

# Central Findings and Lessons Learned from an Evaluation of the Swiss National Science Foundation



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Knowledge is the key to the future. Research creates knowledge.

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) is the most important Swiss agency promoting scientific research. As mandated by the Swiss Federal government, it supports all disciplines from philosophy and biology to the nanosciences and medicine.

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The SNSF's evaluation procedure reviewed
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The SNSF is the largest funder of scientific research in Switzerland and supports research in nearly all disciplines

# Background: General

- Competitively-selected to evaluate 'the transparency and overall quality of evaluation' at the SNSF
- Well-funded (more than ¼ of a million US dollars)
- Short timeframe to plan, design, and execute (less than 10 months)
  - Final report and presentation of evaluation were requested one month earlier than originally planned

# Background: Some Context

- At the time, the SNSF had and was making significant changes to its peer review system
  - Many divisions within the SNSF were and are resistant to the changes
- Support for the evaluation varied widely amongst members within the SNSF
- The SNSF is (relatively) large and complex
  - Numerous governing bodies
  - Numerous funding 'instruments'

# Background: Purpose

- Predominately formative in function and orientation
  - Still useful for summative purposes
- To provide information for improving the transparency and overall quality of evaluation at the SNSF



Guiding



# Questions: 6 Focal

To what extent do the SNSF's evaluation procedures and their execution...

1. ...promote excellent research in all disciplines?
2. ...support research that is both scientifically relevant and original?
3. ...increase the competitiveness of Swiss research and researchers in Switzerland?
4. ...encourage the work of junior researchers?
5. ...ensure that evaluation procedures are fair and unbiased?
6. ...ensure that evaluation decisions are transparent and comprehensible to applicants?



# Questions: 26 Secondary

Organized by (as defined by the SNSF)

- Structures and environments
- Targets, criteria, guidelines, and procedures
- Transparency and comprehensibility
- Impacts

Method



# Method: Approach & Design

- Utilization-focused approach
- Concurrent mixed-method design
  - Collection of qualitative and qualitative information (generally, but not always) occurred simultaneously
  - Equal weighting and priority given to both types of information
- Primary sources of information
  - SNSF documents
  - Interviews
  - Surveys
  - Extant SNSF data

# Method: Documents

- $N = 104$  unique documents
  - SNSF policies and procedures
  - Guidelines for evaluation
  - Internal and external reports
- $n = 45$  met inclusion criteria and were analyzed

# Method: Interviews

- Census
  - SNSF Foundation Council (FC) Presidium
  - Relevant members of the SNSF Secretariat
- Stratified random sample (by divisions)
  - National Research Council (NRC)
- $n = 99$  semi-structured interviews

# Method: Surveys

- Funding applicants/applications
  - Stratified random sample (by gender [male/female] and applicant status [funded/unfunded]) of applications submitted between 2006 and 2011
  - $n = 243$
- External reviewers
  - Simple random sample of all reviewers between 2006 and 2011
  - $n = 222$
- FC members
  - Census
  - $n = 20$

# Method: Extant Data

- Applications submitted between 2006 thru 2011
- $N = 27,006$  usable records retained for analysis following extensive restructuring of the SNSF-provided database



Central

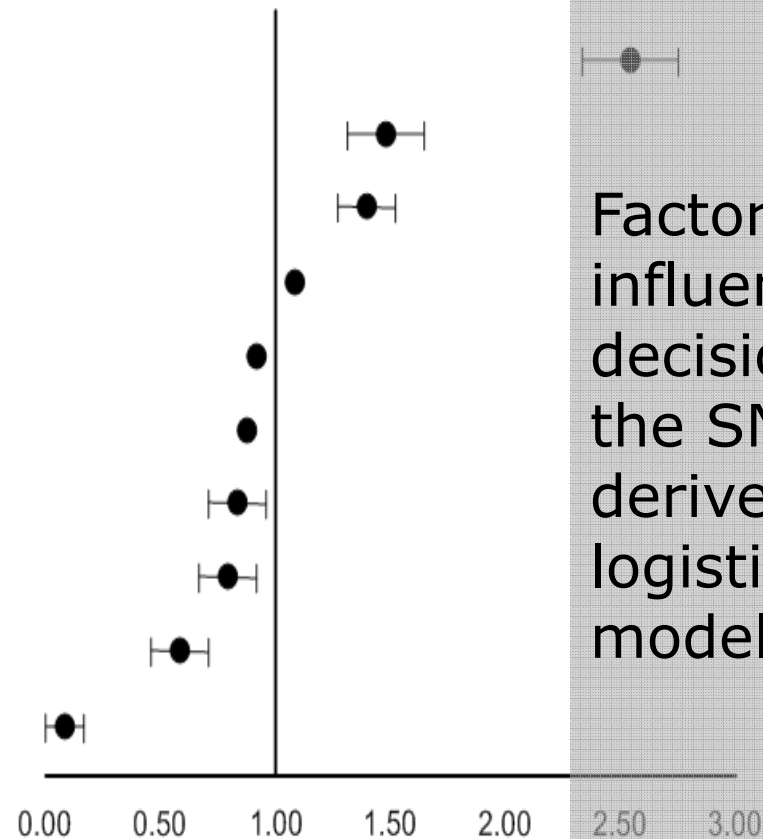


# Summary of Findings

- Overall, the SNSF fulfills its objectives and mission (focal questions #1 thru #6)
- However, several more and less serious problems need to be addressed by the SNSF
  - Peer review system
  - Transparency
  - Communication and feedback

Predictor	Odds Ratio and 95% Confidence Interval
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Division II	2.53 (2.24, 2.85)
Division I	1.47 (1.31, 1.64)
ETH	1.40 (1.24, 1.57)
Age	1.08
Number of Applications	0.98
Year of Application	0.91
Gender	0.83 (0.74, 0.92)
Andere	0.80 (0.64, 0.98)
Fachhochschule	0.66 (0.55, 0.78)
Type of Application	0.19 (0.17, 0.21)



Factors that influence funding decisions across the SNSF as derived from a logistic regression model

Lessons



# Lesson # 1: Culture

- Cultural divide
  - Very different from working on a comparable project in the United States
  - Words like “independence,” “evaluation,” and “bias” differ in meaning from our perceived meanings
  - At times created very real tensions
  - Power dynamics
  - Team viewed by some within (and outside) the SNSF as ‘cultural outsiders’

## Lesson #2: Politics

- Political agendas of some of those within the SNSF
  - ‘Felt’ by members of the project team, but never fully known
  - Sometime overt, but more often covert
- Manifest through increasing ‘input’ (translated as ‘interference’) into all aspects of the evaluation

# Lesson #3: Project Team

- Multidisciplinary team with differing skills and differing perspectives
  - Created good solutions, but took extensive time and effort
- Short timeframe for completing the study added to stress
- Given differing expertise and personalities amongst team members required tolerance
- Compromise was critical



# Lesson #4: Workload

- Project team was working on multiple high-stakes projects simultaneously
  - Four of which were international
    - SNSF (Switzerland)
    - Dynasty Foundation (Russia)
    - International Development Research Centre (Canada)
    - World Vision (Africa/India)

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2/21/2013

**The SNSF's evaluation procedure reviewed**

**The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) aims to be an excellent funding body that funds excellent research. A team of researchers from Western Michigan University were engaged to find out whether this objective is being achieved. Their evaluation report is now available.**

The evaluation project "Quality and transparency in the evaluation procedure of the SNSF" was conducted in 2012 under Chris Coryn. It aimed to show to what extent the evaluation procedure is fair and impartial as well as understandable and transparent. In addition, the project intended to establish to what degree the evaluation procedure of the SNSF

- promotes excellent and original research in all disciplines;
- increases the competitiveness of Swiss research and of researchers in Switzerland;
- promotes young researchers.

**Mission accomplished, but...**

After evaluating comprehensive data chiefly gained from numerous interviews with actors of the SNSF, external reviewers and applicants, the US research team has come to the conclusion that the SNSF achieves its objects to a very large degree. There is still room for improvement, however, with the ever-increasing workload of the National Research Council being particularly problematic. The results also show that the SNSF's decision-making, though impartial and fair, needs to be made more transparent and understandable, and the processes and criteria on which it is based need to be improved.

In order to improve the quality and transparency of the evaluation procedure, the research team recommends a reform of the external review system. In addition, they think that the documents and guidelines for applicants should be made clearer and more user-friendly. Other suggestions include systematically examining the funding schemes and clarifying certain points in the election procedure for the Research Council.

The SNSF is currently studying these recommendations. It will make a statement on the evaluation and announce the measures to be implemented in due course. The evaluation report has been made available to the public and interested circles.

**On this Subject**

► [An Evaluation of the Transparency and Overall Quality of Evaluation at the Swiss National Science Foundation: Final Report \(PDF, 1.1 MB\)](#)

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The SNSF's public  
statement on the  
evaluation and  
release of the  
evaluation report

Dankes

