



European Research Council Work Programme 2007

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1. Introduction

The European Research Council (ERC) has a unique position as a pan-European funding organisation designed to support the best science and scholarship. It must operate at the highest level of ambition to generate the maximum benefit to European research from the activities it pursues. As a new organisation, it will not be hostage to the conventional wisdom; instead, it will take the best practice wherever it can be found.

The fundamental principle for all ERC activities is that of stimulating investigator-initiated frontier research across all fields of research, on the basis of excellence. Awards will be made and grants operated according to simple procedures that maintain the focus on excellence, encourage initiative and combine flexibility with accountability.

By using competition on the basis of excellence at the European level, the ERC will add value to other funding schemes, such as those of Research Funding Agencies operating at the national level. The ERC will also complement other research activities in the European Commission 7th framework programme, including the Marie Curie schemes, strategic basic research in support of thematic priorities, and support for European infrastructures.

The ERC will aim to create leverage towards structural improvements in the research system of Europe. For example, since many investigators who will be involved in the funded activities are likely to be working within universities, academies, research centres and similar establishments, the ERC can have a strong incentive effect on these institutions by:

- Offering greater independence to early stage (starting) investigators as an investment in the next generation and towards enhancement and sustainability of the institutions' research capacity.
- Setting quality benchmarks, allowing institutions better to judge their research performance.
- Revealing in a bottom up manner the availability of top talent in various fields and emerging areas, and thus assisting the institutions' strategic thinking and priority setting.
- Promoting interaction of European research institutions with similar institutions around the world on the basis of the participation of individual researchers from these institutions in ERC activities.

The Scientific Council of the ERC will establish the ERC's strategy. It will have full authority over decisions on the type of research to be funded and act as guarantor of the quality of the activity from the scientific perspective. Its tasks will cover, in particular, the development of the annual work programme, the establishment of the peer review process, as well as the monitoring and quality control of the programme's implementation from the scientific perspective including the development of the ERC's strategy regarding international cooperation.

2. ERC Grants

Two types of ERC grant will be available. These two funding streams, operating on a "bottom-up" basis, across all research fields, without predetermined priorities, are expected to be the core of the ERC's operations for the duration of the EC 7th Framework Programme.

- The ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants (ERC Starting Grants). The objective is to provide adequate support to the independent careers of excellent researchers, whatever their nationality, located in or moving to the EU and associated countries, who are at the stage of establishing and leading their first research team or programme.
- The ERC Advanced Investigator Grants (ERC Advanced Grants). The objective is to encourage and support excellent, innovative investigator-initiated research projects by leading advanced investigators across the EU member states and countries associated to the framework programme. This funding stream will complement the Starting Grant scheme by targeting the population of researchers who have already established themselves as being independent research leaders in their own right.

The Grants will support projects carried out by individual teams which are headed by a single **principal investigator** of any nationality and, if necessary, include additional **team-members**. These teams could be of national or trans-national character.

The grant will be awarded to the institution (Applicant Legal Entity) that will be engaging and hosting the Principal Investigator, with the attached **commitment that this institution will grant the Principal Investigator the independence to manage the research funding for the duration of the project.**

The ERC's funding will increase substantially over the period 2007-2013. **The first call will cover research proposals for ERC Starting Grants (call deadline to be announced). The overall indicative budget for this call will be approximately €300,000,000. The ERC Advanced Grant scheme will be introduced in the second call for proposals, expected to be published later in 2007.**

From 2008 onwards it is anticipated that both ERC Starting Grants and ERC Advanced Grants will be the subject of annual calls. As experience and the portfolio of funded projects builds up, the Scientific Council will be in a position to evaluate the programme achievements, adjust mechanisms and procedures as needed, and elaborate its scientific strategy as this is seen to be appropriate.

3. The ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant

3.1. *Background*

A widely accepted view is that Europe offers insufficient opportunities for young investigators to develop independent careers and make the transition from working under a supervisor to being independent research leaders in their own right. This structural problem leads to a dramatic waste of research talent in Europe. It limits or delays the emergence of the next-generation of researchers, who bring new ideas and energy, and it encourages highly talented researchers at an early stage of their career to seek advancement elsewhere, either in other professions or as researchers outside Europe.

Up to now, only some relatively small scale efforts have been made in Europe to address these problems. The ERC is well placed to develop a broad, international and consistent scheme on the much larger scale that will be necessary to make a real impact on European science and scholarship.

3.2. *Objectives of the scheme*

ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants will support the creation of independent and excellent new individual research teams and will strengthen others that have been recently created.

The scheme is designed to support researchers at the stage at which they are starting or leading their first research team or, depending on the field, establishing their independent research programme¹.

¹ It is recognised that in certain fields (e.g. in the humanities and mathematics), research is often performed individually, aside from guiding research students. The term "team" is used in the broadest sense, including cases of individuals working independently or conversely in cases when several investigators are working so closely together as to constitute a single team.

Independence implies that the principal investigator has the authority to:

- apply for funding independently of senior colleagues
- manage the research funding for the project and make appropriate resource allocation decisions
- publish as senior authors and invite as co-authors only those who have contributed substantially to the reported work
- supervise team members, including research students or others
- have access to reasonable space and facilities for conducting the research

The peer review evaluation Panels will be empowered to conclude whether the grant and the conditions specified by the hosting institution will allow the Principal Investigator to make the transition to independence.

3.3. Size of ERC Starting Grants

ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants will be offered at pre-set discrete levels of between €100,000 and €400,000 per year (in increments of €50,000) for a period of up to 5 years.

The level of grant will be affected by the nature of the project and team (research field, size of the team etc.) and whether it is intended to set up a new team or add support to a recently-established team. The level will be determined by the peer review evaluation, on the basis of the needs of the project, judged by the panel against the requested budget of the proposal.

The Community financial contribution shall be in the form of a grant to the budget corresponding to a maximum of 100% of the total eligible direct costs and a flat rate contribution of up to 20% of the total eligible direct costs towards indirect costs.

3.4. Submission procedure and peer review evaluation

Proposals are submitted by the Principal Investigator in agreement with the hosting institution is the "applicant legal entity"². Applications may be made in any field of research with particular emphasis on the frontier of science and scholarship. Proposals of an interdisciplinary nature which cross the boundaries between different panels, proposals in new and emerging fields and "high-risk, high-gain" proposals are encouraged.

Pre-registration of the proposals is required and should be done at least three weeks prior to the application deadline.

The Scientific Council will establish, *a priori* and on the basis of experience across the world, an indicative budget for each of the 3 main scientific domains (Physical Sciences & Engineering, Life Sciences and Social Sciences & Humanities). A reserve not exceeding 20% of the total may be retained for funding proposals that have been judged of comparable merit but beyond the budget allocated to the panel, and can be used to further promote frontier research and interdisciplinarity.

A two-stage application procedure will be followed. At the first stage, a proposal will be presented and evaluated, describing the project and the qualifications of the Principal Investigator. Successful Principal Investigators at the first stage will be invited to submit a more detailed proposal by the second stage deadline.

The following elements will be required:

- a) CV and a self-evaluation of the Principal Investigator's research achievements, including a brief "funding ID" specifying any current research grants and any on going application for work related to the proposal.
- b) Brief description of scientific and technical aspects of the project
- c) Description of the scientific environment and resources

Strict limits will be applied to the length of proposals³:

- Stage 1: 8 pages total (3+4+1)
- Stage 2: 16 pages total (4+10+2)

Only the material that the proposal contains within these limits will be evaluated.

² Exceptionally, the Principal Investigator may himself/herself act as the "applicant legal entity", if he/she is acting in the capacity of the legal entity in his/her own right.

³ Font and letter size will be determined in the Guide for Applicants

In addition, the applicant legal entity must provide, in the stage 2 application, a binding statement that the conditions of independence set out in section 3.2 are already fulfilled or will be provided to the Principal Investigator if the application is successful.

The peer review evaluation for ERC Starting Grants will be carried out by means of a structure of high level Panels.⁴ The Panels may be assisted by referees and may carry out interviews with the applying Principal Investigators at the second stage of the evaluation. The assignment of the proposals to the various panels will take into account the subject of research of each proposal.

Evaluation criteria for ERC Starting Grants are set out in Annex 2. The proposed research activities should respect fundamental ethical principles⁵. Proposals must meet a quality threshold in order to qualify for funding. Amongst the proposals meeting the quality threshold in any call for proposals, a ranked list (stage 2) will be drawn up to determine the retained proposals to be funded in the context of the available budget. If the call establishes indicative budgets for particular topics or fields of research within the scope of the call, separate retained lists may be prepared for each such field, in addition to the overall retained list. The number of proposals passing the first stage of the evaluation will be limited to avoid oversubscription at the second stage.

3.5. *Reapplications and multiple applications*

Rules will apply to reapplications by Principal Investigators for ERC grants whose proposals are not judged to meet the threshold of quality, as well as for multiple applications within the same or different type of ERC grants. These rules, which may subsequently be modified by the Scientific Council in light of experience, are as follows:

- No principal or collaborating investigator may be associated with more than one application to the ERC during the same year.
- A Principal Investigator may not submit an application for an ERC grant during the calendar year following the submission of an unsuccessful application unless that application was judged to meet the quality threshold for funding.

⁴ Approximately 20 panels will be established to span the spectrum of research areas, each of which will have responsibility for a broadly-defined set of research fields.

⁵ Including those reflected in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The opinions of the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies are and will be taken into account. Research activities should also take into account the Protocol on the Protection and Welfare of Animals, and reduce the use of animals in research and testing, with a view to ultimately replacing animal use.

(Note: this rule will not apply to the second call for ERC Starting Grants, in view of the long interval between first and second calls.)

- Only one ERC grant by the Principal Investigator can be active at any time. However, to secure continuity of funding, ERC Starting grantees may apply for an Advanced Investigator Grant during the last year of their Starting Grant award.

4. Coordination & Support Actions (CSA)

Coordination and Support Actions aim to contribute to the implementation activities of the work programme, the analysis and dissemination of results or the preparation of future activities, with a view to enabling the ERC to define and achieve its strategic objectives.

A Co-ordination and Support Action will be used for the appointment and administrative support of the Secretary General of the ERC Scientific Council.

Annex 1

Eligibility Criteria

Starting Independent Researcher Grant

Eligible Scientific Fields

Applications may be made in any field of research, other than those specifically excluded from the EC 7th Framework Programme such as research on nuclear fission and fusion covered by the EURATOM treaty⁶.

Funding of human embryonic stem cell research will be possible within the ethical framework defined in the EC 7th Framework Programme⁷.

Eligible Principal Investigator

The ERC actions are open to researchers of any nationality who would like to set their research activity up in any European Union Member State (EU-25) as well as any Associated or Associated- Candidate Country.

The Principal Investigator can be of any age, nationality and country of residence. He/she must have been awarded⁸ his/her first PhD (or equivalent doctoral degree) more than 2 and less than 8 years prior to the deadline of the call for proposals.

Extensions of this period may be allowed only in case of eligible career breaks which must be properly documented: maternity & paternity leave (up to a maximum of 12 months per child), and leave taken for long-term illness, national service. Leave taken for unavoidable statutory reasons (e.g. clinical qualifications) may also be excluded in the calculation of the eligibility period.

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(a) **Fusion energy research**, with the objective of developing the technology for a safe, sustainable, environmentally responsible and economically viable energy source;

(b) **Nuclear fission and radiation protection** with the objective of enhancing in particular the safety performance, resource efficiency and cost-effectiveness of promoting the safe use and exploitation of nuclear fission and other uses of radiation in industry and medicine.

⁷ "Commission Declaration" in Annex IV of European Council's political agreement on 7th Framework Programme on 25/07/2006

⁸ The reference date towards the calculation of the eligibility period should be based on the date of the actual award according to the national rules in the country that the degree was awarded.



The cumulative eligibility period should not in any case surpass 10 years following the award of the first PhD. No allowance will be made for part-time working (2 years of half-time working count as 2 years towards eligibility).

Eligible Hosting Institution (Applicant Legal Entity)

This institution that will host and engage the Principal Investigator for the duration of the grant must be situated in one of the European Union Member States, or one of the countries that are Associated to the Framework Programme including the countries that are candidates to become EU members. It may also be an International European Interest Organisation (such as CERN, EMBL, etc.) or the European Commission's Joint Research Centre.

Normally, the applicant legal entity will be the only participating legal entity. Other legal entities, including those located in third countries, may however be involved and receive funding to support the work of additional team members, if so specified in the grant award.

This presupposes that in such cases the scientific added value was properly justified and accepted during evaluation by the peer review panels.

Annex 2

Evaluation of proposals for the ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants

Excellence is the sole criterion of evaluation. It will be applied to the evaluation of both the Principal Investigator and the research project. The evaluation will also assess the extent to which the research environment enables the excellence of the project to be achieved.

The detailed criteria applying to these 3 elements of the proposal are as follows:

1. Principal Investigator: Potential to become a world class research leader

Quality of research output: Has the Principal Investigator published in high quality peer reviewed journals or the equivalent? To what extent are these publications ground-breaking and demonstrative of independent creative thinking and capacity to go significantly beyond the state of the art?

Intellectual capacity and creativity: To what extent does the Principal Investigator's record of research, collaborations, project conception, supervision of students and publications demonstrate that he/she is able to confront major research challenges in the field, and to initiate new productive lines of thinking?

2. Quality of the proposed research project

Ground-breaking nature of the research: Does the proposed research address important challenges in the field(s) addressed? Does it have suitably ambitious objectives, which go substantially beyond the current state of the art (e.g. including trans-disciplinary developments and novel or unconventional approaches)?

Potential impact: Does the research open new and important, scientific, technological or scholarly horizons?

Methodology:

a) is the outlined scientific approach (including the activities to be undertaken by the individual team members) feasible? (*Stage 1*)

b) the proposed research methodology (including when pertinent the use of instrumentation, other type of infrastructures etc.) comprehensive and appropriate for to the project? Will it enable the goals of the project convincingly to be achieved within

the timescales and resources proposed and the level of risk associated with a challenging research project? (*Stage 2*)

3. Research Environment

Transition to independence: Will the proposed project enable the Principal Investigator to make or consolidate the transition to independence?

Host institution [normally applicant legal entity]: Does the institution hosting the project have most of the infrastructure necessary for the research to be carried out? Is it in a position to provide an appropriate intellectual environment and infrastructural support and to assist in achieving the ambitions for the project and the Principal Investigator?

Participation of other legal entities: If it is proposed that other legal entities participate in the project, in addition to the applicant legal entity, is their participation fully justified by the scientific added value they bring to the project?

Application of Criteria

- Panels and referees will evaluate and score numerically the proposals under the criteria of Heading 1: *Potential of the Principal Investigator* and Heading 2: *Quality of the proposal*.
- Proposals will be evaluated under Heading 3 criteria on a "pass/fail" basis and commented but not scored.
- The overall grading of the proposals will integrate the strengths and weaknesses including these scores as well as an overall appreciation of the proposal.
- Threshold scores for quality, overall and for individual criteria, will be used to establish the "retained list" of proposals which will be ranked in order of priority for funding.
- Panels will establish a recommended budget for the proposals retained at stage 2.