

ERC SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL

Strategy Note

The ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant (ERC Starting Grant)

1. Objective of the note

This note outlines the approach that the Scientific Council intends to take regarding the ERC Starting Grant. By setting out the rationale and key elements of the scheme at an early stage, the Scientific Council aims to assist the scientific community and other stakeholders in preparing for the start-up of the ERC. It must be understood however that the Scientific Council's further deliberations, taking account of comments received and operational experience, will lead to more detailed development and possible modification of the approach described below.

2. Introduction

A widely accepted deficiency in European research is the lack of opportunity for young investigators to develop independent careers and make the transition from working under a supervisor to being independent research leaders in their own right. This structural problem leads to a dramatic waste of research talent in Europe. It limits or delays the emergence of the next-generation of researchers, who bring new ideas and energy, and it encourages talented researchers at an early stage of their career to seek advancement elsewhere, either in other professions or as researchers outside Europe.

Europe has made some relatively small scale efforts to address these problems, with funding activities within some member states and with a pilot international scheme (EURYI). The ERC is well placed to develop a broad, international and consistent scheme on the much larger scale that will be necessary to make a real impact on European science and scholarship.

With a budget of approximately a third of the ERC's annual budget (perhaps € 300-350 m per year), a rough estimate would be that around 200 Starting Independent Researcher Grants could be made annually, each for up to 5 years. Over the 7-year period of the 7th Framework Programme, the ERC Starting Grant will thereby make a substantial and durable effect on Europe's research culture and the vitality of its research institutions and universities.

The first year's call should be published as soon as FP7 is approved, i.e. in early 2007 or even at the end of 2006, with funds to be committed in late 2007. A budget (commitment credits) of this order will be a reasonable starting point to launch the ERC in a manner that should avoid unacceptably high levels of oversubscription at the outset.

3. ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant activities

The scheme is designed to support researchers at the stage at which they are starting their first research team or, depending on the field, establishing their independent research programme¹.

Independence implies the investigators having authority to apply for, hold and manage their own research funding, to publish as senior authors and to supervise research students or others. The selection panels will be empowered to conclude whether the applicants have been granted or are being granted independence.

Its main function will be to provide ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants to support the creation of independent and excellent new individual research teams and to strengthen others that have been recently created.

4. Eligibility

The ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant will be designed to ensure that the grant is open to investigators who are working, or intend to work in any part of the EU and associated countries² and are in the position of starting their first independent research team, with sufficient flexibility to avoid penalising those whose career path falls outside the norm. Applicants should be less than 10 years from the award of their PhD.

The eligibility criteria will be established drawing on experience in other European, national and overseas schemes to select, and where possible improve, best practice wherever it arises. The criteria will avoid overlap with the Marie Curie awards under FP7. In particular, the ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants must be clearly understood as distinct from typical “postdoctoral support” grants.

5. Submission procedure for ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants

Considering the likelihood of oversubscription and to avoid inordinate waste of effort on the part of both applicants and evaluators, submission should follow a two-step procedure. The proposed structure and evaluation process will be adapted to this procedure (e.g. at the first stage outline proposals will be submitted to allow rapid processing of a high number of applications). The successful proposals after the first stage will be limited in number to provide a real competition combined with a reasonable chance of success at the second stage. To ease pressure on the administration and the electronic proposal submission system, it may

¹ It is recognised that in certain fields (e.g. in the humanities and mathematics), research is often performed individually, aside from guiding research students. The term “individual team” and “team” is used in the broadest sense, including cases of individuals working independently or conversely in cases when independent investigators are working so closely together as to constitute a single team.

² The scheme will be open to researchers (irrespective of nationality) who wish to return or move to take up a position in an academic or research institution in the EU or an associated country, on the condition that they have the prior agreement of the prospective host institution.

be necessary to set a series of “sub-deadlines” a few days apart, for example according to the first letter of the family name of the applicant.

6. Evaluation criteria

The evaluation criteria for the ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant will be a blend of:

- The potential of the *people* and their track record (research excellence of the applicant at PhD level and subsequently, achievements, publication list).
- Excellence of the *project* (in terms of the scientific value, innovativeness and feasibility of the objectives sought, the methodology proposed, the project management and research environment)

The precise definition of criteria, and the relative weighting of “project” and “people” considerations, will be established taking note as needed from the experience of other relevant programmes.

7. Evaluation methodology

The basis of the peer review evaluation process for the ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants will be a structure of high level Panels (the same approach is also expected to be adopted for other ERC grants).

Approximately 15 panels will be established to span the spectrum of research areas covered by the ERC, each of which will have responsibility for a broadly-defined set of research fields. The panels will be assisted by referees who will be drawn from a register set up by the Scientific Council. The selection of referees might benefit from the advice of national research councils and other European research organisations.

Each panel will have a highly respected Chair, who should be a major scientific figure with a reputation not only for scientific achievement but also for mentoring and advancing the careers of younger scientists. Panels will have approximately 10 members, all highly regarded scientists and scholars, carefully selected for their experience and other qualities including a range of “academic ages”. It will be desirable for one member of the Scientific Council to attend each panel’s meetings as observer. Special attention will be paid to including people whose research interests cross the traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Panel membership should be subject to a system of staggered fixed terms (perhaps 2-4 years), allowing stability of membership and judgement, combined with a process of renewal to avoid inertia and inward thinking. Panel members will be compensated for travel expenses and will receive a generous daily allowance.

The Scientific Council will be responsible for determining the structure of panels, selecting the panel chairs, and in consultation with the latter (and, as time permits, the appropriate

“programme director”³), deciding the panel membership. The Scientific Council will also maintain a high level of oversight in the operation of the panels, conveying the appropriate “spirit” and ensuring coherence of approach across the panels, as well as being involved as observers in their operation.

On the basis of this structure, the evaluation process, including support as necessary by written reviews by specialist referees, will be developed in detail. The predominantly disciplinary panel structure should not militate against the evaluation of proposals which straddle the borders between disciplines and emerging, unconventional research, which should indeed be encouraged. The broad remit of panels should allow some proposals crossing disciplinary borders to be considered within each panel; in cases of more radical cross-disciplinarity, two different panels could consider proposals. Final granting decisions should accommodate a reasonable balance between disciplinary projects and those that cross disciplinary boundaries.

There will be a need to ensure a suitable balance of funding across broad domains. As a starting point, guidelines could be taken from the experiences of the national funding institutions in the Member States and potentially abroad. More specific guidelines would ultimately emerge from ERC operational experience. Estimates of the likely number of ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants to be given in each broad disciplinary area for each call will be very helpful to applicants and may also reduce oversubscription (by a process of self-calibration).

8. The ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant

ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grants will be offered at pre-set discrete levels, for example between €100,000 and €400,000 per year (in increments of €50,000) for a period of up to 5 years. The level of grant will be affected by the nature of the team and the project (size of the team, research field etc.) and whether it is intended to set up a new team or add support to a recently-established team. The level will be determined by the peer review evaluation, on the basis of the panel’s judgement of needs, against the requested budget in the proposal.

The grant should be very flexible. It should specify the limit of total expenditure, the final payment being made on the basis of the actual costs incurred. An indicative budget breakdown (in broad categories e.g. personnel, supplies, equipment) should be specified, taking account of the investigator’s proposal; however, the investigator should be free to re-budget, with an explanatory statement to their institution and the ERC but without requiring approval.

The conditions of the grant should reflect the need for commitment to the integrity and sustainability of the team and the research effort. Salary costs of the investigator and team members, for example to allow them reduced commitments to teaching or administration, should be eligible for reimbursement. Full reimbursement of the cost of purchasing appropriate equipment should be allowed, and there should be favourable depreciation rules, allowing the purchase of necessary equipment even in the second half of the grant period.

³ The tight timescale, requiring the panels to be established possibly even before the formal Decision on the FP7 “Ideas” programme, may require interim measures to be adopted for the selection of the first panels.

The grant should also encourage a spirit of shared responsibility, with a real (financial) commitment on the part of the university or institute hosting the research team; thus the overhead (ie contribution to “indirect” costs) should be limited to a maximum of 20% of the direct costs of the research. It is foreseen that institutions may wish to reserve such overheads to facilitate sustainability of research or teams that are initiated with ERC Starting Grants.

However, the grant will be given to the investigator⁴ and will therefore be portable, between host institutions within the EU Member States and other associated countries contributing to the Framework Programme.

9. Reapplications and multiple applications

Simple but clear rules will be applied as regards reapplication by candidates who do not succeed on their first try, and to address the question of multiple applications within the same or different type of ERC grants. Managing the potential oversubscription is one important rationale for these rules. The following suggested rules could be adopted “until further notice”, allowing modification by the Scientific Council in light of experience.

- No-one may submit more than one application to the ERC during the same year.
- At least one year must elapse before successive applications for an ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant.
- Only one ERC grant by the same investigator can be active at the same time. However, to secure continuity of funding, ERC Starting Independent Researcher grantees may apply for an Advanced Investigator Grant during the last year of their Starting Grant award.

⁴ i.e., the grant agreement will specify that the funds are earmarked for the work carried out under the leadership of the investigator as a named individual