Federal Ministry
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NKS ERC
Nationale Kontaktstelle zum
EU-Programm Horizont Europa

For Starting, Consolidator, and Advanced Grant Interview Candidates

How to prepare for the ERC Interview

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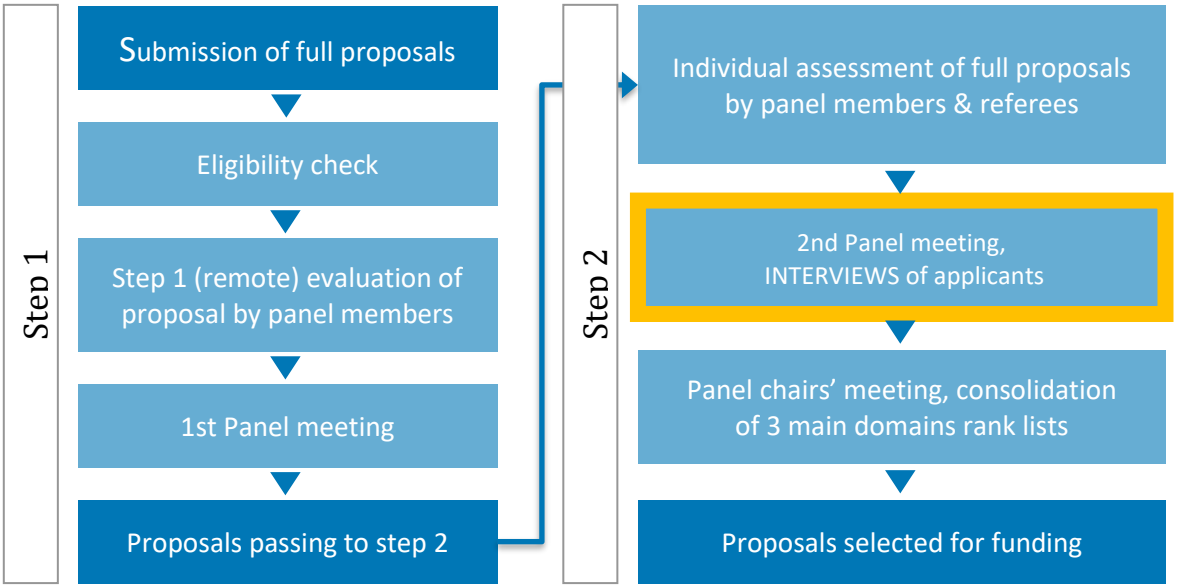
The Interview as Part of the Evaluation Procedure

The ERC Evaluation Process

The application process for the funding lines is single-stage. Both a short and a full version of the proposal are submitted, which are evaluated in two steps. After the assessment of the short proposal (B1) in the first step, successful applicants are invited in the second step to remote interviews. At Step 2, the full proposal (Part B1, Part B2, Section 3 – Budget, included in the administrative form, and the equipment table for Advanced Grant applicants) will be evaluated. Together, the evaluation of the full proposal and the interview form the basis for the assessment of the project proposal in the second step.



At the second step, panel members and remote referees remotely and individually review the complete version of the retained proposals. After this remote evaluation phase, the panel meets for the step 2 panel meeting, at which interviews with the applicants take place. An indicative budget will be allocated to each panel in proportion to the budgetary demand of its assigned proposals in order to equalize the success rate across panels. A significant number of candidates are invited to interviews, surpassing the available funding slots by a considerable margin. At the time of your interview, the panel members will usually have prepared a preliminary ranking list of proposals, based on their own assessments and the comments they have received by the remote referees. You will not be informed on any reviewer comments at this stage.
The assessment by the panels will take into account the interview, as well as the individual reviews and the panel discussion. At the end of the meeting, the panel establishes the final panel ranking and each proposal receives one of the following panel scores:

- A - fully meets the ERC's excellence criterion and is recommended for funding if sufficient funds are available;
- B - meets some but not all elements of the ERC's excellence criterion and will not be funded.

The Panel

The evaluation will be carried out through a structure of high-level peer review panels. A panel is composed of 10 to 16 renowned scientists from around the globe from various disciplines. The composition of panels varies annually due to the alternation of members, who are appointed for multiple years. For transparency reasons, panel chairs and members are published on the ERC Call pages. Additionally, there is a dedicated webpage providing information about the panel members who took part in completed ERC grant competitions, and about panel chairs, both past and currently serving. Please note, that **no contact is allowed with peer reviewers**.[1]

As panel members come from various fields, it is essential to remember that not all attendees are experts in each individual proposal. Typically, some panel members are primarily responsible for the technical discussion of a proposal. Therefore, it is crucial to prepare both linguistically and conceptually for specific field details and to remain understandable to an audience less familiar with the field. It should be evident to non-specialists where the challenges in your specific field lie. **Try to present your scientific idea in a concise way allowing also non-experts to follow.**

The Evaluation Elements applying to Excellence

While preparing your presentation and for your interview, bear the evaluation elements[2] in mind as they guide the panel members' assessment.

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)?

Scientific Approach

- To what extent is the outlined scientific approach feasible bearing in mind the groundbreaking nature and ambition of the proposed research (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 research proposal)?
- To what extent are the proposed timescales, resources, and PI commitment adequate and properly justified (based on the research proposal)?

2. Principal Investigator: Intellectual capacity and creativity

- To what extent has/have the PI demonstrated the ability to conduct ground-breaking research?
- To what extent does the PI provide evidence of creative and original thinking?
- To what extent does the PI have the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project?

[1] See e.g. the ERC Information for Applicants to the Starting and Consolidator Grant Calls, p. 10

[2] *Evaluation Elements applying to Excellence*, ERC Work Programme 2025, p. 36-37

What you can expect from the Interview

Setting and Procedure

The interviews are conducted via Webex and held in English. Panel members, along with two or three ERCEA Scientific Officers, will be physically present in Brussels. The interview rooms, usually configured in a U-shape, are equipped with two large-format screens to conduct the interview with the applicant remotely. In advance, interview candidates receive detailed information about the content and technical process of the interview. This invitation letter and its annexes should be read very carefully.
For each candidate, a 30-minutes slot is reserved during the interviews. Within this timeframe, you present your proposal and answer panel questions. Typically, you start your presentation immediately after being welcomed by the panel chair. Following the presentation, the question-and-answer round begins. While some questions may arise spontaneously, others are prepared in advance by the panel. Additionally, the panel may forward very specific questions from the external reviewers. Notably, the panel does not provide feedback at the interview's conclusion.
The atmosphere in the interviews is usually friendly but also varies. Some panels foster collaborative discussions, facilitating an equal exchange. In contrast, others create a more stringent examination environment or directly address proposal weaknesses.

Importance and Purpose

At the second step of the evaluation, the interview, combined with the remote assessment of the full proposal, forms the foundation for the panel's assessment results. After the interview, the additional assessments are factored into the evaluations, potentially restructuring the order of the ranking list. Keeping that in mind, **manage and prepare what's within your control: Know your proposal inside out, demonstrate your excitement and commitment to the project and remain confident**, regardless of how you perceive the interview.

The purpose and direction of interviews can vary significantly, depending on the preceding evaluation. Therefore, focus, tone, and structure of interviews differ. A panel may mainly aim to assess the applicant's genuine support and ownership of the proposed idea(s), evaluating their ability to articulate all relevant aspects clearly. The interview can also be an opportunity for panels to address questions that may have been left unanswered in the written proposal and to focus on points identified as 'weak spots' during the remote evaluation phase. Prepare for a diverse range of questions, and acknowledge that seemingly minor aspects, like those related to time or work planning, could play a crucial role given the excellence of all proposals and the intense competition.

How to prepare for the Interview

How to get ready for the Interview

After the completion of the first stage of evaluation, scientists are notified of the outcome via email. The invitation and its annexes - annex I is usually sent later, once the panels have fixed their schedule and plans - provide the following information to the applicants in advance:

- Panel ID
- Interview format and any other panel specific comments about your interview
- Details for electronic presentation

Always stick to the rules and format as layed down in the annex of the invitation. **Follow all your panel instructions exactly!**

Prepare and Practice: Start well in advance preparing for the interview. It is advisable to prepare and discuss your own presentation with colleagues. Questioning by colleagues helps to become aware of 'blind spots' so that you can confidently handle tough questions. Ask ERC grantees about their experience and how they prepared for the interview.
Address any open questions regarding procedures and setting of the interview with the support staff at your institution and/or the NCP ERC .

Can you answer these questions briefly and in a way that is easily understood also by generalists?

- Can you describe the idea of your research project as concise and comprehensive as possible?
- Which major challenge/problem is going to be solved?
- What are your objectives?
- What are the ground-breaking/visionary aspects of your research project?
- What would be the impact on your research field?
- What makes you the right person to lead the project?

Organize several practice sessions: They should include as many colleagues as possible as mock panels. Try to include people from outside your lab/institute/faculty and/or younger colleagues and ERC grantees to obtain diverse perspectives, ensuring also fresh and unbiased evaluations of your presentation. If practicing with others is not yet possible, begin by recording yourself and assess your performance and appearance on screen.

Test your technical setup: If permitted and applicable, ensure that your presentation with all included features will run and be particularly cautious with films and animations. Familiarize yourself with Webex; pay attention to the guidelines and recommendations on using Webex provided with the annexes of the invitation. Double-check your equipment and technical infrastructure. Be prepared for technical issues. Telephone-conference will be used in case of technical problems. Have the requested back-up presentation as pdf ready.

What else? Check your appearance on screen (light, camera position & perspective, background, clothes, etc.). On the very day of your interview, make sure you can avoid any disturbances and organize everything you might need around you. Be prepared for potential waiting time within your allocated slot.

The Presentation

While it's challenging to provide specific advice given the unique nature of each panel's assessment, insights from previous interview candidates suggest that focusing on the fundamental idea of your research project, on the problem(s) you are going to solve, the goals and the potential impact of the project (on your research field and beyond, if applicable) can prove advantageous. Try to concisely articulate the ground-breaking nature of your research and to underline its visionary aspects. It's not about retelling the content of your full proposal. **Prepare a concise and understandable presentation of your project idea.**
You can also include information on your background, that showcases that you are the right person to lead the project. But since the panel members have access to your curriculum vitae and track record, personal details should not constitute a significant portion of the presentation. Better articulate your motivation for pursuing this idea, eventually refering to your experiences/background.
The interview is also an opportunity to provide updates, if there are any relevant ones. New relevant developments/data etc. that will affect your project should be mentioned together with a concise explanation how your project plan will be adjusted accordingly.

Time: The exact duration of the presentation is determined by the panel. The allocated time for the presentation should not be exceeded under any circumstances. In some panels, applicants have been interrupted mid-sentence if the allotted time was exceeded.

Slides: If you are allowed to prepare slides, prepare slides that are understandable for generalists and specialists. Make sure the most important information is the most prominent. Do not overload your slides; it is better to have more slides than to overload them; if the annex specifies a maximum number of allowed slides, adhere to it. Given the intense competition where minor details may make a difference, pay attention to details, including slide style (contrast, color, size, images, etc.).

The Questions and Answers

The presentation is followed by a discussion that can encompass various aspects. The focal points of the discussion have varied significantly across different panels in the past. In general, the emphasis is on the scientific aspects of the proposal. Common questions include those about the conceptual boundaries of the project, the scientific novelty of the research, as well as questions about situating the project within the discipline and differentiating it from other projects at the host institution and the applicant's own. You should be able to contextualize the project within a broader framework, e.g., its impact on other scientific fields and society.
Inquiries may pertain to any aspect of the proposed project including budget and personnel. Aspects related to project planning have often focused on managing critical phases of the project. Regarding resource planning, it is particularly important to clearly justify the necessity of all requested costs.
In addition to the project's excellence, the excellence of the Principal Investigator is a criterion for evaluation. Some interviews may include questions about the Principal Investigator's scientific background, leadership qualities, and independence in relation to the research environment (institution and independence from mentors).
Concrete questions from past interviews have also centered on team composition, such as how different disciplines will be brought together, which individuals will take on specific tasks, and what experience is available in team management.

Respond to all questions with precision and conciseness. Always be factual in your response. **Keep the answers short and precise thus saving valuable time for more answers.** The panel may have many questions and seek additional information for funding decisions. **Be prepared for challenging questions**, as this session allows panel members to address perceived weaknesses in your proposal. Embrace the opportunity to provide further details, clarify critical points, and to effectively convey key messages.
If a question is unclear, don't hesitate to seek clarification. Be prepared for the possibility that the interview may not be highly interactive or responsive, especially if the panel primarily relies on pre-prepared questions from external reviewers. Refrain from evaluating questions from the panel.

How can you prepare for this the question-and-answer part? Think of possible questions, keeping in mind in particular The Evaluation Elements applying to Excellence. Examine your proposal critically for potential weaknesses. Collect critical questions from team members and colleagues. Be aware, that the questions can cover any aspect of your proposal:

- on the project: idea, preliminary results, risks, innovation, timeliness
- on the project's context and relevant competitive landscape
- on budget, necessity of team members / equipment / travels
- on project management: challenges, adjustments, personnel
- on your profile/ experience
- on your capacity to lead a team/project
- on the impact, the broader, longer-term goals of the project

Prepare answers on potential questions, making use also of the Sample Questions. Have all details well-remembered and further arguments e.g. for the requested budget ready.
Be prepared to react adequately even if you do not have a direct answer. Prepare yourself for such a situation, too.

Further Information for Preparation

ERC Class How to prepare for the Interview

The comprehensive ERC tutorial on „How to prepare for the interview“ not only provides an overview on ERC interviews but also offers insightful perspectives and practical tips. This will enhance your understanding of the other side – the esteemed panel – and consequently, elevate your readiness for the entire interview situation.

Some quotes with practical tips: "You are talking to researchers, so you will need clear slides that focus on the research. Do not try to conduct a business presentation. It should not be too naive. They want to see the real nitty gritty details of your research."
"Prepare, prepare, prepare. You have to know every single detail of your proposal and methods as well as your research area."
"Very often you will be asked about who your main competitors are as well as your main collaborators. You should be able to name them all."
"Do not over explain your CV."
"Panels sometimes like to ask the same questions to every applicant. So just in case, here are two that you should be able to answer. Here's the first one. Which two sentences do you hope will be added to a textbook thanks to your ERC project? And here's the second one. Where do you want to be in five years? And please do not answer this with, I want to be an ERC grantee and be applying for my next grant. I guarantee you it will not be the first time they hear this."
"You may want to avoid starting your answers with 'excellent question'."
"Practice, practice, practice."

Sample Questions

This collection of questions is derived from applicants' experiences. It's important to note that many grantees do report that they were mainly asked **project related questions,** incl. very detailed ones.
The list provided here comprises questions of a more general nature.

Questions on the project [idea, preliminary results, risks, challenges, innovativeness]

- What is the most critical step in your proposal?
- Could you describe the innovative character of the project? Why would you describe it as groundbreaking research?
- Can you generate general conclusions from your specific results?
- Do you see any risks in your proposal?

- How will you carry on with the project if your methodology does not work out? What alternative strategies do you have at hand?
- What will you do if stage X in your research yields no results?
- Where do you see the main challenges in your proposal?
- Why do you focus only on XX, not on XX?
- How exactly will you conduct the XX analysis?
- How does your approach differ from other approaches?
- Did you consider ethical aspects?
- Do you have any preliminary results?
- In which respect does this project differ/demarcate from the projects you are currently/were previously involved in?
- Where do you see the limitations of your project?
- What makes this project special/outstanding?
- Do you really think that you can measure XX in the project and apply the XX method?
- Wouldn´t it be preferable to use another method?
- What are the crucial milestones in your project?
- What are the risks and how are you planning to mitigate them?
- What if you find more than you expect?
- How exactly will you go about answering the main scientific question from your data?

On implementation and working arrangements [challenges, feasibility, personnel, budget]

- Would you be able to conduct this project with fewer resources?
- Why do you need so many team members? Why do you want to involve...?
- What will you do if we will recommend financing your project with X PhD students less?
- Is there some chance to save some money considering a budget cut?
- How will you recruit your team members? Where will you find these specialists/experts?
- How do you assure that this project will be successful?
- With whom will you collaborate?
- What is your relation to your previous mentors? Are you able to conduct research independently? Have you already shown/proven scientific independence?
- In which way does your Host Institution support your project? Do you have enough lab space?
- What will you do if we decide not to recommend this project for funding?
- This is a very ambitious project. Are you sure you are going to pull it off with only X people?
- Will your team members get the chance to develop as independent researchers?
- How are you going to hire your team members?
- What about diversity? How are you going to ensure that your team and collaboration will be diverse?

On the Principal Investigator [profile, Independence, capacity to lead a team, why ERC grant]

- What qualifies you to conduct this program as PI?
- What will the grant mean for your personal/career development?
- Within other ongoing projects respectively in your research group there are already xx PhD students working, will the grant still help you to consolidate your independence?
- Which are your most important papers? What was your contribution to these publications?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years? What will be your standing once the project is finished?
- Why did you choose to work at this institution?
- How many students have you supervised so far?

- There are many people who are trying to measure XX. Why do you think you are in a better position to succeed?

On the field of research

- Who are your main competitors (names, places)? Which other research groups are active in this field and why is your approach better?
- How do you see the future of your research field? How will your research results change this field respectively open up new horizons or fields?
- How can your results be useful for other disciplines?
- What are your contributions to your research field (so far)?

Further Links and Sources

For a good understanding of the review process and principles, you may want to read the ERC guide for peer Reviewers:

For Starting and Concolidator Grants: guide-for-peer-reviewers_he-erc-stg-cog_en.pdf (europa.eu)

For Advanced Grants: guide-for-peer-reviewers_he-erc-adg_en.pdf (europa.eu)

It also explains procedures and decision-making of the ERC panels in detail.

Furthermore, the ERC Scientific Council's President has published a report, that explains the recent changes of the evaluation procedure, the discussions that led to them, and the reasoning behind them: Evaluation_of_research_proposals.pdf (europa.eu)

This compilation of information, tips, and example questions for the ERC interview is provided for informational purposes only and intended to offer general guidance. The content is based on various sources, with a particular emphasis on experiences reportedby ERC interviewees to the German NCP ERC. Please note, that the nature and conduct of ERC interviews can vary widely, individual experiences differ, and the ERC interview process might be subject to change, i.e. the information presented here may not cover all possible scenarios.
Information on the Evaluation process, Panels and Evaluation Elements applying to Excellence are taken from the current ERC Work Programme and the "Information for Applicants" the ERC publishes on the ERC call pages.

For further information and contact details, please see the website of the NCP ERC.