



European
Commission

January 2024

RESEARCH SECURITY

Building blocks for risk appraisal

In its proposal for a Council recommendation on research security the Commission sets out several guidance and support actions at all relevant levels to raise awareness and enhance resilience across Europe. This factsheet addresses in more detail the issue of **risk appraisal**, which is a key element in any research security approach.

What is risk appraisal?

In the context of research security risk appraisal means taking into consideration a number of risks that could occur in international research and innovation cooperation. It is the combination of factors that defines the risk. The key elements to assess can be grouped into four categories:

1. **The risk profile of your own organisation.**
2. **The research domain in which the international cooperation is to take place.**
3. **The risk profile of the third country where the international partner is based.**
4. **The risk profile of the international partner organisation.**

For whom is it relevant?

Risk appraisal is relevant for anyone embarking on research and innovation cooperation with partners from third countries.

It could be carried out in the decision-making process in a university or other research performing organisation before signing a partnership agreement, such as a memorandum of understanding. It could also be required by a national funding organisation as part of the application procedure or, at the EU-level, by the Horizon Europe managing authorities, depending on the context in which the risk appraisal takes place.

In all cases, the risk appraisal procedures should be customised to the organisation's needs and (risk) profile.

How does it work?

It is recommended to develop a concise and easy to understand intake form that takes these key elements into account. Questions should be formulated to stimulate thinking through the context in which the research and innovation cooperation takes place and what motivations and (hidden) agendas from the international partner could play a role.

The form could be based on closed questions (yes/no/unsure). While this may minimise administrative burden, a 'tick-box' exercise should be avoided. In case the form includes open questions, it should be explained that no confidential information should be added, and it is important to ensure answers are treated confidentially by the recipients of the form.

The objective is to ensure potential risks and threats are identified up front, with the aim to avoid, as far as possible, serious problems later. It should be emphasised that identifying potential risks is by itself not a determinant for denial of approval or funding. Instead, it should be the basis for further discussion and advice. After all, risk appraisal is about managing risks responsibly, not about avoiding risks altogether.

Possible building blocks for a risk appraisal form

The following questions and considerations could be addressed in the intake phase of an international research and innovation partnership or project. It is intended as a source of inspiration, not as a template per se.

1. Your own organisation's profile

- What are your organisation's strengths and vulnerabilities?
- Is your institution known to be a scientific leader in the research domain or does it have a unique position in the world for other reasons, such as exceptional labs or facilities
- Does your organisation have any financial dependencies that could be related to the project?

2. Research domain

- Is the project focussing on a research domain or does it involve methodology or research infrastructure considered particularly sensitive from a security or ethical/human rights perspective?
- Does it involve dual-use technology? Please check the EU's Export Control regulation [\[link\]](#)
- Is it a key enabling technology?

3. Profile of the country of the partner organisation

- Does the project include partners based in or affiliated with third countries with a high risk profile, e.g.: flawed rule of law, aggressive civil-military fusion strategies or limited academic freedom (ref. international indices such as Rule of Law Index [\[link\]](#) and Academic Freedom Index [\[link\]](#))
- Is the country subject to sanctions with relevance to research and innovation (such as embargos on export of certain goods and technologies, as well as technical assistance related thereto) [\[link\]](#)
- Is the research domain of particular interest to the country in which the partner is based or to which it is affiliated? Is there an explicit government policy to become world leader in the field?

4. Profile of the partner organisation

- What do you know about the organisation you want to cooperate with?
- Is the organisation linked to the government; does it have links to the military?
- What is its governance structure? Where does it get its funding from?
- Has it been involved in any reported/ media covered scandals or security-related incidents?
- What do you know about background and affiliations of the researchers/staff involved?
- What do you know about the partner's intentions regarding the end-use or application of the research results? Is your interest in the cooperation as big as the interest from the partner?

Please keep in mind that if relevant basic information about the prospective partner cannot be found in the public domain, this usually should raise concerns.

What happens after the risk appraisal?

For the aspects where the researcher has doubts, it is recommended to draw up, with the help of security advisers where applicable, a risk management plan in which the researcher describes how risks will be addressed and mitigated. Concerns related to reciprocity and intellectual property rights related issues should for instance be addressed in the partnership agreement which is concluded with the prospective partner.

From this follows that the more doubts there are, the more robust the mitigating measures should be, up to the point where the only remaining conclusion can be that research security cannot be guaranteed and therefore the project should be abandoned.

Next Steps

In the coming months this factsheet will be discussed further with experts and practitioners. As a result, the factsheet may be updated as needed and will be found on the research security webpage.

More information: [\[research security webpage\]](#)