European Research Council (ERC)
Frontier Research Grants

Guide for Peer Reviewers

Applicable to the ERC Synergy Grants
(ERC Work Programme 2020)

Version 1.0
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This document is published by the ERC Scientific Council on the ERC website. It can also be downloaded from the Funding & tender opportunities (Single Electronic Data Interchange Area (SEDIA)) portal.
IMPORTANT TO NOTE

This Guide for Peer Reviewers is based on legal documents setting the rules and conditions for the ERC frontier research grants, in particular:

- the **ERC Work Programme 2020**\(^1\), which defines, inter alia, all the parameters of the Call for Proposals for the ERC SyG 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.


- The **Contract**\(^3\) or **Letter of appointment**\(^4\) (in the case of Remote Referees) for ERC experts, defines the relationship between the ERCEA and the experts, and use of personal data by the ERCEA.

This document complements and does not supersede the afore-mentioned documents, which are legally binding. Should there be any discrepancies between the aforementioned legal documents and this document, the former will prevail. This guide specifies in more detail the peer review evaluation process and its inputs and outputs, and the responsibilities of the participants in the process.

The European Commission, the ERC Executive Agency or any person or body acting on their behalf cannot be held responsible for the use made of this document.

**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>Associated Country</td>
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<tr>
<td>AdG</td>
<td>Advanced Grant</td>
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<tr>
<td>cHI</td>
<td>corresponding Host Institution</td>
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<tr>
<td>CoG</td>
<td>Consolidator Grant</td>
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<td>cPI</td>
<td>corresponding Principal Investigator</td>
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<td>ERC</td>
<td>European Research Council</td>
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<td>ERC NCP</td>
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<td>HI</td>
<td>Host Institution</td>
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<tr>
<td>PI</td>
<td>Principal Investigator</td>
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<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>Panel Member</td>
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<td>PEV</td>
<td>Panel Evaluator</td>
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<td>PIC</td>
<td>Participant Identification Code</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEP</td>
<td>Submission and Evaluation of Proposals</td>
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<tr>
<td>StG</td>
<td>Starting Grant</td>
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<tr>
<td>SyG</td>
<td>Synergy Grant</td>
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\(^3\) The model expert contract was adopted by the European Commission Decision C(2017)1392 of 07 March 2017.

\(^4\) See Annex B to the **ERC Rules for Submission and Evaluation**.
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1. ERC SYNERGY GRANT 2020

The purpose of the ERC Synergy (SyG) funding scheme is to enable a small group of two to four Principal Investigators (PIs) and their teams to bring together complementary skills, knowledge, and resources, in order to jointly address ambitious research problems. Synergy projects should enable substantial advances at the frontiers of knowledge, stemming, for example, from the cross-fertilization of scientific fields, from new productive lines of enquiry, or new methods and techniques, including unconventional approaches and investigations at the interface between established disciplines. The transformative research funded by Synergy Grants should have the potential of becoming a benchmark on a global scale.

Principal Investigators must demonstrate the ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility of their scientific proposal. Principal Investigators must also demonstrate that their group can successfully bring together the scientific elements necessary to address the scope and complexity of the proposed research question.

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 which would not be possible by the individual PIs working alone.

As is the case with any other frontier research funded by the European Research Council (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.

2. PEER REVIEW EVALUATION OF PROPOSALS

2.1. PANEL STRUCTURE

The ERC has the mandate to implement a bottom-up, investigator-driven approach to frontier research funding. The selection of proposals for funding by the ERC is based strictly on a panel based, peer review evaluation with excellence as the sole criterion. 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. In the ERC panel-based system high-level scientists and/or scholars, called Panel Members (PMs) assess proposals and make recommendations for funding, with the assistance of external specialists, called Remote Referees (RRs). The Panel Members are 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.

The Synergy call foresees a single submission of full proposals (Part B1 and B2), followed by a three-step evaluation, including interviews. The Step 1 panel will be formed from approximately 80 Panel Members and 5 Chairs, 5 Step 2 panels will be composed using the Step 1 Panel Members, grouping them by around 15-18 experts in each panel. In Step 3, the interview panels may be reconfigured to ensure the best expertise for the proposals in a given panel.

The names of Panel Chairs are publicly available after the call publication. The names of Panel Members are published on the ERC website after the final results have been communicated to all 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.

Exclusion of independent experts at the request of an applicant

The applicant corresponding Principal Investigator can request on behalf of the group that up to four specific persons would not act as evaluators 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 a 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 for exclusion. In the case of exclusion of the Panel Chair, the authorised staff of the ERCEA may consult the Vice Panel Chair accordingly.

2.2. EVALUATION PROCESS

The schematic representation of the Synergy evaluation process is shown below.

Step 1:
Proposals that fulfil the eligibility criteria⁵ are evaluated by a single panel. If needed, panel members of other ERC frontier calls will provide further reviews. These experts, working for the Synergy call, are called Panel Evaluators (PEVs), they do not participate in panel meetings.

Applicants select between 4 to 6 ERC keywords to best describe the field(s) of research covered by their proposals (same keywords used as for ERC StG/CoG/AdG grants). The allocation of proposals to experts will be done by the Panel Chairs during the Initial Panel Chairs' meeting. During the Step 1 remote phase, Part B1 af all the proposals will be evaluated individually and remotely by a pool of experts. The pool of experts would comprise about 85 Synergy Panel Members including the Panel Chairs and additional experts, Panel Members of other ERC frontier calls, called Panel Evaluators (PEVs). PEVs will contribute with reviews in case of need, but they do not participate in any of the

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⁵ ERCEA carry out eligibility checks on submitted proposals.
panel meetings. At the end of the Step 1 remote phase, the SyG Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs meet in Brussels and select the proposals in a panel meeting to be evaluated in Step 2.

For the rejected proposals (B or C scored), short panel comments will summarize the decision of the panel. For proposals selected for Step 2, Panel Members will suggest specialists in the field of the proposals for a more in-depth review. These experts will be contacted to review proposals as Remote Referees (RR) during the Step 2 evaluation. At the end of the Step 1 panel meeting, the Panel Chairs jointly examine all proposals passed to Step 2, decide on the allocation of reviewers to proposals and form 5 panels using the pool of about 85 SyG Panel Members.

**Step 2:**
Full versions (Part B1 and B2) of proposals passed to Step 2 are assessed. Reviews of Remote Referees and Panel Evaluators with a close expertise to the proposals will complement the generalist reviews of the Panel Members.

Five panels are dynamically constituted in the Step 2 evaluation. The nature of the scientific field(s) covered by each panel, will depend on the nature of the proposals retained for Step 2. Each panel will have 15 - 18 members. A dynamic panel structure would accommodate the possibility of experts participating in different panels to ensure proper treatment of inter/multidisciplinary proposals. At the end of the remote assessment the five panels meet in Brussels.

The Synergy Grant call budget will be allocated to each panel in proportion to the budgetary demand of its assigned proposals. The number of proposals will be reduced during the Step 2 panel meetings, such that the accumulative total value of all proposed budgets is up to three times the call budget. The applications passed to Step 3 will not be ranked. For the proposals not selected for Step 3 (scored B) panel comments will be prepared. At the end of the Step 2 panel meeting, the Chairs of the Step 2 panels jointly examine all successful proposals to establish the interview format and to constitute the Step 3 panels. The same panel configuration as in Step 2 may be considered for Step 3. The Chairs may also agree on a set of general questions to be asked for each application across all the 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 will be encouraged to participate in panels of variable configurations to best meet the needs of the proposal. No new written reviews are required at this stage. Principal investigators of all proposals assessed in Step 3 will present their proposals and answer questions of the Panel Members. Budgets are reassessed at this stage, and adjusted if needed.

All proposals at this final stage are ranked. The results from the different interview panels will be consolidated into one ranked list. Only those proposals meeting the ERC excellent criterion and that have a rankings above the cut-off line set by the call budget are funded. For all proposals, the panels will draft panel comments conveying the decision and score.

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6 In rare cases when the expertise of a Panel Member is no longer suitable to evaluate any of the proposals left in evaluation, these experts may not need to further participate in the evaluation.
### 2.3. TASKS OF REVIEWERS

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

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 or if their expertise is needed. In Step 2 however, they act as Remote Referees, being selected due to their close expertise to the proposal. PEVs, being Panel Members of ERC frontier calls, they are paid for their remote reviewing task.
### 3. THE INDIVIDUAL REVIEWS

#### 3.1. EVALUATION CRITERION

**Scientific excellence is the sole criterion of evaluation** and is at the core of the peer review evaluation process. It will be applied 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, collaborative working arrangements, risk – when assessing the excellence of the proposal.

No other criteria than the evaluation elements applying to the Evaluation Criterion defined in the ERC Work Programme, must be considered when evaluating a proposal. Evaluation questions are listed in Annex 1.

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.

#### 3.2. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Eligibility criteria are simple, factual and legally-binding. Their interpretation does not involve scientific judgement. Hence, assessment of eligibility by peer reviewers is not part of the 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 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.

#### 3.3. 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, a clear set of rules has been formulated pertaining to conflict of interest. These rules are annexed to the Contract and can also be found in Annex 2 of this document.
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 ERC Rules For Submission and Evaluation)

3.4. DRAFTING OF INDIVIDUAL REVIEWS

Individual reviews are written prior to Step 1 and 2 panel meetings. The ERC Rules For Submission and Evaluation 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 or in case of need of expertise they will be supported by members of other ERC frontier call panels (PEVs). In Step 2, reviews are carried out by Panel Members and Remote Referees.

During the individual remote review 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 remote review evaluation process 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

While comments are critically important, the individual numerical marks may serve as a starting point for the panel discussions. The marks should be consistent with the comments. These numerical marks are not communicated to the applicants; only the final outcome expressed as A, B or C is (see section 4.1). All comments are included in the Evaluation Report and therefore reproduced in the feedback to applicants. 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 any direct comparison with any other proposals.
- Avoid any reference or comparison with previous assessments.
- Avoid comments that merely give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the Principal investigator, the proposed science, or the scientific field concerned.
- Make sure that your marks are in line with your comments.
- Avoid making reference to marks in the comments.

*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**

The reviewers will evaluate and mark the proposals according to: 1) Research Project and 2) Principal Investigators.

Each proposal receives a mark on a scale from 1 to 5 for each of the above two aspects. Marks are awarded in integers or halves. Marks range from 1 (non-competitive) to 5 (exceptional). The use of the full range is recommended in general. In all cases, and above all, reviewers are requested to base their assessment strictly on the evaluation criterion.

While numerical marks from 1 to 5 are used in the remote evaluation phase, the outcome of the panel meeting is expressed as A, B or C scores awarded by the panel. 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 panel scores they have received and the panels' overall appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses.

**4. PREPARATION AND ORGANISATION OF THE PANEL MEETINGS**

**Briefings of experts**

At the start of the Call evaluation process, 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, at the start of each evaluation meeting, Panel Chairs and Members⁸ 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 confidentiality, impartiality, concealment of conflict of interest, 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 the very limited scope for recommending improvements to highly scored proposals⁹.

**Autonomy of Panel Chairs**

Panel Chairs have a high degree of autonomy in the conduct of their meetings, within the ERC Rules For Submission and Evaluation, the ERC WP 2020 and this Guide, in particular which proposals to discuss in detail, in which order, when to resort to voting and how to vote. 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**

⁸ Panel Members attend only the Step 2 and 3 evaluation meetings.
⁹ See section 3.6.1 – ‘Briefings of the panels’ in the ERC Rules for Submission and Evaluation.
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 each meeting by electronic means:

**PRIOR TO EVALUATION MEETINGS**
Panel Members assess a subset of proposals evaluated in the panel. Before the Step 1 panel meeting Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs familiarise themselves with the proposals. They will base their panel decision on the reviews delivered prior to the meeting. Panel Members do not attend the Step 1 meeting.
Panel Members participating in the Step 2 and Step 3 meetings familiarise themselves with the proposals in their panel prior to the meeting in order to be able to make high-quality recommendations.

**STEP 1**
Reviewers individually and remotely review assigned proposals and they all are asked to recommend specialist Remote Referees for the in-depth review of those proposals that they consider having a high chance to be retained for Step 2.

**STEP 2**
Panel Members and Remote Referees individually and remotely review assigned proposals.
Panel Members are asked to identify further Remote Referee names to ensure that various aspects of a proposal are sufficiently covered.

**STEP 3**
While no new reviews are written, Panel Members prepare for the interview meeting by identifying the proposals’ strengths, weaknesses and concerns raised in Step 2.

The prior individual reviewing stage increases the efficiency of the evaluation in two ways:
1. By gathering considerations on the proposals or by creating a preliminary ranking, this would allow panel discussions to focus on 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 reviewers may sufficiently capture substantial reasons for the rejection.

**Ranking methodology**
Panels may decide to start from the preliminary ranking and 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. In Step 2 panel comments will be provided for the rejected proposals scored B, and for all proposals in Step 3.

**The possible use of a voting system**
While consensus decisions are preferred, 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 Chair/Member cannot vote for a proposal if under a conflict of interest, and in such case, an appropriate adjustment is applied. Voting can be an effective way of finalising a ranking list.

4.1. **THE TASKS OF THE PANEL MEETINGS**
In panel meetings all proposals evaluated by the panel are discussed, scored and ranked.
The output of any panel meeting, consists of the following elements:
1. The ranked list of proposals.
2. A panel report.
3. The feedback to applicants (panel comment to be included in the Evaluation Report).

**The ranked list of proposals and scoring used at each panel meeting**
At Step 1 only **Part B1** of the proposals is evaluated. At the end of Step 1 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:

a) 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;

b) proposals of high quality but not sufficient to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation, scored B;

c) proposals of insufficient quality to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation, scored C.

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 (Parts B1 and B2) of the retained proposals is assessed and ranked by the panel. At the end of Step 2 the panel makes two types of recommendations:

a) proposals 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;

b) proposals which meet some but not all elements of the ERC's excellence criterion and therefore will not be retained for the next evaluation step, scored B. Applicants whose proposal will receive a B score in Step 2, will receive a panel comment.

Applicants whose proposal will receive a B or C score in Step 1 or a B score in Step 2 may be subject to resubmission restrictions in future calls if specified in the applicable ERC WP.  

At Step 3 Principal Investigators whose proposals have been retained for 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 and makes two types of recommendations:

a) those proposals which fully meet the ERC's excellence criterion and are therefore recommended for funding if sufficient funds are available, are scored A;

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

Panel Comments – included in the Evaluation Report and sent as feedback to the applicants

In addition to individual reviews, Panel Members may also be asked to draft panel comments after the score and the rank of the proposal is decided. Each application is assigned to a ‘lead reviewer’

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10 See under ‘Evaluation procedure and criteria’ of the ERC WP 2020.
11 See under ‘Restrictions on submission of proposals’ of the ERC WP 2020.
12 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.
13 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 proposals ranked higher in the same panel and the indicative budget of the panel.
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 sent to the applicant as feedback.

Review of the requested EU contribution
In Step 3 panel comments, a reductions 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.

The panel report
In addition to the ranked list of proposals, the panel report (prepared with the Panel Chair) 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.

4.2. PANEL MEETING OBSERVERS
ERC Scientific Council
The ERC Scientific Council may delegate its members to attend panel meetings. The role of these delegates is to ensure and promote coherence of the evaluation process between panels, to identify best practices, and to gather information for future revision 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.

Independent observers
Under the ERC Rules for Submission and Evaluation, 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 and Evaluation.

5. FEEDBACK TO APPLICANTS – 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 and Evaluation, the ERCEA will provide an Evaluation Report to each applicant, which documents the results of the evaluation. 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 Step 1 the decision of the panel is conveyed through a short panel comment. 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 Panel Evaluators 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 score plus ranking range).
2. A comment approved by the panel.
3. The individual assessments given by reviewers prior to the panel meeting.

The comments by individual reviewers
The comments by individual 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 polemical remarks, remove revelation of the peer reviewer’s 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.

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 the panel 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.

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. In some cases, the panel may take a position that is different from what could be inferred from the comments/marks of the individual reviewers. For example, if the panel discussion reveals an important weakness in a proposal the panel comment should document its reasons in a substantial comment.

Panel members should ensure that scientific recommendations made to PIs (which may or may not be taken into account) are clearly distinct from their budget recommendations to ERCEA (which are binding though final decision is made by the ERCEA Director).

6. THE CONTRACT/LETTER of APPOINTMENT FOR ERC EXPERTS
The relationship between the ERCEA and the experts is defined by a written and signed agreement (the Contract for paid experts such as Panel Members or a Letter of appointment in the case of Remote Referees). By signing these documents, the expert accepts the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest (see Annex 2, Code of Conduct), 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.

7. SUPPORT FOR THE ELECTRONIC TOOLS USED IN EVALUATION
- Quick Guide on SEP Evaluation tool can be found here: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/support/expert/expert_evaluation_user_manual.pdf
- Detailed how-to procedures and instructional video presentations on the usage of the SEP evaluation tool are available on the following location under 'Expert Evaluation of Proposals':

- Information on EU Login is available here [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/wikis/display/ECResearchGMS/Logging+in+to+the+Evaluation+Tool+through+EU+Login](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/wikis/display/ECResearchGMS/Logging+in+to+the+Evaluation+Tool+through+EU+Login)

**ANNEX 1 – EVALUATION FORM**

1. **Research Project**

**Ground-breaking nature, ambition and feasibility**

*Ground-breaking nature and potential impact of the research project*

To what extent does the proposed research address important challenges?

To what extent are the objectives ambitious and beyond the state of the art (e.g. novel concepts and approaches or development between or across disciplines)?

To what extent is the proposed research high risk/high gain (i.e. if successful the payoffs will be very significant, but there is a high risk that the research project does not entirely fulfil its aims)?

**Scientific Approach**

To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the extent that the proposed research is high risk/high gain (based on the Extended Synopsis)?

To what extent does the proposal go beyond what the individual Principal Investigators could achieve alone (based on the Extended Synopsis)?

To what extent is the combination of scientific elements put forward in the proposal crucial to address the scope and complexity of the research question (based on the Extended Synopsis)?

To what extent are the proposed research methodology and working arrangements appropriate to achieve the goals of the project (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

To what extent does the proposal involve the development of novel methodology (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

To what extent are the proposed timescales, resources and PI commitment adequate and properly justified (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?

2. **Principal Investigator**

**Intellectual capacity and creativity**

To what extent has/have the PIs demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking research?

To what extent does/do the PIs has/have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project?

To what extent does the Synergy Grant Group successfully demonstrate in the proposal that it brings together the elements – such as skills, knowledge, experience, expertise, disciplines, methods, approaches, teams – necessary to address the proposed research question (based on the full Scientific Proposal)?
ANNEX 2 – CODE OF CONDUCT OF ERC REVIEWERS

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 1290/2013 and, in particular, with the ERC rules for submission and evaluation;

(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 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;

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15 Available at http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/funding/reference_docs.html
(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 budget-split, 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 Funding and Tender Opportunities 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.