

Be successful in your research grant applications: lessons from the ERC



Dr. Laurence COLIN
Scientific Officer
ERC Life Sciences Unit

5th September, 2021

European Research Council (ERC)

A bit of context



European Research Council



Directorate-General
Research and
Innovation (RTD)



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission



EUR 16 billion
ERC budget in Horizon
Europe



17%
of the entire
Horizon Europe budget



The ERC is ...



European Research Council

- A **funding body** set up by the EU in 2007, based in Brussels
- Led by **scientists** for **scientists**
- **International** peer-review
- Supports **bottom-up, investigator-driven** research across **all fields**, on the basis of **scientific excellence**
- Looking for **High-risk/High-gain** ambitious projects



Starting Grant

Size of the grant: up to €1.5 million + up to €1 million

Duration: up to 5 years

2-7 years of experience since completion of their PhD



Consolidator Grant

Size of the grant: up to €2 million + up to €1 million

Duration: up to 5 years

7-12 years of experience since completion of their PhD



Advanced Grant

Size of the grant: up to €2.5 million + up to €1 million

Duration: up to 5 years

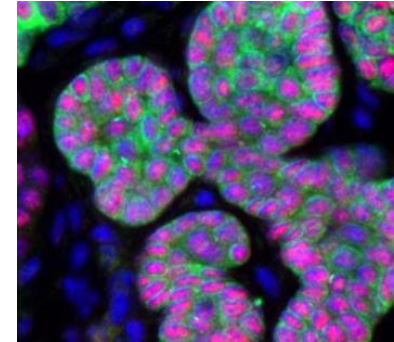
An excellent scientific track record of recognized achievements in the last 10 years

Why should you apply? ERC grants provide independence, recognition & visibility



European Research Council

- Work on a research topic of your **own choice**, with a team of your **own choice**
- Gain true **financial autonomy** for 5 years
- Negotiate the **best conditions** with the Host Institution
- Attract **top team members** and **collaborators**
- Move with the grant to any place in Europe (**portability**)
- Attract **additional funding**



Evaluation procedure

Single submission, **two-steps** evaluation



European Research Council

STEP 1

Remote individual assessment by
Panel Members of **Part B1 only**
(synopsis and CV)

Evaluation procedure

Single submission, **two-steps** evaluation



European Research Council

STEP 1

Remote individual assessment by
Panel Members of **Part B1 only**
(**synopsis and CV**)

Panel meeting 1

score **B & C**:
Rejected

score **A**: proposals
continue to step 2

Feedback to
applicants

Evaluation procedure

Single submission, **two-steps** evaluation



European Research Council

STEP 1

Remote individual assessment by **Panel Members of Part B1 only** (synopsis and CV)

Panel meeting 1

score **B & C:**
Rejected

score **A:** proposals
continue to step 2

Feedback to
applicants

STEP 2

Remote individual assessment by **Panel Members and External Reviewers** of Part B1+ Part B2 (full proposal)

Evaluation procedure

Single submission, two-steps evaluation



European Research Council

STEP 1

Remote individual assessment by **Panel Members of Part B1 only** (synopsis and CV)

Panel meeting 1

score B & C:
Rejected

score A: proposals
continue to step 2

STEP 2

Remote individual assessment by **Panel Members and External Reviewers of Part B1+ Part B2 (full proposal)**

Panel meeting 2 + Interview

scores A & B

Feedback to
applicants

Preparing your proposal:

Tips



European Research Council

- **Register early**, get familiar with the system and templates and start filling in the forms
- A submitted proposal can be **revised until the call deadline** by submitting a new version and overwriting the previous one
- Follow the formatting rules and page limits.
- Get feedback from peers (who have an ERC Grant)
- Make use of the **help tools and call documents** (*Information for Applicants, Work Programme, FAQs*)
- Talk to your country's **National Contact Point** and your **Institution's Grant Office**

Preparing your proposal ...for StG/CoG, make sure you are eligible!



European Research Council

1. Eligibility window measured from the 1st of January of the year of the Call

Extensions of eligibility window possible for documented cases of:

- Maternity – 18 months per child (**before or after PhD**)
- Paternity – actual time taken off
- Military service
- Medical specialty training
- Caring for seriously ill family members

2. Time commitment: Min. 50% (StG), 40% (CoG), 30% (AdG)

3. Minimum 50% of PI working time in an EU Member State or Associated Country



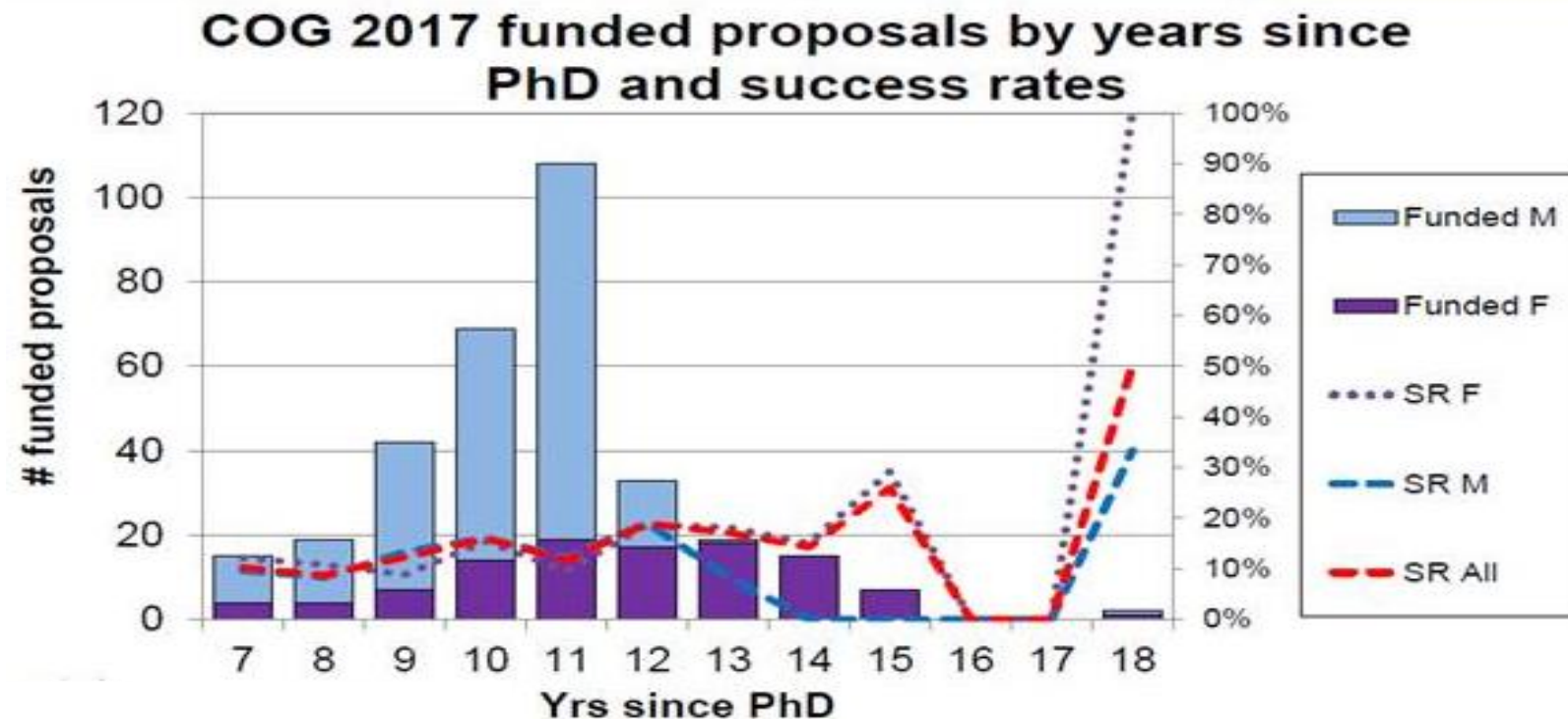
Preparing your proposal

.. Shall I apply now or wait another year?



Rumour: I should wait until the end of the eligibility window since then I will be more competitive

✗ NOT true: The success rate is virtually flat across the eligibility window (StG, CoG)



Updated ERC panel structure (from Starting Grant 2021 onwards)

**3 domains, 27 panels,
each panel: Panel Chair + 12-16 Panel Members**

Life Sciences

- LS1** Molecules of Life: Biological Mechanisms, Structures and Functions
- LS2** Integrative Biology: from Genes and Genomes to Systems
- LS3 Cellular, Developmental and Regenerative Biology**
- LS4 Physiology in Health, Disease and Ageing**
- LS5** Neuroscience and Disorders of the Nervous System
- LS6** Immunity, Infection and Immunotherapy
- LS7 Prevention, Diagnosis and Treatment of Human Diseases**
- LS8** Environmental Biology, Ecology and Evolution
- LS9** Biotechnology and Biosystems Engineering

Physical Sciences & Engineering

- PE1** Mathematics
- PE2** Fundamental Constituents of Matter
- PE3** Condensed Matter Physics
- PE4** Physical and Analytical Chemical Sciences
- PE5** Synthetic Chemistry and Materials
- PE6** Computer Science and Informatics
- PE7** Systems and Communication Engineering
- PE8** Products and Processes Engineering
- PE9** Universe Sciences
- PE10** Earth System Science
- PE11** Materials Engineering

Social Sciences and Humanities

- SH1** Individuals, Markets and Organisations
- SH2** Institutions, Governance and Legal Systems
- SH3** The Social World and Its Diversity
- SH4** The Human Mind and Its Complexity
- SH5** Cultures and Cultural Production
- SH6** The Study of the Human Past
- SH7** Human Mobility, Environment, and Space

... Choosing the right Panel is very important

- Proposals are assigned to the Panel of the PI's choice
- The PI can flag one "Secondary Review Panel": the PI **must explain the interdisciplinary nature of the proposal in Part B1**
- **Choose your descriptors/free keywords carefully!**
- **Transfer of proposals between panels may occur if:**
 - there is a clear mistake on part of the PI
 - the necessary expertise is available in a different panel



Rumour: Choose the panel "strategically" in order to increase chances of success

✗ NOT true: The budget is distributed among the scientific panels as a function of demand → success rate is equal amongst panels → choose the Panel that is right for your proposal!

Excellence is the only evaluation criterion

Research Project

- Ground-breaking nature
- Potential impact
- Clever Scientific Approach

Principal Investigator

- Creativity
- Leadership
- Scientific expertise and capacity to execute the project





Questions to ask yourself when writing your proposal



European Research Council

Research Project

Is my project new, **innovative**, bringing in new solutions/theories?

Does it promise to go **substantially beyond the state of the art**?

Why is my project **important? Think Big!**

How can I **prove/support** my case? Have I proven the project's **feasibility**?

Is it **timely**? (Why wasn't it done in the past?)

What's the **risk**? Have I proposed **alternatives**?

Have I given a realistic picture of my **collaborations**? Show that it is you who will be leading the project.

💡 Questions to ask yourself when writing your proposal



European Research Council

Research Project

Is my project new, **innovative**, bringing in new solutions/theories?

Does it promise to go **substantially beyond the state of the art**?

Why is my project **important? Think Big!**

How can I **prove/support** my case? Have I proven the project's **feasibility**?

Is it **timely**? (Why wasn't it done in the past?)

What's the **risk**? Have I proposed **alternatives**?

Have I given a realistic picture of my **collaborations**? Show that it is you who will be leading the project.

Principal Investigator

Why am I the **best/only person** to carry it out? Know your competitors

Am I able to **work independently**, and to manage a 5-year project with a substantial budget?

Am I **internationally competitive**?

Have I shown my **scientific leadership** in my CV?



💡 Questions to ask yourself when writing your proposal



European Research Council

Research Project

Is my project new, **innovative**, bringing in new solutions/theories?

Does it promise to go **substantially beyond the state of the art**?

Why is my project **important? Think Big!**

How can I **prove/support** my case? Have I proven the project's **feasibility**?

Is it **timely**? (Why wasn't it done in the past?)

What's the **risk**? Have I proposed **alternatives**?

Have I given a realistic picture of my **collaborations**? Show that it is you who will be leading the project.

Principal Investigator

Why am I the **best/only person** to carry it out? Know your competitors

Am I able to **work independently**, and to manage a 5-year project with a substantial budget?

Am I **internationally competitive**?

Have I shown my **scientific leadership** in my CV?

NO THEMATIC PRIORITIES

NO CONSORTIA

NO CAREER DEVELOPMENT PLAN

NO SOCIETAL/ECONOMIC IMPACT

ONLY CRITERION: EXCELLENCE OF BOTH THE PI AND THE RESEARCH PROJECT



.. When writing your CV

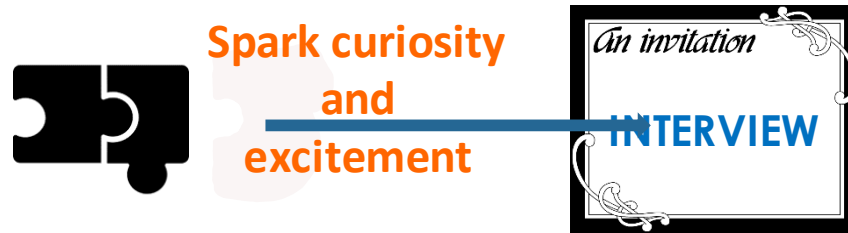
- Remember that the CV/Track Record are as **important as your project!**
- **Explain** what has been **your own contribution to your key publications** (incl. papers published without your PhD and postdoc supervisor).
- If you know that **you have gaps** or other issues in your CV (e.g. co-authored publications), **explain them.**
- Describe accurately **any other activity which can indicate scientific maturity.**
- **Fully fill in your Funding ID**



Part B1

and

Part B2



State of the art

Feasibility

Originality/Novelty

Importance/Impact

Scientific approach

References

Show scientific independence in CV

Specificity of your career path/breaks
/research environment and context



DO NOT just copy paste B1

Detailed scientific approach

Preliminary results

Detailed workplan

Resources

Budget

Risk assessment/contingency plans

Time commitment

Explain your budget properly



European Research Council

- Panels have to ensure that the requested resources are reasonable and well justified.
 - **Unexplained costs may (will) be cut.**
- Granting is made on a 'take-it-or-leave-it' basis: no negotiations.
- Ensure coherence between the description of **resources** and the **budget table**.
- Follow *Information for Applicants* on how to fill the budget table and calculate overheads.
- Ask for funding for Open Access – **OA is obligatory** and these costs are eligible.

I have been invited for an interview .. now what?



European Research Council

- Have **clear and representative slides** and focus on SCIENCE!
- **Anticipate questions.**
- Know the **details** of your proposal and methods, as well as your research area – who are your main competitors/collaborators?
- Bring **additional slides** on new supporting data, if you have, and for possible explanations.
- **Don't over-explain your CV!**

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!!!!



Rumour: Choose your Acronym in alphabetical order, interviews are planned alphabetically.

✗ NOT true: the important thing is to choose an easy-to-remember acronym since this helps identifying the project during discussions!

Typical reasons for rejection

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

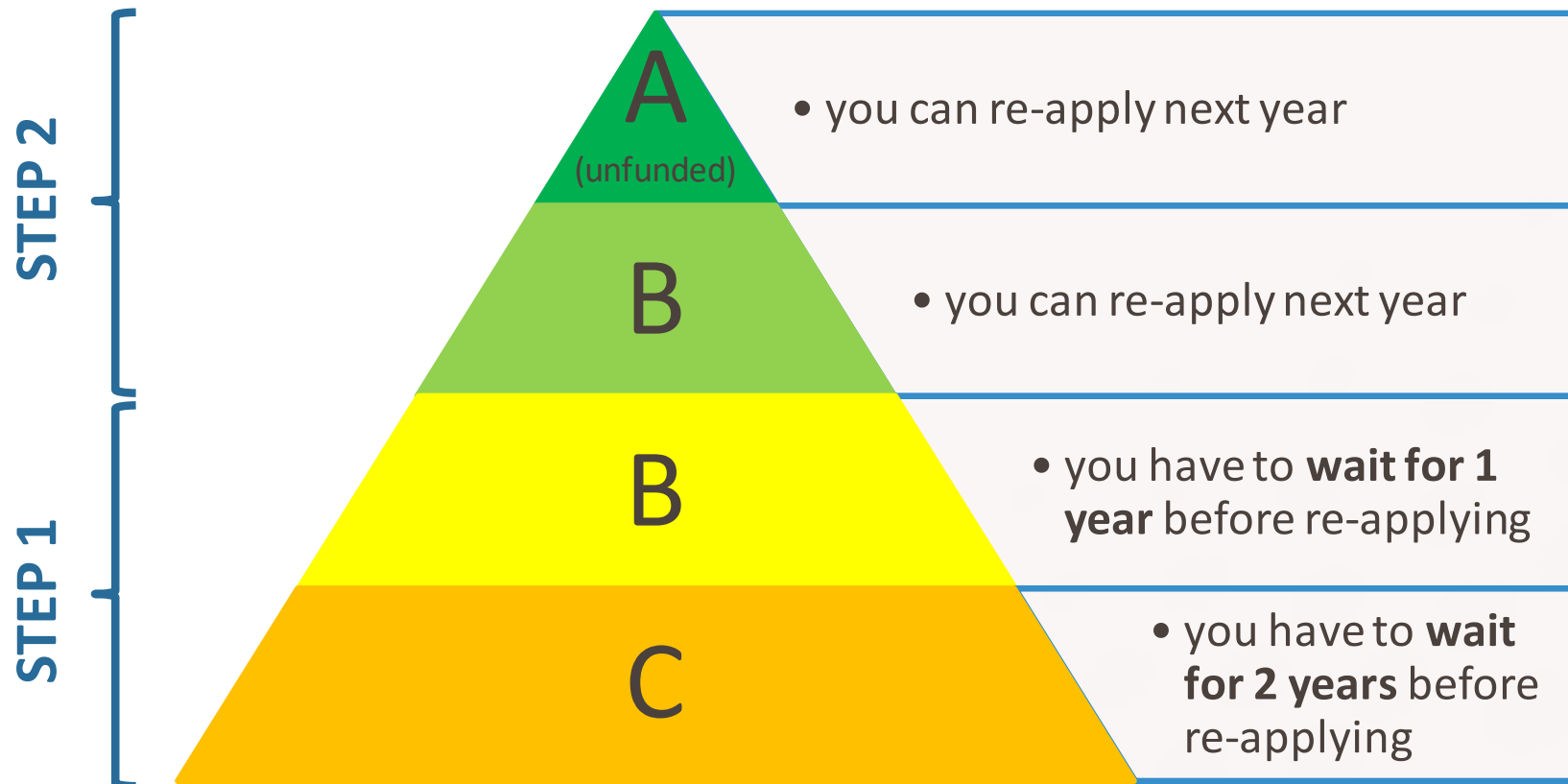
- Insufficient track-record
- Insufficient (potential for) independence
- Insufficient experience in leading projects

RESEARCH PROJECT

- Scope: Too narrow \leftrightarrow too broad/unfocussed
- Incremental research
- Work plan not detailed enough/unclear
- Insufficient risk management

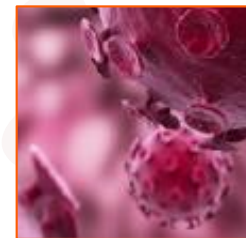
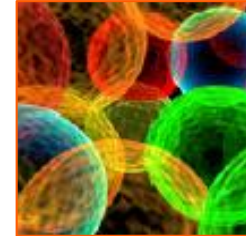
I did not get the grant, can I apply next year?

In order to make the evaluation process more effective, the Scientific Council has introduced **re-submission restrictions**.



Contrary to what you may think.....

- ERC funds "frontier research", including applied research
- The budget **is distributed among the panels as a function of demand** (equal success rate)
- The panel descriptors do not represent ERC scientific priorities
- Publication record is not decisive in selection
- Re-applying pays off (50% success rate increase)
- No indication that native English speakers are more likely to succeed



Calendar for 2021 and 2022 calls



European Research Council

<i>WP</i>	<i>Starting Grant</i>		<i>Consolidator Grant</i>		<i>Advanced Grant</i>		<i>Synergy Grant</i>
	2021	2022	2021	2022	2021	2022	2022
<i>Open</i>	25/02/2021	23/09/2021	11/03/2021	19/10/2021	20/05/2021	20/01/2022	15/07/2021
<i>Closure</i>	08/04/2021	13/01/2022	20/04/2021	17/03/2022	31/08/2021	28/04/2022	10/11/2021
<i>Budget</i>	619 M	757 M	633 M	784 M	626 M	561 M	300 M

Where can you find more information?



Videos - ERC Classes

- What to consider before applying
- How to fill in the application
(Part B1 and B2)
- The interview
- How the evaluation works

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x bFbzkVWgCU&list=PLtv6FnsXqnXAYRk6HCErwMxwML0ZKoMcy>

Where can you find more information?

Our website:

erc.europa.eu

Our social media channels:



National Contact Points (NCP):

<https://erc.europa.eu/funding/national-contact-points>

Funding & Tender Opportunities:

<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home>

Speakers



European Research Council



Dr Jane REZNICK

ERC-2019-StG

Project: METAMOLE



Dr Daniela COTA

Panel Member AdG LS4



European Research Council

Thank you

