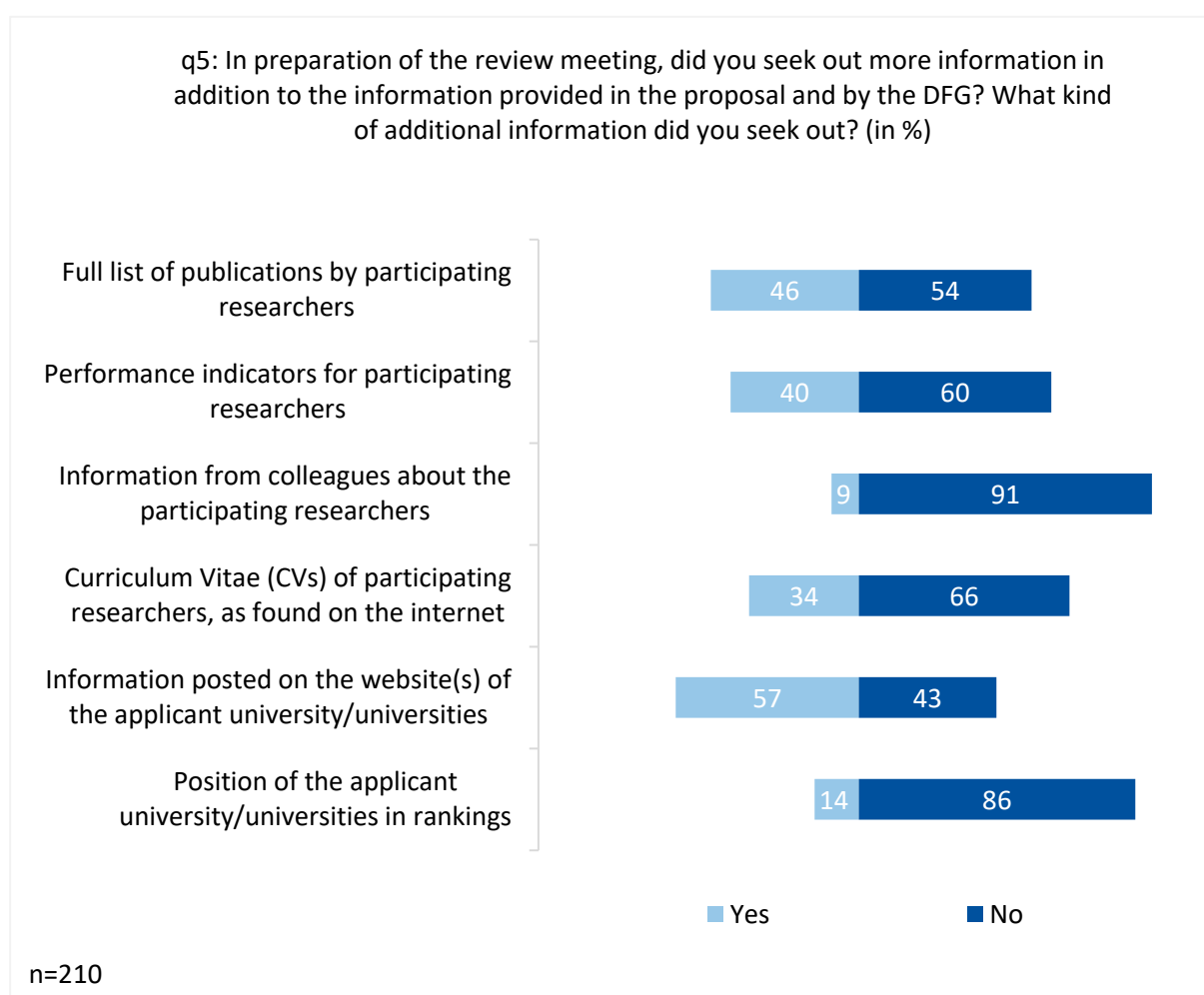


Figure 7 Use of sources of information for evaluating the draft proposal (draft proposal stage)

<sup>5</sup> infas, (2018). *Clusters of Excellence Review Process. Review of the Clusters of Excellence in the 2018 Excellence Strategy – Survey of Reviewers.*

Almost all the researchers working in Germany who took part in the survey used additional sources of information disproportionately often (cf. Table 4). Use of the websites of the applicant universities (75%) is particularly worth noting. Reviewers from Europe (excluding Germany) and North America (or other regions not covered by the designated groups) tended to use publication lists and the websites of the applicant universities as additional sources of information for evaluating the draft proposals. The position of the applicant university in rankings played a slightly greater role than average in the evaluation of the draft proposals by reviewers from Europe (excluding Germany).

Table 4 Use of various additional sources of information for evaluating the draft proposals by employment region of the reviewers (draft proposal stage)

		Categorized Research Area							
		Total		DE		Europe without DE		North America & Others	
		Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
<i>Full list of publications by participating researchers</i>	<i>Yes</i>	97	46	13	65	62	46	22	41
	<i>No</i>	113	54	7	35	74	54	32	59
	<i>Total</i>	210	100	20	100	136	100	54	100
<i>Performance indicators for participating researchers</i>	<i>Yes</i>	84	40	11	55	55	40	18	33
	<i>No</i>	126	60	9	45	81	60	36	67
	<i>Total</i>	210	100	20	100	136	100	54	100
<i>Information from colleagues about the participating researchers</i>	<i>Yes</i>	18	9	4	20	12	9	2	4
	<i>No</i>	192	91	16	80	124	91	52	96
	<i>Total</i>	210	100	20	100	136	100	54	100
<i>Curriculum Vitae (CVs) of participating researchers, as found on the internet</i>	<i>Yes</i>	72	34	13	65	47	35	12	22
	<i>No</i>	138	66	7	35	89	65	42	78
	<i>Total</i>	210	100	20	100	136	100	54	100
<i>Information posted on the website(s) of the applicant university/universities</i>	<i>Yes</i>	120	57	15	75	76	56	29	54
	<i>No</i>	90	43	5	25	60	44	25	46
	<i>Total</i>	210	100	20	100	136	100	54	100
<i>Position of the applicant university/universities in rankings</i>	<i>Yes</i>	29	14	2	10	24	18	3	6
	<i>No</i>	181	86	18	90	112	82	51	94
	<i>Total</i>	210	100	20	100	136	100	54	100

Researchers in the field of humanities and social sciences made comparatively less use of full publication lists of the participating researchers (33%, cf. Figure 8) and performance indicators for participating researchers (13%, cf. Figure 9) than representatives of the other sciences. With regard to the other sources of information, there were no significant differences in use by research area.

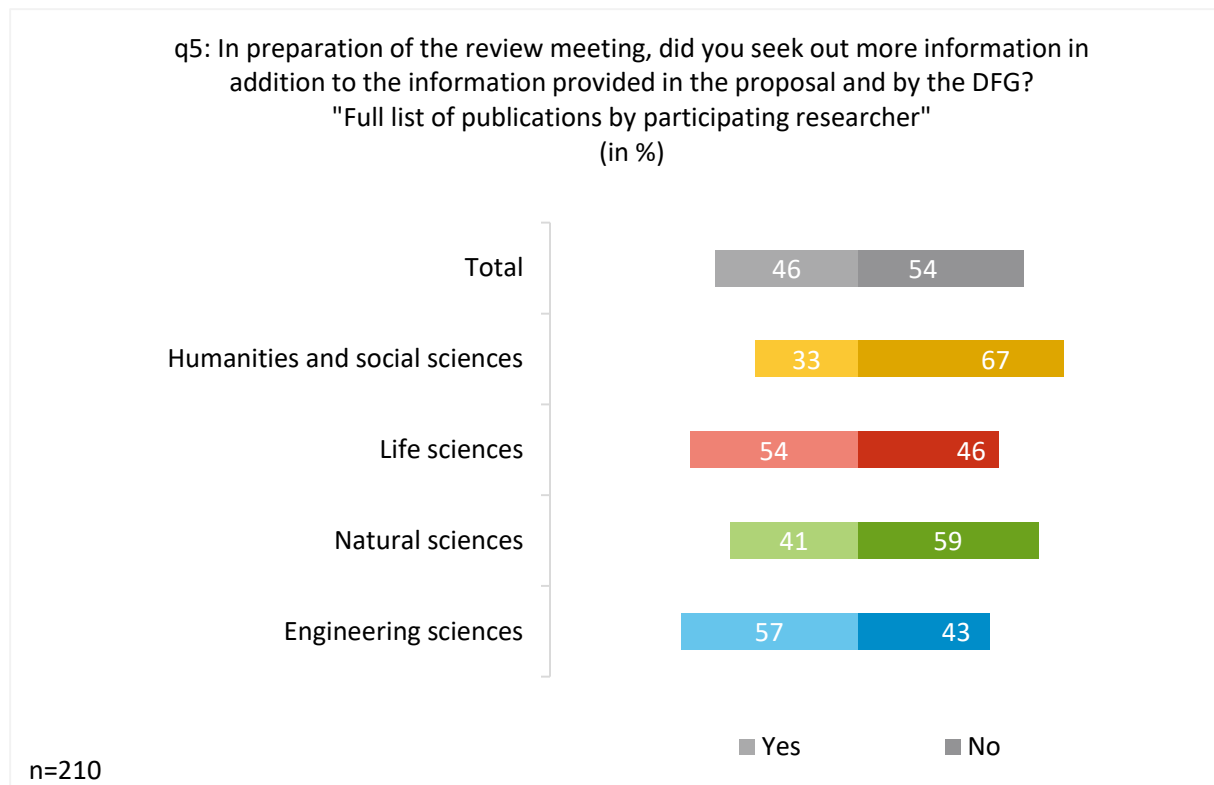


Figure 8 Use of full publication lists by research area (draft proposal stage)

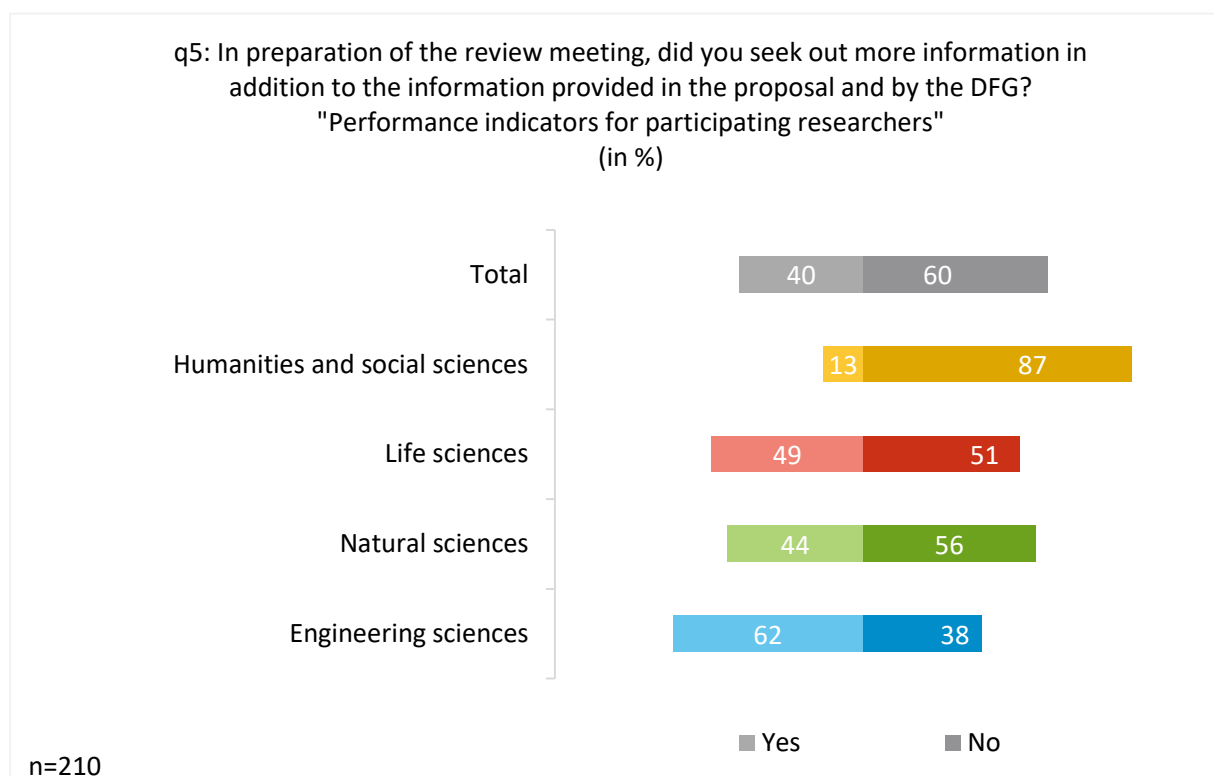


Figure 9 Use of performance indicators for participating researchers by research area (draft proposal stage)

### 3.3 Evaluation of standardised CVs

For the draft proposal stage of the review, the DFG provided reviewers with CVs of the principal investigators in a standardised format. Eighty-one per cent of the participants found the information contained in these standardised CVs (very) useful (cf. Figure 10).

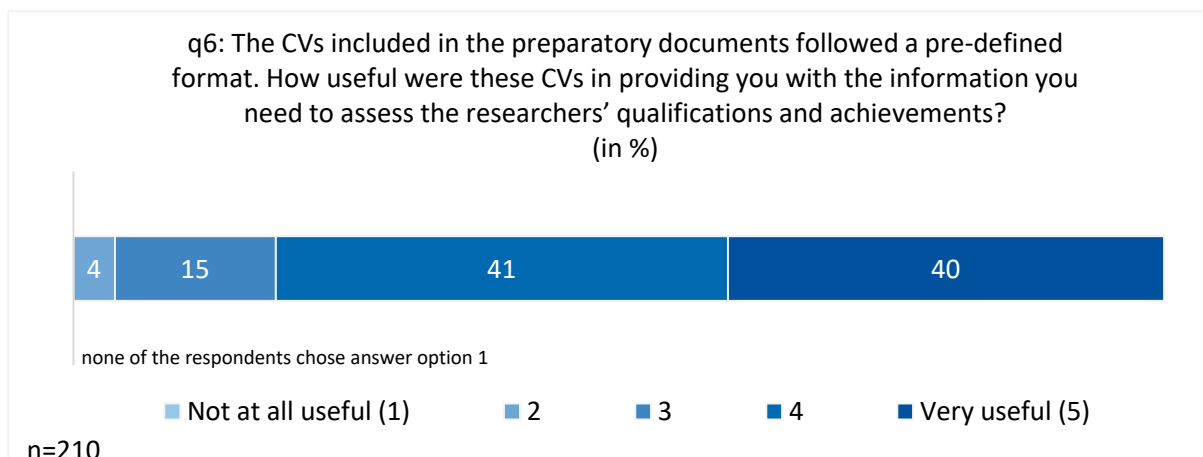


Figure 10 Evaluation of the predefined CV format (draft proposal stage)

Looking at the evaluation by the reviewers from different research areas, it is noticeable that the defined CV format was rated as particularly positive by reviewers in the natural sciences (90%), followed by those in engineering sciences (85%) (cf. Figure 11).

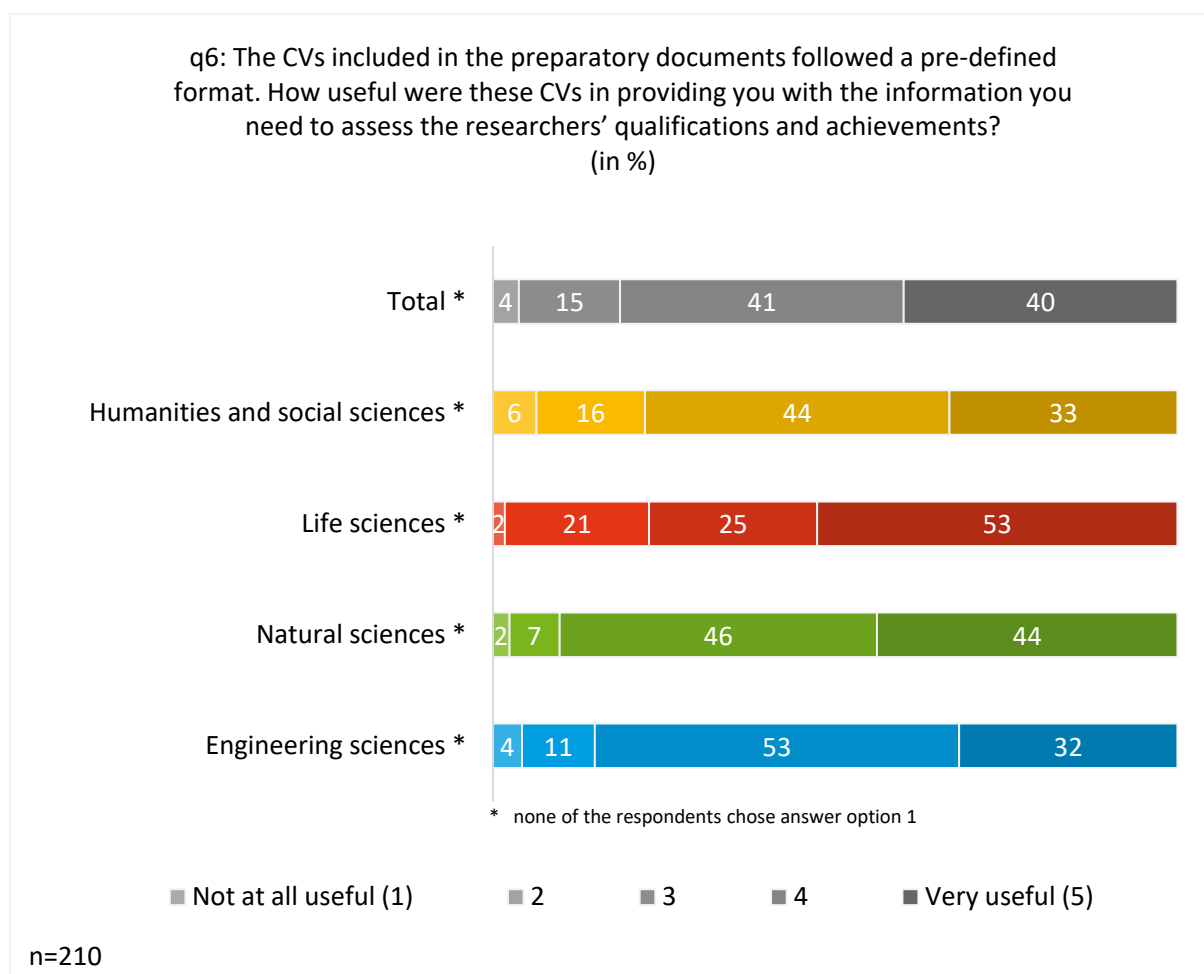


Figure 11 Evaluation of the predefined CV format by research area (draft proposal stage)

The usefulness of the predefined CV format was rated similarly highly by reviewers from different regions and with varying levels of review experience.

## 4 Evaluation of the content of the review process in the draft proposal stage

The preparatory stage of the review process was followed by the actual evaluation stage (the panel), on which the participants were likewise invited to comment in the online survey. The reviewers were asked to rate various elements of the review process with respect to their importance in the decision-making process.

### 4.1 Relevance of funding criteria in the review process

Figure 12 shows that the participants found reading the draft proposals to be the most important decision instrument in the review process (99 per cent of respondents considered it (very) important). The closed sessions with other reviews (90%) and the interaction with the lead researchers (84%) likewise had significant relevance for the decision-making process.

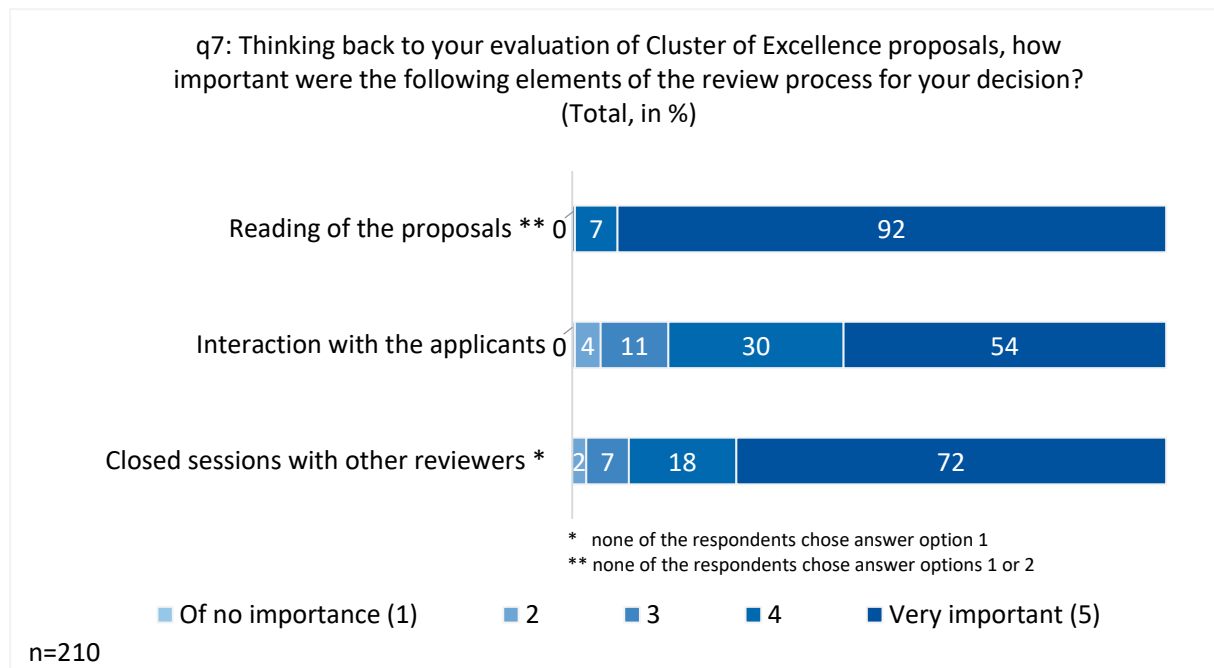


Figure 12 Relevance of the evaluation elements in the review process (draft proposal stage)<sup>6</sup>

## 4.2 Discussions with lead researchers of the applicant universities

Discussions with the researchers involved were felt to be (very) helpful for the evaluation process (cf. Figure 13).

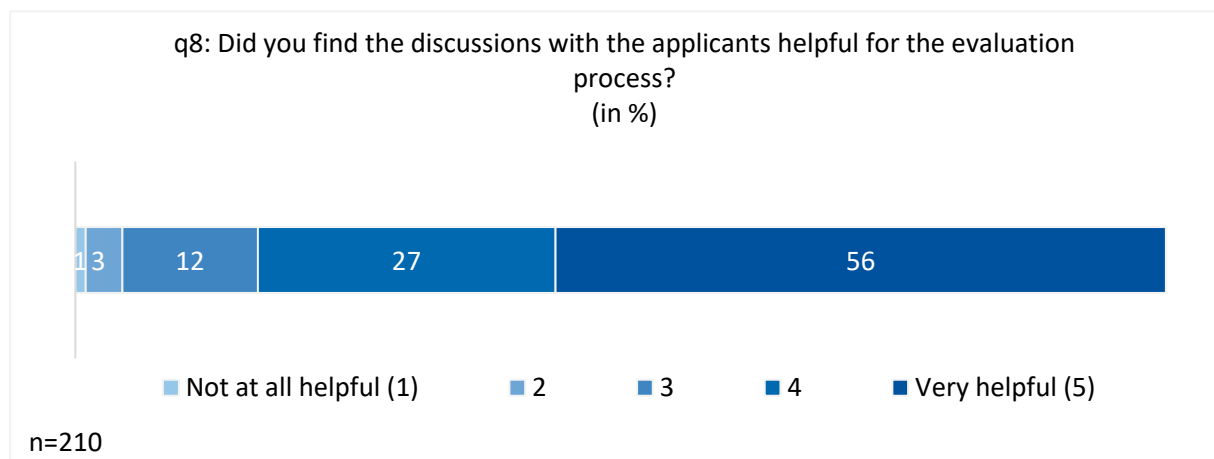


Figure 13 Relevance of discussions with lead researchers of the applicant universities (draft proposal stage)

Breaking this down by research area, it can be seen that reviewers in the engineering sciences found this aspect even more helpful in reaching their decisions, particularly by comparison with those in the

<sup>6</sup> Because the format of the figures only allows whole numbers, values below 0.5% are shown as zero ("0").



humanities and social sciences (cf. Figure 14). There were no significant differences in the evaluation of this aspect in terms of regions and review experience.

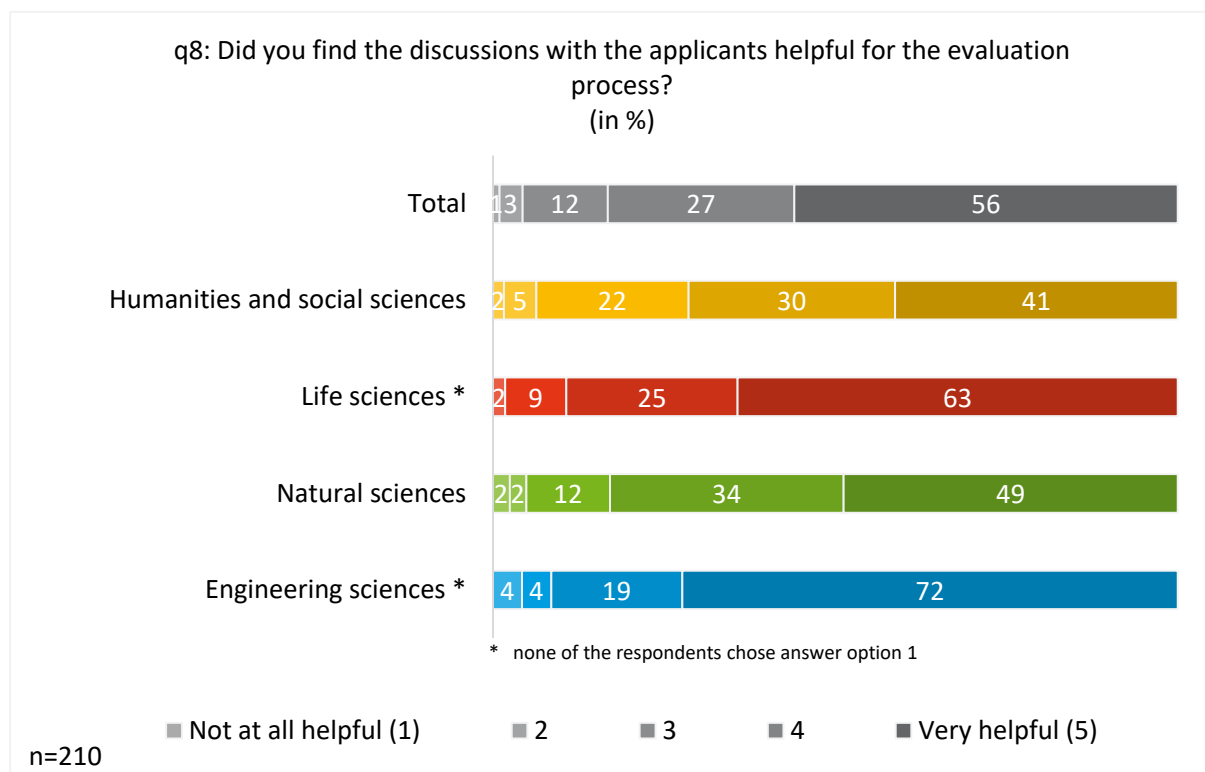


Figure 14 Relevance of discussions with lead researchers of the applicant universities by research area (draft proposal stage)

### 4.3 Evaluation of the spectrum of expertise of the panel

Alongside the evaluation of the usefulness of available information in preparing for the review process (section 3.1) and the relevance of various aspects for reaching a personal decision in the review (section 0), reviewers were also asked to evaluate the composition of their review panel. Did the body have enough interdisciplinary expertise to evaluate all the proposals discussed in the panel?

In the view of the reviewers, the disciplinary expertise was sufficient for an evaluation of the projects submitted, with 89 per cent of respondents agreeing (strongly) with this statement. The level of agreement on this was equally high across all research fields, regions and groups with varying levels of review experience.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Unless explicitly stated otherwise below, the evaluations by reviewers of different regions, research areas or review experience were comparable across the various groups.

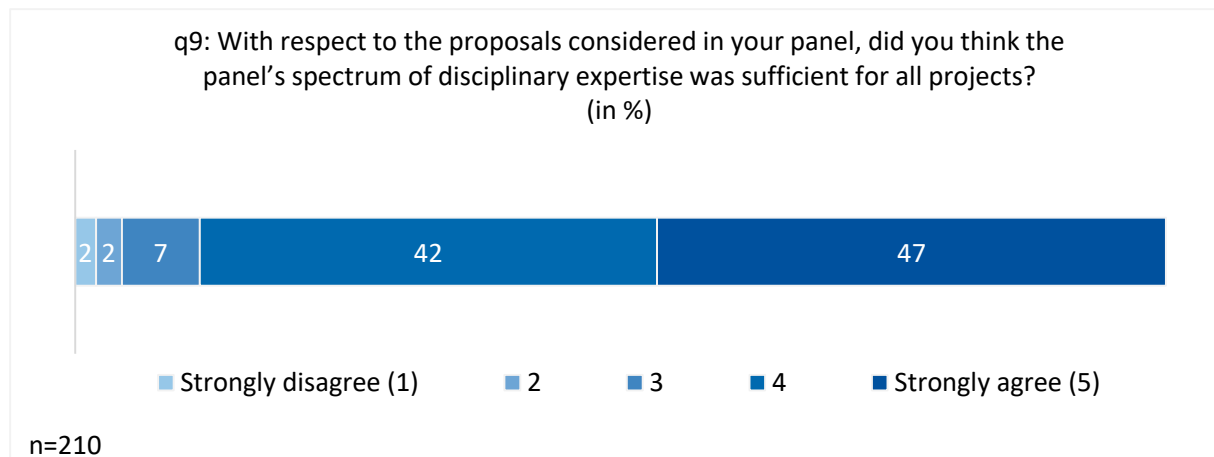


Figure 15 Evaluation of the spectrum of expertise of the panel (draft proposal stage)

#### 4.4 Evaluation of the time scheduled for the review panel

Seventy-eight per cent of the reviewers felt the time available in the panel meeting was sufficient overall for discussing the individual proposals and clarifying any issues (cf. Figure 16).

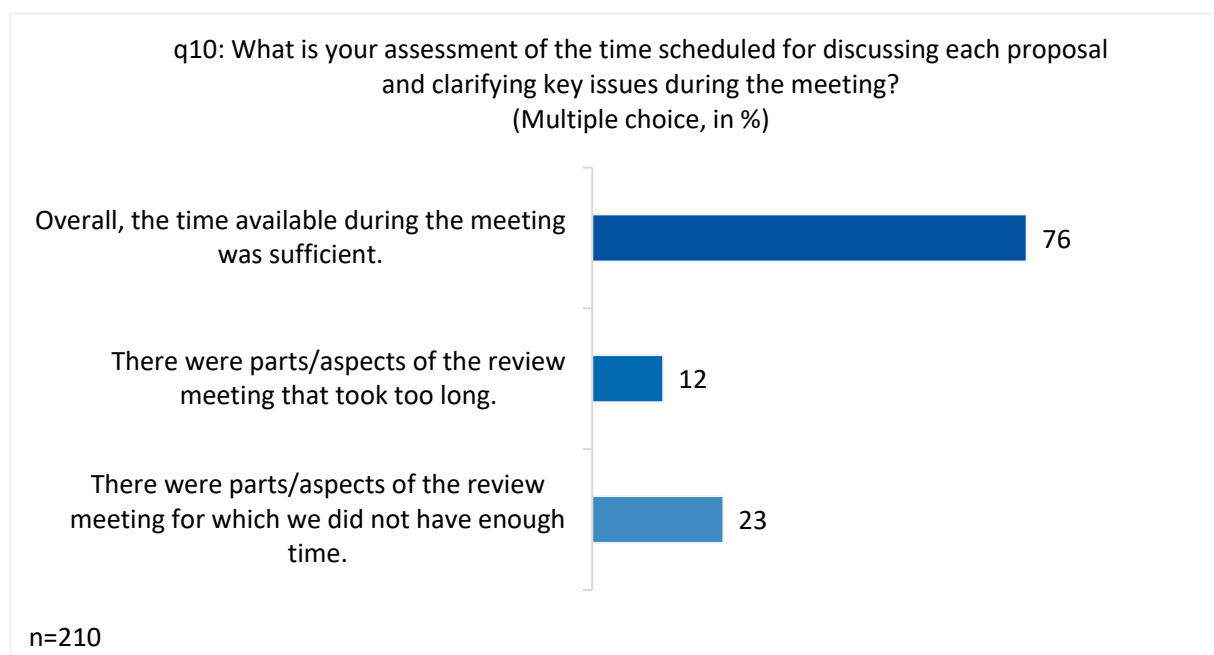


Figure 16 Evaluation of the time scheduled (draft proposal stage)

Only 12 per cent of respondents took the view that they did not have enough time for some aspects. This was expressed by participants from the life sciences (21%) especially. One fifth of the respondents who already had review experience in the Excellence Strategy thought parts of the discussion took too long (22%).

Twenty-three per cent of the reviewers found the time available in the panel meeting to be too short to deal with all aspects sufficiently. This was particularly the view of reviewers from the natural sciences (29%), while those from the engineering sciences were less likely to report a shortage of time

(15%). The small group of reviewers working in Germany (50%) and reviewers with experience of digital review meetings for the DFG (40%) were relatively more critical about the lack of time and agreed with the statement that there was not enough time for some aspects.<sup>8</sup>

## 5 Summary evaluation of the review process in the draft proposal stage

### 5.1 Evaluation of the digital format of the review process

Overall, two thirds of the reviewers surveyed (64%) felt the digital format was an efficient way to conduct the meeting. The specific advantages and disadvantages arising from the digital format were addressed differently in the online survey: Asked about their experience with the digital format in the review process, only six per cent reported having technical difficulties. A great majority also said the timing across multiple time zones had not presented a problem. Just nine per cent found the times of meetings difficult because of the different time zones. Only a few (10%) had experienced concentration problems during the long review meetings. That discussions in the digital format lacked depth was denied by two thirds of respondents (62%), with another fifth being neutral on the issue (20%). The reduction in travel was seen as beneficial, both because it allowed other commitments to be maintained (58%) and because it helped protect the environment (52%). Half of the respondents (51%) reported that they missed the informal discussions with other reviewers, and one third regretted the lack of face-to-face interaction with the researchers involved in the proposals (33%). Those reviewers with review experience were much more likely to miss the personal discussions with the participating researchers (> 40%) than those who did not have such experience (25%). In addition, respondents from German-speaking countries particularly emphasised the value of this form of interaction.

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<sup>8</sup> Here the overlap between reviewers working in Germany and those with experience of digital reviews is quite considerable.

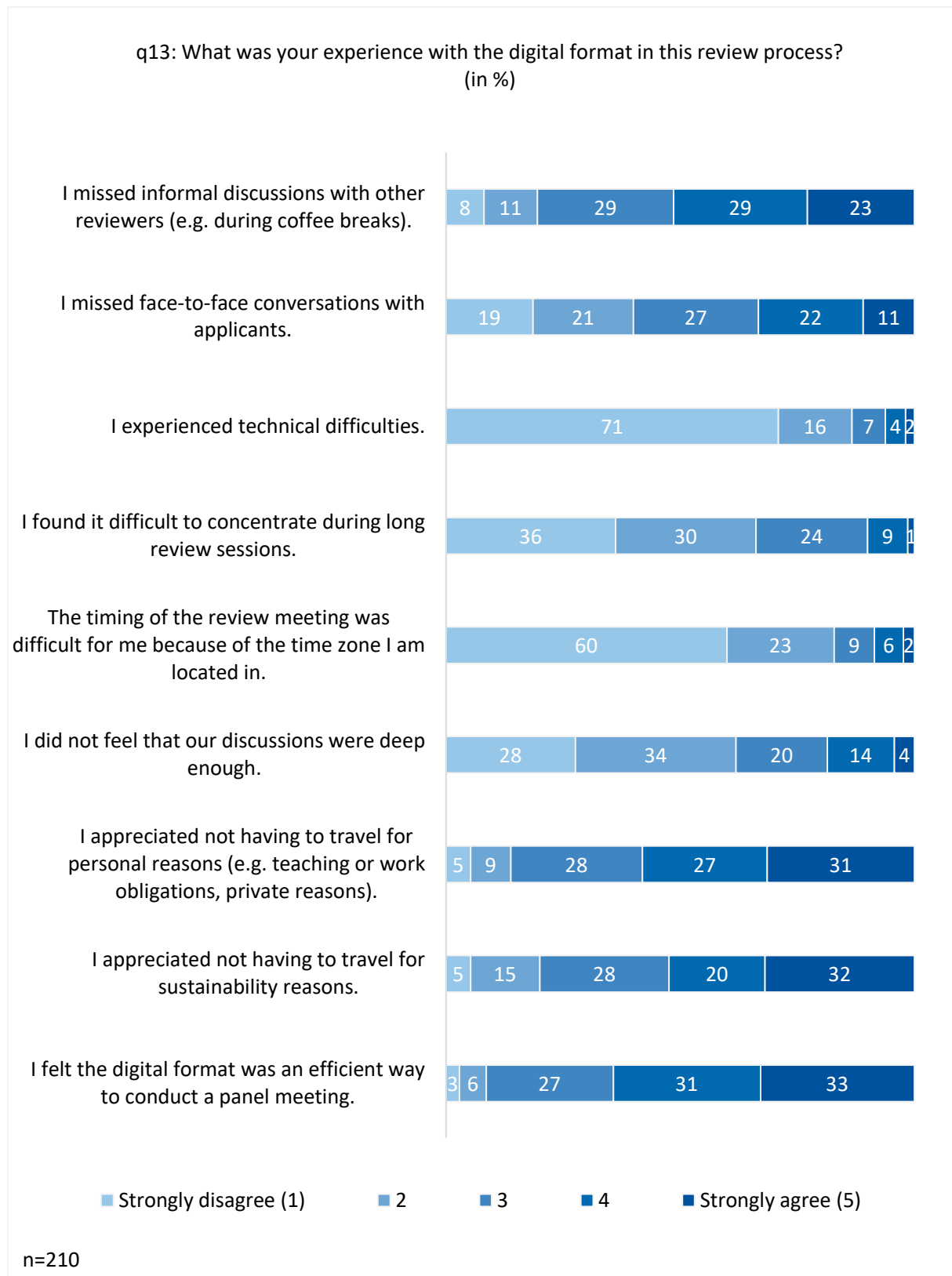


Figure 17 Evaluation of the digital format (draft proposal stage)

## 5.2 Hypothetical participation in an alternative in-person review process

The evaluation of the digital review format turned out very positive, with the perceived benefits outweighing the disadvantages. Furthermore, 20 per cent of the reviewers indicated that they would not have attended an in-person review meeting in Bonn during the draft proposal stage.

As expected, given their geographical proximity, willingness to participate in an alternative in-person review was very high among reviewers working in Germany, at 95 per cent. At 68 per cent, reviewers from North America (or other regions not included in the specific groups) would have been less likely to travel, probably due to the more complicated arrangements.

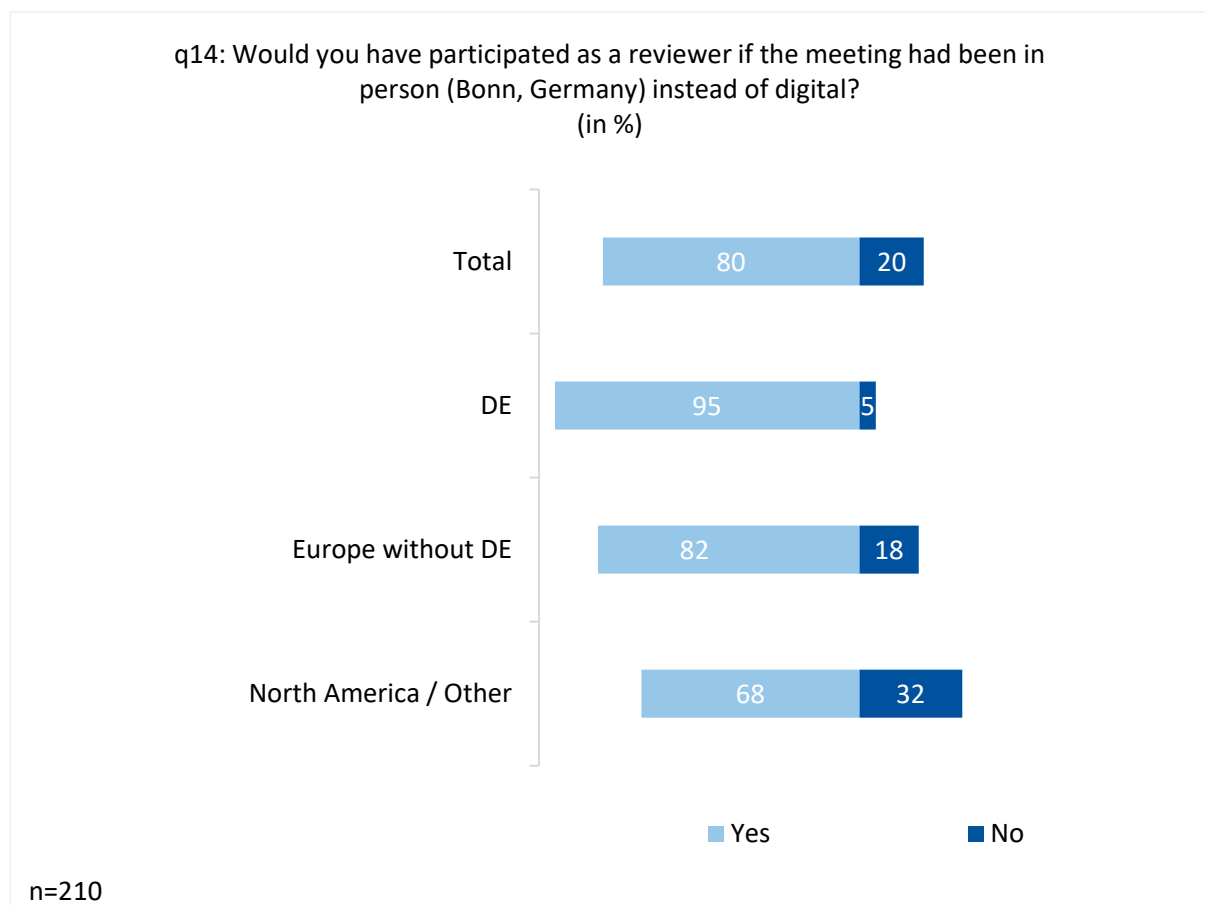


Figure 18 Willingness to participate in alternative in-person meetings (draft proposal stage)

Reviewers from the natural sciences (85%) and life sciences (84%) showed somewhat above-average readiness to participate in an alternative in-person review. Willingness was high overall, regardless of review experience. Only among respondents without DFG review experience was the hypothetical willingness to participate below average, at 74 per cent.

## 5.3 Suitability of the review process for identifying the best projects

In the draft proposal stage, 81 per cent of respondents rated the review process as (very) suitable for identifying the best projects (cf. Figure 19). Agreement was particularly high among reviewers from Germany (95%) and the engineering sciences (91%). There were no differences in the evaluation based on review experience.

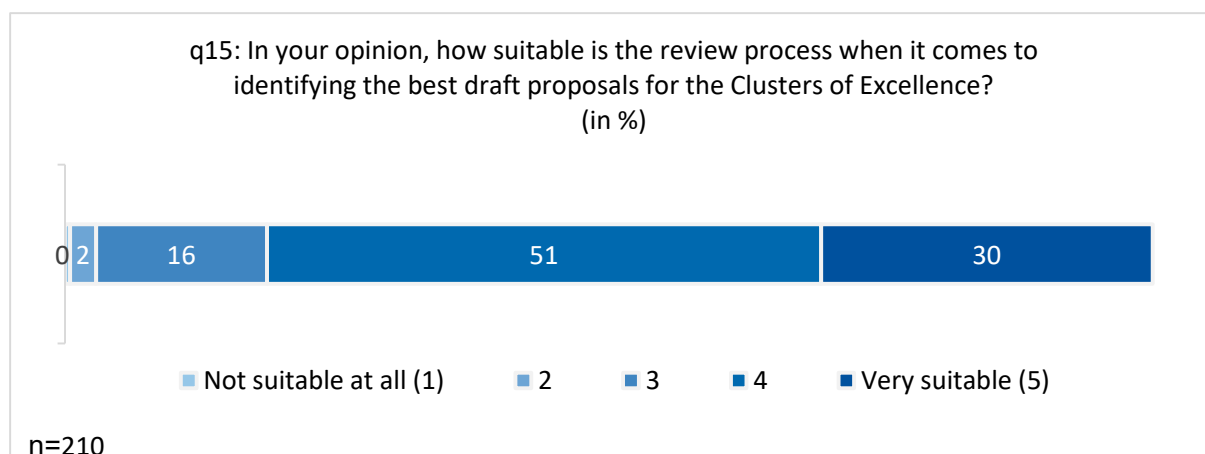


Figure 19 Suitability of the review process for identifying the best projects (draft proposal stage)<sup>9</sup>

#### 5.4 Satisfaction with the organisation of the review process

Almost all reviewers (94%) who took part in the online survey said they were (very) satisfied with the organisation and handling of the review process by the DFG. Fewer than one per cent<sup>10</sup> of respondents indicated they were not satisfied. Agreement was particularly high (98%) among reviewers from both the natural and the engineering sciences. There were no significant differences between reviewers from different employment regions or with different review experience.

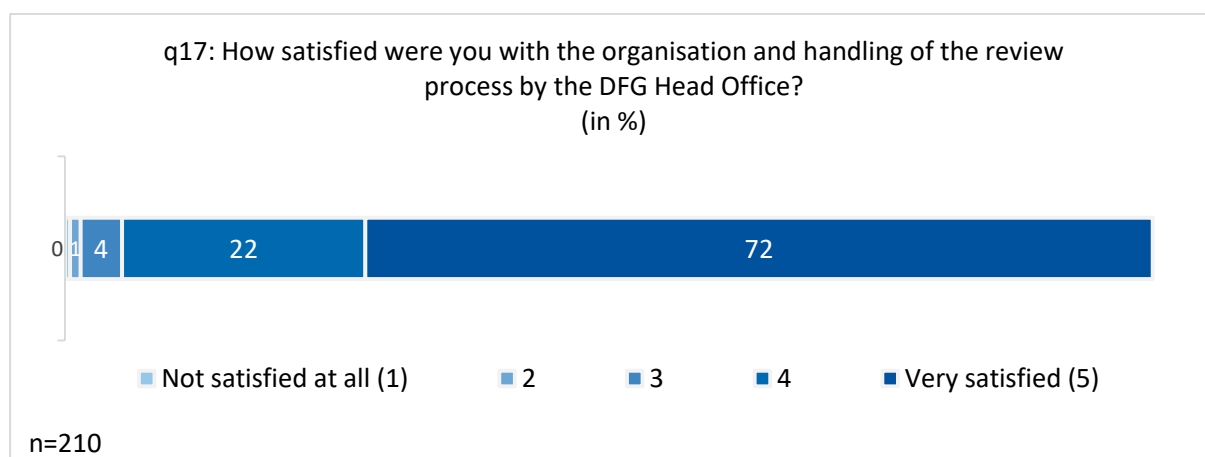


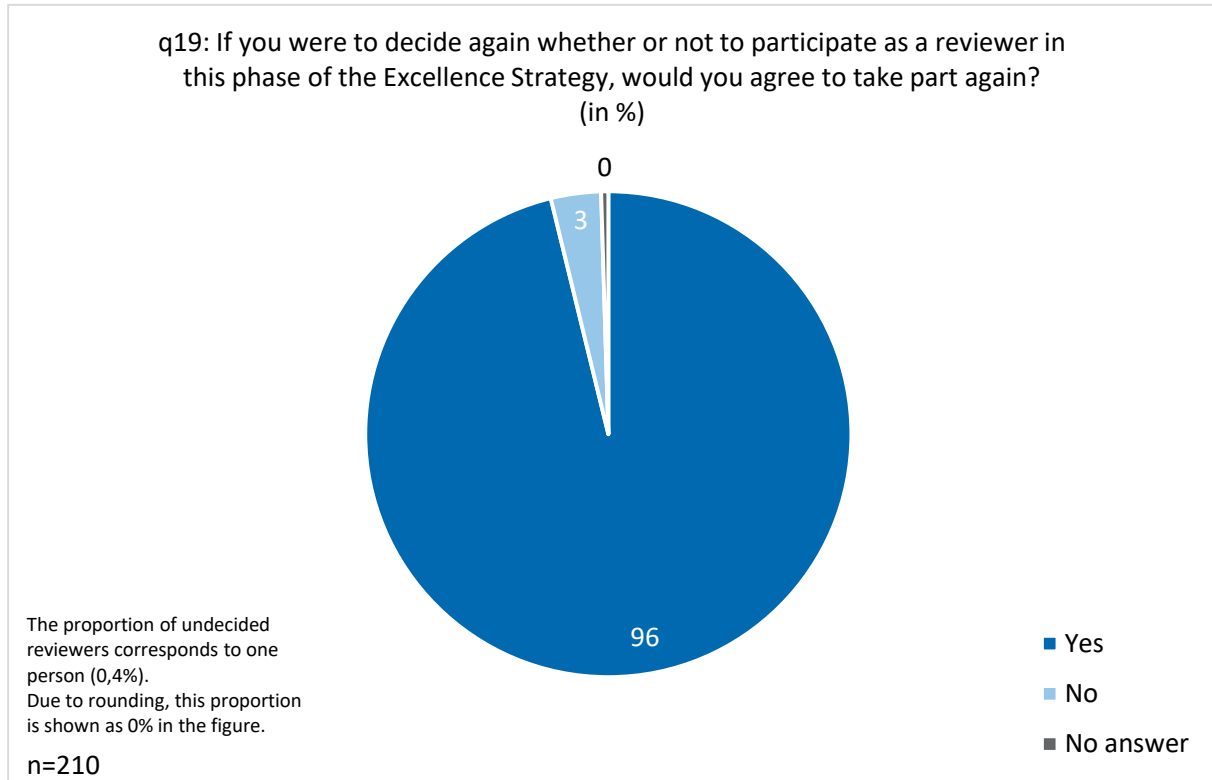
Figure 20 Satisfaction with the organisation of the review process by the DFG (draft proposal stage)

<sup>9</sup> Because the format of the figures only allows whole numbers, values below 0.5% are shown as zero ("0").

<sup>10</sup> Shown as zero ("0") in the figure.

## 5.5 Willingness of reviewers to participate from a retrospective viewpoint

A further indication of high satisfaction with the overall review process in the draft proposal stage is the positive reaction to the question of whether the reviewers would also be available for future review activities within the Excellence Strategy. At 96 per cent, almost all reviewers who took part in the online survey confirmed they would be willing to do so again.



Future 21 Willingness to take part in future reviews within the Excellence Strategy (draft proposal stage)

## Results from the proposal stage

### 6 Information on the reviewers in the proposal stage

A total of 412 reviewers took part in the reviews of the proposal stage, which were held in 32 panels from the middle of September to the middle of November 2024 and the middle of February 2025. Of these, 289 responded to the subsequent online survey. The following sections set out detailed information on the research areas, countries of employment and previous review experience for the DFG of the participating reviewers.

#### 6.1 Research area of the reviewers

Figure 22 shows the stated assignment of the reviewers to the research areas according to the DFG classification. It reveals a relatively balanced distribution, with 28 per cent of reviewers coming from the natural sciences, 27 per cent from the life sciences, 26 per cent from the humanities and social sciences and 20 per cent from the engineering sciences.

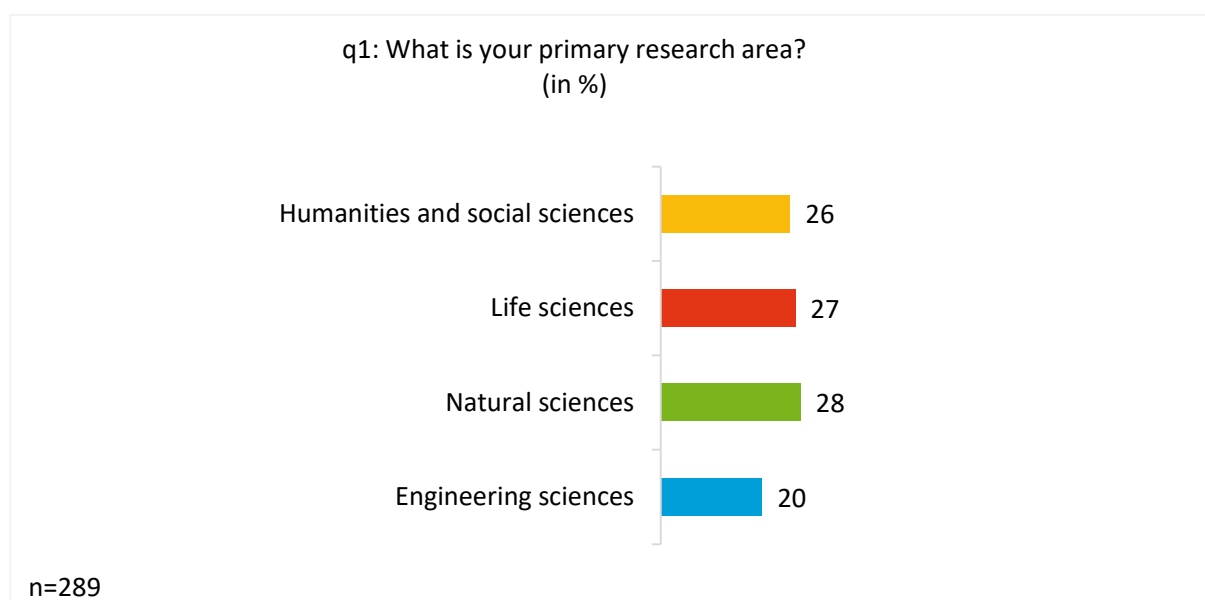


Figure 22 Summarised research areas of the reviewers (proposal stage)

#### 6.2 Country of employment of the reviewers

Figure 23 provides an overview of the distribution of the reviewers invited to take part in the survey (gross) and the number who actually took part (net). In terms of regional origin, it is noticeable – as it was in the draft proposal stage – that the majority (at 53 per cent a little over half) of respondents work in Europe (excluding Germany). About one third of reviewers are employed in North America (34%), while ten per cent – as in the draft proposal stage – work in Germany. Only three per cent of those surveyed indicated employment in a country not included in these categories.



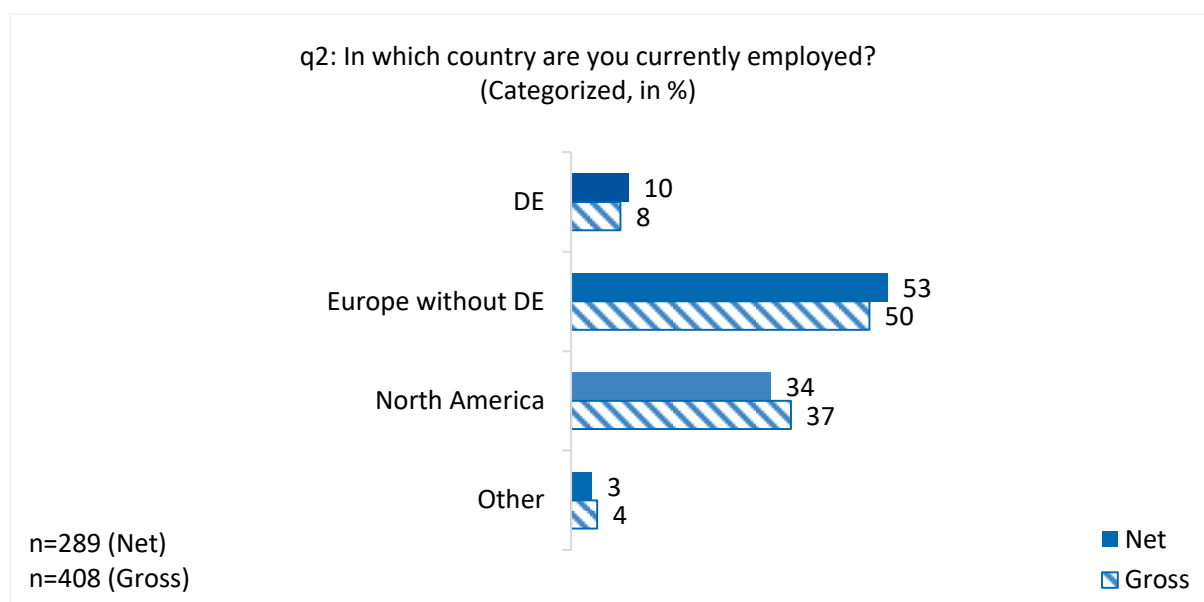


Figure 23 Region of current employment of the reviewers (proposal stage)

Given the low share of reviewers who work outside Germany, Europe and North America, they are henceforth not reported separately but instead grouped together with reviewers from North America (37% North America / Other).

The regional distribution of the reviewers who took part in the survey following the proposal stage corresponds roughly to the distribution of the reviewers invited to take part.

### 6.3 Review experience

In the proposal stage, too, the reviewers were asked about their previous review experience for the DFG.

The great majority of respondents already had experience of DFG reviews prior to their activity in the proposal stage. Thirty-nine per cent indicated having previously provided one or more written reviews, with 43 per cent having already participated in review meetings for the DFG. Sixteen per cent of participants had also participated in the draft proposal stage of the Excellence Strategy in 2023.

Almost one third (30%) had not had any DFG review experience before taking part in the review meeting of the proposal stage. The proportion of reviewers without previous experience is thus lower than in the draft proposal stage, when it was 39 per cent.

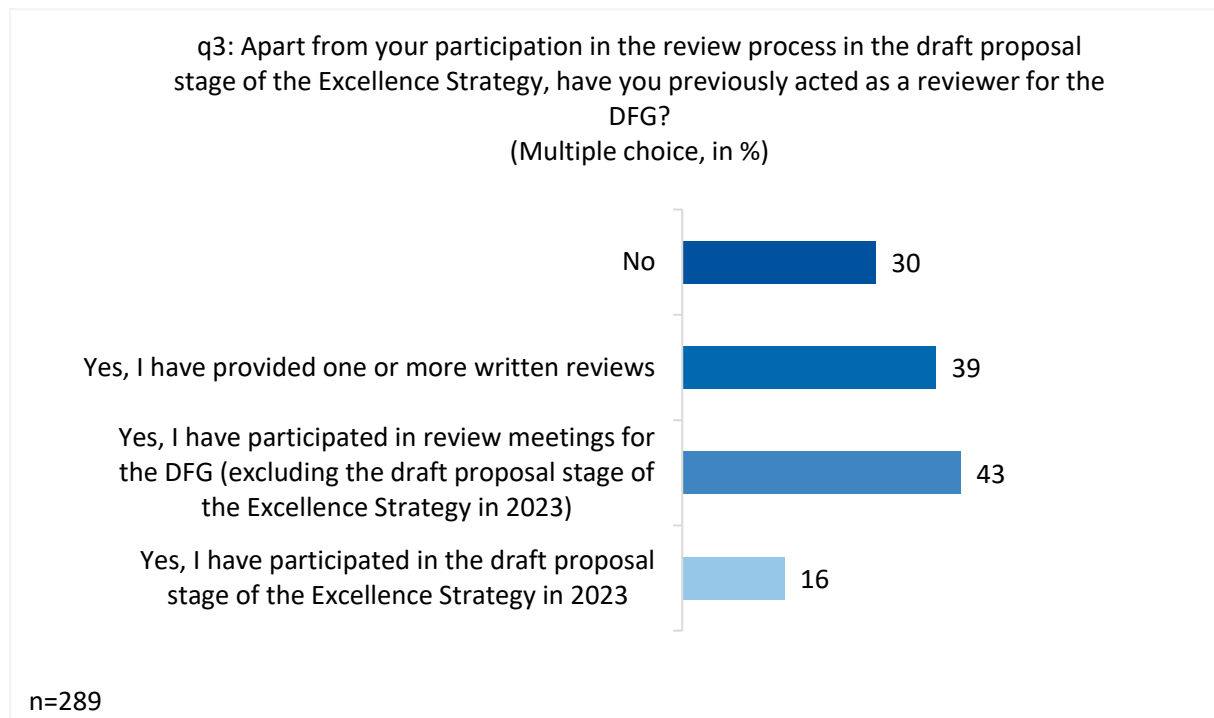


Figure 24 Review experience (proposal stage)

A differentiated analysis of reviewers by region of current employment shows that respondents from Germany already had extensive experience in the preparation of written reviews for the DFG (54%), while 96% of respondents from Germany had already participated in review meetings for the DFG. This high proportion is not surprising, since – as already described – these are primarily review board members (cf. Figure 25).

About one third of reviewers from Europe (excluding Germany) and North America or others from regions not in these groups were working as reviewers for the DFG for the first time.

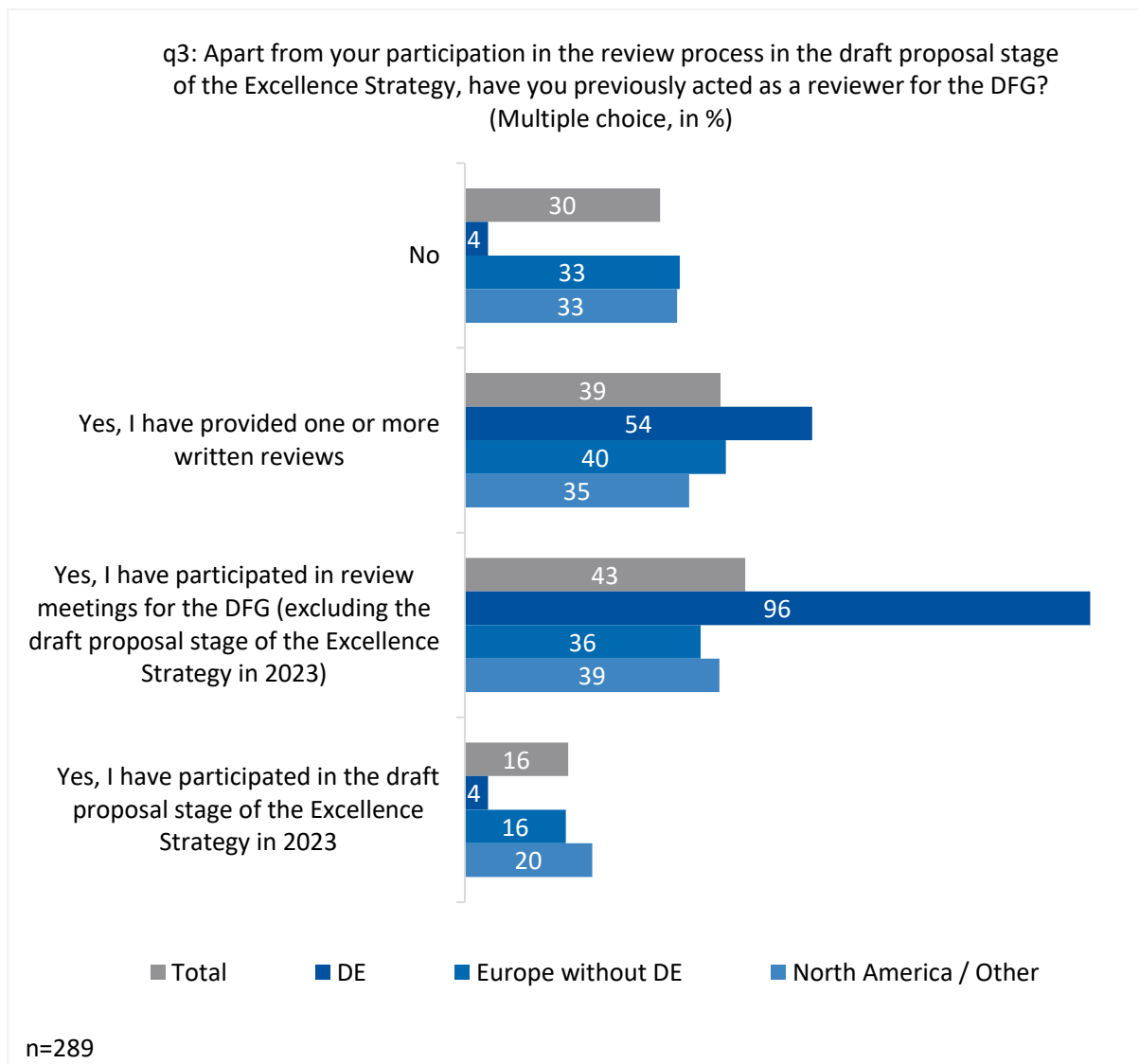


Figure 25 Review experience by region (proposal stage)

In terms of research areas, it is striking that natural scientists have above-average experience of review meetings (60%) and written reviews for the DFG (48%).

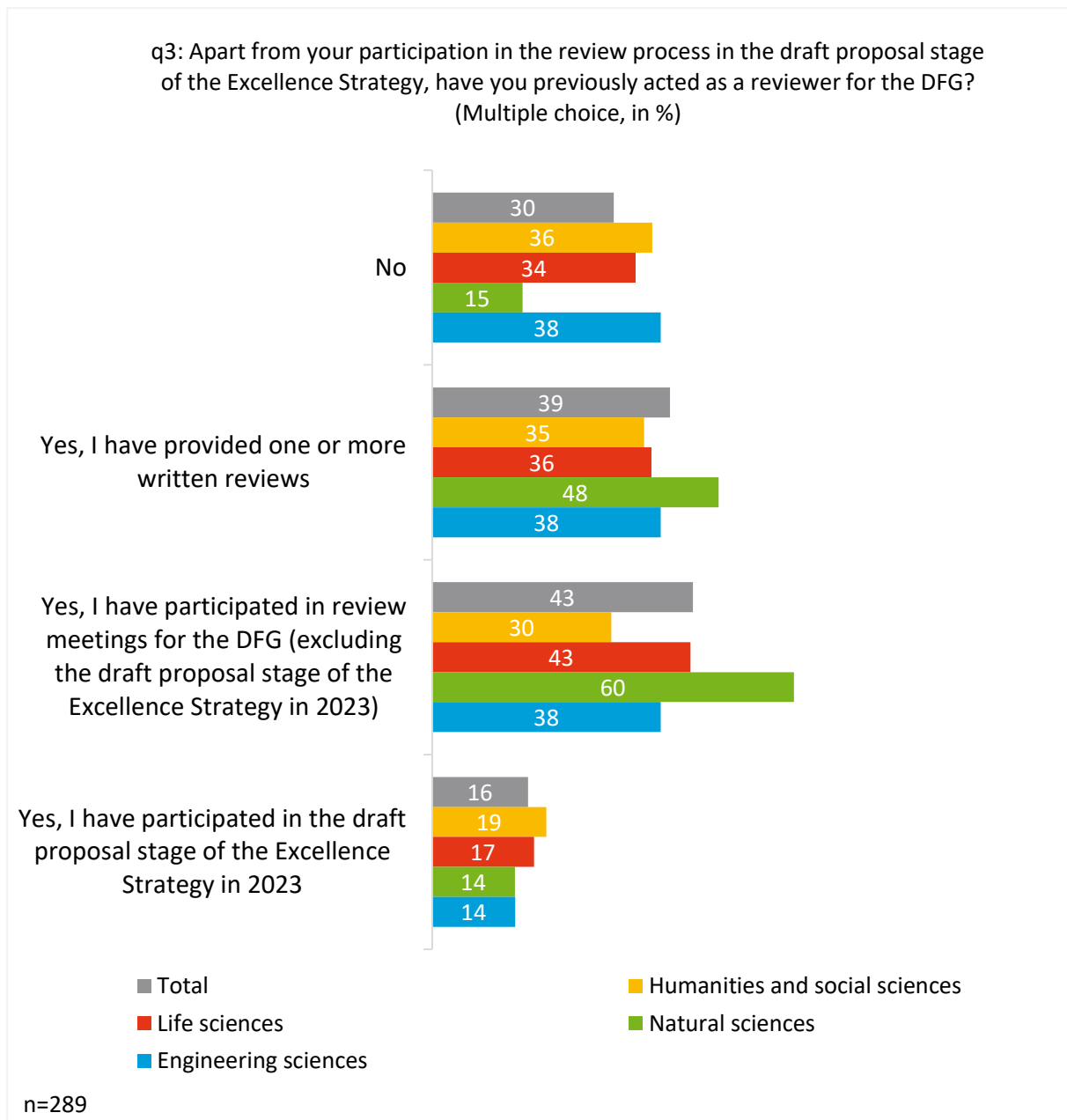


Figure 26 Review experience by research area (proposal stage)

## 7 Evaluation of the review process in the proposal stage

In the online survey, reviewers were asked to rate the review process after the panels. Below is a description of their evaluation of

- the elements of the review panels,
- the perceived suitability of the review process for identifying the best proposals, and
- the suitability of the funding criteria for different kinds of proposals.

## 7.1 Relevance of evaluation criteria in the review process

Reviewers were asked to evaluate the elements of the review: How important were the various elements of the review process in the proposal stage?

Overall, more than 90 per cent of the respondents found every single one of the elements being evaluated to be (very) important (rated the two most positive scale points 4 and 5, cf. Figure 27). The closed session with other reviewers stands out in terms of perceived relevance for the review, with 97 per cent of reviewers considering this element (very) important. The preliminary discussion and poster sessions were accorded a little less significance by comparison with the other elements, although the importance of these elements is likewise very clear, given that 64 and 67 per cent respectively regarded these elements as very important, another 27 and 22 per cent respectively as quite important.

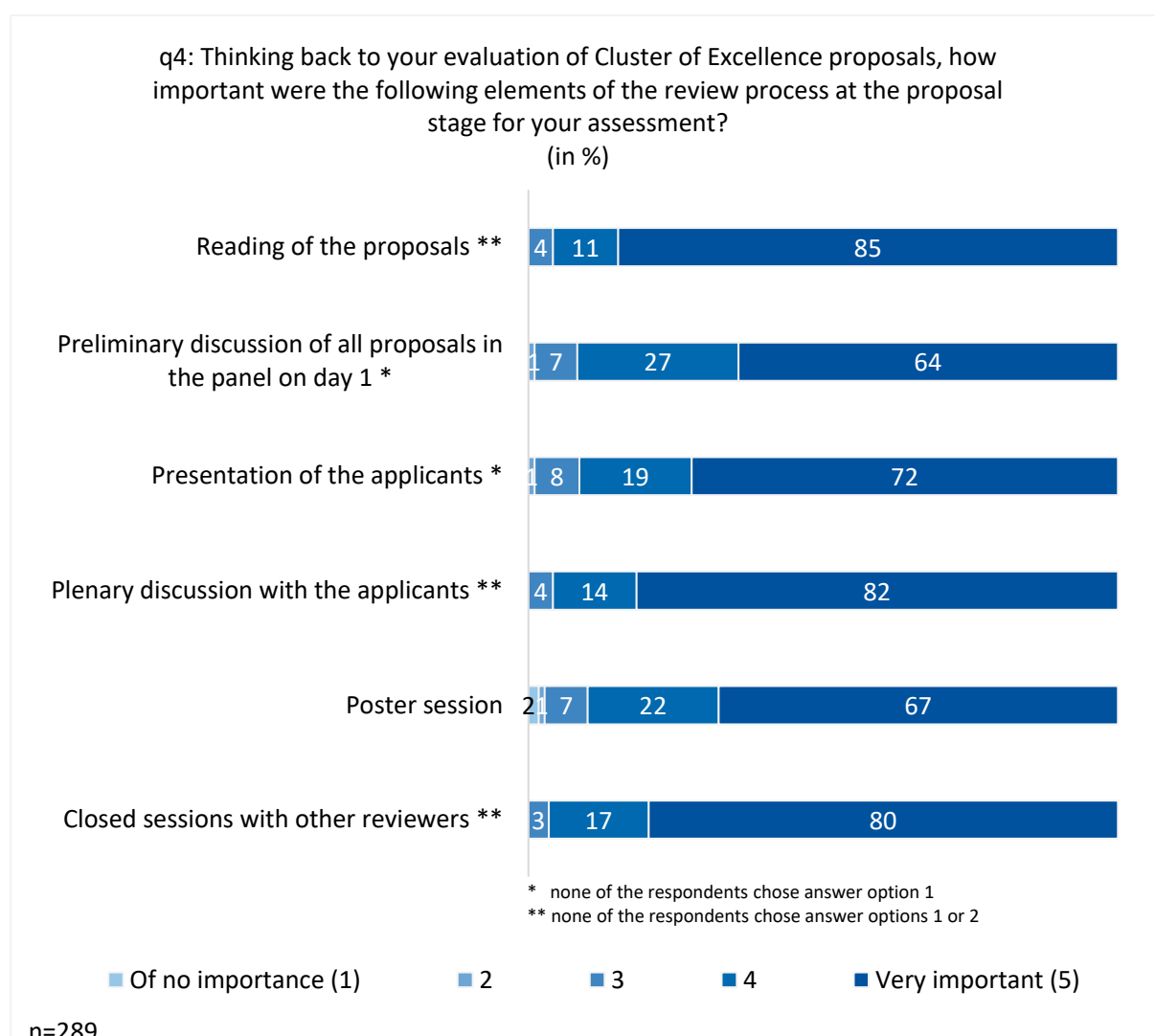


Figure 27 Relevance of the review elements (proposal stage)

Looking at the top two levels of importance (allocated four or five points), there is no significant difference for reviewers from different employment regions, disciplines or review experience.

The reviewers felt that all the elements of the review process addressed in the survey played a major part in their assessment of the proposals.

## 7.2 Evaluation of the suitability of the review process for identifying the best proposals

The reviewers were then asked how suitable the review process in the proposal stage is when it comes to identifying the best proposals for Clusters of Excellence. The process was found to be (very) suitable by 96 per cent of respondents, with no negative responses being given.

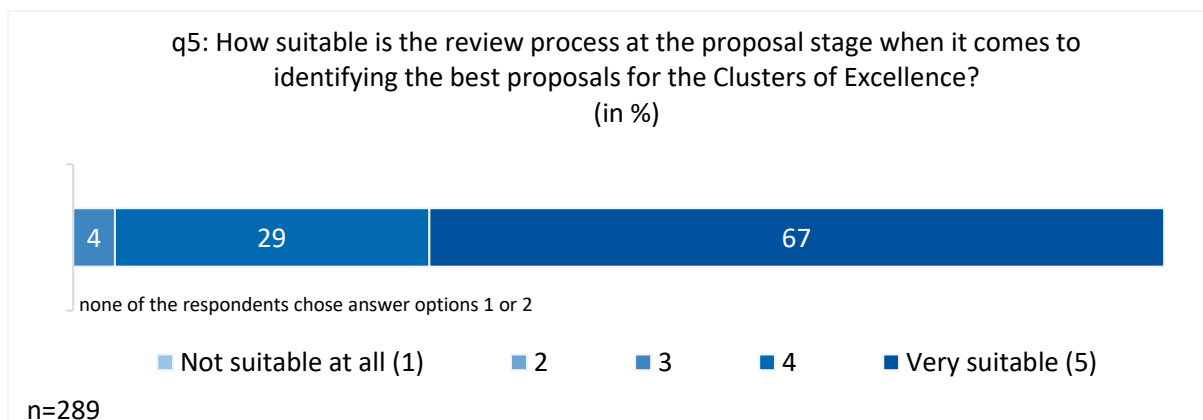


Figure 28 Suitability of the review process (proposal stage)

This result applies equally across reviewers from all research areas and employment regions. A differentiated analysis of the various groups does not show any significant differences in the evaluation, nor can any differences between reviewers with different levels of previous experience be discerned.

## 7.3 Applicability of the funding criteria

The reviewers were asked to assess the applicability of the review criteria to all kinds of proposals. Can the criteria be applied equally to new and renewal proposals and to proposals with a broader or a narrower disciplinary focus?

Eighty-seven per cent of the reviewers surveyed agreed that they were (quite) equally applicable. Another nine per cent were undecided, while only four per cent tended to reject the idea that the criteria were universally applicable.

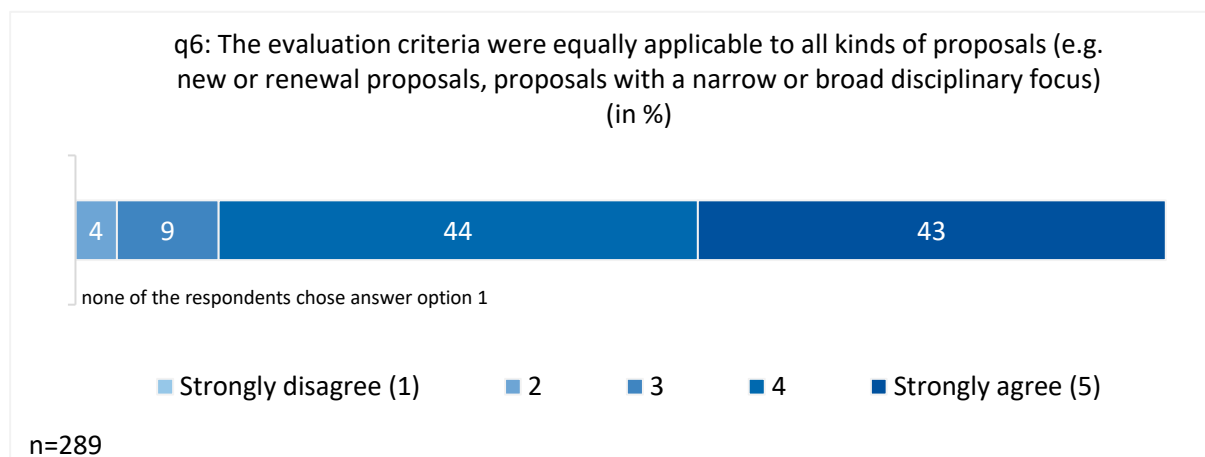


Figure 29 Applicability of the evaluation criteria (proposal stage)

Reviewers who work in Germany gave particularly high scores for the suitability of the funding criteria, with 96 per cent agreeing (strongly).

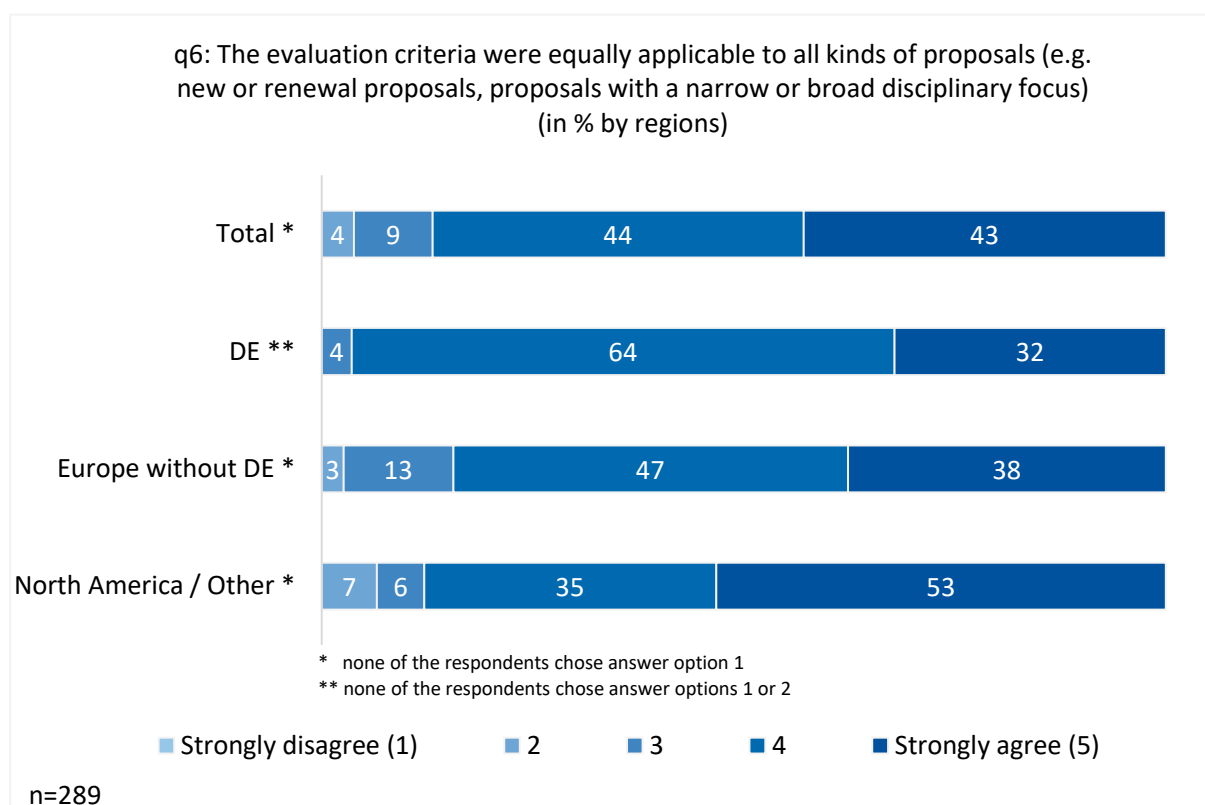


Figure 30 Applicability of the evaluation criteria by region (proposal stage)

In terms of the research areas of the reviewers, it can be seen that agreement on the suitability of the evaluation criteria was a little higher for reviewers from the life sciences than the average, with 92 per cent agreeing (strongly) with the statement.

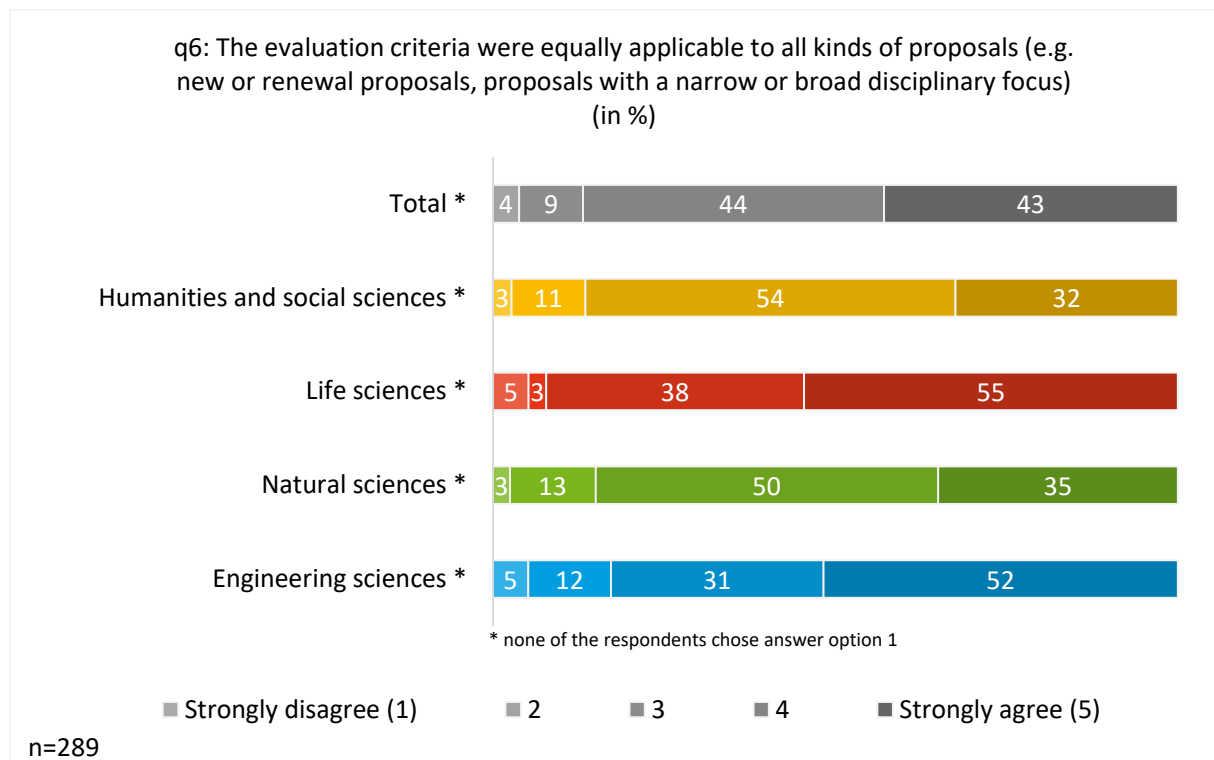


Figure 31 Applicability of the evaluation criteria by research area (proposal stage)

Ninety-one per cent of the reviewers who had already taken part in review meetings for the DFG considered the evaluation criteria suitable, slightly higher than the average for the respondents.

## 8 Evaluation of the participation format of the review process in the proposal stage

Unlike in the draft proposal stage, the review process in the proposal stage took place in the form of in-person meetings. Reviewers were asked to evaluate the process in this regard.

### 8.1 Hypothetical participation in an alternative online review process

In an age of hybrid participation models, the question of whether the reviewers would have taken part in meetings if they had been held digitally rather than in-person is relevant. The responses were split, with 49 per cent stating they would also have taken part in a digital format but 50 per cent indicating they would have rejected a digital form of participation.



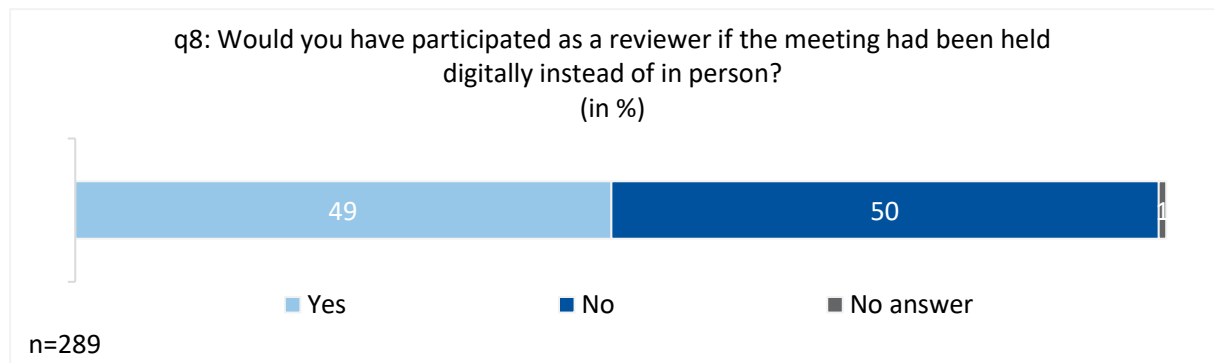


Figure 32 Willingness to participate in an alternative digital review (proposal stage)

Consent to an alternative participation in a digital review format was 55 per cent for reviewers from Europe (excluding Germany) and for reviewers from the life sciences, slightly higher than the average. It is noticeable that reviewers from North America (or other regions not included in the reported groups) had less preference for a digital participation format; this group appears to attach particular importance to face-to-face interaction.

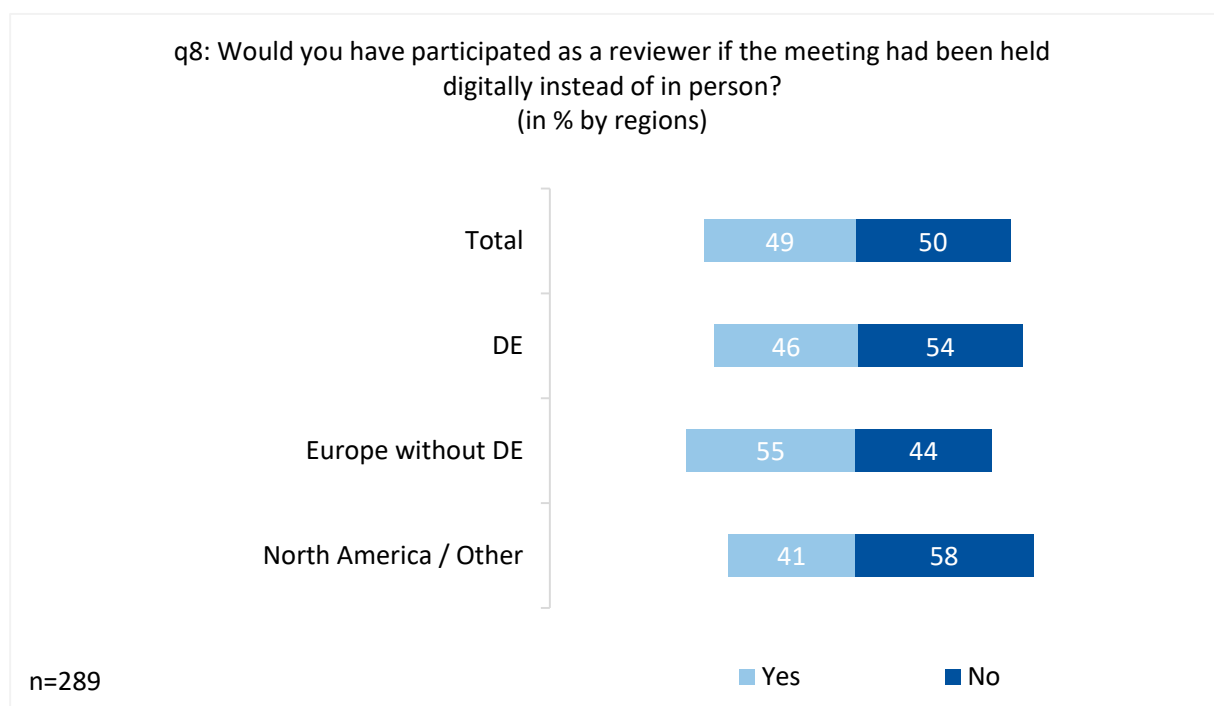


Figure 33 Willingness to participate in an alternative digital review by region (proposal stage)

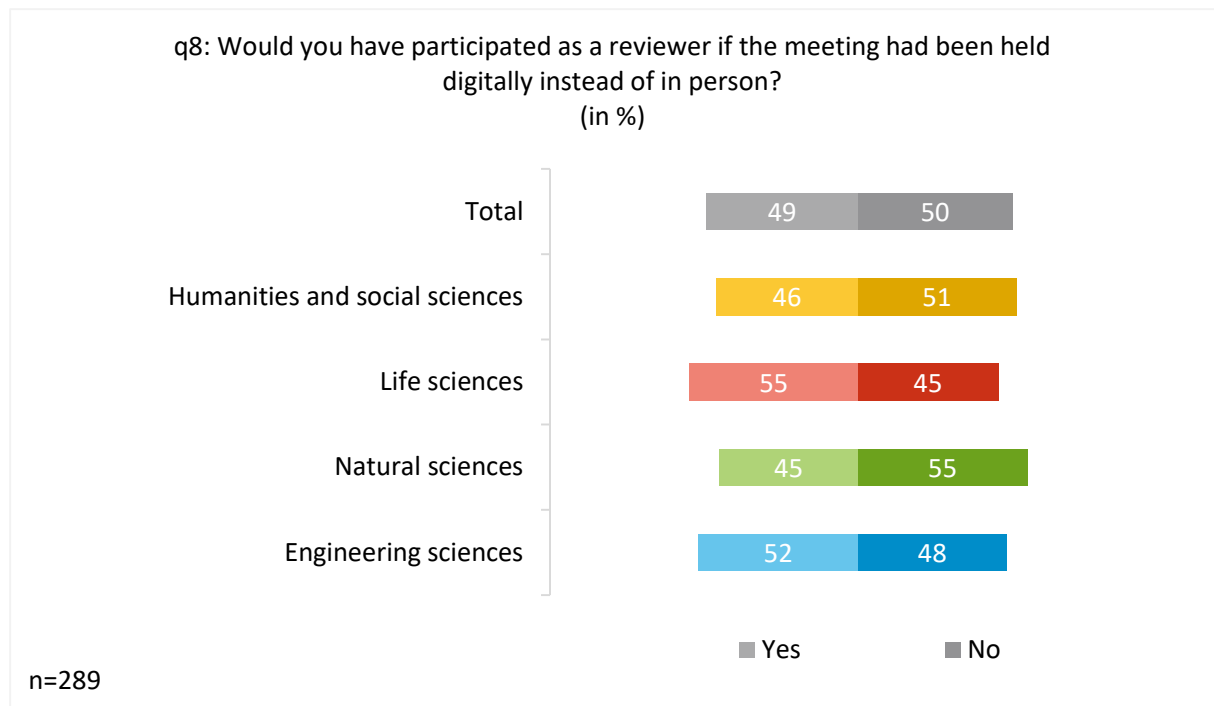


Figure 34 Willingness to participate in an alternative digital review by research area (proposal stage)

Sixty-one per cent of reviewers who had already taken part in reviews during the draft proposal stage of the Excellence Strategy and already had experience with the digital format would also have consented to an alternative digital participation.

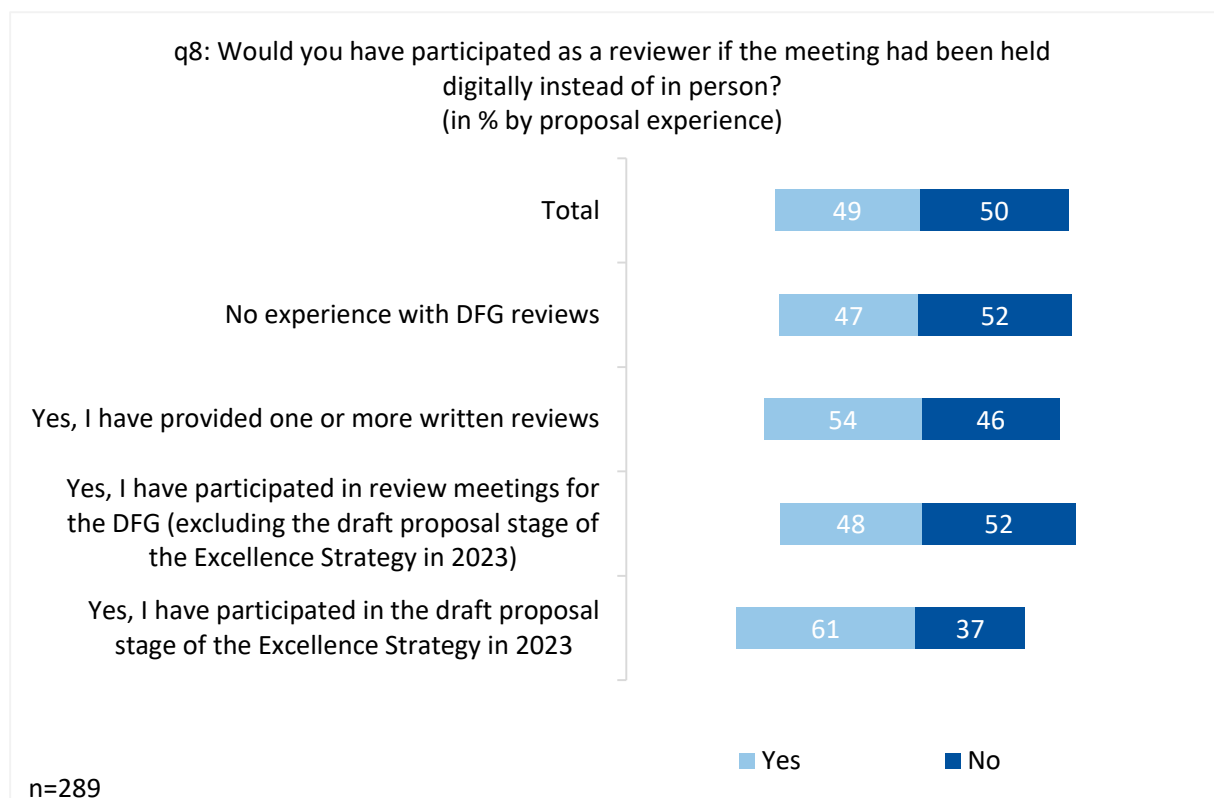


Figure 35 Willingness to participate in an alternative digital review by review experience (proposal stage)

## 8.2 Evaluation of the in-person format of the review process

On the question of an alternative digital participation in review processes, it is interesting how the in-person format was perceived by the reviewers in the proposal stage. Three key findings stand out: 97 per cent of reviewers liked the face-to-face interviews with the researchers from the Clusters of Excellence, 96 per cent found the in-person format to be an efficient way to conduct a panel meeting, and 93 per cent appreciated the opportunity for informal discussions with other reviewers.

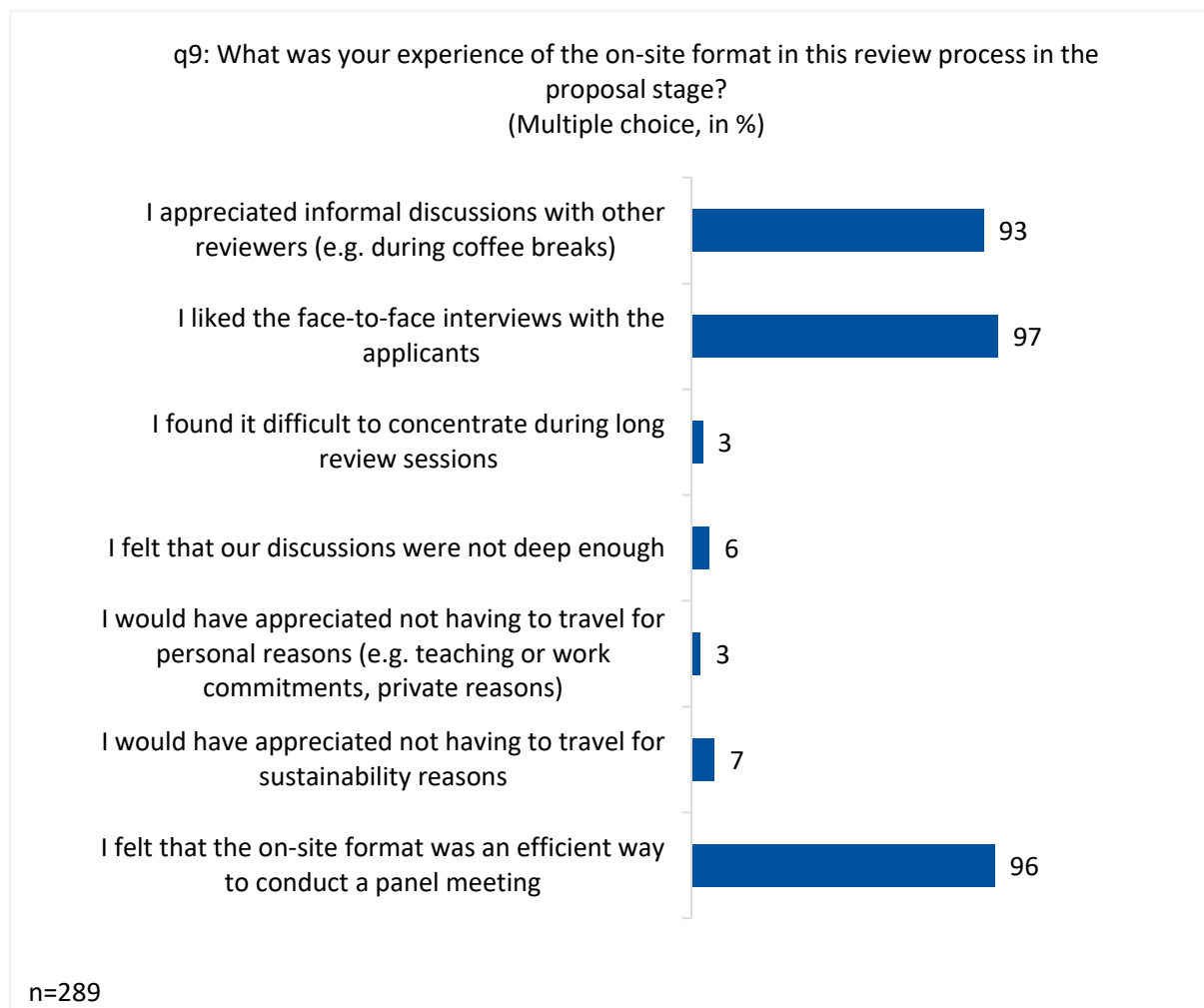


Figure 36 Experience with the in-person format of the review (proposal stage)

No significant differences between different employment regions, research areas or review experience were found in the evaluations by the reviewers surveyed, with all respondents regarding these three positive aspects of the in-person format as particularly relevant.

## 9 Summary evaluation of the review process in the proposal stage

Finally, the reviewers provided a summary evaluation of the organisation and handling of the review process, indicating how satisfied they were with the organisation and handling of the review process by the DFG Head Office.

## 9.1 Satisfaction with the organisation of the review process

Practically all reviewers (99%) indicated they were (very) content with how the DFG Head Office organised and handled the review process.

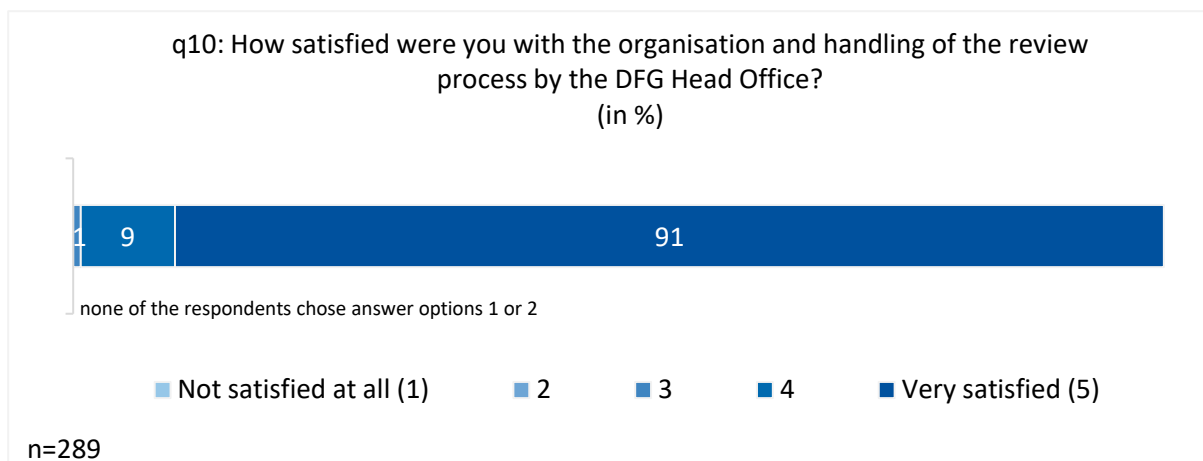
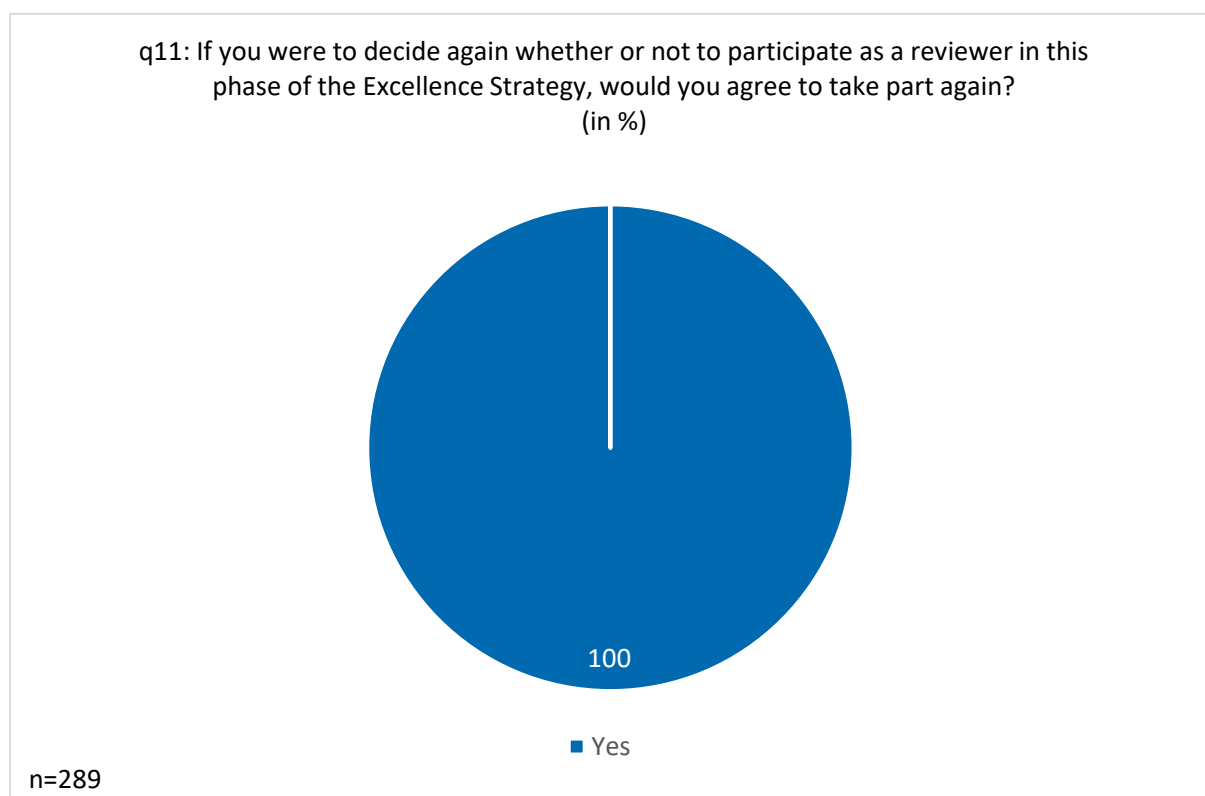


Figure 37 Satisfaction with the organisation of the review process by the DFG Head Office (proposal stage)

No differences in evaluation in this regard were found between reviewers of different research areas, regions or review experience.

## 9.2 Willingness of reviewers to participate from a retrospective viewpoint

Finally, the reviewers were asked whether they would be willing to take part as reviewers in this stage of the Excellence Strategy again. The result is unambiguous: All the reviewers surveyed would take part again.



Future 38 Willingness to take part in future reviews within the Excellence Strategy (proposal stage)

## 10 Summary of the results from the draft proposal and proposal stages

The surveys on the two stages of the review process differed to some degree. The use of additional sources of information that could be consulted during the digital process to aid assessment was examined in the draft proposal stage, for instance, and aspects of the panel procedure were also considered in more detail there.

Overall, both review stages were rated positively by the reviewers surveyed with respect to the organisation, the elements provided for the review, and the review process itself. The online survey following the draft proposal stage delivered some feedback that was then taken into consideration in order to optimise the preparation and planning of the proposal stage.

In the follow-up surveys for both review stages, participants were asked to assess how suitable the relevant review process is for identifying the best draft and proposals for the Clusters of Excellence. In the draft proposal stage a good 81 per cent of respondents, and in the proposal stage a very high 96 per cent, felt the process was (very) suitable for identifying the best proposals. Comparing the responses of the reviewers in the draft and proposal stages, respectively, it can be seen that evaluations in the proposal stage were more consistent, showing less variance of response.

The biggest difference between review stages (alongside the aspect of the draft versus the final status of the proposal) consisted in the digital and in-person format. The choice of format was made against the backdrop of the genuinely different conditions and requirements of the two stages. The introduction of the possibility of interacting with representatives of the applicant university in the draft proposal stage, for example, was only possible in the digital format, since a much higher number of draft

proposals were discussed within one panel than in the proposal stage. Both formats essentially worked well for the participants and were evaluated positively, with the lack of travel and the climate and time aspects in particular being seen as advantages of the digital format. The format was also found to be an efficient way of holding reviews. In the in-person format the opportunity for informal interaction with the researchers from the Clusters of Excellence and other reviewers was rated very positively. Fifty per cent of in-person participants rejected an alternative digital participation, while only 20 per cent of participants in the digital format rejected in-person participation.

The fundamental willingness to take part in another review within the Excellence Strategy is very high among respondents of both stages: In the draft proposal stage 96 per cent of participants indicated such a willingness, and in the proposal stage 100 per cent gave their approval. The respondents expressed themselves very satisfied in both stages – and it was even possible to discern a slight improvement in satisfaction: Whereas 95 per cent of respondents in the draft proposal stage rated the organisation as (very) good, satisfaction with the organisation was even more positive in the proposal stage (99% (very) satisfied).

## Screenshots of the online survey of reviewers in the draft stage

Stop

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0%

### Clusters of Excellence Review Process – Draft Proposal Stage

**Welcome to the survey on the review process for Clusters of Excellence.**

We wish to gather information on your opinions and experiences as reviewers to improve the quality of the review process in the Clusters of Excellence funding line.

The survey will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. It is being carried out by uzbonn on behalf of the DFG.

**How to fill out the questionnaire:**

- Please navigate through your questionnaire using the **“Next” and “Back” buttons** that appear on each page of the questionnaire. Please do not use the browser's navigation buttons.
- We would appreciate your opinion on all questions. However, **you can skip those you do not wish to answer, by clicking on the “Next” button twice in a row.** After the first click you will receive an error message, the second click will take you the next question.
- **You can use the “Stop” button to pause the survey.** To continue later just follow the link in our invitation e-mail.
- You will be prompted to submit your answers at the end of the questionnaire. **Once you have submitted your answers, you will not be able to return to the survey.**

Your decision to take part in this survey is entirely voluntary. All your answers will remain completely confidential and will not be linked to your name.

If you are experiencing technical issues, please contact:  
Dr. Astrid Mayerböck  
uzbonn - Gesellschaft für empirische Sozialforschung und Evaluation  
e-mail: [ExStra@uzbonn.de](mailto:ExStra@uzbonn.de)


If you have any questions or comments on the survey in general, please contact:  
Anke Reinhardt  
Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft e.V.  
phone: +49 - 228 / 8852588  
e-mail: [extra-gutachtendenbefragung@dfg.de](mailto:extra-gutachtendenbefragung@dfg.de)


**please click “Start survey”**


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15%

**In which country are you currently employed?**  
*If you are employed in more than one country, please indicate the country in which you work most of the time.*

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20%

**Apart from your participation in the review process in the draft proposal stage of the Excellence Strategy, have you previously acted as a reviewer for the DFG?**  
*Check all that apply.*

☐ No

☐ Yes, I have provided one or more written reviews for the DFG

☐ Yes, I have participated in one or more on-site review meetings for the DFG


☐ Yes, I have participated in one or more digital review meetings for the DFG

☐ Yes, I have participated in one or more previous review meetings for the Excellence Initiative or Excellence Strategy


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25%

**Thinking back to your preparation for the review meeting, how important were the individual elements for you in understanding the goals and processes of the Excellence Strategy?**


	Of no importance 1	2	3	4	Very important 5	Did not use it
Preparatory documents provided by the DFG Head Office	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Introductory meeting prior to the reviewers' meeting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Contact with DFG staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Experience from participation in previous meetings for the Excellence Initiative or Excellence Strategy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Website on the Excellence Strategy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Explanatory films	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
General knowledge from public sources (newspapers, websites, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information gathered from discussions with colleagues or other reviewers who participated in previous meetings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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30%

**In preparation of the review meeting, did you seek out more information in addition to the information provided in the proposal and by the DFG? What kind of additional information did you seek out?**


	Yes	No
Full list of publications by participating researchers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Performance indicators for participating researchers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information from colleagues about the participating researchers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Curriculum Vitae (CVs) of participating researchers, as found on the internet	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information posted on the website(s) of the applicant university/universities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Position of the applicant university/universities in rankings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I have looked for additional information other than the above:

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35%

**The CVs included in the preparatory documents followed a pre-defined format. How useful were these CVs in providing you with the information you need to assess the researchers' qualifications and achievements?**


Not at all useful 1	2	3	4	Very useful 5	Did not read them
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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40%

**Thinking back to your evaluation of Cluster of Excellence proposals, how important were the following elements of the review process for your decision?**


	Of no importance 1	2	3	4	Very important 5
Reading of the proposals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interaction with the applicants	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Closed sessions with other reviewers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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45%

**Did you find the discussions with the applicants helpful for the evaluation process?**

Not at all helpful 1	2	3	4	Very helpful 5	Did not attend
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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50%

**With respect to the proposals considered in your panel, did you think the panel's spectrum of disciplinary expertise was sufficient for all projects?**

Strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly agree 5
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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55%

**What is your assessment of the time scheduled for discussing each proposal and clarifying key issues during the meeting?**  
*Check all that apply.*

☐ Overall, the time available during the meeting was sufficient.

☐ There were parts/aspects of the review meeting that took too long.

☐ There were parts/aspects of the review meeting for which we did not have enough time.

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60%

**Which parts of the meeting took too long?**


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63%

**For which parts of the meeting did you not have enough time?**


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68%

**What was your experience with the digital format in this review process?**

	Strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly agree 5
I found it difficult to concentrate during long review sessions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I experienced technical difficulties.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I missed face-to-face conversations with applicants.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I did not feel that our discussions were deep enough.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The timing of the review meeting was difficult for me because of the time zone I am located in.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I missed informal discussions with other reviewers (e.g. during coffee breaks).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I appreciated not having to travel for personal reasons (e.g. teaching or work obligations, private reasons).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I appreciated not having to travel for sustainability reasons.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I felt the digital format was an efficient way to conduct a panel meeting.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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73%

**Would you have participated as a reviewer if the meeting had been in person (Bonn, Germany) instead of digital?**


☐ Yes  
☐ No

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78%

**In your opinion, how suitable is the review process when it comes to identifying the best draft proposals for the Clusters of Excellence?**

Not suitable at all 1	2	3	4	Very suitable 5
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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84%

**What suggestions do you have on how to improve the review process?**

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89%

**How satisfied were you with the organisation and handling of the review process by the DFG Head Office?**

Not satisfied at all  
1

2

3

4

Very satisfied  
5

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

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94%

**Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the organisation and handling of the review process by the DFG Head Office in the draft proposal stage?**

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100%

**If you were to decide again whether or not to participate as a reviewer in this phase of the Excellence Strategy, would you agree to take part again?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

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100%

You have reached the end of the questionnaire.

In order to submit your answers, please click "Complete survey".

**Once you have submitted your answers, you will no longer be able to make any changes.**

If you would like to keep the option of changing your answers, click "Stop" now and review them later.

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100%

You have completed the survey.

**Thank you for taking the time to provide us with your answers!**

If you have any questions or comments, please contact:  
Anke Reinhardt  
Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft e.V.  
phone: +49 - 228 / 8852588  
e-mail: [extra-gutachtendenbefragung@dfg.de](mailto:extra-gutachtendenbefragung@dfg.de)

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## Screenshots of the online survey of reviewers in the proposal stage

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0%


### Clusters of Excellence Review Process – Proposal Stage

**Welcome to the survey on the review process for Clusters of Excellence.**

We wish to gather information on your opinions and experiences as reviewers to improve the quality of further review processes in the Clusters of Excellence funding line.

The survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. It is being carried out by uzbonn on behalf of the DFG.

**How to fill in the questionnaire:**

- Please navigate through your questionnaire using the **“Next” and “Back” buttons** that appear on each page of the questionnaire. Please do not use the browser's navigation buttons.
- We would appreciate your opinion on all questions. However, **you can skip those you do not wish to answer by clicking on the “Next” button twice.** After the first click you will receive an error message, the second click will take you to the next question.
- If you want to **remove a given answer**, simply click on this icon: 
- **You can use the “Stop” button to pause the survey.** To continue at a later time, just follow the link in our invitation e-mail.
- You will be prompted to submit your answers at the end of the questionnaire. **Once you have submitted your answers, you will not be able to return to the survey.**

Your decision to take part in this survey is entirely voluntary. All your answers will remain completely confidential and will not be linked to your name.

If you are experiencing technical issues, please contact:  
Dr. Astrid Mayerböck  
uzbonn - Gesellschaft für empirische Sozialforschung und Evaluation  
e-mail: [ExStra@uzbonn.de](mailto:ExStra@uzbonn.de)


If you have any questions or comments on the survey in general, please contact:  
Anke Reinhardt  
Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft e.V.  
phone: +49 - 228 / 8852588  
e-mail: [extra-gutachtendenbefragung@dfg.de](mailto:extra-gutachtendenbefragung@dfg.de)


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7%

**What is your primary research area?**  
*Please select only one.*


-please select-

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21%

**In which country are you currently employed?**  
*If you are employed in more than one country, please indicate the country in which you work most of the time.*


-please select-

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28%

**Apart from your participation in the review process in the proposal stage of the Excellence Strategy, have you previously acted as a reviewer for the DFG?**  
*Check all that apply.*

☐ No


☐ Yes, I have provided one or more written reviews.

☐ Yes, I have participated in review meetings for the DFG (excluding the draft proposal stage of the Excellence Strategy in 2023).


☐ Yes, I have participated in the draft proposal stage of the Excellence Strategy in 2023.

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35%

**Thinking back to your evaluation of Cluster of Excellence proposals, how important were the following elements of the review process at the proposal stage for your assessment?**


	Of no importance 1	2	3	4	Very important 5	
Reading of the proposals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Preliminary discussion of all proposals in the panel on day 1	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Presentation of the applicants	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Plenary discussion with the applicants	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Poster session	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Closed sessions with other reviewers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

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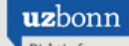
42%

**In your opinion, how suitable is the review process at the proposal stage when it comes to identifying the best proposals for the Clusters of Excellence?**


Not suitable at all 1	2	3	4	Very suitable 5	
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

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50%

With regard to the discussion of different proposals in your panel, do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

**The evaluation criteria were equally applicable to all kinds of proposals (e.g. new or renewal proposals, proposals with a narrow or broad disciplinary focus).**

Strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly agree 5	
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

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57%

**What do you think should be done to make the evaluation criteria more equally applicable to all kinds of proposals?**

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64%

**Would you have participated as a reviewer if the meeting had been held digitally instead of in person?**

☐ Yes

☐ No



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71%

**What was your experience of the on-site format in this review process in the proposal stage?**  
*Check all that apply.*

☐ I appreciated informal discussions with other reviewers (e.g. during coffee breaks).

☐ I liked the face-to-face interviews with the applicants.

☐ I found it difficult to concentrate during long review sessions.

☐ I felt that our discussions were not deep enough.

☐ I would have appreciated not having to travel for personal reasons (e.g. teaching or work commitments, private reasons).

☐ I would have appreciated not having to travel for sustainability reasons.

☐ I felt that the on-site format was an efficient way to conduct a panel meeting.

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78%

**How satisfied were you with the organisation and handling of the review process by the DFG Head Office?**

Not satisfied at all 1	2	3	4	Very satisfied 5	
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

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85%

**If you were to decide again whether or not to participate as a reviewer in this phase of the Excellence Strategy, would you agree to take part again?**

☐ Yes

☐ No




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92%

Is there anything else you would like to mention?

4000 characters left

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Complete survey ▶

100%

You have reached the end of the questionnaire.

In order to submit your answers, please click "Complete survey".

**Once you have submitted your answers, you will no longer be able to make any changes.**


If you would like to keep the option of changing your answers, click "Stop" now and review them later.

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100%

You have completed the survey.

**Thank you for taking the time to provide us with your answers!**

If you have any questions or comments, please contact:  
Anke Reinhardt  
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phone: +49 - 228 / 8852588  
e-mail: [exstra-gutachtendenbefragung@dfg.de](mailto:exstra-gutachtendenbefragung@dfg.de)

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## Clusters of Excellence Funding Line

### Funding Criteria

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#### Research

- Quality of the research programme in an international comparison: originality, vision, and openness to risk
- Disciplinary and interdisciplinary scope, coherence and feasibility of the research programme
- Added value of the collaboration
- Quality of previous contributions to the field of research
- Positive impact on the future development of the field of research or the stimulation of new research areas

#### Researchers

- Academic excellence of the participating researchers
- International competitiveness and visibility
- Diversity in the composition of the group

#### Structures and strategies in the Cluster of Excellence

- Support for early-career researchers and their academic independence
- Support of equity and diversity
- Strategies for research data and research software management and provisions for research infrastructures and instrumentation
- Management, governance and quality assurance
- Science communication and knowledge transfer; where applicable: research-oriented teaching

#### Environment of the Cluster of Excellence

- Integration and role in the strategic development planning of the university/universities (in the case of joint proposals: cooperative structure and contributions of the respective applicant universities)
- Staffing, financial, infrastructural and other resources provided by the institution(s)
- Benefit of the collaboration with other institutions

#### Appropriateness of the requested funds

#### University allowance

- Plausibility of the strategic objectives pursued by the university/universities