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European Research Council (ERC) Frontier Research Grants

Guide for Peer Reviewers

Applicable to the ERC Synergy Grants
(ERC Work Programme 2018)

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1.0	19.07.2017	Initial version
2.0	03.11.2017	Modification of Annex 1: the Excerpt of the Conflict of interest was substituted with a description of the Code of Conduct adapted to the ERC calls. Annex 2 is no longer present.

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1. Introduction

The selection of proposals for funding by the European Research Council (ERC) is based strictly on peer review evaluation with excellence as the sole criterion. The ERC uses a panel-based system, high-level scientists and/or scholars assess proposal and make recommendations for funding, with the assistance of external specialists, called Remote Referees.

The ERC Rules for Submission

The ERC Scientific Council (ERC ScC) defined a number of high-level requirements on the processes collected in the 'ERC Rules for the submission'. This document adopted by the European Commission, establishes the rule of 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](#))¹.

The ERC Work Programme

The [ERC Work Programme \(ERC WP\) for 2018](#)², defines, *inter alia*, all the parameters of the Call for Proposals for ERC Synergy Grant. More specifically, it defines the call deadlines and the call budget. It also specifies that a three-step peer review procedure will be applied following a single submission of a full proposal, and sets the framework for budgetary implementation, and the evaluation criteria.

This document

The ERC ScC establishes the peer review evaluation methodology, and this document (also referred to as the 'The procedure for peer review evaluation' in section 3.6 of the [ERC Rules for Submission](#)) complements the abovementioned legal texts. It specifies in more detail the peer review evaluation process and its inputs and outputs, and the responsibilities of the participants in the process.

ERC Synergy Grants: objectives

ERC Synergy is a funding scheme reintroduced with [ERC WP 2018](#). The purpose of this scheme is to enable a small group of two to four Principal Investigators and their teams to bring together complementary skills, knowledge, and resources in new ways, in order to jointly address ambitious research problems so to promote substantial advances at the frontiers of knowledge, to cross-fertilize specific fields and to encourage new productive lines of enquiry and new methods and techniques, including unconventional approaches and investigations at the interface between established disciplines.

The peer review evaluation will therefore look for proposals that demonstrate the synergies, complementarities and added value of the group that could lead to breakthroughs that would not be possible by the individual PIs working alone.

As is the case with any other frontier research funded by the ERC, research proposals are expected to be risky. It remains important, however, that the risk and how it will be managed is well thought through and explained in the proposal.

¹ European Commission C(2017)4750 of 12 July 2017

² European Commission C(2017) 5307/2 of 2 August 2017

2. Panel structure

The ERC has the mandate to implement a bottom-up, investigator-driven approach to frontier research funding. Consequently, the principal objective of the peer review system is to select the best science, independent of its discipline and independent of the particularities of the review panel structure.

The Synergy call foresees a single submission of full proposals, followed by a three-step evaluation, including interviews. The evaluation will be conducted by means of a structure of dedicated panels composed by members nominated by the Scientific Council on the basis of their scientific reputation and following the criteria set up by the ERC ScC Standing Committee on Panels. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of Synergy proposals, the composition of the panels in step 1 is not predefined. Step 1 panel will be formed from approximately 80 Panel Members and 5 Chairs, who will ensure a wide generalist approach to review the entire spectrum of science and scholarship currently known. In addition to Synergy Panel Members, up to 70 Members of other ERC frontier calls, called panel evaluators (PEVs) can complement the expertise of the Synergy panel if needed. Five panels in step 2 will be formed in a dynamic way after the step 1 filtering to ensure the best expertise for a group of proposals. The step 2 panels will be composed using the step 1 Panel Members, grouping them by around 15-18 experts in each panel. In addition to the Panel Members (who act as 'generalists'), the ERC evaluation process relies on input from Remote Referees. They do not participate in panel meetings. They are scientists and scholars who bring in the necessary specialised expertise. Remote Referees are suggested by the Panel, they work remotely and deliver their individual assessments by electronic means. In step 3, the interview panels may be reconfigured to ensure the best expertise for the proposals (ideally in 3 panels and not more than 5).

The contracts/letter of appointment for ERC experts

The relationship between the ERCEA and the experts is defined by a written and signed agreement (the [Contract](#)³ or a [letter of appointment](#)⁴ in the case of ERC Remote Referees). By signing these documents, the expert accepts the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest (see section 6), and use of personal data by the ERCEA. The ERCEA cannot make proposals available to an expert who has not been officially contracted. A breach of the Code of Conduct or other serious misconduct by a reviewer may be qualified as grave professional misconduct and may lead to the termination of the contract.

Exclusion of independent experts at request of an applicant

The group of applicants submitting a proposal to Synergy call, may request that up to four specific experts would not act as peer reviewers in the evaluation of their proposal. Such a request is made in the administrative forms at the time of proposal submission.

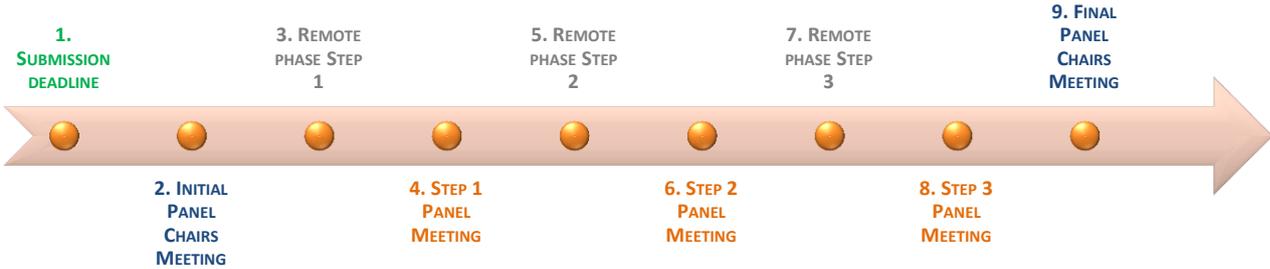
The nominated independent expert may be excluded from the evaluation of the proposal as long as the ERCEA remains in the position to have the proposal evaluated by qualified expert.

Such a request will be treated confidentially by the authorised staff of the ERCEA and the concerned Panel Chair. If the excluded expert is a member of the panel, they may be informed in confidence about the request concerning him/her. In the case of exclusion of the Panel Chair, the authorised staff of the ERCEA may consult the Deputy Panel Chair accordingly.

³ Commission Decision C(2017)1392 of 07.03. 2017 on the model contract for experts for Horizon 2020

⁴ See Annex B to the [ERC Rules for Submission](#).

3. The tasks of Panel Chairs, Vice Panel Chairs, Panel Members, Panel Evaluators and Remote Referees



	Task	Panel chairs	Vice chairs	Panel Members	Panel Evaluators (PEVs) ⁵	Remote Referees (RRs)
Step 1	Participation at the Initial Panel Chair meeting: familiarisation with the proposals and assignment of proposals to reviewers	X				
	Writing Individual Assessment Reports (by electronic means)	X	X	X	X	
	Identification of Remote Referees (specialised external reviewers), who will complement in step 2 the generalist reviews of Panel Members	X	X	X	X	
	Participation at the step 1 panel meeting (selecting proposals to pass to step 2, and writing short panel comments for the rejected proposals)	X	X			
Step 2	Formation of the 5 step 2 panels and allocation of proposals to reviewers	X				
	Further identification of Remote Referees	X	X	X		
	Writing Individual Assessment Reports	X	X	X	X ⁵	X
	Participation at the step 2 panel meeting (selecting proposals to pass to step 3 and writing panel comments for the rejected proposals)	X	X	X		

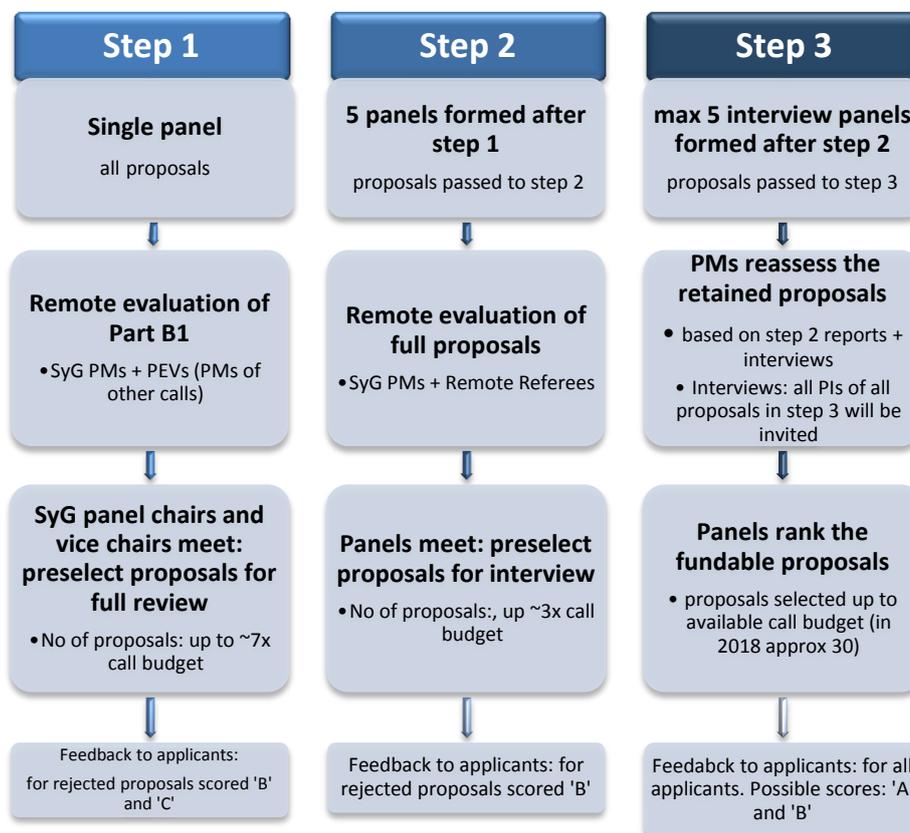
⁵ Note that PEVs, thus Panel Members of other ERC frontier calls, in step 1 act as generalists, helping out the SyG panel members in case of a great number of proposals. In step 2 however, they act as Remote Referees, being selected due to their close expertise to the proposal. PEVs, being active Panel Members of ERC frontier calls, are paid for their remote reviewing task.

Step 3	Formation of up to 5 step 3 panels and allocation of proposals to reviewers	X				
	Defining the interview format and preparing questions to be asked during the interview, at the panel meeting	X	X	X		
	Participation at the step 3 panel meeting (interviews with all PIs for each proposal, ranking of the proposals selected for funding, writing panel comments for all proposals)	X	X	X		
	Participation at the Final Panel Chairs meeting	X				

The names of the Panel Chairs are publicly available after the call publication. The names of Panel Members are published after the final results have been communicated to all the applicants. The names of all Remote Referees are made public once a year for all ERC calls, after the final results have been communicated to all ERC applicants.

4. The Reviewing process

The Synergy evaluation scheme is to be carried out in three steps. The figure below shows the schematic representation of the evaluation process.



Step 1: Proposals that fulfil the eligibility criteria are evaluated by the ERC Synergy panels. Due to the expected broad spectrum of proposals, no disciplinary panels will be constituted at Step 1. Applicants select between 4 and 6 ERC keywords to best describe the field of research covered by their proposals (same keywords used as for StG/CoG/AdG grants). The allocation of the proposals will be done by the Panel Chairs during the Initial Panel Chair meeting. During the step 1 remote phase, proposals will be evaluated by a pool of experts remotely. The pool of experts would comprise of about 85 experts nominated as Synergy Panel Members by the Scientific Council. If needed, panel members of other ERC frontier calls will provide further reviews. These additional panel members, working for the Synergy call, are called panel evaluators (PEVs) and are paid, but they do not participate at panel meetings. For the proposals not selected for step 2, scored B or C, short panel comments will be used. For proposals selected for step 2, Panel Members will suggest specialists in the field of the proposals and who will be contacted to act as remote referees in the remote phase of step 2. At the end of the Step 1 panel meeting, the Panel Chairs jointly examine all proposals passed during the Step 1 evaluation process, decide on the allocation of reviewers to proposals and form 5 panels using the pool of Panel Members.

Step 2: Full versions of proposals (i.e. Part B1 and Part B2) passed during the Step 1 evaluation process are assessed by members of the Step 2 panels. Five panels are dynamically constituted, 2 Physical Sciences and Engineering (PE), 2 Life Sciences (LS) and 1 Social Sciences and Humanities (SH) oriented panels in step 2. Each panel would have around 15 - 18 members. A dynamic panel structure would accommodate the possibility of experts participating in different panels/configurations to ensure proper treatment of

inter/multidisciplinary proposals. External specialized reviews will complement the generalist reviews of the panelists. The specialist reviews will be provided by unpaid remote referees and, if needed, panel evaluators (PEVs), with an expertise close to the proposal. At the end of the remote assessment the 5 panels meet in Brussels. The number of proposals would be reduced during the panel meetings, such that the accumulative total value of all proposed budgets is up to about 3 times the call budget. The applications passed to the next step will not be ranked. For the proposals not selected for step 3, scored B, panel comments will be written. At the end of the Step 2 panel meeting, the chairs of the Step 2 panels jointly examine all proposals passed during the Step 2 evaluation process and establish the Step 3 interview process and (re)form the step 3 panels. They will agree on the format of the interview that will be communicated to the applicants. They will also agree on a set of general questions to be asked for each application across all the newly formed step 3 panels.

Step 3: The most competitive of the retained proposals are identified at this step. A minimum of three and a maximum of five panels would interview the applicants in parallel. Panel Members would be encouraged to participate in panels of variable configurations to best meet the needs of the proposal. The principal investigators of all proposals passed during the Step 2 evaluation process present their proposals and answer questions of the members of the Step 3 panels. Budgets are reassessed at this stage, and adjusted if needed. No new written reviews are required at this stage. All proposals at this final step are ranked and only those that have rankings above the limit set by the call budget are funded. The results from the different interview panels will be consolidated into one ranked list. For all proposals, the panels will draft panel comments conveying the decision and score of the panel.

5. The individual reviews

For all ERC frontier research grants, **scientific excellence is the sole criterion of evaluation**. It will be applied in conjunction to the evaluation of both: the ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility of the research project, and the intellectual capacity, creativity and commitment of the Principal Investigators.

In case of the ERC Synergy Grant the scientific excellence takes on an additional meaning: its intrinsic synergetic effect. Peer reviewers are asked to look at distinct features – synergy, complementarity of the Principal Investigators, appropriate working arrangements, risk – when assessing the excellence of the proposal.

Individual reviews are carried out prior to step 1 and 2 panel meetings. Panel Members, Panel Evaluators and Remote Referees participate in the individual review stage.

Minimum requirements

[The ERC Rules for Submission](#) stipulate that each proposal shall be reviewed by at least three peer reviewers. In step 1 all proposals are reviewed by Panel Members. In case of oversubscription, they will be supported by Members of other panels (PEVs). In step 2, reviews are carried out by Panel Members and Remote Referees.

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 (in step 2 and 3) reflecting the main points of the panel discussion. The panel comment drafted by the 'lead reviewer' is agreed upon in its final version by all Panel Members. The panel comment is part of the 'Evaluation Report' which is returned to the applicant as feedback.

The interpretation of 'individual' review

During the individual reviewing/remote evaluation process, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between reviewers. Moreover, during the remote evaluation of proposals (i.e. before panel meetings), Panel Members should not disclose the proposals assigned for their evaluation to other experts. When a Panel Member considers that they have insufficient

expertise to evaluate any of the assigned proposals, they should immediately inform the ERCEA's Scientific Officers and the Panel Chair, so that the proposal can be reassigned to another reviewer.

Marks and comments

Individual reviewing consists of:

- Providing a succinct explanatory comment substantiating the mark for the Research Project.
- Indicating to which extent the reviewer agrees with the statements related to the excellence of the Principal Investigators and providing an optional explanatory comment.
- Awarding marks for the two main elements of the proposal - the Research Project and the Principal Investigators.
- Moreover, in individual reviews in step 1 and then in step 2, experts are asked to suggest names of scientists/scholars who could assess as specialists the proposals in step 2. These suggestions are crucial at this stage of the Synergy evaluation process.

The importance of marks and comments

Both marks and comments are critically important. The individual review marks determine the relative position on the initial ranking list and may serve as a starting point for the panel discussions. These marks are not communicated to the applicants; only the final outcome expressed as A, B or C (see section 11). All comments are included in the Evaluation Report and therefore reproduced in the feedback to applicants (see section 12). Reviewers should therefore take care about the formulation of comments in their individual assessments.

The nature of the comments

Comments should be provided at each step by each reviewer for the Research Project. They should be of good quality, genuine, succinct but substantial. They should also be impeccably polite. Comments should take the form of a statement and explanation of key strengths and key weaknesses of the proposal, in light of the evaluation criterion.

Reviewers are obliged to observe the following guidelines:

- Use dispassionate, analytical and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Critical comments should be constructive.
- 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, the proposed science, or the scientific field concerned.

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

The range of marks

Panels and Remote Referees will evaluate and mark the proposals according to:

- 1: Research Project;
- 2: Principal Investigators

Each proposal receives a mark on a scale from 1 to 4 for each of the two above sections. Marks are awarded in integers or halves. Marks range from 1 (non-competitive) to 4 (outstanding). As a general recommendation, it seems reasonable to reserve the highest mark, i.e. 4.0 (outstanding), for the top 10% of proposals, marks 4.0 or 3.5 only for the top 20%, and mark 3.0 only for the top 30% of proposals. In all cases, and above all, reviewers are requested to base their assessment strictly on the evaluation criterion.

While numerical marks from 1 to 4 are used in the remote evaluation phase and serve as a starting point for the panel meetings, the outcome of the panel meeting is expressed as A, B or C (see section 11 of this document – 'The tasks of the panel meetings'). Hence, the individual numerical marks are not communicated to the applicants. At the end of each evaluation step, the proposals will be ranked by the panels on the basis of the marks they have received and the panels' overall appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses.

Review of the requested EU contribution

In step 3 panel comments, a reduction of the requested grant may be recommended if some expenses are not considered fully justified or needed (i.e. cuts across-the-board are not allowed). Recommendations for amendments to the amount granted must be documented and explained in the panel comments for each proposal concerned, based on an analysis of the resources requested and necessary to carry out the work.

Panels are advised to consider carefully whether recommendations for large reductions may in fact be a reflection of a weak proposal and whether it would be advisable to reject the proposal.

6. Conflict of Interest for ERC experts

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.

The conflict of interest rules for Panel Members and Panel Evaluators are annexed to the Expert Contract. Since a new model expert contract has been adopted with the effect of 01/04/2017 please see the revised [Annex 1](#) enclosed to this document 'Code of Conduct'. On the basis of the information available, the Panel Chair shall avoid making conflicting assignments of proposals to reviewers.

The conflict of interest rules for Remote Referees are outlined in their letter of appointment (see Annex B to the [revised ERC Rules for Submission](#)).

7. The eligibility and evaluation criteria

The criteria express the objectives of the ERC activity at the level of the review. They are, therefore, defined in the applicable [ERC WP](#). There are two types of criteria:

- Eligibility criteria
- Evaluation criterion

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria are simple, factual and legally-binding. Their interpretation does not involve scientific judgement. Hence, eligibility is not part of the peer review evaluation 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 they should clarify the case immediately with the ERCEA's Scientific Officers. In some (rare) cases, proposals may be

declared ineligible during or even after the peer review evaluation process, as their ineligibility can only be confirmed with some delay.

Evaluation criterion

Excellence is the sole criterion of evaluation and is at the core of the peer review evaluation process. It is applied to the evaluation of both the Research Project and the Principal Investigators in conjunction. The feasibility of the scientific approach is assessed at step 1. The detailed scientific approach (methodology, timescales and resources included) is assessed at step 2 and at step 3. The detailed elements applying to the excellence of the Research Project and the Principal Investigators for each step and their interpretation are described in the applicable [ERC WP 2018](#). All assessments on proposals must be made against the evaluation criterion and its detailed elements alone.

The incorrect application of the evaluation criterion or the application of inexistent or irrelevant criteria for the step concerned is considered a procedural error, which may justify a re-evaluation of the proposal.

8. Preparation and organisation of the panel meetings

Briefings of experts

At the start of the evaluation session, Panel Chairs are invited to Brussels for an Initial Panel Chairs' Meeting. This meeting's purpose is two-fold – (i) to brief the Panel Chairs on all relevant aspects of the evaluation processes and procedures, and (ii) to work on tasks including the assignment of the proposals with the ERCEA's Scientific Officers. Furthermore, before each evaluation session, Panel Chairs and Panel Members⁶ are briefed by their ERCEA Scientific Officers. These briefings cover matters such as the evaluation processes and procedures; 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; and the need to evaluate proposals 'as they are'; and very limited scope for recommending improvements to highly scored proposals⁷.

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 with any query.

Autonomy of Panel Chairs

Panel Chairs have a high degree of autonomy in the conduct of their meetings, within the [ERC Rules for Submission](#), the [ERC WP](#) and this Guide: which proposals to discuss in detail, in which order, when to resort to voting and how to vote, etc. The conduct of the meetings will also be influenced by the number of proposals to be reviewed by the panel.

The efficiency of meetings and preparation

The ERC attaches great importance to the principle that panel meetings should be efficient. For this reason, preparatory work is carried out in advance of the meeting by electronic means:

1. Panel Members participating at the meetings familiarise themselves with proposals in their panel, in order to be able to make high-quality recommendations;
2. In step 1, Panel Members, individually and remotely, review a subset of submitted proposals;

⁶ Panel Members only participate to evaluation meeting at step 2 and step 3

⁷ See section 3.6.1 – '*Briefings of the panels*' in the [ERC Rules for Submission](#).

3. In step 1, each Panel Member and Panel Evaluator is asked to recommend to the Panel Chair potential Remote Referees⁸ for an in-depth review of those proposals they recommend to be retained for step 2;
4. In step 2, Panel Members, individually and remotely, review a subset of retained proposals;
5. In step 2, Panel Members are asked to recommend potential Remote Referees for an in-depth review of the proposals they review in step 2.
6. In step 2, Remote Referees contribute to the evaluation process with individual reviews prepared remotely;
7. In step 3, Panels will conduct the interviews and will decide on a rank list of proposals selected for funding.

The prior individual reviewing stage increases the efficiency of evaluation in two ways:

1. By creating a preliminary ranking of proposals; this allows panel discussions to focus on those proposals that merit substantial discussions and an early elimination of the low-ranked proposals.
2. By gathering elements of the feedback to applicants; particularly for the low ranked proposals, the comments obtained by their individual reviewing may sufficiently capture substantial reasons for the rejection (see section 12 of this document 'Feedback to applicants (the Evaluation Report)')

Ranking methodology

Starting from the preliminary ranking, panels may decide to go through a process of successive elimination stages, where the depth of discussion increases as the number of proposals in competition decreases. Panels will provide short panel comments in step 1 for the rejected proposals, scored B and C, while in step 2 and 3 a panel comment will be provided (see section 12 of this document 'Feedback to applicants (the Evaluation Report)').

Outputs of the panel meetings

The output of any 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;
3. List of remote referees for step 2 (in step 1 and step 2 panel meetings);
4. A panel report.

The panel report

In addition to the ranked list of proposals, the panel report (prepared by the Panel Chair) 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. It may furthermore contain recommendations to be taken into account by the ERC in future review sessions.

9. The tasks of the panel meetings

At step 1 of the evaluation process Part B1 of the proposal is assessed, marked and ranked.

At the end of step 1 panel meeting, the proposals will be ranked by the panels chairs and vice chairs on the basis of the comments they have received and the panels' overall appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses. The panel then makes three types of recommendations:

⁸ See footnote 27 of the [ERC Rules for Submission](#).

1. Proposals of sufficient quality to pass to step 2 of the evaluation, scored **A**. The total budget of proposals selected for step 2 may correspond to up to 7 times the panel's indicative budget.
2. Proposals of high quality but not sufficient to pass to step 2 of the evaluation, scored **B**. These proposals are not further evaluated and will not be recommended for funding. In this case applicants may be subject to resubmission restrictions in future calls if specified in the applicable [ERC WP](#)⁹.
3. Proposals that are not of sufficient quality to pass to step 2 of the evaluation, scored **C**. In this case applicants may be subject to resubmission restrictions in future calls if specified in the applicable [ERC WP](#)⁹.

Applicants whose proposal will receive a B or C score in step 1, will receive a short panel comment.

At step 2 the complete version (i.e. Parts B1 and B2) of the retained proposals are assessed and ranked by the panel.

At the end of step 2 the panel makes two types of recommendations:

1. Proposals are of sufficient quality to pass to step 3 of the evaluation, scored **A**. The total budget of proposals selected for step 3 may correspond to up to 3 times the panel's indicative budget.
2. Proposals are of high quality but not sufficient to pass to step 3 and therefore will not be funded scored **B**.

Applicants whose proposal will receive a B score in step 2, will receive a panel comment.

At step 3 the most competitive (i.e. Parts B1 and B2) of the retained proposals are identified and ranked by the panel.

For Synergy Grant Call, Principal Investigators whose proposals have been retained for the step 3 of the evaluation are invited for an interview to present their proposal to the evaluation panel in Brussels. At the beginning of the step 3 process the proposals are not ranked. At the end of step 3 the panel produces a final ranking list. At this point the panel makes two types of recommendations:

1. Those proposals which fully meet the ERC's excellence criterion and are therefore recommended for funding **if sufficient funds are available**, are scored **A**;
2. Those proposals which meet some but not all elements of the ERC's excellence criterion and therefore will not be funded are scored **B**.

Proposals recommended for funding will be funded by the ERC if sufficient funds are available¹⁰. Proposals will be funded in priority order from the respective panel budgets based on their rank. If any funds are still available from the panel budgets or additional funds become available, proposals will then be funded in order of their 'normalised accumulated budget'¹¹.

⁹ See under Eligibility criteria; 'Restrictions on submission of proposals' of the [ERC WP 2018](#).

¹⁰ Additional funds can become available in cases such as the failure of the granting procedure to projects, the withdrawal of proposals, budget savings agreed during the granting procedure, or the availability of additional budget from other sources.

¹¹ The recommended normalised accumulated budget (NAB) for every panel is calculated by summing the normalised budget (recommended budget divided by panel's indicative budget) of each proposal from the top position down to the actual position of the given proposal. Thus, the normalised accumulated budget takes into account the position of the proposal in its panel ranking, the recommended budget of the proposal and of all

At the end of this step, applicants will receive an Evaluation Report which will include the ranking range of their proposal out of the proposals evaluated by the panel.

10. Feedback to applicants (the Evaluation Report)

Apart from recommendations on fundable proposals and their ranking, the most important output of the panel meetings 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 from step 2 and 3, needs to convey a comprehensive explanation of the fate of the proposal and the position of the panel with regard to it. At the end of the first step, only a short comment is conveyed to the applicant alongside the individual reviews. The principle applied is that the Evaluation Report of each proposal contains a documentation of all comments and observations it received from both Panel Members and the individual peer reviewers who have carried out individual assessments of the proposal.

Elements of the Evaluation Report

The Evaluation Report of any proposal comprises three components:

1. The recommendation of the panel (A, B or C grade plus ranking range).
2. A comment approved by the panel.
3. The comments from the individual assessments given by individual reviewers prior to the panel meeting.

The comments by individual reviewers

The comments by reviewers (Panel Members, and other 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 Remote Referees' 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 comment

The panel comment is the key element of the information provided to the applicants at the end of the evaluation. It should clearly explain the decision adopted by the panel substantiating the reasons which led to the panel decision.

Proposals rejected at step 1 will receive short panel comments. For proposals passed to the next steps, the panel comment would acknowledge the weaknesses or strengths pointed out by the individual reviewers and/or arisen during the panel discussion.

As it is a highly competitive call, at each step a number of proposals of reasonable or good quality will be rejected. Such proposals may typically have positive comments from individual reviewers. However, they do not gather enough support from Panel Members when taking into account the budgetary constraint that determines the number of proposals that can be passed to the next step or funded. In such cases, the panel comments may reflect this aspect.

11. The role of the ERC Scientific Council

The ERC ScC may delegate its members to attend panel meetings. The role of these delegates is to ensure and promote coherence of reviews between panels, to identify best

proposals ranked higher in the same panel and the indicative budget of the panel.

practices, and to gather information for future reviews of the procedures by the ERC ScC.

In conformity with the mandate of the ERC ScC to carry out the scientific governance of the ERC, and in line with the role of the ERC ScC foreseen in the [ERC WP](#), ERC ScC members will abstain from influencing the results of the peer review evaluation process.

12. The role of independent observers

Under the [ERC Rules for Submission](#), independent experts may be appointed as observers to examine the peer review evaluation process from the point of view of its working and execution. The independent observers are external to the ERCEA and to the ERC ScC. Their function and role is described in section 3.4 of the [ERC Rules for Submission](#).

13. Annex 1

Code of conduct as annexed to the new model expert contract (in force since 01/04/2017). The version adapted to the ERC Calls is herein reported.

1. Performing the work

1.1. The expert must work independently, in a personal capacity and not on behalf of any organisation.

1.2. The expert must:

(a) evaluate each proposal in a confidential and fair way, in accordance with the Horizon 2020 Rules for Participation Regulation No 1290/2013¹² and, in particular, with the ERC Rules for Submission and Evaluation¹³;

(b) perform his/her work to the best of his/her abilities, professional skills, knowledge and applying the highest ethical and moral standards;

(c) follow the instructions and time-schedule given by the Agency.

1.3. The expert may not delegate the work to another person or be replaced by another person.

1.4. If a person or entity involved in a proposal(s) approaches the expert before or during the evaluation, s/he must immediately inform the Agency.

1.5. The expert may not be (or become) involved in any of the actions resulting from the proposal(s) that s/he evaluated (at any stage of the procedure, including for two-stage calls).

2. Impartiality

2.1. The expert must perform his/her work **impartially** and take all measures to prevent any situation where the impartial and objective implementation of the work is compromised for reasons involving economic interest, political or national affinity, family or emotional ties or any other shared interest (**'conflict of interests'**).

The following situations will **automatically** be considered as **conflict of interest**:

(a) **for a proposal(s) s/he is requested to evaluate**, if s/he:

(i) was involved in the preparation of the proposal(s);

(ii) is a director, trustee or partner or is in any way involved in the management of an applicant (or linked third party or other third party involved in the action);

(iii) is employed or contracted by one of the applicants (or linked third parties, named

¹² Regulation (EU) No 1290/2013 of 11 December 2013 laying down the rules for the participation and dissemination in "Horizon 2020 – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020)" (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 81).

¹³ Available at http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/funding/reference_docs.html

subcontractors or other third parties involved in the action);

(iv) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with the principal investigator of the proposal s/he is requested to evaluate as an additional reviewer from another panel (cross-panel or cross-domain proposal);

(v) has (or has had during the last five years) a scientific collaboration with the principal investigator of the proposal;

(vi) has (or has had) a relationship of scientific rivalry or professional hostility with the principal investigator of the proposal;

(vii) has (or has had), a mentor/mentee relationship with the principal investigator of the proposal.

In this case, the expert must be excluded from evaluation of the proposal(s) concerned (and may not take part in any discussion or scoring of the proposal and must leave the room or the electronic forum when it is discussed ('out of the room' rule). Part(s) of an evaluation to which the expert already participated must be declared void. Comments and scores already given must be discounted. If necessary, the expert must be replaced and the proposal(s) concerned must be re-evaluated.

However, in exceptional and duly justified cases, the responsible Agency staff may decide to nevertheless invite the expert to take part in the evaluation, if:

- the expert works in a different department/laboratory/institute from the one where the action is to be carried out and
- the departments/laboratories/institutes within the organisation concerned operate with a high degree of autonomy and
- the participation is justified by the requirement to appoint the best available experts and by the limited size of the pool of qualified experts.

In this case, the other experts in the group of evaluators will be informed about the situation of the expert.

(b) for a proposal(s) s/he is requested to evaluate AND for all proposal(s) competing for the same call budget-split, if s/he:

(i) was involved in the preparation of any proposal(s) assigned to the **same panel within the same call** budget-split;

(ii) would benefit if any proposal(s) assigned to the same panel within the same call budget-split is accepted or rejected;

(iii) has close family ties (spouse, domestic or non-domestic partner, child, sibling, parent etc.) or other close personal relationship with a person (including linked third parties or other third parties) involved in the preparation of any proposal(s) assigned to the same panel within the same call budgetsplit, or with a person which would benefit if such a proposal(s) is accepted or rejected.

In this case, the expert may not evaluate any proposal in the call concerned ('out of the call' rule). Part(s) of an evaluation to which the expert already participated must be declared void. Comments and scores already given must be discounted. If necessary, the expert must be replaced and the proposal(s) concerned must be re-evaluated.

(c) for **ALL proposal(s) under the call in question**, if s/he:

(i) 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 in question;

(ii) is a National Contact Point (NCP) or is working for the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN);

(iii) is a member of a programme committee;

(iv) has submitted a proposal as a principal investigator or a team member, under the same call;

(v) 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 his/her panel.

In this case, the expert may not evaluate any proposal in the call concerned ('out of the call' rule). Part(s) of an evaluation to which the expert already participated must be declared void. Comments and scores already given must be discounted. If necessary, the expert must be replaced and the proposal(s) concerned must be re-evaluated.

The following situations **may be** considered as **conflict of interest** if the responsible Agency staff so decides (in consultation with the ERC Scientific Council) , in view of the objective circumstances, the available information and the potential risks:

(a) employment of the expert by one of the applicants (or linked third parties or other third parties involved in the action) in the last three years;

(b) involvement of the expert in a contract, grant, prize or membership of management structures (e.g. member of management or advisory board etc.) or research collaboration with an applicant, a linked third party or another third party involved in the action in the last three years;

(c) any other situation that could cast doubt on his/her ability to participate in the evaluation impartially, or that could reasonably appear to do so in the eyes of an outside third party.

In this case, the responsible Agency staff may decide (in consultation with the ERC Scientific Council) to exclude the expert from the evaluation (and on the scope, i.e. only for the proposal(s) concerned or also for competing proposal(s) or the entire call) and, if necessary, to replace him/her and organise a re-evaluation.

2.2. The expert will be required to **confirm** — for each proposal(s) s/he is evaluating — that there is no conflict of interest, by signing a declaration in the Participant Portal electronic exchange system (see Article 21).

If the expert is (or becomes) aware of a conflict of interest, s/he must immediately **inform** the responsible Agency staff and stop working until further instructions.

2.3. If the expert breaches any of his/her obligations under Points 2.1 and 2.2, the Agency may apply the measures set out in Chapter 5, and in particular terminate the Contract (see Article 17).

3. Confidentiality

3.1 During implementation of the Contract and for five years after the date of the last payment, the expert must keep confidential all data, documents or other material (in any form) that is disclosed (in writing or orally) and that concerns the work under the Contract (**'confidential information'**).

Unless otherwise agreed with the responsible Agency staff, s/he may use confidential information only to implement the Contract.

The expert must keep his/her work under the Contract strictly confidential, and in particular:

(a) not disclose (directly or indirectly) any confidential information relating to proposal(s) or applicants, without prior written approval by Agency;

(b) not discuss proposal(s) with others (including other experts or Agency staff that are not directly involved in the evaluation of the proposal(s)), except during evaluation meetings and with prior approval by the responsible Agency staff;

(c) not disclose:

- details on the evaluation process or its outcome, without prior written approval by Agency;
- details on his/her position/advice;
- the names of other experts participating in the evaluation.

(d) not communicate with applicants (including linked third parties or other third parties involved in the actions) nor with the principal investigators or potential team members or persons linked to them during the evaluation or afterwards — except in panel hearings, interviews or on-site visits.

If the Agency makes documents or information available electronically for remote work, the expert is responsible for ensuring adequate protection and for returning, erasing or destroying all confidential information after the end of the evaluation (if so instructed).

If the expert works on Agency premises, the expert:

(a) may not remove from the premises any documents, material or information on the proposal(s) or on the evaluation;

(b) is responsible for ensuring adequate protection of electronic documents and information and for returning, erasing or destroying all confidential information after the end of the evaluation (if so instructed).

If the expert uses outside sources (for example internet, specialised databases, third party expertise etc.) for his/her evaluation, s/he:

(a) must respect the general rules for using such sources;

(b) may not contact third parties, without prior written approval by the Agency.

The confidentiality obligations no longer apply if:

- the Agency agrees to release the expert from the confidentiality obligations;
- the confidential information becomes public through other channels;
- disclosure of the confidential information is required by law.

3.2 If the expert breaches any of his/her obligations under Point 3.1, the Agency may apply the measures set out in Chapter 5.