The ERC evaluation process

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Today's topics:

- ERC projects - brief overview

- Evaluation process & criteria

- Tips on proposal preparation:
    - what to keep in mind when putting it together
    - frequent problems/misconceptions

ERC projects - overview

- **ERC Starting Grants:** 2-7 years after PhD
    - at least partly independent or with clear potential for research independence
    - at least one important publication without the participation of the PI's PhD supervisor

- **ERC Consolidator Grants:** 8-12 years after PhD
    - fully independent researcher
    - evidence of maturity (well developed publication profile)

- **ERC Advanced Grants:** no limit
    - world leading researcher

- **ERC Synergy Grants**: 2-4 PIs
    - "outstanding intrinsic synergetic effect" that can't be achieved by a single PI; 6 years

- **ERC Proof of Concept Grants**: a holder of an on-going ERC grant (StG, CoG, AdG, SyG)
    - commercial or societal impact of the main grant; 18 months

ERC projects - overview

- **Panels**:
  - Chair + 14-16 members
  - cover all subdisciplines in the panel's domain as generalists
  - different countries, incl. overseas experts
  - only Chair's identity is known, the rest only after results are published
  - Chair distributes proposals among the members

    based on your abstract !

  - each proposal is read by 4 panel members:
    - 1-2 might be experts in your **field**
    - the rest are experienced researchers within the domain of a given **panel**

Evaluation process

Evaluation process

- **Step 1 - B1** document only = 5-page 'extended' synopsis & PI profile

- **Panel meeting:**
  - designated Lead Reviewer – summary of the strong and weak points
  - general discussion within the panel
    - → provisional marks (A, AB, B, BC, C) & ranking of the proposals
  - detailed discussion of AB/BA-marked proposals
    - → final decision about proposals **to retain for Step 2** (max. 44/panel)
    - & list of external, expert reviewers for Step 2

  - Lead Reviewers – final report for **rejected proposals** (approved by entire panel):
    - main reasons for rejection, advice for improvements

ergo:

B1 is absolutely **crucial** for getting your foot in the door!

Evaluation process

- **Step 2 - B1 & B2** documents

- **Panel preparation** for the interviews:
  - The evaluation and ranking process start over, regardless of the mark from Step 1

  - reviewers: panel members as generalists
                & minimally 3 (often up to 6) **external experts in your discipline**
  - Lead Reviewer prepares:
    - summary of all reviews
    - draft evaluation report
    - questions for the interview

  provisional Step 2 ranking based on internal & external reviews

Evaluation process

- **Step 2 panel meeting (a.k.a. 'interview'):**
    - applicant's short presentation
    - Q & A period:
        - Lead Reviewer – questions about the critical points raised by external reviewers
        - other panel members
      - → provisional ranking adjustments during a closed discussion

    - last day, after all interviews:
        - general discussion, esp. ranking of A/B and B/A proposals
        - budget issues, recommendations for adjustment if needed
        - **final marks and ranking** approved by **all members** of the panel

- **In sum** – decisions are based on:
      - experts' reviews & performance in the interview & panel's collective judgment

Evaluation criteria

for "excellent frontier research"…

Criteria - overview

- Proposals – numerical marks (1.0 – 5.0):
  - ground-breaking nature
  - ambition
  - feasibility

- PI – overall assessment (no numerical values anymore):
  - intellectual capacity
  - creativity
  - research achievement and peer recognition
  - journal-based metrics (such as IF & similar) *not* to be used in PI evaluation

- *More emphasis on **project excellence** than PI's past achievement*

What counts as 'excellence'?

1. Project proposal

- Originality of your research
    - a new way of framing a known problem
    - novel and open-ended research questions
    - ideally, hypothesis-driven research (may depend on the field)

- Significance of new findings & impact on specific disciplines
    - the results have to lead toward *re-conceptualizing* a topic
    - potential for impact on research in related disciplines

- Nonstarters, to be avoided:
    - adding 'new knowledge'/discovering new 'facts' (= *descriptive* research)
    - 'filling the gap' (≠ a measure of significance)
    - incremental research

Putting it together…

- **State of the art**
  - thorough & convincing critical assessment of existing research:
    - must support the claim of your originality
    - must make it clear why your research is important & findings will be significant

- **Project design**
  - well-defined and clearly presented focus and scope (the *ambition* criterion!)
  - concrete steps and methods for conducting the research
  - properly structured project's parts and sub-parts
  - meaningful relationships between the parts and their findings
  - overall coherence of the project → answering the 'big question'

  note: **no longer** an issue of 'hi-risk/hi-gain' quality !

Putting it together…

- **Feasibility**
  - appropriate data and methods:
    - sources of data (existing?, new?, volume?, relevance?, access?...)
    - well-justified methodology (need not be brand-new!)
  - properly set and clearly presented timeline:
    - believable and effective time allocation
    - coherent milestones and time flow
  - team composition and expertise, division of labor:
    - convincing coverage of the scientific requirements of the project
    - appropriate level of skills, expertise, experience of each project member
    - clearly defined PI's role, responsibilities, and degree of engagement

remember:

these are *individual* grants, **you** are the center of the responsibility !

What counts as 'excellence'?

2. Researcher profile

- Evidence of creativity & intellectual capacity
  - advancement in the field through your scientific output
    - substantial research output to convince the panel you can carry out the project
    - evidence of international recognition
  - emphasis on more recent achievements (publications, datasets, software, patents…)

- Peer recognition:
  - prizes, awards, fellowships, elected academic membership

- Other noteworthy contributions to the research community (if applicable)
  = additional responsibilities, commitments, and leadership roles beyond your individual research activities

Proposal preparation – dos and don'ts

B1 - Extended synopsis

- Must appeal to both generalists and experts in the discipline

- Convincingly presented project description:
  - contextualization within the state of the art, which
    - motivates project's research questions and objectives
    - highlights project's ground-breaking quality
  - clear articulation of the project's conceptual novelty (the 'main idea')
  - description of chosen approaches (not detailed methodology yet)

- Make sure you:
  - resist using too much jargon (esp. important in B1 and Abstract)
  - maintain logical flow in the text (helpful to the evaluator)
  - strike the right balance between the proposal's sections
  - break up the text with an occasional graphic and/or examples

B2 – Full project description

- Aim for scientific peers in the topic/discipline/nature of your project

- Full description:
  - detailed methodology
  - issues (if any) with data that will be used and any contingencies (if applicable)
  - clear articulation and motivation of objectives, novelty, significance, theoretical break-throughs
  - detailed work plan and workflow

in sum: B1 and B2 are distinct documents – written for different audiences and with different goals

Things to be generally careful about

- Select the right panel to start with!
  - → frame your research and write your proposal for that audience
    (different panels may be used to different style and language)

- Do not try to oversell your project/results

- Do not use buzzwords

- Do not engage in name dropping

- Do use graphics – but judiciously and according to the habits of your discipline, AND diagrams have to be truly informative and easy to follow

- Do not evaluate your own project for the panel
  (as in e.g. "this is a very ambitious project")

Things to be generally careful about

- Not enough to focus on developing/building a new infrastructure

- Not enough to "generate new knowledge" – what kind of knowledge??

- Not always a good idea to pursue a topic that is 'in vogue'
  - try to be unique

- Not enough to aim for societally relevant outcome without significant scientific impact
  - societal usefulness as a 'side effect' is commendable but ERC grants are not about applied research

- CV and TR: short informative narratives instead of long lists of items

Some parting words:

- Be prepared to put in many months (9-10) of thinking, rethinking, writing, rewriting – simply a LOT of hard, intensive work.

- Do not feel discouraged if you don't succeed – ERC grants are extremely competitive, and you can always submit again.

- Read the feedback carefully and take it seriously – the evaluators are experienced researchers, and their feedback can help you see how others understand your work.

- Don't be afraid of being bold and ambitious.

- Be proud of your courage and accomplishment, and –

good luck!