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**for Research & Innovation**

# European Research Council (ERC) Proof of Concept Grants

## Guide for Peer Reviewers

Applicable to the ERC Proof of Concept Grants

(ERC Work Programme 2017)

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# 1. Introduction

The selection of proposals for funding by the European Research Council (ERC) Proof of Concept is based strictly on the evaluation criteria set in the ERC Work Programme 2017.

## **The ERC Rules for Submission**

The ERC Scientific Council (ScC) has established a document, adopted by the European Commission, namely the 'ERC Rules for the submission of proposals and the related evaluation, selection and award procedures relevant to the Specific Programme of Horizon 2020 - the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020)' ([ERC Rules for Submission](#))<sup>1</sup>. The ERC Rules for Submission define a number of high-level requirements on the processes implemented by the ERC.

## **The ERC Work Programme**

The ERC ScC has also established the ERC Work Programme (WP) for 2017<sup>2</sup>, which, inter alia, defines the parameters of the Call for Proposals for ERC Proof of Concept Grants. More specifically, it defines the call deadlines and the call budgets. It specifies the evaluation criteria and sets the framework for budgetary implementation.

## **This document**

This document complements the abovementioned legal texts. It specifies in more detail the evaluation process and its inputs and outputs, and it defines the responsibilities of the participants in the process. It details the "ERC Rules for Submission" in a number of important issues, such as the management of conflict of interest.

# 2. Panel structure

In the context of the PoC evaluation procedure, given that it does not involve any scientific evaluation per se, peer reviewers are grouped in a single evaluation panel.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission C(2015)4975 of 23 July 2015

<sup>2</sup> European Commission C(2016)4616 of 25 July 2016

### **3. Peer Reviewers**

#### **The panels**

An ERC PoC panel differs from other ERC panels in several ways. It is composed by a pool of experts, who do not necessarily have similar scientific background, and is not chaired by a Panel Chair. The PoC peer reviewers are selected by the ERCEA on the basis of their technical expertise. They make a significant commitment of their time to the ERC review process. The size of the panel might be increased if the demand of the PoC increases.

**PoC peer reviewers** perform the following tasks:

- Individual review –by electronic means– of a subset of the proposals.
- If necessary, participation in the panel meetings.
- In case of panel meeting, prior familiarisation with a relevant subset of proposals in preparation for the meeting.

#### **The contracts**

In all cases, the relationship between the ERCEA and the peer reviewers is defined by a written and signed agreement (the Contract<sup>3</sup>). Signature of this contract by the peer reviewer indicates acceptance of the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest (Annex 1, Code of Conduct to the expert contract), and use of personal data by the ERCEA. The ERCEA cannot make proposals available to a peer reviewer who has not been officially appointed/contracted (i.e. signed the Contract and, in so doing, agreed to the terms laid down in it including in particular, confidentiality and conflict of interest aspects).

A breach of the Code of Conduct or other serious misconduct by a peer reviewer may be qualified as grave professional misconduct and may lead to the exclusion of this independent expert.

#### **Use of personal data**

All experts involved in the evaluation of proposals must keep in mind that any personal data received are only to be used for the purposes for which they are transmitted. All unnecessary and excessive information submitted by applicants should be disregarded.

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<sup>3</sup> The model expert contract was adopted by the European Commission Decision C(2013)8373 of 10 December 2013.

## 4. The individual reviews

Individual reviews are carried out remotely prior to panel meetings by the deadline set by the Call coordinator. Panel Members participate in the individual review stage.

### Minimum requirements

In the PoC scheme each proposal is evaluated by at least 3 individual peer reviewers. In case of panel meeting, each application is assigned to a “lead reviewer” who introduces the proposal to the panel for discussion and is responsible for drafting the panel comment<sup>4</sup>.

### The interpretation of 'individual'

During the individual evaluation process, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between peer reviewers. Moreover, during the remote evaluation of proposals (i.e. before panel meetings) peer reviewers should not disclose the proposals assigned for their evaluation to other experts. When a Panel Member considers that he/she has insufficient expertise to evaluate any of the proposals he/she received to review, he/she should immediately inform the ERCEA's PoC call coordinator so that the proposal can be reallocated to another peer reviewer.

### Marks and comments

Individual evaluation consists of:

- Awarding a pass/fail mark for each of the evaluation criteria<sup>5</sup>. It is of utmost importance that only the criteria as described in the Work Programme are used to assess the proposals. Peer reviewers should refrain from using any additional criteria no matter the importance it bears in the frame of a given proposal. Each proposal should be treated with the same severity and professionalism (equal treatment).
- Providing a succinct explanatory comment substantiating each mark. Comments should take the form of a statement and explanation of key strengths and key weaknesses of the proposal, in the light of the evaluation criteria.

### The nature of the comments

Comments should be provided by each peer reviewer for the proposal. As these comments will be sent to the applicant as feedback, they should be of good quality, succinct but substantial. They should also be impeccably polite.

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<sup>4</sup> The panel comment is part of the “Evaluation Report” which is returned to the applicant as feedback. The panel comment drafted by the lead reviewer is agreed upon in its final version by all peer reviewers.

<sup>5</sup> See ERC Work Programme 2017, Evaluation criteria

Peer reviewers are obliged to observe the following guidelines:

- Use dispassionate, analytical and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Provide polite comments.
- Critical comments should be constructive and not offensive.
- Avoid self-declaration of insufficient expertise (personal or panel) or non-confidence in the proposal.
- Avoid reference to the applicant age, nationality, gender, or personal matters.
- Avoid making reference to scores in the comments.
- Avoid any direct comparison with any other proposals.
- Avoid any reference or comparison with previous assessments.
- Avoid comments that give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the Principal Investigator or the project.

**Individual reviews have to be submitted in due time to the ERCEA and at the latest prior to the panel meeting.**

## **5. Conflict of Interest (Col)**

Peer reviewers should not be put in a situation in which their impartiality might be questioned, or where the suspicion could arise that recommendations are affected by elements that lie outside the scope of the review. To that effect, the ERC has formulated a clear set of rules pertaining to conflict of interest (Col). These rules are annexed to the Contract and can be found at the end of this document.

## **6. The criteria**

The criteria express the objectives of the ERC activity at the level of the review. They are, therefore, defined in the applicable ERC Work Programme. There are two types of criteria:

- Eligibility criteria.
- Evaluation criteria.

### **Eligibility criteria**

Eligibility criteria are simple, factual and legally-binding rules. Their interpretation does not involve scientific judgement. Hence, eligibility is not part of the review process. Instead, it is carried out in parallel by the ERCEA. Nevertheless, if an expert considers a proposal to be

potentially ineligible during the evaluation process he/she should clarify the case immediately with the ERCEA's PoC call coordinator. In some (rare) cases, proposals may be declared ineligible during or even after the review process, as their ineligibility can only be confirmed with some delay.

### **Evaluation criteria**

The evaluation criteria are at the core of the review process. The evaluation criteria and their interpretation are described in the applicable ERC Work Programme. All judgement on proposals must be made against the evaluation criteria<sup>6</sup>, and against these criteria alone. It is to be noted that, ***in order to be considered for funding, proposals will have to be awarded a pass mark by a majority of peer reviewers on each of the three evaluation criteria.***

The incorrect application of the evaluation criterion or the application of inexistent or irrelevant criteria is considered a procedural error, which may lead to a successful evaluation review and justify a re-evaluation of the proposal.

### **Ranking**

A proposal which fails one or more of the criteria will not be ranked and will not be funded.

If there is not enough budget to fund all the proposals which pass all three evaluation criteria, those proposals which pass all three evaluation criteria will be sorted by the number of pass marks awarded by peer reviewers to criterion 1 (Excellence- Innovation potential), then by the number of pass marks awarded to criterion 2 (Impact), then by the number of pass marks awarded to criterion 3 (Quality and efficiency of the implementation). Proposals will be funded in order of the ranking resulting from this 3-level sorting exercise until depletion of the available budget per evaluation round.

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<sup>6</sup> See ERC Work Programme 2017, Section on Proof of Concept Grants

## **7. Preparation and organisation of the panel meetings**

### **About the necessity of the panel meeting**

The ERC Work Programme 2017 states that proposals which have passed all three evaluation criteria (i.e. 'awarded a pass mark by a majority of peer reviewers on each of the three evaluation criteria') will be ranked according to the number of pass marks they received at the end of the individual review process following the procedure explained above. Proposals will be funded in order of this ranking up to depletion of the available budget. If necessary, the peer reviewers will meet as an evaluation panel in order to determine a priority order for proposals which have the same ranking. Panel meetings will hence only be held if there is any ambiguity on the list of proposals to be considered for funding.

### **Briefings of experts**

At the start of the evaluation session, panel members are invited to Brussels for an Initial Panel Meeting. This meeting's purpose is two-fold – the first is to brief the Panel members on all relevant aspects of the evaluation processes and procedures, and the second is to exchange view with the ERC Executive Agency's (ERCEA) staff about the evaluation.

Experts are encouraged to participate at this initial briefing.

These briefings cover matters such as the evaluation processes and procedures; the content of research topics under consideration; the terms of the experts' contract, including conflict of interest rules, completion of tasks and approval of reports and the possible consequences of non-compliance; instructions to disregard any excess pages; and the need to evaluate proposals 'as they are'; and very limited scope for recommending improvements to highly scored proposals.

For experts evaluating remotely, particular attention will be given to their briefing when specially adapted material may be needed (e.g. CD-ROMs, on-line presentations). Close contact is maintained with the individual experts to assist them on any query.

### **Outputs of the panel meetings**

The output of any individual panel meeting, to be provided at the end of the meeting, consists of the following elements:

1. The ranked list of proposals;
2. The feedback to applicants (see section 8 below);
3. A panel report.

### **The possible use of a voting system**

In the later stages of the evaluation process, panels may expedite their ranking process by the use of a voting system (e.g. a majority vote on one or more proposals, with each Panel Member having one vote per proposal being considered). A Panel Member cannot vote for a

proposal if under a Col, and in such case, an appropriate adjustment is applied. Voting can be an effective way of finalising a ranking list.

## **8. Feedback to applicants (the Evaluation Report)**

Apart from recommendations on fundable proposals and their ranking, the most important output of the panel meetings and the evaluation is the feedback to applicants. According to the ERC Rules for Submission, the ERCEA will provide an Evaluation Report to each applicant, which documents the results of the evaluation. Especially in the case of rejection, the Evaluation Report needs to convey a comprehensive explanation of the fate of the proposal and the position of the Panel with regard to it. The principle applied is that the Evaluation Report of each proposal contains a documentation of all comments and observations it received from Panel Members.

### **Elements of the Evaluation Report**

The Evaluation Report of any proposal comprises three components:

1. The recommendation of the panel (ranking list).
2. Average pass/fail by criterium
3. A compilation of Individual reviews.

### **The comments by individual peer reviewers**

The comments by peer reviewers are included in the Evaluation Report as received. They may be subject to mild editing by the ERCEA, without altering their intended message, in order to enhance clarity, remove any inappropriate, irrelevant or polemic remarks, remove revelation of the peer reviewers' identity, misleading recommendations, etc. These individual comments may not necessarily be convergent - differences of opinion about the merits of a proposal are legitimate among evaluators, and it is potentially useful for an applicant to be informed of the various views.

### **The panel report**

In addition to the ranked list of proposals, the panel report briefly documents the evaluation methodology followed by the panel. It may also contain, as deemed appropriate, reflections on issues such as the quality of proposals in relation to the budget and other observations. It may furthermore contain recommendations to be taken into account by the ERC in future review sessions.

## **9. The role of the Scientific Council (ScC )**

The ERC ScC may delegate its members to attend panel meetings. The role of the ScC delegates relates to ensure and promote coherence of reviews, to identify best practices, and to gather information for future reviews of the procedures by the ScC.

In conformity with the mandate of the ScC, to carry out the scientific governance of the ERC, and in line with the role of the ScC foreseen in the WP, ScC Members will abstain from influencing the results of the review process.

## **10. The role of Independent Observers**

Under the ERC Rules for Submission, independent experts may be appointed as observers to examine the evaluation process from the point of view of its working and execution. The Independent Observers are independent of the ERCEA and of the ScC. Their function and role is described in the ERC Rules for Submission.

# 1. Annex 1

## Article 2 – Obligations of Impartiality<sup>7</sup>

1. The expert must perform their work **impartially**. To this end, the expert is required to:

- a) inform the contracting party or relevant service of any conflicts of interest arising in the course of their work including of any proposal competing with the proposal where the expert may have a conflict of interest;
- b) confirm there is no conflict of interest for each proposal s/he is evaluating by signing a declaration in the electronic evaluation system.

2. **Definition of the conflict of interest:** For a given proposal, a conflict of interest exists if an expert:

- a) was involved in the preparation of the proposal.
- b) stands to benefit directly or indirectly if the proposal is accepted.
- c) has a close family or personal relationship with any person representing an applicant legal entity.
- d) is a director, trustee or partner or is in any way involved in the management of an applicant legal entity.
- e) is employed or contracted by one of the applicant legal entities<sup>8</sup> or any named subcontractors.
- f) is a member of an Advisory Group set up by the Commission to advise on the preparation of EU or Euratom Horizon 2020 work programmes, or work programmes in an area related to the call for proposals in question.
- g) is a National Contact Point, or is directly working for the Enterprise Europe Network.

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<sup>7</sup> This section is an extract from Annex 1 to the applicable expert contract [Commission Decision C(2013)8373].

<sup>8</sup> However, the contracting party or relevant service may decide to invite an expert who is employed or contracted by one of the applicant legal entities or any named subcontractors to take part in the panel review session, if the expert works in a different department/laboratory/institute from the one where the work is to be carried out, and if the constituent bodies operate with a high degree of autonomy, and if such a role is justified by the requirement to appoint the best available experts and by the limited size of the pool of qualified experts.

- h) is a member of a Programme Committee.
- i) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with the principal investigator of any proposal s/he is requested to evaluate as an additional reviewer from another panel (cross-panel or cross-domain proposal).
- j) has or has had during the last five years, a scientific collaboration with the principal investigator of the proposal.
- k) has or has had a relationship of scientific rivalry or professional hostility with the principal investigator of the proposal.
- l) has or has had in the past, a mentor/mentee relationship with the principal investigator of the proposal.
- m) has submitted a proposal as a principal investigator or a team member, under the same call.
- n) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with the principal investigator of any proposal submitted to their panel.

In the following situations the contracting party or relevant service in consultation with the ERC Scientific Council will decide whether a conflict of interest exists, taking account of the objective circumstances, available information and related risks. The contracting party or relevant service may decide that the expert takes part or not in the evaluation of the given proposal or of the call

when an expert:

- i. was employed by one of the applicant legal entities in the last three years.
- ii. is involved in a contract or grant agreement, grant decision or membership of management structures (e.g. member of management or advisory board etc.) research collaboration with an applicant legal entity or a fellow researcher, or had been so in the last three years.
- iii. is in any other situation that could cast doubt on their ability to participate in the evaluation of the proposal impartially, or that could reasonably appear to do so in the eyes of an external third party.

### 3. Consequences of conflicts of interest

- a) If a conflict of interest referred to in points (m) and (n) of paragraph 2 is reported by the expert or established by the contracting party or relevant service, or becomes apparent at any stage of the evaluation, the expert must not evaluate any proposal in the call ('out of the call' rule). Any comments and scores already given by the expert will be discounted. If necessary, the expert will be replaced.
- b) If a conflict of interest referred to in points (a) to (l) of paragraph 2 is reported by the expert or established by the contracting party or relevant service, the expert must not evaluate the given proposal or take part in any discussion or scoring of it. The expert must leave the room or the electronic forum when the proposal is discussed ('out of the room' rule).

If it is revealed during an evaluation that an expert has knowingly concealed a conflict of interest, the expert will be immediately excluded, and sanctions will apply (see Articles 14, 15, 16 and 18 of the Contract or in the Financial Regulation and its implementing rules). Any panel meeting in which s/he has participated will be declared null. The panel meeting will be reconvened and the proposal(s) concerned will be re-evaluated.