

FAQ ERC Starting Grants

General information

What are Starting Independent Researcher Grants?

Starting Grants are aimed to support researchers of any nationality who are at the stage of starting or consolidating their own independent research team or, depending on the field, their independent research programme. ERC Starting Grants will be awarded for up to 5 years with an annual budget of up to € 400,000.

The hosting institution of the Principal Investigator must be situated in the European Union or in an Associated Country. Research teams can be of national or trans-national character, including team members who may be located in non-European Third Countries.

What kind of research can be funded?

Applications may be made in any field of research ("bottom-up"-approach). Projects to be funded by the ERC are encouraged to focus on scientific objectives at or beyond the frontiers of knowledge and cross the boundaries between different fields of research. A comprehensive list of all evaluation panels indicating their covered fields of science, engineering and scholarship is provided on the ERC's.

Who can apply for a Starting Grant?

Applications may be submitted by a single Principal Investigator who can be of any nationality or country of residence and who must have been awarded his/her first PhD (or equivalent doctoral degree) more than 3 and less than 8 years prior to the date of publication of the call for proposals. An extension of up to 11 years may be allowed in cases of parental leave, leave taken for long-term illness, national service or due to unavoidable statutory reasons (e.g. clinical qualifications). Terms of part-time working count as full-time years.

For medical doctors, an MD will not be accepted by itself as equivalent to a PhD award. The ERC Scientific Council has decided to accept as eligible applications from medical doctors who have concluded both basic studies (MD) and a research doctorate or clinical specialty training. Candidates must also provide information on their research experience in order to further substantiate the equivalence of their overall training to a PhD. In these cases, the certified date of the clinical specialty completion is the time reference for calculation of the eligibility time-window (3-8 years).

Who could be a competitive candidate for the ERC Starting Grants?

A competitive PI must have already shown the potential for research independence and evidence of maturity including producing independently at least one important publication without the participation of their PhD supervisor.

Applicants should also be able to demonstrate a promising track-record of early achievements appropriate to their research field and career stage, including significant publications (as main author) in major international peer-reviewed multidisciplinary scientific journals, or in the leading international peer-reviewed journals of their respective field. They may also mention monographs or demonstrate a record of invited presentations in well-established international conferences, granted patents, awards, prizes etc.

The evaluation panels will assess the applicants taking into account the specific stage of the research career they are at the time of the application.

How many Starting Grants will be awarded per year?

It is expected that approximately 300 grants will be funded annually.

Which time-commitment is foreseen for the ERC Starting Grant scheme?

ERC-funded PIs are supposed to be strongly committed to the project and devote a significant amount of time to the project: in the case of the Starting Grant the ERC-funded project should represent the Principal Investigator's main workload.

Peer reviewers will therefore assess during the evaluation whether PIs who have already been entrusted to lead important research teams/activities during the next few years and have already committed for this period significant time and effort will be able to simultaneously manage the significant ERC funding.

How many times can I apply for an ERC Starting Grant?

For reapplications and multiple applications, the following rules apply:

- Only one ERC grant managed by a Principal Investigator can be active at any time.
- No Principal Investigator may be associated with more than one application to the ERC during the same year.
- No Principal Investigator who has submitted an eligible proposal to a Starting Grant call may apply to the next Starting Grant call, unless his/her proposal was evaluated above the quality threshold.*
- It will be possible for ERC Starting Principal Investigators to compete within the last two years of the Starting Grant for an Advanced Investigator Grant to allow for uninterrupted funding of their project/activity.
 - To note: Applicants of the ERC-2007-Starting Grant call are exempted from this rule and can, therefore, apply in 2008 for the ERC-2009-Starting Grant call.

Preparation phase

Is there any age limit for Starting Grant applicants?

No, applications may be submitted by scientists of any age - as long as they have received their first PhD (or equivalent doctoral degree) more than 3 and less than 8 (in exceptional cases less than 11) years prior to the call for proposals. The evaluators will take into account to what extent an ERC Starting Grant will make a significant contribution to the establishment or consolidation of independence of the respective applicant.

Is mobility required for an application?

No, mobility is not required. Potential applicants can be situated in the country of their prospective host institution or can even be associated with their host institution at the time of the application.

Can the Principal Investigator be employed by the hosting institution at the time when the proposal is submitted?

The Principal Investigator can, but does not necessarily need to be employed by the institution at which he/she is planning to establish an independent research team.

Which date is relevant regarding the award of the PhD?

The reference date for being awarded a PhD is the date as indicated in the PhD certificate.

For medical doctors, an MD will not be accepted by itself as equivalent to a PhD award. The ERC Scientific Council has decided to accept as eligible applications from medical doctors who have concluded both basic studies (MD) and a research doctorate or clinical specialty training. Candidates must also provide information on their research experience in order to further substantiate the equivalence of their overall training to a PhD. In these cases, the certified date of the clinical specialty completion is the time reference for calculation of the eligibility time-window (3-8 years).

A participant has been awarded a professorship (W2 or equivalent position). Can he/she still apply for a Starting Grant?

Yes, applications are possible as long as applicants meet the time requirements regarding the award of their PhD and insofar as the grant will enable applicants to promote their transition to independence. When taking up a professorship at another university during the course of the Starting Grant, grant holders can transfer their grant - and therefore their research group - to the respective institution (portability).

Which institutions can host an ERC Starting Grant research group?

The hosting institution for an ERC Starting Grant research group can be any legal public or private entity, which has the infrastructure and capacity to carry out a frontier research project, such as universities, non-profit research organizations or research-performing companies. The hosting institution must be situated in the European Union including its Candidate Countries or in countries associated to the Framework Programme, like for example Switzerland, Norway or Iceland. An updated list of all eligible countries is provided by CORDIS. In addition, International Organization like CERN, EMBL, ILL, ESO, ESRF and EMBO may also act as a hosting institution.

Is there any preferred size of the research team?

There is no preferred size for Starting Grant teams. Applicants should follow the budget requirements of the ERC (EC contribution up to € 400,000 per year). The proposed size of the research team should reflect the nature and objectives of the project. Furthermore, it will always be possible to carry out ERC projects as a single Principal Investigator.

What should be considered concerning the composition of the team, in particular as regards mobility, status, etc.?

The composition of the research team must reflect the nature and objectives of the project. Commonly, a research team will involve the Principal Investigator and other researchers associated with the Principal Investigator's research institution. Team members can be of any nationality, age and occupational status. Furthermore, research teams may also involve team members from other research facilities or even team

members located in Third Countries. However, such arrangements (and possible funding of the respective team members) are subject to appraisal by the ERC peer review evaluation panels.

Can team members from other research facilities be incorporated into a research team?

Yes, research teams may also involve team members from other research facilities. However, the funding of team members working at institutions located in non-European Third Countries is subject to appraisal by the ERC peer review evaluation panels.

Can a team member already be employed by the hosting organisation at the time of the proposal?

Yes.

Application

How can I apply for an ERC Starting Grant?

ERC Starting Grant applications can be submitted only in response to a "Call for Proposals" which will be published in the Official Journal of the European Union (<http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/oj>), on the website of the ERC (<http://erc.europa.eu>) and on the CORDIS website (<http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/dc>).

Proposals must be submitted to the corresponding domain-specific deadline via the "Electronic Proposal Submission System" (EPSS). A pre-registration is needed in order to get access to EPSS.

The deadlines end in autumn of the same year as the date of publication. There will be three deadlines according to the funding domains of the ERC ([Physical Sciences & Engineering](#), [Social Sciences & Humanities](#), and [Life Sciences](#)).

Who applies for a Starting Grant: the Principal Investigator or the hosting organisation?

An ERC grant application has to be submitted by a single researcher (the Principal Investigator) in conjunction with and on behalf of her/his hosting institution.

Is my proposal complete?

A complete proposal includes the following components:

- Part A: Administrative Forms (to be edited online via EPSS)
- Part B: Research Proposal (upload as PDF via EPSS)
- Supporting documentation: Binding statement of support by the host institution, PhD certificate, documents proving the extension of the eligibility period - if applicable (upload as PDF via EPSS)

N.B.: Proposals without the binding statement of support by the host institution will not be considered for evaluation.

Part A) The administrative forms ask for the following information:

- Administrative Data concerning the Principal Investigator as well as the scientific project (A1)
- Short summary of the Scientific Leadership Potential and the Early achievements track-record (A1T)
- Data concerning the host institution (A2) and the estimated research budget (A3)

Part B) The research proposal contains 3 sections

1. The profile of the applicant including a Scientific CV with a so called Funding-ID (max. 2 pages), information on the Scientific leadership potential (max. 2 pages), the Early achievements track-record (max. 2 pages) - as well as a summary of the research project (Extended Project Synopsis, max. 5 pages)
2. The description of the Research Project including an Ethical-Issues-Table and - if applicable - explanations on how the project will deal with ethical issues (max. 15 pages)
3. The description of the Research Environment (max. 2 pages)

What should the hosting institution provide to the project?

The hosting institution shall provide the Principal Investigator with workspace capacities and infrastructures as required for the efficient implementation of the project, in particular as regards laboratory capacities, equipment, access to libraries and databases, software, etc. Furthermore, the hosting institution shall support the Principal Investigator in the management of the project, in particular as regards the reporting of finances, the preparation of reports to the ERC, the organisation of project meetings, etc. At the second stage of the evaluation process, the research environment provided by the hosting institution will be evaluated by the panels. This assessment regarding the commitment of the hosting institution is taken into account for the overall ranking of the proposal.

What is the function of the administrative form A1T?

The online-form A1T contains the summary of the Scientific leadership potential and the Early achievements track-record. Together with the Extended Project Synopsis, it will be used in order to identify less competitive applications prior to the evaluation in case of heavy oversubscription of the call. With the agreement of the individual reviewers to whom the proposals have been allocated, these proposals will not be further evaluated.

Which language is required for the application?

The proposal can be submitted in any official language of the European Union. Due to the fact that English serves as the working language of the evaluation panels, English is highly recommended as language for the project proposal. However, using English is mandatory to fill in the administrative forms (A1, A2 and A3).

What is the Participant Identification Code (PIC)?

Applicants at host institution possessing a Participant Identification Code (PIC) can use this number to identify themselves in the Electronic Proposal Submission System. On entering the PIC, parts of the A forms will be filled in automatically. Please note that in the cases where a PIC is not available it will always be possible to submit a proposal by entering the organisation details manually.

The process for assigning a PIC is triggered by a self-registration of an organisation. Principal Investigators can check whether their institutions have already registered themselves for a PIC by using the following website: http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/urf-pic_en.html.

How strict are the page limits defined for each section and is there a suggested font template?

The research proposal contains 3 sections:

- In Section 1, the profile of the applicant has to be described in the following sub-sections: Curriculum Vitae (max. 2 pages), Scientific Leadership Potential (max. 2 pages), Early achievements track-record (max. 2 pages); furthermore, an Extended Project Synopsis (max. 5 pages) has to be added in the first section.

- Section 2 contains the "Research Project" (max. 15 pages)
- Section 3 describes the "Research Environment" (max. 2 pages)

The page limits as well as the suggested format requirements with regards to font (Times New Roman), font size (at least 11 pt), line spacing (single) and margins (at least 1.5 cm) must be respected. Only proposal material within these limits will be evaluated.

Is it necessary for the team members to be identified at the proposal stage?

Team members can, but do not necessarily need to be identified at the proposal stage. The panels will evaluate the achievements of the Principal Investigator and the proposed project (as well as the research environment), whereas individual attributes of team members will not be taken into consideration at this stage. Once funding is agreed, vacant positions can be advertised internationally.

Do applicants need to submit a confirmation of the hosting organisation by the time of the proposal submission?

Yes, when submitting a proposal for an ERC Starting Grant, the Principal Investigator must submit a Commitment Letter signed by the legal representative of the hosting institution. In this statement, the hosting institution confirms its association and support to the proposal and confirms that the Principal Investigator will have full scientific responsibility for the project. Host institutions also have to confirm that they intend to sign a Supplementary Agreement with the Principal Investigator if the grant is funded by the ERC. This Supplementary Agreement covers the rights and obligations of both contracting parties according to the requirements laid down in Annex II of the Grant Agreement and the Model Supplementary Agreement provided by the ERC.

Should an applicant include additional references in the proposal?

If necessary, references to scientific key publications should be included in the research proposal. However, the given page limits have to be respected. Any additional material exceeding the page limits will not be considered for evaluation.

Evaluation procedure

Who is evaluating the proposals?

Proposals submitted to the ERC are evaluated by independent experts in an international peer-review process. For the ERC Starting Grant scheme, 25 Panels have been established, each consisting of about 10 scientists selected by the Scientific Council and covering all fields of science, engineering and scholarship. These panels are divided into the following main scientific domains:

- Physical Sciences & Engineering (10 Panels)
- Life Sciences (9 Panels)
- Social Sciences & Humanities (6 Panels)

Before the deadline of a call, the names of the panel chairs are published on the ERC website. Similarly, the names of panel members are published later, however, only in the form of a consolidated alphabetical list.

At any stage of the evaluation process, panels will be assisted by additional experts who act as referees to provide individual assessments.

What is meant by the interview during step 2 of the evaluation?

The review methodology for the ERC Starting Grant includes interviews with all PIs of proposals at step 2 in the evaluation process conducted by the relevant ERC evaluation panel in Brussels. (Travel expenditures will be reimbursed by the ERC.)

Depending on the panel, interviews will last between 20 and 30 minutes in total. The first 5 to 10 minutes will be devoted to a presentation of the outline of the research project by the PI. The remaining 15 to 20 minutes will be devoted to a question and answer session.

Panels or sub-panels will express their appreciation of the PI in the form of a score. In the subsequent panel meeting, panels will take into account the results of the interviews alongside the other elements, i.e. the individual reviews and the preliminary ranking.

What kind of feedback is provided to the applicants?

Applicants are provided with feedback on the outcome of the peer review evaluation in the form of an evaluation report.

The report indicates whether the proposal meets the quality threshold and is retained, and provides the score and corresponding comments given by the panel as well as the comments given by the individual reviewers.

The comments by the individual reviewers may not necessarily be convergent – controversy and differences in opinion about the merits of a proposal are part of the "scientific method" and are legitimate.

Furthermore, the ERC panel may take a position that is different from what could be inferred from the comments of the individual reviewers.

Financial and contractual aspects

Can the grant cover the Principal Investigator's own salary?

Yes, the Grant can cover the salary of the Principal Investigator. To note: Only personnel costs related to actual hours worked by a person directly carrying out work under the project can be reimbursed.

Who is negotiating the Grant Agreement with the European Commission/the ERC?

The Grant Agreement will be negotiated between the hosting institution and the European Commission/the ERC. Regarding the grant agreement preparations, the Principal Investigator is responsible to draft Annex I of this agreement, i.e. the scientific and technological description of the project which forms an integral part of the Grant Agreement.

What are the obligations of the Principal Investigator regarding the implementation of the project?

By accepting an ERC Starting Grant, the Principal Investigator commits himself/herself to take all appropriate steps towards the effective execution of the project and to be in charge of the scientific reporting and contribute effectively to the financial management reporting conducted by the hosting institution.

How can the funding be used?

ERC grants cover up to 100% of the total eligible costs which can be attributed directly to the project, such as personnel costs (salaries of the team leader and team members), consumables, travel and subsistence costs, publication costs and equipment costs. In addition, ERC grants include a flat-rate of 20% of the total eligible direct costs (excluding the eligible costs for subcontracting) covering indirect costs, i.e. cost related to the administrative support of the hosting institution or costs incurred through the allocation of work space and equipment, etc.

Can members of the research team be dispatched to other facilities for research purposes?

Yes, team members can be dispatched to other research facilities for research purposes. Especially in the case of long-term secondments, the respective proposal should pay attention to and explain the planned arrangements in advance. Furthermore, a Starting Grant team may also involve team members associated with institutions other than the hosting institution of the Principal Investigator during the entire course of the project. However, this arrangement should be justified in the application.

Is it possible to transfer the grant to a new hosting institution?

The ERC normally expects that the Principal Investigator concludes the funded research project in association with the original hosting institution. However, it will be possible to transfer funds other than those that have already been consumed to another institution if, for example, the provisions for the Principal Investigator's leadership of the research have not been respected. Normally, the ERC expects no change regarding the hosting institution during the first two years of the project duration. As a general rule, any such transfer will require the approval of the ERC. In case of a grant to be transferred to another institution, the current hosting institution has to transfer any funds not covered by an accepted cost claim to the new hosting institution.

*Contact: Servei de Projectes Europeus i Internacionals (AGAUR)
Av. Catedral, 6-8, 2 Planta, 08002 Barcelona
Telf: 93 5526903
spei.cur@gencat.cat
www.gencat.cat/agaur/spei*

Source: Koordinierungsstelle EG der Wissenschaftsorganisationen -Kowi