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for Research & Innovation

European Research Council (ERC) Proof of Concept Grants Guide for Reviewers

Applicable to the ERC Proof of Concept Grants

(ERC Work Programme 2020)

Version 2.0

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This second version contains additional guidance on the evaluation of resources and the importance of ensuring consistency between marks and written comments.

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1. Introduction

The selection of proposals for funding by the European Research Council (ERC) Proof of Concept is based strictly on the evaluation criteria set in the ERC Work Programme 2020.

The ERC Rules for Submission

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

The ERC Work Programme

The ERC ScC has also established the [ERC Work Programme](#) (WP) for 2020², which, inter alia, defines the parameters of the Call for Proposals for ERC Proof of Concept Grants. More specifically, it defines the call deadlines and the call budgets. It specifies the evaluation criteria and sets the framework for budgetary implementation.

This document

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

2. Panel structure

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

3. Reviewers

The panels

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

PoC reviewers perform the following tasks:

- Individual review –by electronic means– of a subset of the proposals (remote work).
- If necessary, participation in the panel meetings.

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

² European Commission C(2019) 4904 of 2 July 2019

- In case of panel meeting, prior familiarisation with a relevant subset of proposals in preparation for the meeting.

The contracts

In all cases, the relationship between the ERCEA and the reviewers is defined by a written and signed agreement (the Contract³). Signature of this contract by the reviewer indicates acceptance of the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest (Annex 1, Code of Conduct to the expert contract), and use of personal data by the ERCEA. The ERCEA cannot make proposals available to a reviewer who has not been officially contracted (i.e. signed the Contract and, in so doing, agreed to the terms laid down in it including in particular, confidentiality and conflict of interest aspects).

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

Use of personal data

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

4. The individual reviews

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

Minimum requirements

In the PoC scheme each proposal is evaluated by at least 3 individual reviewers. In case of panel meeting, each application is assigned to a “lead reviewer” who introduces the proposal to the panel for discussion and is responsible for drafting the panel comment⁴.

The interpretation of 'individual'

During the individual evaluation process, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between reviewers. Moreover, during the remote evaluation of proposals reviewers should not disclose the proposals assigned for their evaluation to other reviewers. When Panel Members consider that they have insufficient expertise to evaluate any of the proposals he/she received to review, he/she should immediately inform the ERCEA's PoC call coordinator so that the proposal can be reallocated to another reviewer.

Marks and comments

Individual evaluation consists of:

- Awarding a pass mark ('good' or 'very good') or a fail mark for each of the evaluation criteria⁵. It is of utmost importance that only the criteria as described in the applicable ERC Work Programme are used to assess the proposals. Reviewers should refrain from using any additional criteria no matter the importance it bears in the frame of a

³ The model expert contract was adopted by the [European Commission Decision C\(2017\)1392 of 07 March 2017](#).

⁴ The panel comment is part of the “Evaluation Report” which is returned to the applicant as feedback.

⁵ See [ERC Work Programme 2020](#), Evaluation criteria

given proposal. Each proposal should be treated with the same severity and professionalism (equal treatment).

- Providing a succinct explanatory comment substantiating each mark. Comments should take the form of a statement and explanation of key strengths and key weaknesses of the proposal, in the light of the evaluation criteria.

The nature of the comments

Comments should be provided by each reviewer for the proposal. As these comments will be sent to the applicant as feedback, they should be of high quality, succinct but substantial. They should also be impeccably polite. A decision of the reviewer to attribute a “fail” mark shall be explained in detail in order for the applicant to be able to understand the deficiencies of his/her proposal, so as to seek effective remedy for any future applications. Likewise, in case of a “good” mark, the applicant should be put in a position to understand why the reviewer did not award a “very good” mark.

Reviewers are obliged to observe the following guidelines:

- Use dispassionate, analytical and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Provide polite comments.
- Critical comments should be constructive and not offensive.
- Avoid self-declaration of insufficient expertise (personal or panel) or non-confidence in the proposal.
- Avoid any comments about your expertise that may reveal your identity.
- Avoid reference to the applicant’s age, nationality, gender, or personal matters.
- Avoid making reference to scores in the comments.
- Avoid inconsistency between the nature of the comment and the mark attributed.
- Avoid any direct comparison with any other proposals.
- Avoid any reference or comparison with previous assessments.
- Avoid comments that give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the Principal Investigator or the project.
- Avoid very short comments, especially in the case of “fail” mark.
- Double check after submitting the review if the mark appearing for each criteria assessed corresponds to the intended mark.
- Avoid any reference to costs, budget figures when assessing the description of resources (see point 6 below).

Individual reviews have to be submitted in due time according to the deadline set by the ERCEA.

5. Conflict of Interest (Col)

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 pertaining to conflict of interest (Col) are annexed to the Contract and can be found at the end of this document.

6. The criteria

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

- Eligibility criteria.
- Evaluation criteria.

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria are simple, factual and legally-binding. Their interpretation does not involve technical or scientific judgement. Hence, eligibility is not part of the review process. Instead, it is carried out in parallel by the ERCEA. Nevertheless, if a reviewer considers a proposal to be potentially ineligible during the evaluation process he/she should clarify the case immediately with the ERCEA's PoC call coordinator. In some (rare) cases, proposals may be declared ineligible during or even after the review process, as their ineligibility can only be confirmed with some delay.

Evaluation criteria

The evaluation criteria are at the core of the review process. The evaluation criteria and their interpretation are described in the applicable [ERC Work Programme](#). All judgement on proposals must be made against the evaluation criteria⁶, and against these criteria alone. It is to be noted that, ***in order to be considered for funding, proposals will have to be awarded a pass mark by a majority of reviewers on each of the three evaluation criteria.*** The incorrect application of the evaluation criterion or the application of inexistent or irrelevant criteria is considered a procedural error, which may justify a re-evaluation of the proposal.

Reviewers should give particular attention to the evaluation criterion 3 “Quality and efficiency of the implementation (Quality of the proof of concept plan)” due to the fact that the grants to be awarded under the Proof of Concept take the form of a standard lump sum pre-fixed at 150.000 EUR. The lump sum is deemed to cover all eligible (direct and indirect) costs for the action and it cannot be increased or decreased. The description of work (Proof of Concept action) must demonstrate that the resources are appropriate for the implementation of the project, which is part of evaluation criterion 3. The applicant is expected to present a detailed project plan including a **narrative description** of the resources planned for each activity and clearly identified objectives of the project, and a description of work. Examples of resources that the applicant is expected to describe are the type of project staff working on a task and the estimated effort (person-months), type of equipment and consumables required for the project implementation, staff travel requirements, etc. **The applicants are specifically requested not to describe the resources financially**, which means that **no cost figures**

⁶ See ERC Work Programme 2020, ERC Proof of Concept Grant evaluation:
https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2018-2020/erc/h2020-wp20-erc_en.pdf

should appear in the proposal. The applicants are expected to justify the good use of the lump sum for the resources described. In case a proposal includes budget figures, cost details etc. they shall be disregarded by the reviewer and the applicant shall not be penalized for this. The reviewer shall refrain from assessing budget and costs figures and avoid any reference to them that include their assessment. However, when a proposal does not include sufficient details about the resources once the budget and cost details are disregarded, the reviewer can explain this deficiency in the comments.

7. Preparation and organisation of the evaluation including panel meetings

About the necessity of the panel meeting

Proposals will be funded in order of this ranking up to depletion of the available budget. If necessary, the reviewers will meet as an evaluation panel in order to determine a priority order for proposals which have the same ranking. Panel meetings will hence only be held if there is any ambiguity on the list of proposals to be considered for funding. Otherwise, the determination of the priority order for proposals which have the same ranking will be carried out remotely.

Briefings of reviewers

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

Reviewers are encouraged to participate at this initial briefing.

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

For reviewers 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 reviewers to assist them on any query.

Ranking

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

If there is not enough budget to fund all the proposals which pass all three evaluation criteria, those proposals which pass all three evaluation criteria will be ranked according to

the aggregated marks (very good, good and fail) which they received from reviewers for every criterion, and sorted in the following order:

1° by Criterion 1 (Excellence in Innovation potential),

2° then by Criterion 2 (Impact),

3° then by Criterion 3 (Quality and efficiency of the implementation (Quality of the Proof of Concept Plan)).

Proposals will be funded in order of the ranking resulting from this 3-level sorting exercise until depletion of the available budget per evaluation round.

At the Initial Panel Meeting, ERCEA staff presents the methodology to be followed for the evaluation, scoring and final ranking and the PMs agree to follow a remote evaluation process. If as a result of the remote evaluation process, there is a tie between 2 or more proposals, a ranking methodology is also agreed ahead of time to break the tie.

Reviewers are explicitly asked in the Initial Panel Meeting to agree to follow the methodology for the evaluation and ranking. This agreement is asked explicitly and minuted. If not, a final ranking meeting is offered.

The final ranking order is later sent to the PMs for their information and endorsement. The endorsement may also take place electronically in the evaluation IT system.

The possible use of a voting system

In the later stages of the evaluation process, panels may expedite their ranking process by the use of a voting system (e.g. a majority vote on one or more proposals, with each Panel Member having one vote per proposal being considered). A Panel Member cannot vote for a proposal if under a Col, and in such case, an appropriate adjustment is applied. Voting can be an effective way of finalising a ranking list.

If there is a group of equally ranked fundable proposals that crosses the budget cut off line, the panel will proceed as follows:

- ✓ All the reviewers involved in the evaluation of at least one proposal in this group will be sent the reviews of all the proposals in the group taking into account the Cols proposals, without revealing the reviewers' identity.
- ✓ The reviewers will then examine all the proposals in the group and the existing reviews, and decide on their own personal ranking.
- ✓ The ERCEA will compile a sub-ranking within the group taking into account the Cols, and will then come up with an overall final ranking list, for final endorsement by all Panel members.

Outputs of the evaluation

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

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

8. Feedback to applicants (the Evaluation Report)

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

Elements of the Evaluation Report

The Evaluation Report of any proposal comprises three components:

1. The recommendation of the panel (according to the ranking list and the available call budget).
2. A compilation of the individual reviews by criterion including the individual scores for each criterion ('very good', 'good' or 'fail').

The comments by individual reviewers

The comments by 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 reviewers' identity, misleading recommendations, etc. These individual comments may not necessarily be convergent - differences of opinion about the merits of a proposal are legitimate among evaluators, and it is potentially useful for an applicant to be informed of the various views. The PoC call coordinator can contact the reviewer for clarification if necessary and can also alert the reviewer if potential irregularity is spotted by the ERCEA, which would necessitate the revision of a comment or mark.

The panel report

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

9. The role of the ERC Scientific Council (ScC)

The ERC ScC may delegate its members to attend panel meetings. The role of the ERC ScC delegates relates to ensure and promote coherence of reviews, to identify best practices, and to gather information for future reviews of the procedures by the 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 WP, ERC ScC Members will abstain from influencing the results of the review process.

10. The role of Independent Observers

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

Annex 1 – Code of conduct

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](#)⁷ and, in particular, with the [ERC Rules for Submission and Evaluation](#)⁸;

(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 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);

⁷ 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).

⁸ Commission Decision C(2017)4750 of 12 July 2017 amending Decision C(2014)2454 on the European Research Council rules for submission of proposals and the related evaluation, selection and award procedures relevant to the Specific Programme of Horizon 2020.

(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;

(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/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 assigned to the same panel within the same call budget-split;

(ii) would benefit if any proposal 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 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.n 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/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.